

# The Pursuit

Pursuit: the action of following or pursuing someone or something.

What is it that you pursue?

- A big buck?
- A 6 figure income?
- The perfect body?

Paul is leaving final words for Timothy, and us, on what we should be in pursuit of...

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. <sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. <sup>23</sup> But reject foolish and ignorant disputes, because you know that they breed quarrels. <sup>24</sup> The Lord's servant must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient, <sup>25</sup> instructing his opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth. <sup>26</sup> Then they may come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

2 Timothy 2:20-26

Timothy was concerned about service & the church.

- V.20-21 he is using pots as analogy for True & False Teachers
  - Gold & silver vessels have prestige associated with them.
    - They bring pride
    - Favor
      - Just like a special set of family silverware.
        - We treat with pride & Care
        - They are to be treasured.
  - So it is with a teacher who teaches truth. He is a treasure in God's house.
- How is a False Teacher described

- “wood & clay vessels”...”for dishonorable use”
    - Ever heard of a Chamber pot? AKA Thunderpot?
      - You don’t ladle out your grandma’s soup recipe out of one of those!
        - The purpose they serve is not an honorable one...
  - False teachers are for dishonorable use in God’s house.
    - They may or may not be a Christian but their reward will not be nonexistent...
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- Paul was warning them, and us, about false teachers.
  - Flee from false teachings
  - Run to righteousness

## Be Pure.

What does Purity of doctrine look like? (v.20-21)

- It’s in line with scripture
  - They had the old testament
    - They also had early writings of the Gospel that they considered scripture.
      - It was eye witness accounts from some of the apostles.
        - Matthew & Mark
    - We have both testaments
- For Paul, in this instance, it dealt heavily with who Jesus is & what He has done.

## Be Pure in our doctrine.

Be pure in our lives.

## What does purity of life look like?

- Run from things that take you from God
  - 'Youthful passions'
    - Sexual lust
      - Joseph, when Potiphers wife was trying to get him to sleep with her, he ran!
      - Men, there is no room in our lives for pornography.
        - I have a friend that, in order to flee from that sexual lust traded in his phone for a flip phone. No accessing images on that!
    - Pride (Invincible)
      - To many kids in our community have been killed in car wrecks where drugs, alcohol, &/or speed were a factor.
    - Arrogance
    - Self -assertion that we are right & everyone else is wrong
    - Selfish-ambition
    - Headstrong (stubbornness)
  - Reject sin. Run from sin
  
- Run to things that bring you closer to God! Paul gave us a list! (v.22)

*Flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. (V. 22)*

- Pursue..
  - Righeousness
  - Faith
  - Love
  - Peace

In our self-independent society there is an interesting note at the end of Paul's words on what, or in this case, whom we should pursue...

- Pursue other, like-minded, Believers! (v.22)
  - We aren't made to do this alone!
    - Life
    - Worship
    - We are a church "family" after all.

Be Pure in our lives.

Be Pure in our doctrine.

A church that loves God, Loves God's Word, Love's other People whom God loves!

Purity, then—purity of doctrine and purity of life—is the essential condition of being serviceable to Christ. (Stott)

Be Pure.

Meet here at 3:30 to serve our community! Share the Gospel!

## **The Vessel (2 Tim. 2:19–22)**

In this illustration, Paul described a “great house,” which is the professing church. The *foundation* of the house is safe and secure because God’s seal is on it. (In the Bible, a seal is a mark of ownership and security. No one would dare break a Roman seal.) Paul quoted Moses: “The Lord knoweth them that are His” (Num. 16:5). This refers to the Godward aspect of the Christian life: God chose us who trust Him as His elect (see 2 Tim. 2:10).

But there is also a manward aspect of the Christian life: “Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Tim. 2:19). This refers back to Numbers 16:26, where the Lord warned the people to get away from the tents of Korah and the rebels. In other words, those who are the elect of God prove it by living godly lives. We are chosen in Christ “that we should be holy and without blame” (Eph. 1:4).

