

A CALL TO ENDURANCE

Part II

II Timothy 2:14-26

By David H. Roper

You will remember in the opening paragraph of chapter 2 there are three metaphors that the Apostle Paul uses to describe the faithful man of God. He is, first of all, to be like a dedicated soldier who pours out his life in service to his commanding officer. He endures hardship and thus gains the approval of his commander. Second, he is to be like a law abiding athlete who observes the rules of the game in order to secure the prize. Third, he is to be like a hard-working farmer who must toil in order to participate in the harvest. There is a common denominator among these three metaphors -- endurance. The faithful man of God will persist despite opposition, adversity and fatigue. Then Paul applies these metaphors to Timothy, who is weak, timid, flagging in faith, waning in enthusiasm for the Christian ministry in order to encourage him onto continuance. There is no approval, Paul says, without diligent effort. There is no crown without discipline. There is no harvest without labor. Timothy is to be strong, but not in himself, because Timothy did not have what was necessary to be strong in himself. He is to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Now in the remaining section of this chapter, starting with verse 14, Paul adds to his description of the faithful man of God by using three additional figures: an unashamed workman (verse 15); an undefiled vessel (verse 21); and third; an inoffensive servant (verse 24).

First, the unashamed workman, in verses 14 to 19.

"Remind them of this, and charge them before the Lord to avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. Among them are Hymeneus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'"

There are two types of workmen envisaged in this paragraph. There is the workman whom God has approved and therefore has no reason to be ashamed, and there is the workman who is disapproved and who ought to be ashamed. The difference between the two workmen is crystal clear, and is summed up in two verses, 15 and 18. The good workman (and he is good because he is approved by God) is one who rightly handles the word of truth. The bad workman, who has forfeited God's approval, is one who has swerved from the truth and therefore has every reason to be ashamed. Let us look at this in detail. A good workman is one who rightly handles the word of truth. This is translated in various ways in different versions. If you have a King James translation, it reads, "one who rightly divides the truth." J.B. Phillips translates, "one who uses the word of God to the best advantage." Ken Taylor, in *Living Letters*, "one who knows what the Bible says and means." The Greek verb literally means, "one who cuts straight." It is used in other Greek literature of stone cutters who cut a straight line through a stone, or of wood cutters in a forest who cut a straight path through the forest. It is used at farmers who plow a straight furrow. A good workman, then, is one who cuts a straight path. He is one who has a goal in mind and who heads straight for that goal. He is not side tracked, and he is not detoured. There is a translation of the Old Testament that Jesus used, called *The Septuagint*, which was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament scriptures. In that translation, in the familiar verses, Proverbs 3:5-6, this verb is used:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will cut your path straight."

He will direct you straight to the goal. One who handles the word of God aright, therefore is one who directs men *straight* to the *goal*. Now what is the goal of which the scriptures speak? There is no question about this. In the scriptures the goal is Godlikeness. God wants to produce, in our lives, his likeness. And the scriptures are the tool given to produce that quality of life in us. So a good workman will use the word of God to point people toward that goal, the goal of Godlikeness.

There is a great call for Godlikeness today. Young people today see so much hypocrisy among believers. Oh, that they might see in our lives the character of Jesus Christ himself. There is a story young people tell these days. It is funny, but it cuts deeply. It has to do with a truck driver who stopped at Cloud 9 Restaurant on Highway 17 for a bite to eat. He ordered a steak sandwich, a cup of coffee, and a piece of pie. Just as the order arrived, two Hells Angels drove up on their motorcycles and parked them outside the door. The counter was crowded, and the only seats available were on either side of the truck driver. They sat down and, annoyed because he did not move over, one reached over and took the truck driver's steak sandwich and began to eat it. The truck driver looked at him, but did not say a word. Then the other one took his pie and began to eat that. Still no comment. He smiled at the two men, rose from his seat, paid his bill, got in his truck and drove off. One Angel said to the other, "That's a remarkable man. He must be a Christian. That's the way Christians act." The other one said, "Well, if he's a Christian, he's certainly a good one." About that time the first Angel turned around and looked out the window and saw the man driving his truck away. He said, "He may be a good Christian, but he's a terrible truck driver. He just ran over our motorcycles."

