

Be Holy

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Bible Text: 2 Timothy 2:14-26
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Well, if Christianity explored is about who Jesus is and why he came, what he came to do and, thirdly, about what it means to follow him, it's that third thing that Paul is writing about to Timothy through both the letters 1 & 2 Timothy that we have in the New Testament and much of what he writes is not so much about what needs to happen in the church in Ephesus or the churches, those house fellowships in Ephesus that Timothy had oversight over, much of it is actually about Timothy himself and this morning's passage is principally about Timothy. Now immediately, therefore, we just have to sort of take a little check of ourselves because what he's writing about and who he's writing to might so easily seem to us just to have to do with what people in an equivalent position, and it certainly does so it has to do with ministers, church leaders etc., and it certainly does have to do with that but it also has to do with everybody in the church because Timothy has to deal with people who are quarrelsome and Timothy has to deal with people who want to dispute over words, and that's something which every Christian fellowship has to deal with.

There isn't a church in the land where the kind of thing that this passage is about this morning isn't relevant and we need to understand why, and we need to understand why we're susceptible to quarreling about words. And if you're thinking to yourself, "Oh, you know, what does it mean to be a Christian? What is it that Christians believe?" If you're here this morning and you're exploring, let me not only say, please, come along on Thursday night and get a free meal and brilliant material, here's something that you may not have known or thought about what it means to be a Christian. We are people of a book and the book is the Bible, and we are people of this book and this book only. So it's the Bible and not the Bible and every other religious text there is on earth. And we are people who, therefore, believe that words are important. So right now we're listening to a sermon because it is important that we understand what this book says and the most important thing that happens when we gather, in one sense, is that we receive teaching from this word.

We also believe that there is a right and a wrong, there is true and false. Now in our culture, those things, by and large for most folk under the age of about sort of 45-50 or so, are matters of opinion. So what we believe in generally in our culture now is opinion and we are respective of everybody's opinion, and what we don't like now, what we have

a cultural aversion to is the idea that somebody says this is right and you ought to believe this. I mean, that's like a social problem. If you think that mostly nowadays, if you believe this is right and you ought to think it, then you've got a social illness unless, of course, you're a politician in which case, you know, you try and get everybody to do what you want. Isn't it interesting that in our society those who are promoting most laws to do with tolerance and, you know, everybody being the same and all the rest of it, are those who will fight tooth and nail and spend millions to get into power to enforce their will. Anyway, that's beside the point.

Now because we are people of a book and because we believe you can be right and wrong, that there may be several interpretations but not any old interpretation and that it's possible to be mistaken and, third, because we believe the stakes are so high, because we believe that what we're about has eternal significance, that we have a soul that lasts forever and one day we will have to meet our Maker, and we have sins that we can't cover up ourselves, so we need somebody to provide a covering to take those sins away, because the stakes are so high, in churches we can get into arguments about words because words are important. So we get into arguments about doctrine, we get into arguments, particularly we get into arguments, particularly we start quarreling in churches over things that are more speculative, if you like, things that haven't happened yet. What's going to happen when Jesus returns? When? What about the resurrection of the dead when everybody who's died will rise and will be judged, because the Bible says it's appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment?

So we get into arguments over things that haven't happened yet. We get into arguments over passages of the Bible which might not be absolutely crystal clear or might be capable of being interpreted two or three different ways. We end up quarreling and we quarrel for two reasons: because the words are important and we hang a lot on them, and also because we're sinners, and like sinners we like to have the last word, we like to win. We don't like backing down so we go in for the, "Oh, yes it is. Oh, no it isn't," thing, but as we're thinking with it, children, it's not a laugh. Churches, fellowships, denominations, individual Christians with their friends have fallen apart, wounded one another deeply when they started quarreling over words and Paul writes to Timothy in no uncertain terms, in terms which cannot be interpreted in all sorts of different ways, he writes so clearly to say, "Look, don't let that happen in Ephesus. And Timothy, don't let it happen in you."

So in this morning's passage, Paul talks about the quarreling and he talks about people in churches but he also talks about Timothy and what needs to be in Timothy's own heart. So it's what's going on in the fellowships and what's going on in Timothy which is in today's passage. And you'll notice perhaps as we were reading it, that it really falls into three sections. Just don't go too strongly by the paragraphing that we have in the church Bible, sometimes that's really helpful, sometimes it isn't. But what Paul does, if you notice, if you've got it open in front of you and just follow the verses with me a little bit, from verse 14, "Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen." From 14 down to 18, sort of going into 19, Paul is talking about quarreling and, you know, it

mustn't happen. There's this quarreling and godless chatter, all that kind of thing, bad, don't get involved. And then he actually returns to that subject in 23 through to the end. "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel." So he's back to the quarreling. So he starts off with quarreling, 14 through 18, which kind of leads into 19 and 20, and then he comes back to the quarreling, 23 through 26. In the middle, he focuses right on Timothy and Timothy's own conduct, Timothy's own manner, Timothy's way of following Jesus and being a Christian, and it's there that we find what is the title for this morning, that is, "Be Holy." And it's very interesting that Paul wants Timothy to be holy because Timothy is following a God who is holy, Paul wants Timothy to be holy in the area of his speech and other people's speech as well as in the area of other aspect of his conduct.

