

A Truth-Lover

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Date: 16 November 2025

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- [0:00] Let's pray. Father, as I come now, I pray indeed that you would help me to be someone! in Christ. I pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, if you've grown up in church and Sunday school, chances are you will know this classic song.
- Read your Bible. Keep going. Keep going. Read your Bible.
- And very good. Now, that little song teaches us something true, doesn't it? God's people grow through his word and prayer.
- Passages like 1 Peter 2 verse 2 and Colossians 1 verse 9 and 10 confirm that. But here's a question for you. Is it possible to be immersed in a Bible-heavy environment where you attend multiple Bible studies?
- [1:27] discuss the word at length? Listen to all manners of Bible podcasts? And still not grow? Is it possible to be in a majority Christian city where the churches are packed every Sunday and still not grow?
- worse could all this exposure not just leave you stagnant but actually pull you backward spiritually even to the point of spiritual death?
- The sobering answer is yes. Because that was exactly Timothy's environment. Timothy, you see, wasn't living in a place like Afghanistan Pakistan or Somalia where people had no access to the word?
- Quite the opposite in fact. In his city there were plenty of teachers and plenty of talk about God. And yet people were not growing spiritually.
- Why? Because an abundance of religious talk is not the same as an abundance of truth. You see, you might remember from two weeks ago that the gospel can and does provoke a hostile reaction.
- [2:49] After all, Poles ended up in prison. And when you are faced with fierce opposition, what might you do? You could give up the Christian faith altogether.
- Some did. Or you could begin to adapt the faith to make it more acceptable. And that is exactly what was happening.
- Some teachers began reshaping the gospel to suit the world. And as a result, they gained worldly success. Crowds, followers, influence.
- But though they claim to be Bible-based, they weren't truly teaching God's word. So what should Timothy do? What should we do?
- Should we just go with the flow and follow whatever is popular as long as it mentions Jesus and quotes a few verses? After all, as long as it's Bible, we'll grow, right?
- [3:53] Paul answers differently. He says, actually, even if you consume a lot of religious content, you can still die of spiritual malnutrition if the Bible is being misused.
- Like unregulated vitamin supplements, consuming the wrong teaching can actually poison your spiritual health. So, if you want to grow up in Christ, you can't just receive Bible teaching from any source.

Rather, you must stay close to those who are approved by God, faithful workers who handle his word rightly. That is the heart of Paul's message in today's passage.

So let us explore what he has to say, and we'll do so under two headings. Number one, don't stray after unapproved talkers, but stay close to approved workers.

And number two, don't chase foolish hot heads, but follow faithful servants instead. In short, be a truth lover.

[5 : 09] For that's where real growth happens. So firstly, don't stray after unapproved talkers, but stay close to approved workers.

You see, if you look closely at all these teachers floating around, what do you notice about them? Answer, they talk a lot. Verse 14 implies how they use their words.

Verse 16 points out their chatter. Verse 18 gives specific examples of what they were saying. And these guys were smooth talkers.

silver-tongued men with ready audiences. That's the impression verses 14 to 18 gives. But notice, Paul never calls them workers.

They are simply talkers because they only perform with words, not labor for the gospel. Indeed, verse 14, it appears they love to quarrel about words.

[6 : 15] They love to get into word battles. That's the literal translation. So they love to get into complicated but unprofitable debates.

In a culture that loves rhetorical skill and intellectual flair, these men love to show off how smart and well-read they were.

And the crowds that followed them loved to watch them put down their opponents with clever mic drop moments. It was just so satisfying.

And if you think that is a first-century thing, let me invite you to hop onto YouTube or TikTok. Look for videos with titles such as Watch How So-and-So Own the Liberals or see Mr. X Take Down His Haters and notice they all have hundreds of thousands of views.

Even many professing Christians love to see words battles. They love verbal spats over culture wars. But Paul says that kind of talk doesn't build up the church.

[7 : 34] On the contrary, verse 14, it ruins it. It is of no value. Now, Paul doesn't mean we never engage with or call out false teaching.

