**How To Study the Bible**

**Pastoral Epistles**

**2 Timothy 2:14-26**

**What is your response when someone misrepresents you?**

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14 “keep reminding God’s people of these things” what things?

**Look back at the last two lessons:**

1. **to be like the dedicated Soldier**
2. **The Law-Abiding Athlete**
3. **The hard-working Farmer**
4. **Remember Christ**
5. **Remember that the word of God is never chained**
6. **Our suffering will be worth it**
7. **If we die, we live**
8. **Suffer, we reign**
9. **Deny, we’ll be denied**
10. **If faithless, he’s faithful**

15-17 Unashamed Worker, what does this look like? List the qualities of an unashamed worker and of the worker who should be ashamed. (Make your own list, then use the commentary as needed)

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Metaphor IV: The Unashamed Workman (verses 14–19)

We will leave verse 14 aside for the moment and proceed straight to verse 15. Several facts are immediately evident from this exhortation to Timothy to aim to be an unashamed workman.

First, the kind of work the Christian workman does is teaching. He is called to handle ‘the word of truth’.

Secondly, there are two kinds of workman. On the one hand, there are those who are ‘approved’, ‘tried and true’ (AG), who having been tested like coins or metals and passed the test are recognized as ‘sterling’;1 on the other hand there are those who are not approved, because they fail the test. The former group have ‘no need to be ashamed’, while the latter ought to be deeply ashamed of themselves.

Thirdly, the difference between these two categories concerns their handling or treatment of ‘the word of truth’, the good deposit.

So Paul sets these two kinds of teacher in contrast, and supplies an example of each. Timothy (15) is to be a good workman, approved and not ashamed. Hymenaeus and Philetus (17), however, are bad workmen who have forfeited God’s approval (whatever approval they may have obtained from men) and have every reason to be ashamed.

Further, the work of these good and bad workmen is summed up in pregnant verbs. The good workman ‘cuts straight’ (15, literally) the word of truth; the bad workman ‘swerves’ (18) or deviates from the truth. We must look at these more fully and separately.

a. The good workman

The verb in verse 15 (orthotomeō), translated in rsv ‘rightly handling’ means literally not to ‘divide rightly’ (av) but to ‘cut straight’. It is a very unusual word and occurs three times only in biblical Greek, once in the New Testament (this verse) and twice in the book of Proverbs, where in 3:6 we read ‘He will make straight your paths’, and in 11:5 ‘The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight’.

How then is ‘the word of truth’ being pictured that Timothy is commanded to make or cut it straight? Not as a sacrificial victim to be cut into pieces, as some ancient commentators thought; nor as a loaf, so that ‘Paul assigns to teachers the duty of carving or dividing the Word, like a father dividing the bread into small pieces to feed the children’; nor as a ribbon to be cut into strips, or a plot into allotments, as some modern dispensationalists teach; nor even, I think, as a stone which masons cut to fit into a building, as C. K. Barrett suggests; but rather as a road or path or—to be more modern—as a motorway or freeway needs to be cut straight through the countryside. Thus, Arndt and Gingrich define the verb as meaning to ‘ “cut a path in a straight direction” or “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’. Or, possibly, the metaphor may be taken rather from ploughing than from roadmaking, so that the NEB, following Chrysostom, renders it ‘driving a straight furrow in your proclamation of the truth’.

‘The word of truth’ is the apostolic faith which Timothy has received from Paul and is to communicate to others. For us it is, quite simply, Scripture. To ‘cut it straight’ or ‘make it a straight path’ is to be accurate on the one hand and plain on the other in our exposition. Apparently Sophocles used the word for ‘to expound soundly’ (MM). Thus the good workman is true to Scripture. He does not falsify it. Nor does he try to confuse people, like Elymas the sorcerer, by ‘making crooked the straight paths of the Lord’ (Acts 13:10). On the contrary, he handles the word with such scrupulous care that he both stays on the path himself, keeping to the highway and avoiding the byways, and makes it easy for others to follow.