This great house not only has a solid foundation that is sealed, but it also has vessels (utensils of various kinds) for performing household functions. Paul divides the utensils into two categories: those of honor (gold and silver) and those of dishonor (wood and clay). He is not distinguishing between kinds of Christians, but rather is making a distinction between true teachers of the Word and the false teachers he described (2 Tim. 2:16–18). A faithful pastor is like a gold or silver vessel that brings honor to Jesus Christ. The head of a house displays his costliest and most beautiful utensils and gets honor from them. I remember the first time I viewed the crown jewels of England in the Tower of London, along with the priceless table vessels and utensils. I was overwhelmed with their glory and beauty. That is the kind of beauty God gives to his servants who faithfully handle the Word of God.

False teachers are not valuable; they are like wood and clay. They are utensils to dishonor, no matter how popular they may be today. Wood and clay will not survive the test of fire. It is worth noting that the name *Timothy* comes from two Greek words which together mean “God-honoring.” Paul was encouraging Timothy to live up to his name!

The important thing is that the honorable vessels not be contaminated by the dishonorable ones. The word “these” (2 Tim. 2:21) refers to the vessels of dishonor (2 Tim. 2:20). **Paul is admonishing Timothy to separate himself from false teachers.** If he does, then God will honor him, set him apart, and equip him for service. “Useful to the Master” (2 Tim. 2:21, NIV)—what a tremendous honor that is! A useful human vessel of honor does not get involved in the popular things of the world, even the “religious world.” He must remain holy, and this means he must be separated from everything that would defile him.

This includes the sins of the flesh as well (2 Tim. 2:22). Paul used a similar admonition in 1 Timothy 6:11–12—“Flee ... follow ... fight.” True Bible separation is balanced: we flee sin, but we follow after righteousness. If we are not balanced, then we will be isolated instead of separated. In fact, God’s man Paul commands us to fellowship “with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22). After all, this is the purpose of the ministry of the Word (1 Tim. 1:5). It is sad when true believers are isolated because of a false view of separation.

For God to be able to use us as vessels, we must be empty, clean, and available. He will take us and fill us and use us for His glory. But if we are filled with sin or defiled by disobedience, He will first have to purge us; and that might not be an enjoyable experience. In the “great house” of the professing church, there are true believers and false. We must exercise spiritual discernment and be careful that we are vessels sanctified unto honor.

## **The Servant (2 Tim. 2:23–26)**

“Servant” (2 Tim. 2:24) is the Greek word *doulos* which means “slave.” So Paul called himself “a slave of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1). A slave had no will of his own; he was totally under the command of his master. Once, **we Christians were the slaves of sin, but now we are the slaves of God (Rom. 6:16ff).** Like the servant in Old Testament days, we say, “I love my master ... I will not go out free” (Ex. 21:5).

God’s slave does not have an easy time teaching the Word. Satan opposes him and tries to trap his listeners (2 Tim. 2:26). Also, some people are just naturally difficult to teach. They enjoy “foolish and stupid arguments” (2 Tim. 2:23, NIV) and have no desire to feed on the nourishing Word of God. Until you have experienced it, you have no idea how difficult it is to impart spiritual truth to some people.

How easy it would be to ignore them! But then Satan would get them. Paul admonished Timothy to avoid the arguments that create strifes, but not to ignore the people. He must not argue or fight. He must be patient and gentle, teaching the Word of God in meekness. It is not enough just to expose error and refute it; we must also teach positive truths and establish the saints in faith.

A servant of God must instruct those who oppose him, for this is the only way he can rescue them from Satan’s captivity. Satan is a liar (John 8:44). He captures people by his lying promises, as he did Eve (see Gen. 3; 2 Cor. 11:3). A servant’s purpose is not to win arguments but to win souls. He wants to see deceived persons brought to repentance (“I was wrong—I have changed my mind”) and the acknowledging of the truth.

The word *recover* (2 Tim. 2:26) describes a man coming out of a drunken stupor. Satan makes people drunk with his lies, and the servant’s task is to sober them up and rescue them. **The last phrase in 2 Timothy 2:26 can be interpreted three ways: (1) they are delivered from the snare of the devil who took them captive to do his will; (2) they are taken captive by God’s servant to do God’s will; (3) they are delivered out of the snare of the devil, who took them captive, to do God’s will. I prefer the third interpretation.**

As you survey these seven aspects of the work of the ministry, you can see how important and how demanding a work it is. The ministry is no place for a loafer because it demands discipline and work. It is no place for a shirker because there are enemies to fight and tasks to be completed.

