

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Study to show thyself approved unto God - 2 Timothy 2:15 and 3:13-17

Spelling tests! Some of us still come over all cold at the very words. It's not the tests themselves that I have in mind this morning, rather the waiting for the results. I remember that some weeks I waited in dread, fearing the worst and hoping that the teacher might somehow have lost the list of marks. Of course they never did! At other times though, I sat confidently expecting a good result and, maybe, a word or two of praise. What made the difference between waiting in fear or in anticipation? Simply the amount of study I had put in before the test!

This morning we come to the third of our series entitled "Passing on the torch", based on Paul's second epistle to Timothy. Today's talk is based on 2 Timothy 2:15 and 2 Timothy 3:13-17. Our title is taken from the Authorised Version of 2 Timothy 2:15, and is "Study to show thyself approved unto God". Some of us may not have enjoyed our school studies very much, and I apologise if I have stirred up bad memories so early on a Sunday morning! However, we must all face the fact that living our lives in obedience to the Lord who has called us, will involve study. If the word 'study' fills your mind with images of tedious swotting and dull history lessons, you might prefer the New King James rendering of the expression, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God". Changing 'study' to 'be diligent' may be slightly more accurate, but it does not take away the idea that we need to carefully, prayerfully and rigorously apply ourselves to reading God's word, and then carefully, prayerfully and rigorously apply God's word to our lives.

Let's look briefly at the context of today's passage. We have thought before in this series, that Paul is approaching the end of his life. Since his conversion, Paul has lived wholeheartedly for the Lord Jesus. He has preached the Gospel and instructed believers in the truths of God's word, wherever God has sent him. In the course of his missionary career, he has had many fellow workers, and none has been dearer to him than young Timothy. Timothy has accompanied Paul on many dangerous journeys and been trusted with difficult and delicate responsibilities, such as remaining in Ephesus to build up the young church there. Timothy seems to have been a delicate and unassuming man who needed encouraging. Our key verse this morning comes immediately after reference has been made in 2 Timothy 2:14 to "striving about words to no profit" and before verse 16 talks about "shunning profane and idle babblings". To avoid these errors, Timothy will need to "be diligent" in his reading of God's word. But Timothy must do more than avoid error himself. He must instruct others in what is right, and do so with authority. To do this, Timothy will need to command the respect of his fellow believers. His authority is to come from the quality of his Christian life.

It is time we read all of verse 15. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Let's work our way through this verse.

1. "Be diligent"

This suggests application, effort and commitment. Nothing of real value is accomplished in this world without effort. The spiritual realm is no exception. Of course the Spirit of God is necessary for any blessing in our Christian lives. Galatians 3:3 would be enough to prove that the work that is begun by the Spirit must be continued in the Spirit. I also accept that our Father delights to bless. After all Ephesians 1:3 describes us as having been "blessed with every spiritual blessing... in Christ". Having agreed all this, the call to "be diligent" remains. The Holy Spirit does not work in us in a way that suggests we are passive. 2 Timothy is full of calls to action. The following expressions are taken from throughout the four chapters, some occur more than once: "stir up", "hold fast", "be strong", "endure hardship", "be diligent", "shun", "flee", "pursue", "continue", "preach", "be ready", "rebuke", "exhort", "be watchful", "work", "fulfil your ministry". There is nothing remotely passive about these exhortations and, like Timothy, we are called to work hard, systematically and with perseverance at our study of God's word.

2. "To present yourself approved to God"

First we notice that it is God's approval that is to be sought. Many of us expend far too much effort in trying to make ourselves acceptable to other people. Of course, there is nothing commendable about deliberately provoking others! But in verse 2:4, Paul states that the job of a soldier is to "please him who enlisted him as a soldier". We all enjoy being liked and well thought of, and it is tempting to act in ways that please other people. We soon find that the old saying that, "you can't please all of the people all of the time", is very true. In practice, we please the people whose

opinion is most important to us. As believers this ought to be the Lord Jesus. I wonder if my choices in life show that I value Christ's approval above anyone else's? In this passage, although Timothy is to present himself approved to God, this approval is meant to be evident to men. Indeed it is to be his authority when exhorting fellow Christians, as we were thinking earlier. Jesus Himself "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men" (Luke 2:52). The order is important; God and men.