Now it is that sort of behavior, inconsistent with Christian truth, that offends the world. But the word of God is given to point us to true godlike character. Paul writes in Philippians 3:13, "This one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." In the context that goal is Christlikeness. Note verse 10: "that I may know him and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." So, then, the goal of all personal Bible study and Bible exposition is that we may be Godlike. The scriptures are the means to that end.

In chapter 3, verse 15, which we will look at next Sunday, Paul says to Timothy,

" . . . and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

The word of God is the means by which the man of God may be comprehensively equipped for the service of Jesus Christ. The Bible is not intended to be an object for speculation, and it is not to feed our intellectual curiosity; it is to bring us into a relationship with God, and nurture and sustain that relationship. So when we engage in personal Bible study, or when we expound the scriptures to that end, we are good workmen. We have no reason to be ashamed. On the other hand, Paul says that the disapproved workman is one who swerves from the truth, and verse 18 cites two examples of teachers in the assembly who have literally "missed the mark," like a bowman who draws an arrow at the target and shoots wide of the mark because he aims wide. Disapproved workmen miss the mark because they do not put the scriptures to their intended purpose. They use them as a basis for speculation, and they "dispute about words." They engage in "godless chatter." They argue and debate about the meaning of scripture, but they never place themselves under its authority. They have no intention of obeying it, and so consequently they miss the mark. They are like basketball players who pass the ball around but never take a shot at the basket. They are constantly engaged in interpretation, but they never apply the truth. Therefore, Paul says, they are disapproved workmen who ought to be ashamed.

There was a school of thought that was troubling the church at the time Paul wrote this letter, called Gnosticism. It was a system of philosophy producing a lot of unpronounceably long words, and fantastic theories that evidently found its way into the early church. It attempted to make the Christian life a complex, philosophical theory rather than an adventure of faith, and thus it was robbing the Christian faith of its

simplicity. I think perhaps this is what Paul is concerned about as he addresses these words to Timothy, "Timothy, don't mishandle the word of truth, don't make it an object of speculation but use it as an instrument to instruct and correct and encourage men to Godliness."

Timothy was facing the same problem that Jesus himself faced in his conflict with the Pharisees. These were men who were students of the scriptures. They scrutinized them minutely. That was their problem. They became preoccupied with minutia. They counted all the letters in the Old Testament. They found the middle letter of the scripture. They knew where every word could be found, and the number of occurrences of those words, but they never applied the truth to themselves. And so they missed the whole point of the Old Testament, which was to lead people to faith in Messiah. Jesus said to them, "*You search the scriptures because you think that in them you find eternal life; and it is they which testify to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*" They were not good workmen because they missed the mark.

Now the mark of a good workman is that he handles the word of truth honorably. His *personal study* will draw him closer to the Lord because he is confident of its authority. He does not quibble about it; he believes it, he obeys it, he responds to it. And his *teaching* of others is clear and decisive. He does not hesitate to proclaim his authority and he attempts to make its truth understandable to all who hear it. He keeps his exposition simple so that it is readily understood and obeyed. On the other hand, a disapproved workman will leave men befogged and confused about God. Paul says, "They will ruin their hearers, and they will lead people into more and more Ungodliness." This is progress in reverse: the more they teach, the less people know. The result of their teaching is utter confusion. I heard a story recently about Professor Paul Tillich, formerly of the University of Chicago. The story concerns the appearance of certain men before the gates of heaven. The archangel was standing before the gates. The first person to appear was the Apostle Peter. The angel asked him, "Peter, who do you say that Jesus is?" Peter said, "He is the Christ, the Son of the living God." To which the archangel responded, "Enter into his rest." A bit later Professor Tillich comes down the path. The angel asks him, "Paul Tillich, who do you say Jesus is?" His response is, "Theologically, he is the Ground of all Being; eschatologically, he's the Ground of all Hope; and existentially, he is the Ground of the Divine-Human Encounter." To which the angel said, "huh?" Confusion, you see, is the result of his teaching. He does not cut straight toward the goal in his understanding and exposition of the word of God. He is not concise in his teaching, and the result of his instruction is not a more godly person but a more confused one.