Church members need to pray for their pastors and encourage them in the work of the Lord. Church officers should faithfully do their work so that the pastors can devote themselves to their own ministry (see Acts 6:1–7). Churches should provide enough financial support for the ministers so that they can fully devote themselves to the work of the ministry.

In other words, **ministers and members should labor together in the work of the Lord.**<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [\*The Bible exposition commentary\*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 247–249). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

**2:20–21.** Paul drew another word picture to illustrate the distinctions between the true believer and the false follower. He took his imagery from his readers' understanding of an ordinary house. Such a house would have a variety of utensils and wares, some of **gold and silver**, and others of **wood and clay**. Correspondingly, the gold and silver are for **noble purposes**, while the wood and clay are reserved for **ignoble** use. Basically, a person does not use china cups to feed the dog.

Jesus foretold the same truth. **The church is a mixed group, some true to their Lord, others impostors (Matt. 13:24–30).** Though God knows who belongs to him and though true disciples demonstrate a life reflective of his holiness, scattered among them are unbelievers who deny the truth by their doctrine and their lives. These are the wood and clay within God's earthly house. Their presence should not disturb or discourage those who are faithful.

Paul emphasized that each believer bears the responsibility of service to God: **If a man cleanses himself from the latter** (false teachings and wickedness), he will serve **noble purposes**. God can use only clean or holy vessels. This parallels the Jewish tradition of cleansing vessels for temple use or for religious ceremonies and holidays. **God cannot bestow his glory upon anything evil or tainted.** The Christian life demands unswerving obedience and allegiance to Christ. It places responsibility upon each believer to maintain a pure, unpolluted life. Such a person is **holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.**

**2:22.** The bottom line is that each person chooses whether he will befit for God's use. This sobering thought brought Paul to this urgent plea: **Flee the evil desires of youth.**

In the first century, the term *youth* was not confined to the teenage years. In fact, only two phases of life were recognized—youth and old age. Many interpreters believe Timothy was in his late thirties or even in his forties when Paul wrote to him. Perhaps “young” people experience greater temptations toward certain sins which diminish with age, such as haughty independence and selfish ambition. Those seriously committed to Christ must flee anything that smacks of evil or anything that would interfere with faithfulness to God.

Fleeing provides only half the equation, however. As we flee from evil, we must **pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.** **Christianity does not consist merely of prohibitions, but of positive and powerful actions.**

Righteousness, faith, love, peace—these are common words, easily tossed around in Christian conversation, but they are the essence of the gospel.

**Righteousness** means to live uprightly, doing good as empowered by God. **Faith** rests on trust in God's revelation and character; it consists of a genuine relationship with God.

**Love** consists of self sacrifice, living for the good of others with caring actions. **Peace** demonstrates itself through harmonious relations with God and others.

These qualities are normative for **those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.** Believers look to God and depend upon him in all of life. People who have authentic faith are cleansed within. Paul encouraged Timothy to join with other true believers in persisting in his commitment to righteousness.

**2:23.** Paul issued another command: **Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments.** Paul had the false teachers and their followers in mind. Their dogmas lacked common sense (foolish) and were established upon ignorance (stupid). These bogus leaders and their followers were motivated by selfishness. Such inner drives always degenerate into petty **quarrels** and divisiveness.

**2:24.** Paul declared, **And the Lord's servant must not quarrel.** **Selfish attitudes and manners are inconsistent with the nature of God and the disposition of his followers, especially his leaders.** Unfortunately, infighting and positioning for power often characterize churches. Perhaps we have

become too accustomed to this blatant disobedience, viewing it as an inevitable component of modern church life.

But pastors and lay leaders who bicker, creating factions within the church, are wrong. Instead, the church leader **must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful**. Kindness presupposes a peaceable attitude. Such a mindset speaks and acts in goodness. This does not mean spineless acquiescence to popular opinion or to those who may oppose us. Kindness must remain firmly rooted in truth.

