Diligent

Believers find truth and direction by studying God’s Word.

A church congregation elected a committee to oversee the purchase and installation of new carpet in the sanctuary. As part of their task, the committee, along with the church’s pastor, invited a local carpet sales representative to meet with them and give a pitch for the finest, most durable carpet the company offered. At the conclusion of the presentation, the committee members conferred privately for a few minutes and then called the sales representative back into the sanctuary to join them. They announced their unanimous decision to reject the carpet company’s bid for the project. And that is when the meeting got interesting!

The sales representative stood silently for a few moments, reflecting on the committee’s decision. Then he walked to the front of the sanctuary and knelt at the altar. The committee members watched in stunned silence, unsure of what to make of the man’s actions. Minutes later, the representative returned to address the committee, making the bold pronouncement that God had told him the church needed to purchase his company’s carpet. With no hesitation, the church’s pastor walked quietly to the altar and also knelt to pray. When he returned to the meeting, the pastor told the sales representative, “God told me that He wants to talk to you again.”

This story—which I first heard a preacher use in a sermon illustration when I was a youth—actually makes a serious point. While prayer is crucial for making wise decisions in every situation, we should not naively accept every claim to have heard God’s voice on a particular decision. In particular, we should reject claims of messages from God that prove to be inconsistent with the teachings of God’s Word.

In this session’s Bible passage, Paul urged Timothy to ground his life and ministry in Ephesus on the word of truth. By doing so, Timothy would be able to confront false teachers in the church, build up the congregation in their faith, and provide an example of an effective servant of Christ. This is an important message for believers today as well. We also face the temptations of false teaching and worldly attitudes. We need to heed Paul’s instruction that believers can find God’s truth and direction by studying God’s Word.
SESSION 9: Diligent

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 TIMOTHY 2:14-26

In 2 Timothy 2:1-13, Paul exhorted Timothy to stand strong in the grace of Christ as he trained church leaders to become disciple-makers. The young minister would need to stay disciplined in his life and ministry even in the face of hardship and suffering. Timothy could learn the importance of discipline from the examples of a good soldier, a determined athlete, and a hardworking farmer. Most of all, he could find motivation to endure from the examples of Christ and Paul.

In 2:14-26, Paul continued to give Timothy instructions that would help him meet the challenges he faced in Ephesus. The problems created by false teachers in the Ephesian church, a topic that had weighed heavily on Paul when he wrote 1 Timothy, again came to the forefront. Apparently the issue had not been completely resolved, and false teachers were still causing problems in the church (2:17-18). For Paul, the solution to this dilemma was the careful, consistent study of God’s Word, followed by accurately teaching the truths of Scripture to the church congregation.

Paul reminded Timothy that just as a homeowner might have both prized vessels and disposable vessels, God is most interested in having pure, honorable, and holy “vessels” to serve in His household, the church. Therefore, Timothy needed to flee youthful passions and pursue the qualities of righteousness, faith, love, and peace (2:22). Believers, led by Timothy’s example, must refuse to participate in the quarrels promoted by the false teachers. On the contrary, the teaching of the church leaders should be characterized by kindness and patience. Perhaps the false teachers might be motivated to repent, come to their senses, and escape the devil’s trap (2:25-26).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

TWO GROUPS (2 Tim. 2:14-19)

VERSE 14

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to fight about words. This is useless and leads to the ruin of those who listen.

In these verses, Paul returned to the issue of false teachers in Ephesus and Timothy’s role in dealing with the problem. Timothy was to remind
the Ephesian believers, including those engaged in false teaching, of all the instructions Paul had given in his letter. The phrase rendered **these things** could refer either generally to everything Paul had written or, more specifically, to the exhortations in 2:1-13. Either way, he urged Timothy to give bold leadership to the Ephesian church in getting on the solid foundation that is built on scriptural truth and holy living.

Not only was Timothy to **remind** the Ephesians, but he also was to **charge** (“warn,” NIV) them before God **not to fight about words**. The Greek word rendered **charge** emphasized stating something in a serious manner so that hearers gained a needed sense of urgency. Likewise, the phrase **before God** added a sense of solemn authority. The idea of fighting **about words** points to 1 Timothy 1:4, where Paul initially accused the false teachers in Ephesus of paying attention “to myths and endless genealogies” and promoting “empty speculations rather than God’s plan.” In 1 Timothy 6:4, Paul went on to warn that “an unhealthy interest in disputes and arguments over words” was not a benign activity; it was dangerous, leading to all kinds of sinful behavior. Therefore, Timothy needed to convey the seriousness and urgency of the situation to the Ephesian congregation. Not only was such arguing **useless** (“to no profit,” KJV; “of no value,” NIV) but it also would lead to the ruin of those who listen.

