

Here's a story that I hope will give clarity to what young Timothy was feeling when the Apostle Paul wrote him this encouraging letter. It was Sunday morning and Mrs. Jones was wondering why her son hadn't gotten up for church. Mrs. Jones went into her son's bedroom and insisted that he get up, but her son sharply said that he had no intention of going to church. To this his mother replied: *Bob, you are 38 years old! Now get out of bed and go to church! I don't like church*, Bob complained: *The people are demanding, they're critical and opinionated, fickle and hypocritical and they gossip! Why should I go to church?* Mrs Jones said: *There's one good reason why you should go: Bob, you're their minister!* An old joke but for some ministers there may be some truth in this joke. Those in ministry can get worn down occasionally.

Timothy was worn down and tired of holding his ground against people who opposed him, and from quarrelling with the false teachers in Ephesus. Paul wrote to Timothy advising him how to minister to those quarrelsome people. Paul advises Timothy not to give up and to: *Remind your people of this and give them a solemn warning in God's presence not to fight over words. It does no good, but only ruins the people who listen.* Paul is insisting that Timothy put an end to these harmful discussions.

We should be clear about the nature of these harmful discussions. Timothy's not dealing with gossip, nor is he dealing with issues to do with worship or money. ***Paul advised Timothy to confront the harmful discussions that concern doctrine.*** How appropriate for the times the Church is living through in our time. Paul is most concerned about the doctrine that is being taught by certain people, *to the ruin of the people who listen!* Paul expresses his concern that this teaching is so wrong that it will ruin those who hear it! False doctrine has always been dangerous and Paul's words for Timothy contain a message that's so relevant for today's church. We live in a society that cherishes individual beliefs. A statement that begins with the phrase *I believe*, has become a sacred statement that no one's allowed to question.

Yet, here we have Paul *insisting* that Timothy questions and then corrects, the erroneous beliefs and false teaching of others. Is Paul being narrow-minded, believing that he has a monopoly on the truth? I don't think he is for Paul is aware that conflicting opinions cause quarrels, and wrong opinions can harm communities of faith. Let's read verses 14 to 18 to get a sense of how serious Paul considers this issue to be:

***V14 - The beliefs of the false teachers only ruin the people who listen.***

***V17 - The effect of wrong doctrine is an open sore that eats away at the flesh.***

***V18 - The erroneous doctrine of the false teachers has upset the faith of some believers.***

I believe that a healthy Christian faith is made up of three parts: God's Word, The Holy Spirit and the Doctrine of the church. To have a healthy faith, there has to be a balance to those three elements. It's commonplace for churches to focus on one or two of these elements and neglect the third. For instance, some churches focus purely on Word and Doctrine and abandon the place of the Holy Spirit in their faith. Others over emphasise the work of the Holy Spirit and ignore doctrine. My view is that the bedrock of our faith is the Bible, and it's through God's Holy Spirit that we interpret what God is saying to us through His word. I believe that God speaks to us and guides us through His Word, the bible; and through the Holy Spirit. But doctrine gives us our roots as Presbyterians, it's our doctrine that tells our story as Christians and explains what we believe and why. And it's this skewed doctrine that is concerning Paul in this letter to Timothy.

I've said before that I hold to a simple faith and I consider the fundamentals to be that Christ was born of a virgin, came to earth fully human and fully God, was crucified to atone for our sins, died and rose again after three days, and is alive and reigns with the Father, and it's this doctrine that our faith is built upon. Yet, I know of ministers who don't preach the resurrection because it's not scientifically possible! Not only is this view harmful to the Christian community, it's also illogical. If our faith and hope in eternal life is through the resurrected Christ alone, then to deny the resurrection makes our faith redundant. The light cannot be both *on* and *off*, it's one or the other! A surface can't be both wet and dry!

Paul's not being unreasonably narrow in his counsel to Timothy, he's being consistent. In the face of wrong doctrine ***Christians must be willing to stand for biblical correctness and truth, even when it crosses swords with political correctness, or scientific logic!***

Paul wants Timothy repair the damage done by false teaching and he tells Timothy: *Do your best to win full approval in God's sight, as a worker who is not ashamed of his work, one who correctly teaches the message of God's truth.* (v5) In this one verse, Paul provides Timothy all he needs for combating harmful doctrine of false teaching. As usual, Paul's guidance to Timothy is helpful for us today because we face false teaching every day. Our media through television and newspapers contains beliefs that contradict the Bible. The obvious examples are the acceptance of illicit sex, language where Lord's name is being taken in vain. We find false teaching everywhere, even in the church! False teaching is evident when someone trying to be open and accepting says that *all religions are equally valid, and that we should be open to all.* Not they're not, and the way to the Father is through the Son alone.