Paul required that the Christian leader be **able to teach, not resentful**. Though truth can seem harsh, carrying with it conviction or judgment of sin, it must be delivered with compassion and kindness because God always works for the restoration or repentance of the sinner. Pastors and leaders must model this understanding and care.

**2:25–26.** If a leader's heart is pure, humbled before God's grace, he can then **gently instruct** those who err, **in the hope that God will grant them repentance**. God's earnest desire to draw all people into loving relationship with himself should motivate the pastor to deal kindly with those who oppose him.

Four players participate in this crucial drama for the human soul: the teacher, the unbeliever, God, and Satan.

The Christian teacher not only proclaims truth; he models godliness and kindness as well. As God's representative, he personifies God and his ways. He also recognizes that the battle for human souls takes place on two fronts—the mind and the heart. Unbelievers do not think clearly in matters of the soul or spirit; they need **to come to their senses**. This is why the teacher must feed the minds of unbelievers, leading them to a **knowledge of the truth**.

The unbeliever must remain open and responsive. He must choose to come to his senses. Each person stands responsible before God for his acceptance or rejection of God's truth as found in Jesus Christ.

Beyond the human sphere, God and Satan enter man's spiritual struggle. Those who refuse God's truth come under the influence of **the devil who has taken them captive to do his will**. Satan traps people into his service through clever arguments, fear, and appeals to selfish pride and ambition. Christians should exercise a healthy awareness of the participation of Satan in the thinking of unbelievers. Contending for truth involves contending with spiritual powers; we must not be so naive as to think we confront on purely human terms.

But God remains faithful. He also contends for human souls and minds. As a measure of his grace, he grants repentance. God is sovereign over the universe and all created beings. We should never become overwhelmed at Satan's methods or power. Satan and God are not equals.

As believers, our responsibility is to speak God's truth, live out his nature, and pray earnestly for the salvation of those who continue in Satan's grip. We ask him, by virtue of his authority, to grant a change of heart to those who are estranged from his truth and love.

**MAIN IDEA REVIEW:** Paul called Timothy back to basics—the grace of God and the instructions he had received. The apostle then proceeded to encourage Timothy to remain faithful: enduring hardship, identifying with the crucified Christ, committing to orthodox belief and behavior, disciplining his life for noble use in God's kingdom.

### III. CONCLUSION

So What's the Point?



During the days of the Watergate scandal, President Nixon's press secretary testified: "The other interpretation of the problem of the need or money for the purpose that was stated at the time, which was the purpose that was raised several times, as I have testified earlier that I was aware of, and apparently was raised at other times, which I later found out that I was not aware of."

Ever wish the speaker would get to the point? Say it clearly and be done?

Church leaders have been known to engage in the same sort of jabberwockery made popular by politicians. Using inflated language and esoteric mumblings, they form arguments and defend positions. They quarrel over words and dispute issues that rarely make a difference to life and godliness.

In the process, a watching world yawns as the church camouflages the true issues of life and death, forgiveness and grace to which the gospel speaks.

In this chapter of 2 Timothy, Paul gave Timothy some vital commands about priorities and perspective:

- Continue in the foundational truths of the faith and pass them on to others (2:1–2).
- Do not get sidetracked over minor issues (2:3–7).
- Remember the resurrection of Christ; it is central to our faith (2:8).
- Stay away from quarrels; they divide the church and ruin its witness (2:14–19).
- Commit yourself to the eternal purposes of Christ's kingdom (2:20–21).
- When opposed, keep teaching with gentle love and truth and keep on praying. God brings about change in a person's heart (2:22–26).

If Paul's instructions are followed, the church can avoid useless meetings, church splits, and even a few wars. In all we say and do, Christ is the point. Let us get to the point and stick with it.

## PRINCIPLES

- Established leaders in the church must train new leaders in orthodox Christian doctrine.
- New leaders must evidence faithful obedience to Christ and an ability to teach others the truths of the faith.
- The Christian life demands a commitment which persists through difficulty and hardship.
- All true Christians can expect persecution.
- God is faithful.
- God knows and rewards the inner heart of all people—the faithful follower with fellowship and eternal life; the unfaithful with judgment.
- God's truth unites people.
- Selfish motives always prove destructive.
- We choose whether our lives honor God and result in noble purposes.
- God empowers his people to display a gentle spirit, even in the midst of controversy or personal attack.