He does so himself a little later on in verse 18. But he is against the kind of verbal showmanship that delights more in stoking controversy than in showcasing truth.

Because, you see, when people are into quarreling, that means they are less into listening. They don't listen to others, and quite likely, they are not really listening to God either.

Instead, as the 19th century commentator Matthew Henry noticed long ago, whenever people become obsessed with word battles and pointless debates, bad things usually follow.

Because such people are always competing. And whenever someone's opinion starts gaining more attention than bias, they start becoming jealous.

[8 : 48] So they gear up for a fight. And that in turn leads to more suspicion, more conflict. There is just zero edifying fruit.

So, if you want to grow, Paul says, avoid those who love to quarrel. Don't get sucked into endless command threats. Don't mow over their words while neglecting the words of Jesus.

Don't swallow the red pills they claim to offer. And don't just steer clear of quarreling words, verse 16 says.

Avoid godless chatter too. The ESV calls it irreverent babble. You see, the problem with many of these teachers isn't so much that their talk is false, it's that their talk is empty.

As someone put it so well, there may be lots of words being spoken, but there is not much being said. They might speak eloquently for an hour, but if you pay close attention, you realise all they've given you at the end are meaningless cliches and smoke and mirror explanations.

[10:10] I don't know if you've ever sat through a sermon like that. I have. There might be a funny story or two. There might be some opinions on everything from Laksa to American politics.

There might be spiritual sounding phrases like, God is calling you to a deeper place, or speak life over your future peppered throughout. And these spoken words might not necessarily be immoral, but it is godless, because even if the name of God was used liberally throughout, the truths of God were not taught at all.

And if that is our steady diet, no wonder we don't grow. In fact, we might even regress. Did you notice verse 16 again, how this kind of talk will lead you not to grow more and more like Christ, but less and less like him?

if the teacher persists in godless chatter, their character will increasingly reflect their words.

They will become ever more ungodly, as their teaching lacks God's truth, grace, and power. But what is worse is the impact their teaching can have on others.

[11:42] Verse 17, their teaching will spread like gangrene. Now, gangrene is the death of body tissue due to the lack of blood flow.

It causes skin discoloration, swelling, and pain. And let me advise you against googling for the images of gangrene. It looks really horrible.

And when gangrene is left untreated, it basically means you die. that's what happens if you indulge in such teaching. It could eventually kill you.

So you need to cut it off, just like you need to amputate a gangrene's foot. Otherwise, it will spread quickly and bring more and more ugliness and death to the body of Christ.

That's what Paul is saying. So, here's a question for us. Are they teachers we need to stop listening to?

[12:51] Because if you want to grow up in Christ, you need to cut yourself from the godless chatter of people who claim to teach you amazing spiritual stuff, but really only give you trivial stories and hollow reasoning, who live verses out of context and repurpose them to sound like something any secular therapist could say?

Don't stray after these unapproved talkers if you want to stay spiritually healthy. Instead, stay with the approved workers.

That's what Paul wants Timothy to be. Did you see that in verse 15? do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and correctly handles the word of truth.

So Paul tells Timothy, take a deep breath, relax. I know it is tempting to do what these teachers do. After all, they have the approval of so many people, don't they?

look at the size of their audiences. But seek only God's approval. That's what matters.

[14:16] Seek to be a worker who is certified by God and therefore does not need to be ashamed. Now, we've seen that shame and being ashamed is a theme of this letter.

Paul makes it clear back in chapter 1 that if we stand with Christ and his gospel, we will face shame in this world. Perhaps people will say, you're so old-fashioned, you're so narrow-minded.

But Paul says, if you stick with the gospel, you might be shamed before the world, but you won't be shamed at all before God.

So here is the question for Timothy. would he prefer to be ashamed in front of his friends and the world right now? Or would he prefer to be ashamed in front of God when he stands before him on the day of judgment?

I hope we all know which answer is preferable. But what makes for an approved worker? The answer is right at the end of verse 15.