b. The bad workman

The metaphor Paul employs to describe the bad workman is taken neither from civil engineering nor from agriculture but from archery. So now the truth is likened not to a road being built or a furrow being ploughed but to a target being shot at. The verb (18) is astocheō, which comes from stochos, a ‘target’, and means to ‘miss the mark’ and so to ‘deviate’ from something. It occurs three times in the Pastoral Epistles:

 ‘Certain persons by swerving from these (sc. genuine love, a good conscience and sincere faith) have wandered away into vain discussion’ (1 Tim. 1:16). ‘For by professing it (sc. ‘what is falsely called knowledge’) some have missed the mark as regards the faith’ (1 Tim. 6:21). ‘Who have swerved from the truth …’ or as in NEB, ‘shot wide of the truth’ (2 Tim. 2:18).

We are now in a position to grasp the alternative which Paul sets before every Christian teacher entrusted with the word of truth, and which determines whether he will be a good or a bad workman.

The word of truth is a target. As he shoots at this target, he will either hit it or miss it.

The word of truth is a road. As he cuts this road through the forest, he will make it either straight or crooked.

As a result of what he does, that is, how he teaches, others are bound to be affected, for better or for worse. If he cuts the road straight, people will be able to follow and so keep in the way. If, on the other hand, he misses the mark, the attention of the spectators will be distracted from the target and their eyes will follow the arrow however widely astray it has gone.

Of this grave danger Paul warns Timothy here. There were some in Asia who were teaching serious error. Instead of preaching Paul’s gospel which included ‘Jesus Christ risen from the dead’ (8), the pledge and pattern of his people’s resurrection, they were saying ‘that the resurrection is past already’ (18). Of course in one sense it is, in that Christ has risen and his people have already risen with him. Yet the resurrection of the body lies still in the future. The false teachers, however, were denying any bodily resurrection to come (cf. Acts 17:32; 1 Cor. 15:12). They were perhaps early Gnostics to whom the body was an evil encumbrance and the concept of any bodily resurrection therefore as inconceivable as it was undesirable. So they ‘spiritualized’ it as a release from the flesh through gnōsis (knowledge), or by asserting that the promise of resurrection had been entirely fulfilled when by faith and baptism we were raised with Christ. Similarly today some ‘demythologize’ the resurrection and speak only of faith rising in the Christian’s heart.

Such heretics were substituting for ‘the word of truth’ what Paul calls ‘disputing about words’ (14). The verb he employs here (logomacheō) occur nowhere else in the New Testament, although the noun logomachia, ‘word-battle’ (AG), is found in 1 Timothy 6:4 and some MSS of Titus 3:9. He seems to be referring to something ‘like the hair-splittings of the schoolmen’ in the middle ages. Elsewhere he calls it ‘godless chatter’ (16, kenophōnia or ‘empty talk’).

Paul’s instruction to Timothy about such bad workmen or false teachers is to ‘avoid’ them: ‘… charge them before the Lord to avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers’ (14). ‘Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will eat its way like gangrene’ (16, 17a).

The damage caused by such false teaching is double. It is both ‘godless’ and ‘gangrenous’. That is, in the first place, it leads people away from God. What verse 16 literally says is that those who hold such teaching ‘advance into more and more ungodliness’. It is hardly an ‘advance’, however. As Patrick Fairbairn comments,1 it is ‘a forward movement in the wrong direction’. In the second place, it spreads its infection in the community. Three times Paul reiterates this for emphasis: It ‘does no good, but only ruins the hearers’ (14b). ‘Their teachings are as dangerous as blood poisoning to the body and spread like sepsis from a wound’ (17 JBP). ‘They are upsetting the faith of some’ (18b).

These two tendencies of heresy are most revealing. We would be wise to ask ourselves regarding every kind of teaching both what its attitude is towards God and what effect it has upon men. There is invariably something about error which is dishonouring to God and damaging to men. The truth, on the other hand, always honours God, promoting godliness (cf. Tit. 1:16), and always edifies its hearers. Instead of causing a katastrophē (14), upsetting them or turning them upside down, it builds them up in faith, love and holiness.

