

The Danger of Wrangling with Words and the Model of a Workman

2 Timothy 2:14-15

2 Timothy 2:14-15: *“Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. ¹⁵ Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”*

Background Notes

Soon after Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy, he was martyred for the sake of Christ. According to reliable tradition, Paul was beheaded by the Roman authorities for the “crime” of being a Christian. Knowing that the end was near, Paul wrote this last letter to Timothy to encourage him, and to exhort him to remain steadfast and faithful as a Christian. Already the Roman persecutions had begun. Already false teaching was beginning to infiltrate the church. So Paul wrote to encourage his son in the faith.

At this time Paul was in a dungeon in Rome, and Timothy was in Ephesus, more than a thousand miles away by ship from Rome. Timothy was helping to pastor and build up the church in Ephesus.

There are seven models of the faithful Christian in chapter 2. In the earlier part of the chapter, we saw the models of the teacher, the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer. In verses 14-15 Paul used the model of the workman to teach about faithful Christian living: *“a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* These models were originally given as encouragement for Timothy – but they are not just for Timothy. They are for us as well. This is God’s Word to all of us.

“Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers.” Who is the “them” of verse 14? In the general sense, it was everyone in the local church at Ephesus, but in a special sense it was those who were being affected by the false teaching.

One of the characteristics of false teaching, then and today, is arguing, or striving, or wrangling, or quibbling about words (v14). Wrangling and quibbling is of no profit - and actually leads to tearing down the church rather than building it up. If believers follow the model of the workman, they will not be involved in useless word-arguments. Instead they will be involved in *“rightly dividing the word of truth.”*

Doctrinal Points

1. Like a workman, the faithful Christian is skilled in the use of his tools.

Skill is the primary idea in the model of the workman. *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (v15).* Suppose you hired a carpenter to do some work around your house, and you observed that when he cut boards for the job, not a single cut was straight. He should be ashamed to call himself a carpenter if he’s not skilled in the use of his tools!

In the same way, like a skilled workman, the faithful Christian should be skilled in the use of his tools. What’s our tool? Here it is – it’s the Bible! Are you skilled in the use of the Bible, or do you feel a sense of shame about how little you know the Bible? Suppose a non-Christian were to ask you how to become a Christian. Would you know how to take your tool – the Bible – and lead that person to Christ? If not, you should be ashamed. Do you call yourself a Christian - but you’re not skilled in the use of the Christian’s tool, the Bible? Have you memorized a few Scriptures so that you can share with people who have questions about the faith? Have you studied some Scriptures that would help you to defend the faith? If not, you should be ashamed.

The phrase *“rightly dividing”* literally means “to cut it straight.” The concept comes from the idea of a construction worker cutting a board straight, or a farmer cutting a straight furrow as he plows. The idea is “cutting it straight,” and when it’s applied to faithful Christians, we should be able to “rightly divide the word of truth.”

Suppose a non-Christian friend were to get saved, and suppose they asked you what to do next. Of course you would tell them to start reading the Bible so that they can grow as a Christian. When they ask you where to start, you tell them to start anywhere, because it’s all God’s Word anyway. So they go home and start reading the book of Leviticus, and when they come to Leviticus 5 and read that if you commit sins, you’re supposed to: (1) confess your sins and (2) bring a sin offering to the Lord – a lamb or a goat, or a couple of turtle doves or pigeons. So the following Sunday, that new believer shows up with a goat for a sin offering! What are you going to do now?

Can you rightly divide the word of truth, and explain to them that Leviticus 5 was a requirement under the Old Testament Law - but we are now under grace. And we don’t mix Law and Grace! Can you turn them to Romans 10:4 and show them that “Christ is the end of the Law”? Can you rightly divide the word of truth? Christians who can’t do this should be ashamed. What kind of workmen would we be?

If we can rightly divide the word of truth, we know that we don’t mix Law and Grace. Furthermore, we don’t confuse the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament with what’s said to the Church in the New Testament. All that is also part of

handling the word of truth accurately. If we can't do this, we're not skilled workmen. Like a workman, the faithful Christian is skilled in the use of his tools.

2. Like a workman, the faithful Christian is skilled in the use of his time.

Verse 15, *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God."* A skilled workman doesn't get skilled by sitting around talking about the job, or standing around looking at the job. He becomes skilled by using his time wisely and diligently. The command to *"be diligent to present yourself approved to God"* or "study to show yourself approved unto God" means to ***make every effort to become a skilled workman*** – a workman who doesn't have to be ashamed.

How efficiently do we use our time to become skilled workmen for the Lord? How skilled are we at budgeting and managing our time? I don't know how many times I've started off with a well-intentioned daily program of reading a certain amount of Scripture a day, and a certain amount of time for prayer, and memorizing, and meditating on the Scripture I've read - but there are always those "other things" that come crowding in. Those "other things" might be important jobs or worthy causes, but the point here is that we are commanded to be diligent, to do our best, and to make every effort to become skilled workmen – workers for the Lord, who do not need to be ashamed.

And notice: the bottom line here is to present ourselves ***approved to God***, not before men. Whose approval are we really seeking? Like a workman, the faithful Christian will be skilled in the use of his time.

Practical Application

Let's not wrangle about words!

Verse 14: *"Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive [to wrangle] about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers."* If Christians are following the model of the workman and are skilled in the use of the Bible, then these Christians will not "wrangle about words." This doesn't mean that we should not do "word studies" of the Scripture – no! Careful studies of the words of Scripture are very different than futile word wrangling! When you ignore the clear teaching of Scripture and try to build up the case for your ideas by arguing about words – that's word wrangling.

When I was in seminary, one of the students always seemed to be involved in word wrangling - whether he was talking to a professor or a fellow student. When he left the seminary, he stated to me that he didn't know what he believed anymore. Do you know where his doubts and confusion started? Constant word wrangling.

Word wrangling was characteristic of the false teachers then - and it's characteristic of false teachers today. Describing the characteristics of a false teacher, 1 Timothy 6:4-5 says, *"He is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicion, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself."*

The cults provide us with a good illustration of word wrangling. The Scriptures clearly teach that Jesus is fully God, but the cults, like the Jehovah Witnesses, don't believe in the full deity of our Lord Jesus. They wrangle about words to build their case. They take John 1:1, for example, which says, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* They wrangle with the end of the verse, inserting the article "a," thus forcing the verse to say, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god."* Word wrangling; false teaching.

Colossians 2:9 says that in Christ, all the fullness of the Godhead – all the fullness of deity - was pleased to dwell bodily. You couldn't say any more concisely and precisely that Jesus is fully God! But the Jehovah Witnesses wrangle about the noun "Godhead" or the word "deity." They change these words to become an adjective, and then wrongly translate them as "divine qualities" to build their case that Jesus was not truly God. That's "word wrangling." The clear, overwhelming weight of Scripture is that the Lord Jesus is fully God.

Some time ago I wrote a devotional entitled *Big Flood*, about the Flood of Noah's day. In this paper I wrote that the overwhelming weight of Scripture shows that the Flood was universal - not just a local flood in the Mesopotamian Valley. Well, a Christian man wrote to me saying that he didn't believe in a universal flood. He believed the Genesis Flood was a local flood.

He tried very hard to build his case for a local flood. He went to great lengths to show that the word *"great"* in the Bible does not necessarily mean *"universal."* But the biblical case for a universal flood does not hinge on the word *"great"* and how it may be used in the Bible! There is overwhelming biblical evidence that the Genesis Flood was a universal flood. Read 2 Peter 3 in this connection. That man is leading people astray by wrangling with words!

Let's practice the ***clarity of Scripture***. Let's not wrangle about words!