## APPLICATIONS

- Churches should have an organized method of training new leaders in the church, establishing them in doctrine and belief. Matters of belief must not be presumed but vigorously taught.

- Classes in teaching methods, or the demonstration of teaching ability, should be required of those who hold teaching positions in the church.
- When believers experience hardship, misunderstanding, or ridicule because of their faith in Christ, encourage them to persist in faithful obedience.
- When people argue over words or form groups in opposition to leaders in the church, stay away from them. God calls us to unity.
- Analyze every opinion or idea by God's Word, the Bible.
- Determine to work for God's kingdom. Put people ahead of projects, reconciliation ahead of personal feelings, and truth ahead of acceptance.

## IV. LIFE APPLICATION

### Apprenticed for Life

Robert Louis Stevenson knew from childhood what he wanted to be—a writer. But he discovered early on that good writing requires a long and rigorous apprenticeship.

From his youth, Stevenson always carried with him two books—one to read and one to write in. He knew two disciplines were necessary for success: to feed his mind on the works of great writers and to imitate them by constructing his own stories.

Stevenson built on the experience and knowledge of those before him. He understood that as each generation passes on its skill and knowledge to the next, teachers, leaders, and masters emerge—people who edge closer to the ideal. They set the standard for those who follow. Through imitation and practice, Stevenson created such classics as *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*.

Apprenticeship has a long history, stretching back to ancient times. Though foundational in the early educational stages of this country, apprenticeships became unpopular with the advent of the industrial revolution. The skill of the craftsman was replaced by the machine.

The fallout has hit us today as business leaders bemoan college graduates who cannot think or solve problems, and industry chiefs worry over the poor quality of American products. We are discovering that manual skill without knowledge and understanding is a poor substitute for old-fashioned competence.

On the flip side, university degrees and theoretical knowledge tend toward uselessness without the creative impulses of real-life experiences. Apprenticeships allow students the personal touch of someone who has mastered their particular art, someone who can give guidance, correction, and encouragement to the emerging craftsman.

In the second chapter of 2 Timothy, Paul urged Timothy to follow the model of apprenticeship. It is a pattern for our own Christian development as well as a standard for development within the church.

Jesus Christ is the Master, the ideal whom we seek to imitate. He also provides mature Christians who serve as flesh-and-bones examples for us. For Timothy, it was Paul. For us there is a long history of exemplary Christians to model as well as those in our daily experience.

Biblical Christianity is not theoretical or bookish. It requires that we fill our minds with truth as well as our everyday living. Christian faith is an apprenticeship by which we progress toward greater mastery of the art of living. This is why Paul told Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Robert Louis Stevenson discovered that the art of writing demanded knowledge and practice. So does our personal life of faith and the dynamics of community life within the church. As each

person becomes an imitator of Christ, and as we become models and instructors for others, we encourage one another to pursue the standard of Christlikeness.

The church is like a school of apprenticeship—a place where the knowledge of past generations is rediscovered and built upon; a place where eternal truth is kept alive and preserved. It is also a place of interaction, where we “practice” our faith together under the guidance, encouragement, and correction of those who are more mature in the faith.<sup>2</sup>

## Metaphor V: The Clean Vessel (verses 20–22)

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

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<sup>2</sup> Larson, K. (2000). [\*I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon\*](#) (Vol. 9, pp. 287–293). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

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').

## 9. Metaphor VI: The Lord's Servant (verses 23–26)

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’<sup>1</sup> 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?’<sup>1</sup>

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’.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Imagery of Household Utensils (2:20–21)**

THE IMAGERY OF verses 20–21 continues the theme of false teachers and teachings in verses 14–19, which concluded with the necessity of turning away from wickedness. Paul then introduces a new imagery, that of utensils in a house, which is encompassed in the larger imagery of the

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<sup>3</sup> Stott, J. R. W. (1973). [\*Guard the Gospel the message of 2 Timothy\*](#) (pp. 71–80). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.



house and household. The “large house” does not imply anything about the size of the church at Ephesus, but is in reference to the narrative world of the parabolic saying.