Although the faith of men can be upset (18b), the foundation of God remains secure. This is the true church which he is building. It has a twofold ‘seal’ or ‘inscription’ (JBP, NEB). The first is secret and invisible, namely ‘The Lord knows those who are his’ and will therefore keep them safe for ever. The second is public and visible, namely ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity’, and so let him prove that he belongs to the Lord by his holiness. The reference is probably to the Old Testament story of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, from which incident both quotations come (Nu. 16:5, 26). Ultimately, Paul is saying, it is only the Lord who knows and recognizes his own people, and can tell the true from the spurious, for only he sees the heart. But though we cannot see the heart, we can see the life, which is the one reliable evidence of the heart’s condition, and is apparent to all. Both ‘seals’ are essential, however, the divine and the human, the unseen and the seen. Together they bear witness to ‘God’s firm foundation’, his true church.

John R. W. Stott, Guard the Gospel the Message of 2 Timothy, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 66–70.

20-22 Clean Vessels What is Paul wanting us to understand here?

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The picture which the apostle is conjuring up is clear. Every house is equipped with vessels or utensils of different kinds, pots and pans and dishes and the like. In a ‘great house’ or stately mansion these are many and varied. They may be divided approximately into two groups. There are the ‘vessels of gold and silver’, which are ‘for noble use’, possibly ‘for special occasions’ (JB), and in particular for the personal service of the master of the house. There are also vessels ‘of wood and earthenware’, which, apart from being of cheaper quality in themselves, are reserved for ignoble or menial use in the kitchen and the scullery.

To what is the apostle alluding by this metaphor? There can be little doubt that the ‘great house’ is God’s house, the visible or professing church. But what are the ‘vessels’? The use of the term elsewhere in the New Testament suggests that they stand not simply for members of the church, but for the church’s teachers. For example, Jesus had said to Ananias about the newly converted Saul of Tarsus: ‘he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel’ (Acts 9:15). Years later Paul described himself and his fellow-workers by a similar image when he wrote: ‘we have this treasure in earthen vessels’ (2 Cor. 4:7). In these verses ‘instrument’ and ‘vessel’ translate the same Greek word (skeuos) as Paul is now using in his letter to Timothy. A skeuos was any kind of utensil. It is true that when he called himself an earthen vessel he was applying the metaphor differently, for he was there emphasizing his physical infirmity, and not implying that he was fit only for ignoble use. Nevertheless, the theme of service is prominent in each verse. As a ‘vessel’ Paul’s function was to carry Christ’s name before unbelievers, and in the earthenware vessel he carried the treasure of the gospel, as a fragile pottery lamp carries the light.

From this usage I think we would be justified in concluding that the two sets of vessels in the great house (gold and silver for noble use, wood and earthenware for ignoble) represent not genuine and spurious members of the church but true and false teachers in the church. Paul is still, in fact, referring to the two sets of teachers he has contrasted in the previous paragraph, the authentic like Timothy and the bogus like Hymenaeus and Alexander. The only difference is that he changes the metaphor from good and bad workmen to noble and ignoble vessels.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the privilege which the apostle here sets before Timothy in verse 21. Indeed he extends it to any and every Christian minister or worker who will fulfil the condition, for his statement is couched in quite general terms: ‘if anyone purifies himself’. The privilege is described by simple, yet beautiful expressions. ‘He will be a vessel for noble use.’ This is then elaborated by three further expressions: ‘consecrated’ (permanently set apart), ‘useful (or ‘serviceable’) to the master of the house’ and ‘ready for any good work’. No higher honour could be imagined than to be an instrument in the hand of Jesus Christ, to be at his disposal for the furtherance of his purposes, to be available whenever wanted for his service.