3. "A worker who does not need to be ashamed"

Would other believers recognise me as a worker, somebody who is prepared to get his hands dirty in labouring for the Lord? It might help us understand the expression "does not need to be ashamed", to think for a moment about the kind of worker who **would** be ashamed. If our work was clumsy, unskilled, lazy, incompetent or careless, we might well be ashamed of it. A worker is responsible to the person who pays his wages and the person for whom the work is done. A decorator painting my house would have responsibilities to the owner of the firm that employs him and to me as the client. If he had any respect for himself and his occupation, he would not want to be ashamed of his work before either person. Our work for Christ should bear examination before God and before men. None of this means that we cannot serve the Lord until we have a qualification from a Bible college, or a fixed amount of Christian experience. All of us must be ready to serve the Lord, with whatever gift and experience we have. However, we must not be satisfied without progress in our standard of workmanship.

4. "Rightly dividing the word of truth"

Why would the word of truth require dividing? I can think of three reasons:

1. To make it digestible. Nobody can take in all the truths of God's word in one bite! At Truth for Today we seek, with the Lord's help, to provide rightly divided portions from God's word.
2. To apply the right parts to the right people and situations. For example it is not right to teach believers today that they must keep the laws detailed in the Old Testament, when the book of Galatians makes it clear that we are no longer under the law.
3. To show the consistency and unity of God's word. Lifting pieces of scripture out of context, and applying them falsely has done huge damage. Those who try and set one scripture against another, and claim this shows the Bible to be inconsistent, also do great harm.

Rightly dividing the word of truth always keeps scripture in its proper context. The Bible often looks at a subject from various angles, and the result is never conflict, but greater illumination. For example, James statement that individuals are "justified by works", (James 2:24-25) does not contradict the statement of Galatians 2:16 that "a man is not justified by the works of the law". Rightly dividing the word, shows us that James is speaking about the works of a saved person. These demonstrate his genuine faith in God before human beings, who cannot look inside hearts. Paul is speaking about an unsaved person, who tries to make himself right before God by keeping the Law. Taken together we have, not a contradiction, but a clearer view of faith and its results.

In our next section, from 3:13 down to the end of the chapter, we have further details of the resource to be found in God's word. I want to briefly go through this section in three parts:

1. verse 13 The enemies of the Word of God
2. verses 14-16 The purpose of the Word of God
3. verse 17 The man of God and the Word of God.

1. The enemies of the Word of God

Let's read verse 13: "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived". In the 3:1-12, Paul has described the character of the world, and the people in it. He has also mentioned some of the difficulties this has caused him. Paul did not expect any improvements, so we should not be surprised or disheartened when people, even those with high positions in church systems, reject or downgrade the Word of God. Evil men and impostors, that is those who are evil but wish to appear to be good, will get worse and worse. Having no interest in the word of truth, they will deceive and be deceived.

2. The purpose of the Word of God

Let's read verses 14-16: "But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is

profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness". 3:7 speaks about those who are "always learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth". In contrast, we are to **continue** in what we **have** learned. Much of the New Testament was written by Paul, and Timothy was "assured of" it for three reasons:

- a. Timothy had the internal witness of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So do we.
- b. Paul had **lived** the Gospel. Timothy had seen Paul in every circumstance and knew the reliability of this witness. When we pass on the truths of Scripture to other believers, does the way we live our lives support what we say?
- c. God had testified to the truth of what He revealed by Paul by showing His power and blessing. Great miracles were done by Paul, but the greatest miracle was the way that the Gospel was spread to Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, near and far.