**VERSE 15**

**Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth.**

In contrast to the false teachers, Paul urged Timothy to **be diligent** (“study,” KJV; “do your best,” ESV; NIV) **to present** himself to God **as one approved**. The Greek word rendered **be diligent** can refer to the speed with which something is done (to move quickly) or to a person’s eagerness to discharge a given responsibility (being conscientious; making every effort). Timothy was to eagerly pursue God’s approval, not the approval of others. Approval came when one’s Christian character was tested and proven reliable.

Paul further urged Timothy to be a **worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed**. He had previously admonished Timothy not to be “ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, or of me his prisoner” (2 Tim. 1:8). Suffering for the gospel was not a cause for shame but rather a badge of honor that Christ would one day recognize and reward. By seeking God’s approval, Timothy could be sure that his work in ministry would cause him no shame.

Finally, Paul urged Timothy to present himself for God’s approval by **correctly teaching the word of truth**. The Greek word translated **correctly**
“teaching” literally means “to cut straight.” In this context, it emphasizes handling Scripture properly and applying it correctly. Timothy’s teaching ministry needed to focus consistently on the “sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and with the teaching that promotes godliness” (1 Tim. 6:3).

VERSE 16

Avoid irreverent and empty speech, since those who engage in it will produce even more godlessness,

Paul further commanded Timothy to avoid irreverent and empty speech (“profane and vain babblings,” KJV; “godless chatter,” NIV). The Greek word translated irreverent could refer either to something that was worthless or to that which was profane and worldly, having no spiritual value. The word translated empty speech referred to meaningless words, babble, idle chatter.

VERSE 17

and their teaching will spread like gangrene. Hymenaeus and Philetus are among them.

Paul used a vivid analogy to describe the danger of false teaching. First, it spread all too easily in the church. The Greek term rendered will spread literally means “to have pasture.” The word appears also in John 10:9 to describe the practice of sheep wandering from field to field in search of green pastures. Similarly, people are often prone to wander in search of the next new idea or teaching (see Acts 17:21).

Even worse, however, Paul described the danger of false teaching as spreading like gangrene (“a canker,” KJV). Here the English word gangrene actually is a transliteration of the Greek term. In Paul’s day, this term could describe a number of diseases that involved an inflamed, ulcerous condition. Left untreated, the condition ate away at healthy tissue until the whole body was affected, causing rottenness, severe pain, disability, and even death. Paul described the end toward which the false teachers and their followers were advancing. Left unchecked, their false teaching would continue to spread throughout the church in Ephesus, leaving great pain and ruin in its wake.
Paul named two of the false teachers: Hymenaeus [HIGH meh NEH uhs] and Philetus [fih LEE tuhs]. Hymenaeus probably was the same individual mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:19-20 as being among those who had “shipwrecked their faith” and whom the apostle had “delivered to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.” Philetus appears only here in the New Testament.

VERSE 18

They have departed from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and are ruining the faith of some.

The false teachings prevalent in the Ephesian church had grown worse. Previously, the false teachers were guilty of obsessing about mythical stories built on Old Testament genealogies and endlessly arguing over word meanings. While those kinds of false teachings were dangerous enough to stir up envy, slander, suspicion, and other evils among believers, now the false teachers had departed from the truth of the gospel message. The Greek word rendered departed (“erred,” KJV; “swerved,” ESV) could also mean “miss the mark,” “wander away,” or “go astray.” It refers to straying from truths and moral standards previously adhered to. The false teachers in Ephesus had turned aside from the sound gospel teachings Paul had proclaimed during his ministry there.

In particular, the false teachers such as Hymenaeus and Philetus were saying that the resurrection has already taken place. By the term the resurrection, Paul was referring not to Christ’s resurrection—which had indeed occurred already—but to the believer’s resurrection. It is possible that the false teachers believed only in a spiritual resurrection that happened at conversion. They denied the bodily resurrection of believers that Paul explained in great detail in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58. Perhaps they also had distorted the meaning of Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 2:6 that God has “raised [believers] up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” The denial of the believer’s bodily resurrection at Christ’s return seems to fit with the false teachers’ disdainful view of marriage and forbidding of certain foods (see 1 Tim. 4:3). Paul dealt with a similar false teaching in his letter to the Thessalonian church (see 2 Thess. 2:1-2).

Paul asserted that the false teachers were ruining the faith of some. The Greek word translated ruining also means “overturning,” or “causing to fall.” The term appears in John’s Gospel to describe what Jesus did to the moneychangers’ tables when He cleansed the temple (see John 2:15). Paul was not saying that believers could lose their salvation. He was saying, however, that the distorted teaching concerning the resurrection upended some believers’ settled convictions arising from the true gospel message.
VERSE 19

Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, bearing this inscription: The Lord knows those who are his, and let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness.