The master of the house lays down only one condition. The vessels which he uses must be clean. His promise hinges on this. It is evident at once that some kind of self-purification is the indispensable condition of usefulness to Christ, but exactly what is it? The words ‘from what is ignoble’ are the RSV interpretation of apo toutōn ‘from these’ (plural), and ‘these’ must refer back to the ‘vessels for ignoble use’ of the previous verse. In what sense, then, are we to purify ourselves from these? It cannot mean that we are to cut adrift from all nominal church members whom we suspect of being spurious, and secede from the visible church, for Jesus indicated in his parable that the weeds had been sown among the wheat and could not be successfully separated from them until the harvest. Besides, we have already seen that it is teachers rather than members who are indicated by the two sorts of vessels. This fact and the context suggest, therefore, that we are to hold ourselves aloof from the kind of false teachers who, like Hymenaeus and Philetus, both deny some fundamental of the gospel and (according to 1 Tim. 1:19, 20) have also violated their conscience and lapsed into some form of unrighteousness. But Paul’s condition is more radical even than this. What we are to avoid is not so much contact with such men as their error and their evil. To purify ourselves ‘from these’ is essentially to purge their falsehood from our minds and their wickedness from our hearts and lives. Purity, then—purity of doctrine and purity of life—is the essential condition of being serviceable to Christ.

That this is the correct interpretation is confirmed by the fact that the metaphor of the great house and its vessels (verses 20 and 21) is sandwiched in between two clear allusions to personal holiness: ‘Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity’ (19) and ‘So shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness …’ (22). It is perfectly true that in his sovereign providence God has sometimes chosen to use impure vessels as the instruments both of his judgment and of his salvation. In Old Testament days he described pagan Assyria as ‘the rod of my anger’, with which he smote recalcitrant Israel, and which he then discarded (Is. 10:5 ff.). He also called the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar ‘my servant’ through whom he judged his people, and the Persian king Cyrus his ‘shepherd’ and his ‘anointed’ through whom he redeemed them (Je. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10 and Is. 44:28; 45:1). But these were exceptional cases; they were also national, rather than personal. The overwhelming emphasis of Scripture is that God chooses to use clean vessels, ‘instruments of righteousness’ (Rom 6:13), for the fulfilment of his purposes. Certainly in Paul’s exhortation to Timothy he must purify himself if he is to be fit for the Master to use.

The apostle now elaborates what he means in an outspoken appeal which is both negative and positive. Negatively, Timothy is to ‘shun youthful passions’. This is not to be understood exclusively as a reference to sexual lust, but to ‘self-assertion as well as self-indulgence’, to selfish ambition, headstrong obstinacy, arrogance and indeed all the ‘wayward impulses of youth’ (NEB). Positively, Timothy is to ‘aim at’ the four essential marks of a Christian—‘righteousness, faith, love and peace’—and he is to pursue these in good company (maybe to compensate for the company he will have to avoid if he is to ‘purify himself from what is ignoble’), the company of those ‘who call upon the Lord from a pure heart’, that is, who share with Timothy the same hunger for righteousness and who with unalloyed sincerity cry to God to satisfy their hunger.

As we listen to Paul’s moral exhortation, it is important not to miss the sharp contrast between its negative and positive aspects and in particular between the two verbs ‘shun’ and ‘aim at’. Both are strongly suggestive. Pheugō (‘shun’) means literally to ‘seek safety in flight’ or ‘escape’ (AG). It is used literally of flight from physical danger, as when Moses fled from Pharaoh’s wrath and the holy family from Herod’s (Acts 7:29; Mt. 2:13). So too the hireling flees from the wolf; and the Judean Christians, when in AD 70 Jerusalem was surrounded by the legions of Rome, were to flee to the mountains (Jn. 10:12, 13; Lk. 21:21). In just the same way, when the verb is used figuratively, it denotes flight from spiritual danger. All sinners are urged to ‘flee from the wrath to come’ (Mt. 3:7). All Christians are commanded to flee from idolatry, from immorality, from the spirit of materialism and the love of money, and here from youthful passions (1 Cor. 10:14; 6:18; 1 Tim. 6:11). True, we are also told to withstand the devil, so that he may flee from us (Jas. 4:7). But we are to recognize sin as something dangerous to the soul. We are not to come to terms with it, or even negotiate with it. We are not to linger in its presence like Lot in Sodom (Gn. 19:15, 16). On the contrary we are to get as far away from it as possible as quickly as possible. Like Joseph, when Potiphar’s wife attempted to seduce him, we are to take to our heels and run (Gn. 39:12).