False teaching comes from those who claim that God is love and therefore there can be no hell. False teaching comes from ministers who preach the version of the Bible that they're comfortable with. There are ministers who choose to ignore the Bible passages that address Jesus' preference for the poor, and I confess my own prejudice here, because I wholeheartedly believe in Jesus's preference for the poor! So, be careful of who trust and pray for discernment. Always be ready to challenge me or any minister; especially if you think we're preaching their own agenda.

It's for this reason that Paul's counsel to Timothy is vital to us having a healthy Christian faith. Paul's first lesson to Timothy is that ***our first responsibility is to God***, our priority must be God's approval! Timothy like most ministers, probably wanted to be liked by his congregation because we all need human approval. Paul reminds him and me, that being *approved by God* is what ultimately matters.

The second teaching Paul gives to Timothy is that ***We must not be ashamed of God's Word.*** Paul is telling Timothy *not be ashamed of the testimony of Christ.* Being ashamed of God's Word is a real temptation for some Christians because scientists tell us that the miracles in the Bible are impossibilities, they discount the virgin birth and Christ's resurrection. Historians tell us that no document that has come together the way the Bible has can be considered completely accurate. So keep in mind that false teachers are not all con artists or criminals. They're usually people who teach in universities, stand in pulpits and write books. Against the assault from today's false teachers, let's heed Paul's warning to Timothy: *Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord. (1:8)*

Paul's third teaching to Timothy is: ***We must learn to handle accurately God's Word.*** Being able to *handle accurately* God's Word is vital to fighting false teaching for how can we recognise error if we don't know what the truth looks like? If our knowledge of Scripture is poor how can we recognise false teaching! Note that Paul's doesn't tell Timothy to start more mid-week Bible studies or spend time studying the Bible as an academic exercise. Paul's desire is that we correctly teach the message of God's truth. The Greek literally translates as cutting straight the word of truth. *Cut straight the word of truth!* Paul uses a carpentry metaphor to describe our approach to God's Word. If you've ever cut wood with a saw you'll know that the faster you try to saw wood, the more chance there is of the saw jumping from the groove in the wood into your hand. To saw wood properly and safely, you must carefully draw the saw across the wood in a measured fashion. The same can be said with reading Scripture; it must never be read flippantly or in a hurried manner but slowly and carefully.

False teaching is all around us just as it was for Timothy. I try to start each day by spending a few minutes reading the Bible and praying, and I use *Everyday with Jesus Bible* notes. The reason I use Bible notes to accompany my study is to prevent me from reading something into a passage which isn't there, because we're susceptible to reading the Bible into our own situation and for our own purpose rather than God's.

There are times when we're in danger of appropriating incorrect beliefs about God and Bible notes or commentaries can help us to correct the errors we may make about scripture. If we are confused by the ever-increasing gulf between the world's standards and Christ's standards, then Paul's teaching to Timothy from this passage will help.

Our starting point is to recognize that *our first responsibility is to God*. It's His approval which we must seek above all else. Secondly, *we must never be ashamed of God's Word*. As Psalm 119 has said, God's Word *is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path*. Thirdly, *we must learn to handle accurately handle God's Word*. The Bible is no ordinary book. It has the power to transform change and guide us to God. And when misused, the Bible can be twisted in a way so that it damages the faith of others. If God's Word is to be read properly, we must learn to interpret it correctly.

Paul's encouragement to Timothy gave him a Godly perspective. A perspective based on God's word, the Bible. Hopefully, Paul's words can give us perspective when we read scripture. Or when we pick up a newspaper, or turn on the television and wonder where our church is heading. As I have said repeatedly, it's not easy being true to our Christian faith in the world we live in. There are many challenges to living by faith, and there are those who would have us compromise our faith. When you feel pressured by the world and those around you turn to God's word for guidance and encouragement. The Bible gives sustenance for our souls, its words feed our faith.

**Put God first: Do not be ashamed of His Word; and read God's Word accurately and you will be satisfied in Him.** This is what God has brought us to faith for: *God is most glorified in you, when you are most satisfied in Him!* **Amen.**

(1933 words)