[15 : 35] A worker who has God's approval is someone who correctly handles the word of truth. Now, that phrase, correctly handle, is actually a rather rare word in the Greek.

It comes from the root word autos, which means to cut it straight. So think of orthopedic surgeons, they get their name from this Greek word too.

What do they do? They set crooked bones straight. Or think of a road builder cutting a straight road through rugged countryside, as the Romans often did.

So, the approved worker is the one who stays on the main road of scripture. He isn't diverted by pointless detours diversions, but directs people to the right destination.

Now, faithfully understanding and communicating God's word is harder work than it looks. You see, anyone in theory can look at the Bible and say something about it or from it, can't they?

[16 : 51] Just sit in some small group Bible studies and sometimes you'll hear really creative opinions that have no real anchor in the text. That's not hard to do.

But to rightly handle the word of truth takes actual time and effort. It takes care and precision. I wish I could tell you that the sermons I prepared on the book of Daniel came simply from me sitting in my office, closing my eyes and waiting for God to beam ready made messages into my brain.

But I'm afraid that's not how it works. God doesn't exactly come with an instant download button. And that is why Paul says at the beginning of verse 15 to Timothy, you must do your best.

Literally speaking, you must make every effort. that's what workers who seek God's approval do. They don't dismiss, skim over, or play fast and loose with God's word.

They work diligently to handle it with integrity. And these are the people you want to listen to if you want to grow in Christ.

[18 : 20] These are the Sunday school teachers and the youth and the small group leaders we want if we want those they teach to grow in Christ.

And we listen to such people above all because they are the ones who keep reminding us, verse 14, of these things. Now, what things?

look back to 2, verse 8. What is Paul reminding Timothy of? Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

This is my gospel. And what else does he say in the verses surrounding verse 8? He reminds Timothy one of the gospel's implications is that it will bring about suffering.

But the payoff is certain because Jesus defeated death and during our reward. That's another implication of the gospel.

[19 : 24] Therefore, just as Paul reminds Timothy of the gospel and its implications, so now Timothy, in 2, verse 14, is to remind God's people of the same.

So who should we lend our ears to? Those who relentlessly remind us of the gospel in all its dimensions and its richness, and those who strive to apply that same gospel to all of our lives.

We must listen to those whose teaching agenda is driven by the word of God, rather than the reverse. for that seems to be what was going on with these guys, Hymenaeus and Philetus in verse 17.

Notice verse 18, they no longer handled the word of truth rightly, but departed from the truth. In other words, they started off well enough, going in the right direction, but eventually turned to a different agenda.

indeed, it is a nightmare of mine that I might become like them. But, where did they go wrong? According to verse 18, they were teaching the resurrection has already happened.

[20:55] And you might go, eh? Isn't that the gospel? I thought Jesus' resurrection was precisely what Timothy is supposed to remind us of. But that's not what we're talking about here.

You might remember from Daniel 12 that the Bible teaches there will also be a resurrection at the end of the age. All will rise either to everlasting life or everlasting contempt.

That is still future. But these guys were teaching that has already happened. And you might go, okay, I get that these guys might have gotten this detail wrong, but is that really so bad?

Well, Paul says end of verse 18, they destroy the faith of some. And you go, how? Well, think about it.

we're not sure exactly of the details, but there are a couple of ways that falsehood could undermine our walk with the Lord. So here is one way it could go.

[22:09] If you are teaching the resurrection has already happened, that means you're teaching there is no more judgment to come. So the implication is I can go on sinning because there is no more accountability.

I can attempt to get away with things and I just might. So if I take in what these teachers say, I don't fear God anymore.

I have more incentive to live however I like. And certainly my sinful nature would love such teaching. But it will ultimately be destructive to me because anyone who does not repent of their ungodliness will inherit the kingdom of God.

Or here is another way. If you are teaching the resurrection has already happened, that means you're teaching the new creation is basically here.

So the implication is I should expect to have no more suffering, no more pain, but all the health and wealth now.

[23:21] Because it's new creation time already. And aren't those all new creation blessings? But what happens when I suffer and pray for relief?