The verb diōkō (‘aim at’) is the exact opposite. For if pheugō means to run away from, diōkō means to run after, to ‘pursue, chase, in war or hunting’ (LS). Its distinctive literal use in the New Testament (about 30 times) is of persecution. Paul himself uses it to describe his pre-conversion activities, how he violently persecuted God’s church (Gal. 1:13) and in his raging fury against the Christians even harried them out of Jewry into foreign cities (Acts 26:11). Metaphorically, this verb is used to portray the Christian’s pursuit of the will of God. Under the figure of a chariot-race Paul describes himself as straining forward with eagerness, and adds ‘I press on’ and again ‘I press on toward the goal’ (Phil. 3:12, 14). In particular, the Christian is urged to pursue moral righteousness with the same assiduity with which the Jews pursued legal righteousness (Rom. 9:31). In other passages this righteousness or ‘holiness’ (Heb. 12:14) is broken up into its constituent parts and supplemented with other virtues. Thus, we are to go in hot pursuit of ‘righteousness, faith, love and peace’ (here) or ‘righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness’ (1 Tim. 6:11), or simply ‘love’ (1 Cor. 14:1), and specially that love for strangers called ‘hospitality’ (Rom. 12:13) and the ‘good’ of others which love always seeks (1 Thes. 5:15), or simply ‘peace’, that all-inclusive grace, together with ‘what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding’ (Heb. 12:14a; 1 Pet. 3:11 quoting Ps. 34:15; Rom. 14:19). In all these verses the same verb diōkō ‘pursue’ is used.

So, then, putting back together these two parts of Paul’s exhortation which we have studied in separation, we are both to run away from spiritual danger and to run after spiritual good, both to flee from the one in order to escape it and to pursue the other in order to attain it. This double duty of Christians—negative and positive—is the consistent, reiterated teaching of Scripture. Thus, we are to deny ourselves and to follow Christ. We are to put off what belongs to our old life and to put on what belongs to our new life. We are to put to death our earthly members and to set our minds on heavenly things. We are to crucify the flesh and to walk in the Spirit. It is the ruthless rejection of the one in combination with the relentless pursuit of the other which Scripture enjoins upon us as the secret of holiness. Only so can we hope to be fit for the Master’s use. If the promise is to be inherited (‘he will be a vessel for noble use’), the condition must be fulfilled (‘if any one purifies himself from what is ignoble’).

John R. W. Stott, Guard the Gospel the Message of 2 Timothy, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 71–75.

23-26 The Lord’s Servant. Describe the Lord’s Servant.

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The metaphor changes yet again. The vessel in the house becomes a slave in the household. The skeuos is transformed into a doulos. But before outlining the kind of behaviour fitting to the Lord’s servant, Paul sets the context in which he has to live and work. He reverts to the ‘wordy debates’ of verse 14 and the ‘godless chatter’ of verse 16.

The word translated ‘controversies’ (23) (zētēsis, a singular noun) is normally used in one of two senses. It means either an ‘investigation’, like the legal enquiry into charges against Paul which Festus told King Agrippa he was at a loss to know how to make (Acts 25:20), or a ‘discussion’ like the debate between the apostles and the Judaizers over circumcision (Acts 15:2, 7). If it is used here in the former sense, it will refer to some kind of philosophical investigation and could be translated ‘speculation’. But if it is used in the latter sense, the allusion will be to a ‘controversy’.

The word occurs three times in the Pastoral Epistles, once in each letter (1 Tim. 6:4; 2 Tim. 2:23; Tit. 3:9), or four times if the slightly stronger word ekzētēsis is added (1 Tim. 1:4). This latter word certainly seems to mean a ‘useless speculation’ (AG). In the context it is the fruit of a preoccupation with ‘myths and endless genealogies’. At the end of the same letter, however, the word zētēseis (plural) is coupled with logomachiai, meaning ‘word-battles’, both of which are said to ‘produce envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions and wrangling’ (1 Tim. 6:4, 5a). So there the emphasis is rather upon heated controversy.

