

A Worker Approved by God

- Today's text is a problem sandwich with the meat in the middle. Maybe we should call it a solution sandwich because a sandwich's name is determined by what's in the middle, not what's on the outside, and what's in the middle of this text is the solution. The answer. Let's eat the bread first and deal with the problem. Then we will look at the solution.
- But before we even get to the problem, the first thing you will notice in the text today is that Paul is telling Timothy to remind the church about something. These things. What things, Paul? Well, the things that he has just gotten through writing about. Presumably Paul is telling Timothy to remind his hearers on Sundays when they gather for church about the grace that is in Christ Jesus that strengthens us to be obedient like a soldier, to be determined like an athlete, and to be diligent like a farmer. It's a reminder that is most often needed, not some new and innovative truth. The older I get, the more I see clearly what I heard Alistair Begg say at the pastor's conference a few weeks ago: what's most needed is that we do the basics well most of the time. The basics. When I get together with 4 other men from the church every Tuesday morning, we are not asking each other about how we are doing in learning to parse Greek verbs. I don't think any of us are doing that. Or whether we understand the difference between the communicable and the incommunicable attributes of God. Only Jeremy has a grasp on that. No, we ask each other about the basics: Are you reading the Bible? Are you having family devotions? Are you praying with your wife? And we encourage each other and pray for one another about these things. Remind them of these things, Paul says. Peter says something every similar in **2 Peter 1:12-15**. I met a man this week who was a brand new teacher at Paige High School in 1971. He had just finished four years in the Navy, and walked into the classroom basically two days after he walked off of an aircraft carrier. This was 1971, and Paige High School has just been desegregated. Racial tension was high and this young sailor knew it. So the first thing he did was set up a seating chart that was alphabetical. When his students walked into his classroom that first period, he told them where their assigned seating was. They weren't able to clump up according to race, but whites were sitting next to blacks and blacks were sitting next to whites. Then he called them all Mr. Jones or Miss Smith, and showed them respect. Six weeks into the semester, he told them they could now sit anywhere they wanted to. Nobody moved to a different seat. He said, "Obedience precedes discipline." What I took away from that story was that he taught them something the first day: we will respect one another. The he reminded them of it every day for six weeks and by then, they were practicing it. Paul says, Timothy, remind them of these things.
- Why? What was going on in the church in Ephesus that made it necessary for Paul to give this command to Timothy: hey, make sure you are reminding them about these things! Arguments over words. Not arguments over the Gospel: Paul did not hesitate to confront Peter to his face when Peter's actions were undermining the truth of the Gospel. But the church at Ephesus was arguing over lesser things. And people were being hurt by it. I remember the controversy we had more than twenty years ago at Antioch about who should be able to sing special music on Sunday mornings. In our very limited wisdom, the elders had decided just to put a sign-up sheet on the table and have people sign up whenever they wanted to do a special song. Not our best idea. It was Vance Havner who said, "If the devil is in your church, you will most likely find him in the choir loft." We don't have a choir loft, but we have seen many times in 25 years how much music stirs the emotions and can sometimes get people in arguments, if not, t up in all kinds of controversy. It is a personal subject for many, especially those who see themselves as called by God to offer up special music for the edification of the body. That's the way it was when we put out the sign-up sheet. Wouldn't you know it, the people who wanted to sign up the most were the ones who had the least ability! We had two options at this point, and we chose the wrong

one. We should have sat down with the people who were singing and really did not have any ability in that area and just be honest with them in a loving way. The Bible says it, doesn't it? "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head." (Eph. 4:15) But because we didn't sit down with them and work through this individually, with God's grace and His Word as our guide, there was lots of talk in the body, and we ended up seeing several families leave as a result.