A large house, owned by a wealthy person, would have a variety of utensils. This is not simply a matter of better versus everyday tableware (as is implied in the word “ordinary” in NRSV). It is rather that some utensils are used for purposes that have an overtone of “dishonor,” “disgrace,” or “shame.”<sup>4</sup> Such a purpose might be for removing excrement. This would be better understood by readers in cultures where, for example, the left hand is reserved for the dirty functions of living. It is this strong description that gives sense to verse 21 and its requirement to “cleanse” oneself from the latter group of utensils. This accomplishes the shift from the impersonal utensils of the image to the personal world of Timothy, who is to be “an instrument for noble purposes,” “holy [and] useful to the Master.”

Although it is customary for commentators to refer to Jesus’ parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43) and to Romans 9:19–21, the imagery stands on its own. The lesson concerning personal holiness is clear, and the idea of being “prepared to do any good work” for the Master looks ahead to 3:17.

### **Personal Advice About Handling Controversy (2:22–26)**

THE WORDS IN verse 21 about cleansing oneself are now explained in plain language. Verse 22 presents two contrasting objectives: “the evil desires of youth,” from which one should flee, and the pursuit of “righteousness, faith, love and peace.” The idea of fleeing and pursuing is similar to 1 Timothy 6:11, where the desired objects are “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.” Paul will also mention righteousness later in 2 Timothy in 3:16 and 4:8 (see also Titus 3:5).

The word “faith” (*pistis*) occurs thirty-three times in the Pastoral Letters; it can mean “faith” or “faithfulness,” depending on the context. For “love” see also 1 Timothy 1:5, 14; 2:15; 4:12; 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:7, 13; 3:10; Titus 2:2. The word “peace” (*eirene*) does not appear elsewhere in the Pastoral Letters apart from the salutations. The word “pure” has the same root as “cleanse” in verse 21. The “heart” is, as throughout Scripture, the inner person, which is dedicated either to good or to evil.

Verse 23 warns against arguments that produce quarrels, which must not characterize the Lord’s servant (v. 24). Verse 14 identified this quarreling as a kind of verbal warfare used by the opponents of truth. Thus, it must not characterize Timothy. There is a progression here from arguments that are “foolish and stupid” to outright controversy. The word *mache* (“quarrels”) here refers to “battles fought without actual weapons.” The root of that Greek word is also evident in the verb translated “quarreling” in verse 14 and “quarrel” in verse 24.

The positive attitudes in verse 24 are significant. The word for “kind” (found only here in the New Testament) carries the idea of gentleness and stands in contrast to a controversial spirit. Timothy must have this attitude “to everyone.” The next word, *didaktikos* (“able to teach”), is one of the qualifications for overseership in 1 Timothy 3:2. Paul is not teaching passivity; there is truth to be taught, and taught in a strong, capable way. The word translated “not resentful” appears only here in the New Testament and describes the way one handles evil opposition or pain. The NRSV’s “patient” is not strong enough, while “patient with difficult people” (NLT) comes closer. The picture in the context is of meeting the opposition of aggressive, controversial people, absorbing the pain without losing one’s temper and lashing back at them.

Verse 25 describes the required active response: instruction with a view to the “repentance” of the opponents. This instruction must be done “gently,” which continues the attitude described in the previous verse. Timothy’s arguments could not produce repentance; only God can do that. The noun “repentance” occurs only here within the Pastoral Letters, but it appears twenty-one times in the rest of the New Testament. The verb form is not found in the Pastorals but is used thirty-four times elsewhere. In the present context “repentance” is not used in connection with sin in general, but specifically with respect to opposition to the truth.