Holiness is to do with living the truth as well as, for Timothy, teaching the truth, and holiness as we've been thinking on Sunday evenings of late has a negative thing, there are things you don't do, and a positive thing, there are things you do do. So if you look at the negative things, we've got phrases like this, again, have a look at the passage with me, "Avoid," verse 16, "turn away from," verse 19, "flee the evil desires of youth," verse 22. Verse 23, "Don't have anything to do with." Verse 24, "the Lord's servant must not quarrel." Those are negative ways, just get away from that but also there's the positive side of being holy, of being a good Christian. And so in verse 15, "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved." And then verse 21, "If a man cleanses himself," in the latter, that is, ignoble purposes, things that are bad, things that you want to do that aren't good. Verse 22, "pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace." Verse 24, "be kind." Verse 25, "gently instruct."

So with reference to the word of God and words, with reference to his own personal conduct as well, Timothy and those in Ephesus have to move away from one way of living and move towards another way of living. So let's get into some of the detail as we ourselves seek to follow Jesus, as we ourselves seek to be people of the book who believe that there is true and false and not just opinion, and who believe that the stakes are very high.

Look at what Timothy has been given as his work. His work, verse 15, is because he's a workman so his work is to correctly handle the word of truth. Now that doesn't just mean that he preaches accurately what's in a passage. Correctly handling the word of truth doesn't simply mean that you can analyze it publicly and break it down into, you know, three parts or whatever. That's not simply correctly handling the truth. That's part of it but correctly handling the word of truth is something like correctly handling a sword, for instance, or correctly handling, I don't know what, a frying pan or curling tongs or hair straighteners or whatever. There's one way you've got to understand how to use them but you've got to be able to actually do it as well. You don't have to just understand what they're for and which end you pick up but you've really got to understand what's the best thing to do with it and how to use it properly. So with a sword it's no use just knowing about steel, it's no use just knowing about swordsmanship, you've got to be able to pick

the thing up, wield it properly, fight with it properly, use it well. The same with hair straighteners. Both equally lethal if used wrongly.

Now you see the thing that's going on. Timothy has to be able to take the word of God, understand it, analyze it, but help people to live it, correctly to handle it. Timothy has to be able to put it into practice, teach it, explain it. He has to do the kind of thing that Jesus talked about in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, Matthew's gospel, when he says that it is the work of the church to go into all the world and do what? To make disciples, teaching them, not just teaching them what I have commanded you but Jesus says teaching them to observe what I have commanded you. There's a world of difference between just teaching what I have commanded and teaching to observe. One is knowing stuff, the other is knowing it and doing it.

So Timothy's work and my work here is to correctly handle the word of truth so that not only might I live it but so that we might all live it. So we don't just come for a teaching ministry because we like to hear a text, a passage analyzed and some interesting little details from the Greek or something like that, we come here because there is a teaching ministry because we want to be taught from God through his word how to live in the way that pleases him, and how to do what he's given us to do. If it's just head knowledge that we're wanting, all we're going to do is get proud because we know so much, or despair because there's so much to know and we don't know it, and we'll just end up quarreling about words. But if you've come here this morning because there is something that you know you need in order to live the life that Jesus calls you to, then you're doing the right thing and you've got the right appetite. If you've come here this morning not just to go away with a little bit more knowledge or having heard something which will be forgotten by the end of lunch from the passage, but if you want to come here this morning, if you come here this morning because you want to go away walking more closely with Christ, then you've come with the right spirit. If you've come listening for a word from the Father which is going to help you to follow his Son, then you've come with the right spirit and you've come with a right desire.

So Timothy's work is to rightly handle the word of truth so that he is, therefore, going to verse 14, warn people against quarreling about words. He's going to do the thing which is nowadays you don't do, he's going to intervene, he's going to warn people. He's going to, verse 25, gently instruct people. So Timothy has to be able to correctly handle the word of truth, that's his work, and if he's going to do that, then Timothy himself must not get involved in quarrels and he must do all he can by warning and by gentle instruction to make sure that other people don't start being quarrelsome in the fellowship. So his work is to correctly handle the word of truth, verse 15, his work also means not getting involved, verse 16, in godless chatter, not getting involved, verses 23 and 24, in foolish and stupid arguments producing quarrels.

Why does Paul pick on quarreling? I mean, it is a problem in every Christian church. We thought a little bit about why it becomes a problem. It was obviously a problem in Ephesus. Why does he pick on quarreling? Well, because he says it is of no value and it only ruins those who listen. You see, you can have doctrinal position A and most of the

quarrels are about stuff that's yet to come as here there were Hymenaeus and Philetus talking about the resurrection, not meaning Jesus' resurrection but meaning everybody's resurrection, the general resurrection, the resurrection from the dead for everybody else which is yet to come. What happens, what's the psychology of a quarrel? The psychology is, well, I think the Bible says this. The Bible is very important, therefore it's very important that this is thought by people. Therefore if somebody says something different, it's important that they say something different. That's not a thing you can just walk away from easily. And if they are wrong, then it's important that what they think is corrected by what I think. And what happens is that our human, fallible, sinful stubbornness, our throneness, if you're from around these parts you'll know what the throne means, if you aren't from around these parts, then you've never heard that word before, it just means stubborn and just difficult and awkward and you're never going to let go it and your throne. I don't think there's actually another word in English that does it, but anyway it's like dreich, it just says it all. And what you can't do is let go because in the psychology getting agreement over the words, i.e. agreement with what you think the words are about, becomes more important than anything else, and with that attitude, fellowships are ruined, friendships are ruined, with that attitude relationships fall apart, with that attitude people don't speak to one another anymore in fellowships.