The connecting word nevertheless highlights a contrast between the ruinous teachings of the false teachers and the unchanging character of God. The spread of false teachings in the Ephesian church evidently created a sense of spiritual uncertainty among many believers. Paul used the imagery of God’s solid foundation to counter that sense of uncertainty. The phrase solid foundation may be a reference to the church. In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul referred to God’s household as “the pillar and foundation of the truth.”

The Greek word rendered inscription can also be translated “seal” (see KJV; ESV). The term was often used to describe the sealing of scrolls or documents with soft wax. Although the word was not usually associated with a building’s foundation, Paul may have envisioned an owner’s inscription affixed to a building’s foundation.

In any case, the first part of the inscription on God’s solid foundation probably derives from Numbers 16:5, a passage in which Moses warned a rebellious Israelite clan that the Lord had no difficulty identifying the people who truly belonged to Him and those who did not. Similarly, Paul reminded Timothy that the Lord knows those who are his. The inscription also echoed Jesus’ promise as the good shepherd: “I know my own, and my own know me” (John 10:14).

The second part of the inscription essentially issued a challenge to holy living. While the words let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness may not be a direct quotation from the Old Testament, the challenge echoed a message found in Psalm 34:14: “Turn away from evil and do what is good; seek peace and pursue it.” False teachers such as Hymenaeus and Philetus had shown by their refusal to embrace sound doctrine that their relationship with God was questionable. The believers in Ephesus needed to reject their false doctrine and turn away from the influence of the false teachers. Timothy must lead the church to work hard at “correctly teaching the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

EXPLORE FURTHER

In what ways does the saying “The Lord knows those who are his” give a warning to unbelievers? In what ways does the saying provide a message of both warning and assurance to believers?
TWO VESSELS (2 Tim. 2:20-22)

Paul challenged Timothy to flee from sin and pursue righteousness so that he could become highly useful in God’s service. Paul illustrated his point by describing various pots and utensils used in a house, emphasizing that some vessels have a special use because they are free from contamination.

VERSE 20

Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also those of wood and clay; some for honorable use and some for dishonorable.

The phrase a large house (“a great house,” KJV; ESV) evokes the image of a wealthy person’s home. In such a household, one would expect to find many vessels (“articles,” NIV) with a variety of functions. In most cases, the material used in making the vessels was linked to their intended use. On one hand, dining vessels for use in great feasts (bowls for food, cups for drink, and so forth) might be fashioned from gold and silver. Guests would feel honored by the host’s willingness to serve them on the household’s finest dishes. On the other hand, storage and cooking vessels might be made of wood and clay. In addition, vessels intended to be used in private—a chamber pot, for example—were made from materials of lesser value. Displaying such vessels in public would have been dishonorable.

Bible students have debated Paul’s intent in using this particular metaphor of contrast in this context. He had just warned Timothy to avoid the lifestyle and leadership approach of the false teachers in the Ephesus church (2:16-18). Was Paul saying that in every church there was likely to be both honorable and dishonorable servants of Christ and that Timothy must remain the gold and silver-type servant? Perhaps. In 1 Corinthians 3:12, he made a similar point using contrasting types of building materials (“gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw”) to teach that whatever Christ’s servants do in gospel work will either be revealed as lasting or destroyed as useless on the day of judgment. In my view, Paul was not proposing that some believers are ordinary, everyday vessels and others are special and thus more valuable. Rather, he was urging all believers to honor God by striving to be highly useful in their churches.

VERSE 21

So if anyone purifies himself from anything dishonorable, he will be a special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.
The word so (therefore, KJV; ESV) points to a conclusion or result stemming from the analogy presented in the preceding verse. Paul then constructed a conditional sentence to indicate that Timothy and other believers had a choice to make as to the kind of vessels they would become in God’s house, the church. That choice, set up by the words if anyone, consisted of purifying oneself from anything dishonorable. This phrase literally reads “from these” and thus could refer either to repenting of false teachings and improper behavior in general or to separating from the false teachers themselves. Paul may have had both choices in mind.

The Christian who repents and is made clean thus becomes a special instrument (“a vessel for honorable use,” ESV), set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. The Greek term rendered set apart can also be translated “made holy.” The verb tense points to a work of God accomplished in the believer, not something the believer achieves. Next, the believer then becomes useful in service to Christ the Master. Finally, the purified believer is prepared for truly good work. While good works cannot produce salvation, believers are created for good works (Eph. 2:10).