The spiritual need of repentance will lead to an acknowledging of the truth. Paul hopes that these opponents will “come to their senses,” a phrase that translates a verb that can mean also “to become sober again.” The key to the error and belligerent attitude of these heretics is their entrapment by the devil. Two passages show with special clarity the fact that unbelievers are held under the devil’s power: Acts 26:18 and Colossians 1:13. The former contains Paul’s commission to turn the Gentiles from “the power of Satan to God,” which involves opening their eyes and bringing them out of darkness to light (2 Cor. 4:4). Some have held that “his will” in 2 Timothy 2:26 refers to the will of God, picking up the latter part of verse 25. More likely, however, it refers to the effect of the entrapment and captivity of Satan to do his will.<sup>4</sup>

#### Bridging Context

**Living in God’s household.** The passage goes on in verses 20–21 to use the illustration of a household—an appropriate one considering that the Pastoral Letters address God’s people as a household. In this case the household is not identified as the church, but Paul simply builds on the available image. Nevertheless, those from whom Christians should “cleanse [themselves]” are probably in the professing church. This is a crucial issue, for various groups and cults have used these verses to justify their separation from other believers to form independent churches, organizations, or movements. There is no call here for Christians to separate from each other, but rather it is a call for those who hold to the truth and live it to dissociate themselves from those who are evil in teaching and living. The result should be greater usefulness to the Lord.

The vocabulary describing the persons who do this is significant. They are useful for “noble purposes,” in contrast to the articles in the illustration that are for filth and excrement. The word “noble” has to do with doing what is honorable. The person who cleanses himself or herself is “made holy.” Christians are saints, God’s holy ones. Such a person also becomes “useful to the Master,” which recalls the right God has, like a potter, to mold us as he chooses in order for us to serve him in the most appropriate way. We are thus prepared to do “good works” (see also 3:17; 2 Cor. 9:8; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:10). The separation from the dishonorable articles is thus not the conclusive act; it must be followed by the changes in being and function.

Verses 22–26 begin with a restatement of the kind of person God wants us to be, but now without the imagery of the household articles and their functions. In verse 22 Paul speaks forthrightly in unmistakable terms about the moral characteristics God expects in Timothy and

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<sup>4</sup> Liefeld, W. L. (1999). [\*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus\*](#) (pp. 260–262). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

all believers. Significantly, this leads directly into an amplification of the instructions in verses 14 and 16 and deals with “foolish and stupid arguments” and “quarrels.” Here it becomes clear that in addition to the previously given reasons for appropriate attitudes in the face of arguments, there is a practical goal. The servant of the Lord who does not quarrel but instead is kind will be able to teach others and perhaps see them repent, come to a “knowledge of the truth,” “come to their senses,” and “escape from the trap of the devil.” It is sobering to realize that if the attitude of the Lord’s servant makes these results possible, the opposite is also true: A wrong attitude on our part may, in spite of correct teaching, hinder others from coming to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

### Contemporary Application

**ON DEALING WITH those who are not Christians.** Fred Heeren, author of *Show Me God*, has engaged in stimulating dialogues with scientists with a secular viewpoint. He recently said, “If I’ve found any one thing to be key in getting through to skeptics today, this is it ... *Have an attitude of gentleness and respect toward unbelievers and their views.* Put negatively, the greatest single turn-off for skeptics is the Christian who sets up an us-versus-them argument between Christianity and science.” While the setting is different from that of the early church with its conflicts, this is good advice that accords with what Paul has been telling Timothy about his attitudes to those with whom he disagrees.

Another writer observes:

When people on the streets are asked, What is a Christian? What do they stand for?, on nearly every occasion words come back such as anti-abortion, anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-welfare, anti-this, anti-that. And words like harsh, self-righteous, intolerant, or mean-spirited. Yet another poll of people, asked what they think Jesus was like, almost universally returns with words like compassionate, nonviolent peacemaker, and reconciler. How do we explain the contradictions here? Either the popular conception of Jesus is mistaken, or we in the church have been following the wrong agenda.

Second Timothy 2:14–26, like the rest of the Pastoral Letters, leaves no doubt that Paul was anti-heresy and anti-godlessness, but the point of this passage is that Timothy should not be argumentative and quarrelsome in his attitude, as the false teachers were. In this life we will always need to take some stands that are “anti,” but the issue is whether we can do this in a way that will not involve us in sub-Christian quarreling, producing a sub-Christian reputation.