Timothy also knew the Old Testament, and had done from childhood. In chapter 1 Paul speaks of the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother. No doubt they taught him God's word from early childhood. Those of us who have benefited from being taught God's word as children should constantly thank God for this blessing. If you are a parent or grandparent, make sure you pass on God's word to the next generation. My children have bookcases full of books. They have grown out of some of them now, while others are still too advanced for them. I need to help them get to know the one book that they can never outgrow, and that even the youngest child can delight in! No other book can make you "wise for salvation". Whether we think of salvation as our first being saved from our sins, or as our day by day salvation, the necessary wisdom is found in God's word alone. But there is one essential ingredient required, "faith which is in Christ Jesus". Some people study the Bible for years; are familiar with Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic and give lectures on its content, but they don't have salvation, because they do not have faith in Christ Jesus.

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God" and for this reason is profitable for the four things Paul mentions.

a. **Doctrine**

Our doctrine must not come from human creeds or ideas. Our doctrine, and our creeds, must come from God's inspired word. Doctrine is essential to tell us what is right.

b. **Reproof**

God's word is perfect. My life is not! When I measure my life against God's word, I must be ready for reproof. It is no good running away to hide like a naughty child. I need to face the word and let it judge me.

c. **Correction**

If I have been reproved, I now need correction. One of my children hates to have pencil notes jotted on their homework to show the correct spelling or punctuation! Are we like petulant children, who would rather continue in our mistakes and ignorance than accept God's correction?

d. **Instruction in righteousness**

We do not want to experience an endless cycle of error, reproof and correction. To break out, we need the instruction in righteousness that the Bible can provide. Today you can get instruction in every subject from Archaeology to Zoology, from some school or college, or even over the internet, but there is still only **one** source of instruction in righteousness. We cannot live righteous lives, pleasing to the Father, if we do not diligently consider God's word.

3. **The man of God and the Word of God**

Finally let's read verse 17: "That the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Paul was ready to pass on the torch to Timothy. Imagine having to follow in the footsteps of one of God's greatest servants! The quiet, self-effacing, nervous Timothy did not seem the likeliest candidate, but he was a man of God. What does the man of God need to make him complete and ready for any task God may give him? Not extraordinary faith, many spiritual gifts or a special sign from heaven. He needs the Word of God! The Word of God is what makes the man of God complete. We cannot live for Him if we do not know what He requires, and we cannot know what He requires if we do not give ourselves to prayerful Bible study. The servant of God who is "thoroughly equipped for every good work" is the one who is spending time in the scriptures. Let me be blunt. If you are so busy with Christian service that you have no time to regularly study God's word, then you are not pleasing your Lord, and much of your effort in

service is wasted. How can you be serving Him if you are not spending time with Him, and regularly readjusting your heart and mind, so that you are thinking the right thoughts and praying for the right things?

Some of us might be happy to spend time in prayer and Bible study, but not very involved in practical service. We need to remember that the study of God's word is not an end in itself. The end product is "every good work". Think of a plumber, who has been studying at night school and working as an apprentice for several years. He began by passing spanners and making the tea, but slowly and surely his skills increased, and now he is qualified. With a new set of overalls, his own bag of tools and the knowledge and skill to use them, he is ready to do a useful job. In short, he is "thoroughly equipped for every good work"!

Timothy was in a hostile and difficult environment. People, even real believers, were turning away from God's servant, Paul, and the truths he taught. There were enemies outside and, very sadly, enemies inside the church as well. The society and morals of the day had little in common with God's standards. Times were tough, and likely to get tougher. It sounds very like today doesn't it? Paul did not advise Timothy to give up. He did not talk to him about the 'good old days' and what a pity it was that they were gone. He did not tell Timothy to 'keep his head down' until things improved. No! Paul does not hide the facts from his young friend, but he directs him to look at the resources God has made available to him. Paul is confident that, if Timothy relies on God's provision, he will not "need to be ashamed".

What are you going to do with the rest of today? What about the rest of your life? Let's take our Bible down from the shelf today and apply ourselves to it in God's presence. Then let us apply it to our lives until it changes us. If you are not studying your Bible regularly at the moment then sit down today and plan some time into each day for Bible study. Start today. Be disciplined. Stick to your plan. Some days you will approach God's word with anticipation and joy. Some days you might have to drag yourself to it. Get there anyway, and you will begin to grow into the complete man or woman of God that He desires you to be.

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