Perhaps there is no need to choose between the two meanings. They certainly appear to be combined in Titus 3:9 where Titus is told to avoid four things—‘controversies (zētēseis), genealogies (the speculative idea again), dissensions (ereis) and quarrels (machas, ‘battles’) over the law’. This last word is prominent in 2 Timothy 2 also, for in verse 23 Paul warns that zētēseis ‘breed quarrels’ (machas again), and forbids people, in verse 14, logomachein (to dispute about words; cf. 1 Tim. 6:4) or in verse 24 machesthai (to quarrel or fight). Calvin’s expression ‘quarrelsome speculation’1 neatly unites both emphases.

What, then, is being prohibited to Timothy, and through him to all the Lord’s servants and ministers today? We cannot conclude that this is a prohibition of all controversy. For when the truth of the gospel was at stake Paul himself had been an ardent controversialist, even to the extent of opposing the apostle Peter to his face in public (Gal. 2:11–14). Besides, in these very Pastoral Epistles he is urging Timothy and Titus to guard the sacred deposit of the truth and contend for it. Every Christian must in some sense ‘fight the good fight of the faith’ (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7), seeking to defend and preserve it. What is forbidden us is controversies which in themselves are ‘stupid and senseless’ and in their effect ‘breed quarrels’. They are ‘stupid’ or ‘futile’ (JB) because they are speculative. For the same reason they are ‘senseless’ (apaideutos), literally ‘uninstructed’ or even ‘undisciplined’, because they go beyond Scripture and do not submit to the intellectual discipline which Scripture should impose upon us. They also inevitably ‘breed quarrels’ because when people forsake revelation for speculation, they have no agreed authority and no impartial court of appeal. They lapse into pure subjectivism and so into profitless argument in which one man’s opinion is as good (or bad) as another’s. If only the church had heeded this warning! The combination of unbiblical speculations and uncharitable polemics has done great damage to the cause of Christ.

The fundamental characteristic of ‘the Lord’s servant’ is to be ‘gentleness’ (24, 25a). We have already seen that he is called to a teaching ministry. He therefore needs to be ‘an apt teacher’ (didaktikos), endowed with a gift or aptitude for teaching. His instruction will sometimes have to be negative as well as positive That is to say, he is called not only to teach the truth to the people committed to his care, but also to correct error. He must not shrink from ‘correcting his opponents’, the ‘people who dispute what he says’ (JB). But in all his ministry, instructing and correcting alike, he will exhibit the same distinctive quality. He ‘must not be quarrelsome’. Instead, he will be ‘kindly to everyone … forbearing’ and characterized by ‘gentleness’. The first word (ēpios) means ‘mild’ and is used by Paul to describe the attitude of ‘a nurse taking care of her children’ (1 Thes. 2:7). The second word (anexikakos) means literally ‘bearing evil without resentment’ (AG) and so forbearing of people’s unkindness, patient towards their foolishness and tolerant of their foibles. The last word of the three (praütēs) adds to the gentleness portrayed by the other two the notes of ‘humility, courtesy, considerateness and meekness’ (AG). Its opposite is to be brash, haughty and rude.

All this is the demeanour which is fitting in ‘the Lord’s servant’ and is, of course, deliberately reminiscent of ‘the servant of the Lord’ portrayed in the ‘servant songs’ of Isaiah. That servant was a teacher, for the Lord God gave him ‘the tongue of those who are taught’, and he used it wisely. He knew ‘how to sustain with a word him that is weary’. So meek was he in his ministry that he would never shout or make a noise, and so sensitive that he would deal gently with people whose courage had been bruised and whose faith burned low. He would never break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. And when people rose up in opposition to him he did not resist or retaliate. He gave his back to the smiters, his checks to those who pulled out his beard, his face to those who spat upon him, and eventually allowed himself to be led like a sheep silent and unresisting to the slaughter (Is. 50:4; 42:2, 3; 50:6; 53:7). Such was Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord’s servant par excellence, who described himself as ‘gentle and lowly in heart’ (Mt. 11:29). And this same ‘meekness and gentleness of Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:1) must characterize all who claim to be the Lord’s servants today.

Moreover, if the Lord’s servant adorns his Christian teaching with a Christian character, and if he is meek in his dealings with the wayward, ‘correcting his opponents with gentleness’, lasting good may follow. God himself, through such a gentle ministry, may perform a conspicuous work of salvation.