But it never comes. I might then think that Jesus doesn't keep his promises promises when I've actually gotten the wrong idea about what he promises.

And so my faith is destroyed. Now, we don't know exactly which direction they went, but the point is, do you see how by not handling the word of truth rightly, these guys cause harm to their listeners?

us? When we choose to listen to unapproved talkers, we don't just not grow, we allow for the possibility of our faith being shipwrecked.

And so for people like me, I need to be encouraged to strive to be such an unashamed worker and teacher of the true gospel, so that I won't stand before God ashamed, and I won't cause harm to you.

[24:34] And for people like you, you need to deny the unapproved talkers airtime, and actually be receptive to the right handling of the scriptures to grow up in Christ.

Because the biggest threat to the church probably isn't radical Islam or radical atheism or anything like that, it is simply allowing such teachers to flourish.

But if we are feeling a little alarm at this point, Paul now reassures us. This is the confidence we have, verse 19.

Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription, the Lord knows those who are his. Now, that line comes from a story in Numbers 16.

In that passage, there is a rebellion against Moses, led by Korah. And it's a pretty sizable one. All in all, 250 of them rise up against Moses, saying, who made you boss over us?

[25 : 49] In other words, they are challenging God's very word. For Moses is God's chosen instrument to speak God's word to the people in the Old Testament.

But Moses tells them, God will make clear who belongs to him and who doesn't. God will make clear who speaks the word of truth.

And sure enough, Moses is vindicated and Korah and the rebels perish. And Paul is saying to Timothy and the church, look, just keep holding firm to the word of truth.

Because the Lord knows who are his and he will vindicate them, just as he did with Moses. But at the same time, remember, everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.

That's the second half of verse 19. That is a true mark of those who belong to God. They don't just profess the truth, but practice it.

[27 : 04] And this now takes us to our second headline. Don't chase foolish hotheads, but follow faithful servants instead.

In verses 20 to 26, Paul now gives us another portrait of who we should be listening to and imitating if we want to grow up in Christ.

And he starts by telling us about a house. Verse 20, in a large house, there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay.

Some are for special purposes and some for common use. Now, imagine that house. Maybe it's like your own kitchen. On one shelf, you've got all your fancy plates, the ones that you only bring out when your special guests come.

And then somewhere under the sink, there is that old plastic container you use for food scraps or maybe the bin. Both belong in the same house, but they serve very different purposes.

[28 : 16] And here is Paul's point. In God's household, the church, there are also different kinds of articles or vessels. Some are useful for honourable purposes.

Others, not so much. But here is the encouraging part. Paul says, verse 21, those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the master, and prepared to do any good work.

work. In other words, you don't have to stay a rubbish bin. You can become a gold plate in God's service if you are willing to be cleansed.

Now, what exactly does Paul mean by that? The large house is clearly the church, but the vessels, who are they? I think in context, the most natural way to read this is that Paul is still talking about teachers.

There are two kinds, those who are useful to the Lord and those who are not. Some, like Hymenaeus and Philetus, are spreading decay, their teaching is like gangrene.

[29 : 39] Others, like Timothy, are meant to be vessels for honour, special instruments God can trust to carry his truth. But how does Timothy become such an instrument?

How does Timothy cleanse himself? He does it, of course, by not thinking and teaching like Hymenaeus and Philetus.

But this cleansing isn't just about doctrine, it's not only about making sure your theology is right. It's also about his conduct.

Because even the best Bible teaching can ring hollow if the teacher's heart is corrupt. But if Timothy is ready to submit himself to God's cleansing, he will become the kind of person God delights to use.

Pure, reliable, ready for service. So verse 22 shows us what that cleansing looks like in action.

[30:45] Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Now, people often think that the evil desires of youth means lust, but in context, Paul is probably warning against being quarrelsome and hot-headed.

There's a sort of attitude that is eager to win arguments instead of winning people. And Timothy is not to be like that.

Instead, Paul says, make it your passion to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. That is the kind of zeal a faithful servant should have.