- There were arguments over nonessentials going on in the church at Ephesus. But it was worse than that. Look at the other piece of bread, the bottom of the sandwich, in verses 16-18. Here's the danger of this bread. It is moldy and it stinks, and even though sometimes it is just in jest, just irreverent babble, the end result can be deadly. Look at the list. We have already seen that it can ruin the hearers. This kind of speech also leads people into more and more ungodliness. It is evidence of a heart that has swerved from the truth. It upsets the faith of some. But the most graphic example Paul uses is this: it spreads like gangrene. Have you ever seen that? Maybe you have seen pictures or you have been to the hospital to visit someone who has gangrene. It is dead or dying tissue that results from lack of blood flow. Many times the only hope is to amputate the toe or the foot or whatever is infected. But if it is not treated properly, the infection can spread and cause death. I thought of putting a picture up of what a foot looks like that is in the final stages of gangrene, but decided against it. Suffice it to say, it would turn your stomach. You don't mess around with this stuff. The symptoms are horrifying, the prognosis even worse. You take action to prevent it! It can turn your stomach, and worse. Just like irreverent babble. Ungodly talk. False teaching.
- We would be wise to hold up any teaching, any message, not just at church but anywhere in the life that we live out between Sundays. Hold up every message and see how it answers these questions: 1- What does it say about God? 2- What effect does it have on men and women?
- We have talked about the problem. Let's see what Paul suggests is the solution; what is the meat in this solution sandwich?
- "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." Let's turn that around and see what it looks like: If you rightly handle the word of truth, you will be a worker approved by God, with no need to be ashamed. What is the key? Rightly handling the Word of God. More about that in a minute, but thinking about this passage this week brought back a memory from the days that I was just getting started in ministry. I don't remember whether I was the pastor at Antioch yet or this was during the days when I was traveling with Damascus Road as an evangelist. But a man that I looked up to who was many years ahead of me in ministry and maturity was talking to a small group that I was a part of. And he named a pastor in the area he knew well. In fact, as I recall, he had helped this pastor grow in his relationship with Christ. And he said, "When he started in the ministry, he was absolutely committed to teaching and preaching the Word of God. Let the chips fall where they may, he was not going to swerve from the truth. But over time, that commitment was squeezed out by a stronger desire, to build a big church. He got what he wanted, and lost what he and his people most desperately needed: a man who would rightly handle the Word of truth." I thought then and have often thought since then, "O Lord, help me not to be that man."
- It is clear from this passage that there are good workers and there are bad workers. They are all workers, but only one will be approved by God. What makes a good worker? Rightly handling the Word of Truth. This word for rightly handling is a rare word, I have learned, only found three times in biblical Greek: here in this verse, and twice in Proverbs. Look at **Proverbs 3:5-6**. And **Proverb 11:5**. The word means to "cut a straight path." It can refer to those who make roads, and cut them straight from one point to the other. One Greek scholar says it means "to cut a road across country, that is forested or otherwise difficult to pass through, in a straight direction, so that the traveller may go directly to his destination." John Stott says the goal is to

be accurate on the one hand and plain on the other. If two people say to one another on their way to the car after church, “That preacher sure does talk purty,” and “Yeah, but I can’t understand a word he’s saying,” the preacher has failed. Worse than that, he has drawn attention to himself. It is impossible, John Piper says, to make much of Christ and make much of yourself at the same time. I believe it was J. Vernon McGhee who loved to quote Charles Spurgeon who said, “Put the cookies on the bottom shelf.” Except J. Vernon McGhee would say, “Mah frayunds...” first.

- Well, there are clearly many in the church today who will be a Hymenaeus or a Philetus, taking shots at the beliefs of those who hold to truth of God’s Word, upsetting the faith of some. But here’s the good news that never changes. God’s firm foundation stands. It is sealed with a promise and a warning. The Lord knows those who are His. Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. The first is secret and invisible. Only the Lord knows those who belong to Him. The second is public and visible: let those who think they belong to the Lord show it by their actions. Put away the iniquity. Avoid irreverent babbling. Stop arguing about nonessentials. Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.