The Christian faith was never intended to be a system that boggles the mind. The scriptures are designed to lead us into a relationship with God, and his plan is clear, explicit and intelligible. I am not saying that the scriptures are without subtlety because, as you know, the greatest minds of the past 2000 years have wrestled with their ideas. But the way is clear. There is no question about the basic plan for man's salvation; it is understandable. And therefore a good workman will accept the validity of that plan and make it plain to others.

This, then, is the test that we have to apply to ourselves. If, at the end of our own study of the scriptures and our exposition of scripture to others we are closer to God and are closer to one another, and our lives are manifesting the character and the fragrance of Jesus Christ, then we have no need to be ashamed. On the other hand, if at the end of our study we are farther away from God, if we have erected barriers between him and others¹ then we are disapproved workmen and we have every reason to be ashamed.

Now verse 19 is a word of encouragement to Timothy.

"But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: The Lord knows those who are his, and let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

Timothy, he says, the faith of some is being upset. But the foundation itself will never be upset. God himself will never be overthrown, and the work that he is doing in lives will never be overthrown. Despite what may appear to be, God is at work. His foundation is firm, and it stands. We use the word, foundation, in two different ways. We speak of one type of foundation as a base for a building. Another use is that of an association, founded by someone, like the Ford Foundation. I think it is this latter use that is in view here. Paul is saying that what God has founded is firm and secure. And of course, what he has founded is the church, the body of Jesus Christ. And as Jesus said, the gates of hell will never prevail against that church, the authentic church of Jesus Christ. There are, as Paul indicates, two identifying marks of the church, a twofold

seal: one invisible, the other visible -- 1) the Lord knows those who are his, and -- 2) let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. These are the marks. As we proclaim the truth of the word of God we will see God draw men to himself. And as men are drawn into a relationship with him their lives will change and they will begin to depart from iniquity. So this is the twofold seal: God is at work invisibly in the lives of men; and men are responding to his call, a response manifested by departure from iniquity. This was an encouragement, I am sure, to Timothy and is to us as well. Many were departing from the faith, as we indicated before. They were disregarding Timothy's message. I am sure that Timothy was tempted to mute his message, to tone it down and try to accommodate himself to the climate of that day. Paul says, No! You proclaim the gospel. It is inevitable that some will depart, but the foundation is secure. God will continue to work in his mysterious way to draw men unto himself and to change their lives. But this will come only as we are fearless in our declaration of the truth. We must not swerve from the truth.

I was talking to Mark Petterson this past week about our student ministries. We were reflecting on the fact that so many students start well but fade after a time. The word doesn't seem to take root and the adversary can preoccupy us with the drop outs. But when we look at our ministries realistically we can see young men and women here and there, in the dorms and fraternities and homes, who demonstrate that the foundation is firm. God is at work and is drawing men unto himself, and people's lives are being changed. And that is our confidence. If you are involved in a ministry and you are discouraged because people are not responding as you think they ought, remember God's firm foundation stands. As Paul says in the book of Galatians, we are not to be weary in well doing, for in due season we will reap if we do not faint. We are to continue to declare the word despite opposition, hostility, and lack of response. And by so doing we demonstrate that we are good workmen, who have no reason to be ashamed because we are handling aright the word of truth.

There is a second figure the Apostle uses in verses 20 through 22.

"In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and earthenware, and some for noble use, some for ignoble. If anyone purifies himself from what is ignoble then he will be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work. So shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart."