It ruins those who listen. It never gets anywhere, it never actually builds anybody up in the faith at all. It is of no value, and do you know what it does? It does the devil's work in a congregation. That's what Paul says, he goes to it in verse 26, they have fallen into a trap of the devil who has taken them in their quarrelsomeness captive to do his work. His work. So you can be arguing about a point of doctrine in the Bible which is a good book and doctrine is good, and you can be arguing about it because you believe it's really important, which is good, but you can be doing the devil's work.

So you can argue endlessly, fruitlessly, in a divisive way, never just letting it go, never just agreeing to differ and moving on, and you're not being godly, and if I got involved in those arguments, I wouldn't be being godly either. We would be doing the devil's work. The thing matters but the quarreling and doing the devil's work also matters and that just means that in some friendships, relationships, whatever is in the fellowship, maybe there just has to be some no-go areas, maybe there just has to be some things in which people say, "Well, we agree to differ. Our unity in Christ is crucial." Maybe just have to let something go.

So we've spoken about words, Paul in the middle turns to Timothy himself, and here it's his conduct. What has he got to do? Well, having sort of moved from talking about Hymenaeus and Philetus who have wandered away from the truth and they've got into more and more ungodliness as they've quarreled and argued and their teaching has spread like gangrene, having spoken about them Paul talks about the difference between the Lord knowing those who are his and, of course, by inference those who aren't his. And you can see the way sort of the thinking goes. He talks about Hymenaeus and Philetus, they're examples of people who aren't really God's people at all, they're in the church but they're not really Christians, they're in there and they're just arguing away over stuff and spreading false stuff and they're destroying the faith of some people. They're not

Christians who've got bad teaching, they're just not Christians. They're not Jesus'. The Lord knows who are his and Hymenaeus and Philetus aren't, but you, Timothy, are, you confess the name of the Lord so you've got to turn away from wickedness.

Then he talks to Timothy himself and see what he says, cleanse yourself from that which is ignoble. "Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." What is he saying? He's saying, "First of all, Timothy, you've got to pursue the life that pleases God. You don't drift into it. You don't just sort of by virtue of waking up every morning become more like Jesus. You don't become more like Jesus simply by virtue of adding day to day and year to year." He's still young which is why he says flee the evil desires of youth, but when he's as old as Paul is as Paul writes, he's not necessarily going to be following Jesus more closely just because he's added more years. So he's got to actively cleanse himself from those things which are ignoble. He's got to actively flee the evil desires of youth. He actively has to pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace. He's got to stop himself going back to the quarreling things, so to stop himself from having anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments that he might get drawn into. And what's true for Timothy there is true for the rest of us.

Now if you're a Christian this morning, in 10 years time you will not have drifted into a better Christianity than you've got now, and even if you come to a church or go to a church where there is good solid Bible teaching week in, week out, you won't just have somehow or another by osmosis or by some weird process which mostly involves you doing nothing about it, have become a better Christian. You see, we have to flee and pursue and you pursue something which you've made your goal, you pursue something which you really want and that's the truth for every single one of us.

But it's not just Timothy's conduct that has to function here, it is also Timothy's identity. Look at how Paul writes about Timothy. He is a workman, verse 15. He is the Lord's servant, verse 24. He is somebody who, verse 21, is to be useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. You see, as well as getting it right about words and quarreling and arguments, and as well as fleeing evil desires and pursuing righteousness, Timothy has to see himself in a way which maybe none of us would naturally do and which our culture trains us not to do, and which just about everybody around us when we're at work or studying away at university or college or whatever will think is stupid, we see ourselves as servants. We are not our own. We are bought with a price. We are not the masters of our own lives. We serve the Master. We are not meant to live lives that are useful simply in this world's terms but lives which are useful to the Master.

So there's an identity thing and a call thing and what it's going to mean for us thing, for us as well as for Jesus. Who are you? Are you the Lord's servant? What are you fleeing and what are you pursuing? And what are you doing with words?

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we confess that there is often something quarrelsome that rises within us. We confess, Lord, that it's very difficult for us sometimes just to let go and walk away from an argument and agree to differ and yet your word tells us to do these things, that very word that we would spend time quarreling over. Help us, we pray, to be godly in this way. And Lord, we confess too that sometimes we do pursue wickedness, we aim for it, we go for it. Help us, we pray, Lord, to run from it and pursue righteousness. And help us, Lord, because we struggle with this, help us to see ourselves always and only as your servants, glad and privileged to be serving the King of kings and Lord of lords. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.