We must observe carefully in verses 25b, 26 how these opponents of apostolic truth are regarded. They are evidently sinful, for they need to ‘repent’, and also in error for they need to ‘come to know the truth’. But most striking of all is that the evil and the error in which they are involved are both seen as symptoms of ‘the snare of the devil’ from whom they need to be rescued. And further, important as is the part played by the gentle servant of the Lord in correcting them, it is God who gives or grants (dōē) them repentance, God who illumines their mind to acknowledge the truth, and God who liberates them from Satan’s power.

Although the RSV is not incorrect in its rendering of the first two as separate stages (‘repent and come to know the truth’), the Greek expression is literally ‘grant them repentance unto (eis) acknowledgment of truth’, thus making their acknowledgment of the truth the consequence of their repentance. It is a good example of the strong link which Scripture everywhere forges between the moral and the intellectual. Everybody knows that our belief conditions our behaviour, but not everybody is so clear that our behaviour also conditions our belief. Just as to violate our conscience leads to the shipwreck of our faith (1 Tim. 1:19), so to repent of our sin leads to an acknowledgment of the truth.

There is some uncertainty about the last phrase of verse 26 ‘after being captured by him to do his will’. It is not clear whether the him (who captures them) and the his (whose will they do) relate to God or to the devil. Some commentators think that both refer to God and thus describe the divine capture which secures the people’s escape from the devil. They are ‘caught now by God and made subject to his will’ (NEB mg.). The verb ‘captured’ is zōgreō and means to ‘capture alive’ (AG). Its only other New Testament use is in Luke 5:10, where Jesus tells Peter the fisherman that in future he will ‘catch men’. Perhaps for this reason some commentators attribute the capture to the Lord’s servant himself; e.g. Lock: ‘May it not even be that I shall be a fisher of men, and save them alive, and bring them back to do their true Master’s will?’1

Others think that the captivity is the devil’s, although the will is God’s. In this case the people ‘escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him, to do his (that is, God’s) will’ (RSV mg.).

But most commentators seem to follow AV and RSV in taking both ‘him’ and ‘his’ as relating to the devil. In this case the phrase is simply enlarging on what is meant by the snare of Satan. In it ‘the devil caught them and kept them enslaved’ (JB). If this is correct, it enables us to see behind stage in every Christian evangelistic and teaching ministry. Behind the scenes, invisible to men on the stage and in the audience, a spiritual battle is being fought out. The devil’s grim activity is graphically depicted. He is likened to a hunter who captures his quarry alive in some clever ‘snare’ or trap. He also drugs or inebriates them, for the word used of his captives’ escape (ananēphō) means literally to ‘become sober’ or ‘come to one’s senses again’ (AG) after a period of diabolical intoxication. From such a captivity, in which men are both trapped and doped by the devil, only God can deliver them by giving them repentance unto an acknowledgment of the truth. Yet he effects the rescue through the human ministry of one of his servants, who avoids quarrelling and teaches with kindness, forbearance and gentleness.

Looking back over the chapter, we are now able to picture in our minds the composite portrait of the ideal Christian minister or worker which Paul has been painting with a variety of words and images. As good soldiers, law-abiding athletes and hardworking farmers, we must be utterly dedicated to our work. As unashamed workmen we must be accurate and clear in our exposition. As vessels for noble use we must be righteous in our character and conduct. And as the Lord’s servants we must be courteous and gentle in our manner. Thus each metaphor concentrates on a particular characteristic which contributes to the portrait as a whole, and in fact lays down a condition of usefulness. Only if we give ourselves without reserve to our soldiering, running and farming can we expect results. Only if we cut the truth straight and do not swerve from it shall we be approved by God and have no need to be ashamed. Only if we purify ourselves from what is ignoble, from all sin and error, shall we be vessels for noble use, serviceable to the Master of the house. Only if we are gentle and not quarrelsome, as the Lord’s true servants, will God grant our adversaries repentance, knowledge of the truth and deliverance from the devil.

Such is our heavy responsibility to labour and suffer for the gospel. No wonder the chapter began with an exhortation to ‘be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus’.

John R. W. Stott, Guard the Gospel the Message of 2 Timothy, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 76–80.