Not always wanting to have the final word, but to grow more like Christ. Verse 23 then drives the point home.

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments because you know they produce quarrels. Now, as my fellow Bible teacher, Andrew Chia, points out, Paul is not saying you can't ever argue to defend the gospel.

[31:58] After all, was Paul not always the first one to fight when the gospel was at stake? Was Paul not even willing to rebuke his fellow apostle Peter when his actions jeopardize the gospel of grace?

So, Paul isn't saying avoid all controversy, especially when it comes to gospel truth. He isn't saying, oh, you just preach and never mind if the false teachers also come and preach as well.

But he is warning Timothy, don't be a foolish, hothead, don't love arguments more than truth. Because as we've seen, foolish quarrels don't make anyone godly, they just feed pride.

So what does a faithful servant look like? Verse 24 tells us, the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

Now, that's a striking picture, isn't it? A faithful servant isn't weak, but neither is he harsh. He is gentle yet firm, kind yet courageous, willing to teach truth where necessary.

[33:22] When he is being attacked, what comes out isn't bitterness sarcasm, but a kindness and graciousness that can only come about by the Spirit.

And isn't that the kind of role model we need? You know, there is an old Indian proverb, whatever you are overflowing with will spill out when you're bummed.

So the idea is this, you know, picture a village woman carrying a pot filled to the brim on her head. If someone knocks into her, you'll quickly see whether she's carrying water or milk.

So it is with us. When life bumps into you, when people provoke you, when serving the Lord gets hard, what spills out?

Well, if we have been following faithful servants, people whose lives are marked by love, faith, and peace, then it is far likelier that is what will spill out of us too.

[34:38] Because these people have been filling us with the truth of their words and modelling to us with the truth of their lives. That's why it matters whom you follow.

I'm grateful for men like Tim Keller, or closer to home, my old boss, and Rucia, men who model kindness, patience, and clarity under pressure.

Now, these are the faithful servants I hope to be like. They don't avoid truth, but they handle it with grace. And that is the balance Paul points to in verses 25 and 26.

Opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth. The goal, you see, in the end isn't to crush your opponent, but to win them.

Because the real enemy isn't the person in front of you, but the devil who has taken them captive. That's what faithful servants do. They don't chase arguments, they chase repentance.

[35 : 55] And that is the kind of servant whom God is pleased to use to help us grow. Because we can be confident they are here to consistently point us to Jesus and call us to turn to him.

Because they want you to repent. so flee foolish hotheads, but follow faithful servants instead. So as we close, let's come back to that Sunday school song again.

Is it true that if we read our Bibles and pray every day, we will grow? Yes, absolutely, but that is not the full picture.

because it's not just about the Bible, but how the Bible is handled and who is handling it.

So today, ask yourself, who am I listening to? Who am I seeking out? Are they the approved workers, the faithful servants?

[37 : 09] because as the Scottish preacher Robert Murray McChain once said of them on the screen, it is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus.

A holy minister is an amazing weapon in the hand of God. A word spoken by you, that is the minister, when your conscience is clear and your heart full of God's spirit, is worth 10,000 words spoken in unbelief and sin.

So is this who you are drawn to? Are you at heart a truth lover? I hope you are.

Because God says that is how you will truly grow, grow, grow. Let's pray.

Father, I pray that you would indeed have let your word of truth be heard this morning.

[38 : 19] I pray that truth will settle into our hearts. I pray that this morning we would renew our resolve to listen to only those who are approved by you, those who correctly handle the word of truth, those who strive to seek you and be in line with your heart, and those who want to live for you in every way.

In all of us, for all of us who are in teaching roles of some kind, maybe even just as a parent instructing their kids, as a Sunday school teacher, as a youth leader, whatever it might be, Lord, would you help us to strive to be this kind of person so that at the end of the age we can stand before you unashamed.

Lord, we know we often fall short, so we need your Holy Spirit to keep us on the straight and narrow. And Lord, if there are any bad influences currently in our lives, Lord, that influence us to move away from your truth, to wander away from how you want us to live, will you please remove them.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.