Some years ago a church attempted to apply this passage from 2 Timothy to their own situation. A small group had been started in an area that could benefit from a warm, gospel-preaching, Bible-teaching church. The pieces, so to speak, were all in place. The participants were well-taught Christians. They loved the Lord, devoted themselves to worship in a spirit and

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<sup>5</sup> Liefeld, W. L. (1999). [\*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus\*](#) (pp. 264–265). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

to a depth not usually seen in evangelical churches in those days, and had a desire to reach others for Christ. There was a good diversity in ages, and they fit well socially into the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, they were so intense in trying to follow what they thought was the teaching of this passage that they lacked the positive attitude toward others that it also taught, which could have produced the effects envisioned in verses 25–26. They were unable to achieve such goals because of a pre-occupation with being separate from all those who did not agree with their doctrine at every point, including spiritually minded, Bible-believing Christians. Other nearby churches held most of their doctrines and had similar views of church polity, ministry, and worship. But for this group, cleansing themselves from the unclean articles in the household meant separation even from those sister churches. Only God knows what might have been accomplished and what people might have been won to the Lord by a winsome, open, and kindly attitude toward others.

**Two personal illustrations.** For another application, I might offer a personal illustration. Years ago I had the opportunity to take some doctoral courses in a major liberal seminary. This took place at a crucial time in American fundamentalism. Some of the more strident voices in fundamentalism were making it difficult for others, equally fundamental in their beliefs, to hold meaningful conversations with those of a different persuasion. Some of their attitudes and argumentation were close to what this passage warns against. In this climate I, for one, found it hard to explain my beliefs to others at the seminary. I had no disagreement with the essential doctrines of fundamentalism, but the personal attacks by others of my theological position on some of the very people I was then meeting and appreciating at the seminary made it difficult to represent conservative theology to them.

However, at one point I had the privilege of facilitating an invitation to New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce, who was visiting in the area, to speak in the seminary chapel. He began with words close to these: “It does not matter what we think the apostle Paul might have said, or what we wish he had said. What matters is what, in fact, he did say.” Bruce then proceeded in a clear, gentle way to present a biblical message on the heart of Pauline theology.

Perhaps a second illustration will be useful. From time to time openings present themselves to have public debate, personal dialogue, or correspondence with prominent opponents of the Christian faith. (I still keep a letter from atheist Madeline Murray O’Hare in response to something I once wrote her.) One Christian apologist had opportunities to debate her and others of similar persuasions. After one such appearance, some were troubled by his combative, demeaning attitude to the antagonist. His response was, “I did not go there to save souls but to destroy a heretic.” I believe the apostle Paul would have hoped rather to destroy heresy and save a soul.

**Fruitful dialogue.** Contemporary application of this emphasis in our passage should not be difficult if we share Paul’s goals. It will always be more difficult to separate from those whose life and teachings are destructive if we know them personally than if they are merely names to us. Yet it should make us more concerned for them personally, and we can hope for an eventual turnaround if we do know them. In the house church setting Timothy must have had firsthand contact, perhaps weekly for a period of time, with the very people Paul warns him about.

In what circumstances, then, can we best engage in fruitful dialogue? There are forums that provide an open hearing for differing theological and biblical viewpoints, some involving participants from non-Christian religious and various philosophical perspectives. One thinks of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, but there are major societies in other disciplines also that relate to religion. Disagreement is expected and, if it is

courteous and reasoned, it is respected. Such dialogue allows for dissemination of one's viewpoints as they may legitimately arise from the presentations and discussions, though one must not misuse the scholarly forms for confrontational evangelism.

On the local church scene, pastors and others may be involved in ministerial gatherings with ministers, priests, and perhaps rabbis, where, in a friendly setting, there can be an "appreciative inquiry" (to borrow a happy phrase) of other faiths. Without attacking others or questioning their integrity (which I have unfortunately heard done), a clear testimony is appropriate.

When, however, we are confronted with outright heresy by "wolves" seeking to destroy the flock and to tear a church away from its theological moorings, the rules change, and the Lord's servant should not get sucked into banter or debate. When the lines are drawn and the life of the flock is at stake, truth must confront error as openly and as forcefully as necessary.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Liefeld, W. L. (1999). [\*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus\*](#) (pp. 265–267). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.