The second figure is that of a clean or an undefiled vessel. The picture is very clear, I think. In an affluent household there are various types of utensils. There are some that are reserved for display or for entertainment, i.e., the gold and silver vessels. There are others that are designated for more menial use -- the wood and earthenware. Paul says the measure of the worth of those vessels is the degree to which they are kept clean. None of you ladies would serve the evening meal on a plate that still had breakfast eggs on it. That would never be acceptable. Likewise Paul says that if you want to be acceptable and useful to God, then you must be a clean vessel. If you purify yourself from the things that defile you, Paul says, you will be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master. What a statement -- "useful to the master." That is our hunger, to be useful to him, to be put to his service. And the qualification is that we be clean. Then he applies this metaphor to Timothy and commands him to shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness. He is not advising him to cut himself off from other people. He is to deal with evil within himself. He is only to cut himself off from people insofar as they corrupt him, and cause the evil within to be manifest. He sets the two verbs in contrast. He says to *shun* youthful passions and to aim at righteousness. The word, shun, means to flee, to take flight from danger. It suggests that sin is an enemy of our soul, which will destroy us. There are times when we will have to flee physically or mentally from temptation, if we are to continue to be an instrument of service to God; just as Joseph had to flee physically from Potiphar's wife, and leave her with an empty toga. (I can't help contrasting that story with the modern day story of The Graduate.) But Paul says to shun these things, flee from them. And in establishing your cleanliness, God will give you a place of service.

Now there are certain sins from which Timothy was to flee. They are called youthful lusts. There are certain sins that uniquely characterize young people in addition to sexual sins. There are the sins of impatience, of self-assertiveness, of love of discussion without commitment to truth, a contempt of tradition, an unwillingness to listen to others, an unteachable spirit. These are the sins essentially of idealism. Idealism can be a constructive trait. Young people therefore ought not to be rebuked but to be channeled into constructive

idealism. Paul thus encourages Timothy, to turn from these things and aim positively at: righteousness, i.e., a right relationship with God and man; faithfulness -- dependability and trust worthiness; love, the determination to seek nothing less than the very best for others and to put away bitterness, revenge and violence; and finally, peace, that quiet assurance of fellowship with God, and the quiet confidence that God is at work in the world. The result is a life that is peaceful and one that makes peace. Now all of these things, Paul says, are attributes that are sought in the company of those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart, i.e., a purified heart. Just two brief comments here. One, this is a heart that Jesus Christ has purified. And it is only as our hearts are brought into submission to him that he can purify us. Secondly, this is done only in the company of other believers. This is another of these passages of scripture that speak of our need for other believers. We cannot declare our independence from one another and expect to keep our hearts purified.

There is a third figure in verses 23 through 26.

"Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will."

This final figure is that of an unselfish or an inoffensive servant. The vessel in the house becomes the servant in the household. Now Paul is not prohibiting controversy, for there were times that Paul himself had to enter into controversy in order to declare the truth. What he is prohibiting is a loveless or a quarrelsome spirit. This, he says, is forbidden. We are not to engage in stupid, senseless quarrels, or arguments for argument's sake; but we are to be gentle. You see it is not just what we say that is important.

How we say what we say is just as important. We are to be kind, gracious, forbearing. We do not get resentful when people resist the truth, or when we *face* opposition *or* hostility. We do not get touchy, and our feelings do not get hurt when we are rejected. We are gentle and never arrogant or brash. We melt the coldest heart *with* love. We do not batter people into submission; we love them into submission to Jesus Christ. And Paul says *if* we adorn the Christian message with love, God may grant that they will be released. This is an interesting look, I think, behind the scenes of a Christian evangelistic ministry. Men are only the puppets on a stage; the real action takes place behind the stage. There is a battle going on between God and Satan. Certain men have been ensnared by the devil to accomplish his will. God will grant release to them and set them free to do His will, but it seems to hinge upon our attitude. They will only repent if we are gentle.

These, then, are the figures that describe a faithful man of God. He is like a hard-working soldier, or athlete, or farmer who endures hardship. He is like a skillful craftsman who has learned to use his tools, and therefore has no reason to be ashamed of his work. He is like a household utensil, scrubbed clean, available to the master for his service. And he is like an unselfish servant who serves with gentleness and mercy, without resentment, without personal pique; he gives himself in service to others. These figures describe the faithful man of God. Or, if you like alteration, we must be *committed* in our labor; *confident* in our tools; *clean* in our living; and *courteous* in our demeanor.

Lord, our prayer this morning is that we may be men and women who are faithful. We ask that we may learn, as good work men, to use the word of God aright; and that in our personal lives we may be obedient to the truth and thus be clean vessels that you can use; and that as your servants we may be selfless, and inoffensive. This is our desire. We realize that it is only as we are strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus that we can exhibit these characteristics. Thank you for these truths. In Christ's name, Amen.

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