VERSE 22

Flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Paul then directed Timothy to flee from youthful passions. The phrase rendered youthful passions could refer to sexual desires but likely was not limited to sexual desires in this context. In the subsequent verses, Paul focused primarily on counseling Timothy to avoid the kinds of hotheaded debates the false teachers loved to engage in. Such quarreling led only to foolish arguments that sometimes characterized youthful immaturity.

Timothy needed to fix his eyes and heart on much different targets. Paul exhorted him to pursue (“follow,” KJV) righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Righteousness was reflected in conduct pleasing to God; faith and love reflected a commitment to God and love for God and the Ephesian believers. By adding the word peace, Paul emphasized the need for Timothy to display a gentle, healing disposition.

The final part of verse 22 calls to mind the closing words of 2 Timothy 2:19: “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.” The fact that the ones calling on the Lord would do so from a pure heart indicates that Paul probably was referring to believers who had rejected the false teachers and were marked by their worship of the one true God. Such Christians turn away from wickedness and pursue Christlike virtues.
TWO APPROACHES (2 Tim. 2:23-26)

VERSE 23
But reject foolish and ignorant disputes, because you know that they breed quarrels.

Paul challenged Timothy to reject foolish and ignorant disputes. The Greek word translated reject was also used in 1 Timothy 4:7, where it was rendered “have nothing to do with.” The phrase rendered ignorant disputes could also be translated “uninformed speculations” or “stupid arguments.” Paul was not forbidding informed, respectful discussions about the meaning of Scripture, as is evident in the following verses. Rather, he understood that the constant bickering of the false teachers only led to unnecessary and divisive quarrels (“strifes,” KJV). No church can be effective in its mission and ministry if believers constantly engage in heated arguments.

VERSE 24
The Lord’s servant must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient,

Paul concluded this section by discussing Timothy’s role as the Lord’s servant in restoring order in the Ephesian church. Paul listed five characteristics that Timothy needed to embody so that he could fulfill his important task. First, Timothy must not quarrel. He needed to avoid getting entangled in the fruitless arguments provoked by the false teachers. The same requirement was listed among the traits that an overseer must possess (see 1 Tim. 3:3). Timothy was to fight the good fight of gospel ministry with faith and a good conscience (see 1 Tim. 1:18-19), not through pointless verbal battles.

Second, Timothy needed to be gentle to everyone. The Greek word translated gentle can also mean “kind” (see ESV; NIV). This trait implies a peaceful disposition, one of the traits Timothy was to pursue. This attitude was to be directed toward all people, not just a small group.

Third, Paul stated that an effective servant of Christ needs to be able to teach. This characteristic was also mentioned in the qualifications of overseers in 1 Timothy 3:2. Timothy was to teach the truths of the gospel in a confident, capable way. He was not to go along passively with everything the false teachers were teaching.

Fourth, Timothy needed to be patient. The Greek word rendered patient carries the idea of enduring hardships without resentment toward God. The gentle confidence of Timothy’s teaching must not be changed simply on account of personal attacks by the false teachers. The young minister must patiently present the true gospel without fear.
VERSE 25

instructing his opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth.

Paul added a fifth quality of an effective servant of Christ: he instructs his opponents with gentleness. The Greek word rendered instructing has a range of meanings, including educating (see Acts 7:22; 22:3) and punishing (Luke 23:16,22). Along with these two meanings, the word was often used to describe guidance involving correction. The writer of Hebrews used the word in this way, comparing God’s discipline of His children to an earthly father’s discipline (see Heb. 12:6-10).

Timothy was to consistently embrace these five qualities in his ministry because of the possibility that his opponents might become repentant. The words perhaps God will grant them repentance confirm that God takes the initiative in bringing the rebellious back to Himself. God can and does work through His servants to confront disobedient Christians, but in the end God’s Spirit must give people repentance as a gift. In the church of Ephesus, such repentance would include the false teachers’ turning from their false doctrine and embracing the true gospel—the knowledge of the truth.

VERSE 26

Then they may come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Paul further described Timothy’s opponents in Ephesus as those who needed to come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil. The single Greek word translated come to their senses literally referred to regaining sobriety after being drunk. Figuratively, the term described regaining clarity and Christlikeness in one’s spiritual thinking. The false teachers had fallen for the devil’s temptations and slowly but surely had been taken ... captive to do Satan’s will. As Christ’s servant, Timothy had an opportunity to be used of God to undo the damage wreaked upon the Ephesian church by false teachings. May we as believers see ourselves as having similar opportunities!

EXPLORE FURTHER

How do the qualities Paul listed in verses 24-25 make a believer effective as a gospel witness? As a church leader? In which of these qualities would you like to see improvement in your service to Christ? Explain your response.