

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (23-3-1997 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

2 Timothy 2:23-26

Additional Bible reading: Isaiah 42:1-4; 50:4-9; 53:7-10

Introduction

Paul has urged Timothy to flee from spiritual danger, and run after what is good. He also encouraged him to seek Christian fellowship, and in the company of believers, to aim at righteousness, faith, love and peace. Putting such things into practice can be difficult at times. Even among Christians, within the Christian family, it can be difficult to get along with some people. Paul faces this difficulty very frankly. He teaches what to avoid, and what positive steps to take in putting these things into practice.

The problem faced

One of the great problems in life is personal relationships, and how we live and relate to others. With some people there are no problems. But people differ. Some are hard to get along with, for they may be troublemakers, prickly, critical, or overwhelming. Here is one of the great tests of being a Christian. It is easy to be nice to those who are nice to us, who agree with our outlook and beliefs, and even if they don't, do not make it an issue. But lots do not see eye to eye. There is criticism, talking behind one another's back, deliberate antagonism, suspicion, doubt poured over people's motives. The church business meeting so often reveals true colours!

Christians do not have a very good record for dealing with people who differ – even the greatest preachers and leaders and men greatly used. During the great Evangelical Revival of the 18th century, the issue of Calvinism and Arminianism was to the fore in many debates about faith, election, predestination, falling from grace, for whom did Christ die, sin and its effects. The two schools of thought both based their case on Scripture, and on both sides were preachers whose ministry had been greatly blessed. On the one side was George Whitfield and Augustus Toplady (author of *Rock of Ages* and *A debtor to mercy alone*), and on the other hand John and Charles Wesley. The debates were vicious and acrimonious. Toplady produced a treatise entitled “Absolute Predestination”. In a letter, Wesley caricatured it, ending “Reader, believe this or be damned.. Witness my hand, Augustus Toplady”. Toplady accused Wesley of forgery and satanic guilt, and replied with a tract calling Wesley “an old fox, tarred and feathered”, accusing him of blunders and blasphemies, and questioning whether a man of his views could ever get to heaven.

How could these great godly men, eminent soul-winners and Christian leaders, who were spiritually mature, speak and write of each other like this? People can be, on the whole, levelheaded. But when certain situations arise, or certain subjects are discussed, emotions are aroused, and they lose their heads, saying and doing quite shameful things. Nothing has changed much since the days of Wesley and Toplady.

Negative response

There are certain things we must avoid. **Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel** (2 Timothy 2:23,24). This does not mean we are not to engage in any controversy. When the truth of the Gospel was at stake, Paul was an ardent controversialist. He opposed Peter to his face in public (Galatians 2:11-14). **Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints** (Jude 3). Christ was controversial. He spoke plainly about Pharisaic hypocrisy. **Fight the good fight of the faith** (1 Timothy 6:12).

However, what is forbidden is stupid and senseless quarrels, where the truth is not at issue, only idle speculations, which are not dealt with in Scripture. Profitless arguments about things that are not revealed in Scripture are merely one man's opinion over another's. People can get really hot under the collar about their own unsubstantiated opinions for which there is no basis. Bad feeling is the only sure outcome of such argument.

How sad when people have been put off coming to church because of a critical comment on the way they dress. We must concentrate on the big, clear-cut, fundamental issues instead of airing our opinions about little petty things that do not in the least matter. People who obsess over trifles and trivialities are usually the same people who neglect the important issues of the Gospel.

Positive response

The Lord's servant must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful (2 Timothy 2:24). The only other place where the Greek word translated "be kind" is used is in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, **we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children**. This is the kind of gentleness the Lord's servant must show. The ability to teach and give wise counsel requires a good knowledge of the Scripture, and an ability to illustrate and apply its truth in a way that people can understand and grasp. "Not resentful", or "patient" or "forbearing" in some translations, just as God has been to us.

The picture we get of the Lord's servant is of someone who is easy to speak to, approachable, not putting people off, not irritable, sarcastic, or scornful. His concern is to win people, not to win the argument. Honey, and not vinegar, is his means. Sometimes gentleness is not appreciated or reciprocated, and it leads to a response of ridicule or abuse. The Lord's servant must be prepared to be like the Master who, even when He was reviled, reviled not again.

In this spirit of humility and meekness, he is to correct and teach those who are in opposition. He is not meant to be a "yes" man, agreeing with everybody no matter what they believe. It is his place to correct, to put right what is wrong – but always in meekness and humility, courteously and considerately, not in a superior or haughty way. He must love men, not batter them into submission to the truth. His hand must be like the surgeon's, carefully finding the diseased spot, but not causing unnecessary pain.

If this is the Christian's approach, then lasting good may follow. God Himself, through such a gentle but faithful ministry, may perform the conspicuous work of

salvation. **God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will** (2 Timothy 2:25,26). This is not something which the Christian worker can do. Only God can do this miracle, but He works through the Christian, and as God's instrument, the Christian does not quarrel, but with kindness and gentleness he humbly teaches and corrects.

Note the two-fold work – the human instrument, and divine power in giving grace to the sinner. Behind the scenes, invisible to man, a spiritual battle is being fought out. The devil is like a hunter capturing his quarry and drugging him. Only God can deliver through the ministry of one of his servants, who displays the qualities taught here.

Model or pattern for our conduct

Remember we are the Lord's servants. He is the one who teaches us how we are to do it. We are to behave like this because the Master did. **Your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey** (Matthew 21:5). **He will not quarrel or cry out... A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out** (Matthew 12:18-21, quoting Isaiah 42:3).

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary.... I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting (Isaiah 50:4,6). **He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth** (Isaiah 53:7). He used his tongue wisely, and His attitude was meek. He never shouted, made a scene, but dealt gently with people when they were hurting or when their faith burned low. He did not retaliate or avenge Himself. His is to be the character of the Lord's servant.

When on earth, Jesus described Himself as **gentle and humble in heart** (Matthew 11:29). Paul spoke of **the meekness and gentleness of Christ** (2 Corinthians 10:1). If our Christian teaching is adorned with Christian character, if we are gentle and meek in dealing with the wayward, lasting good may follow, and God will carry out the work of salvation.

Conclusion

Looking back over the whole of 2 Timothy, we have a wonderful and many-sided picture of the Christian worker. He is portrayed as a good soldier, a disciplined athlete, and a hard-working farmer. He is an utterly dedicated unashamed workman, accurate in handling God's Word. He is a vessel for noble use, upright in character and conduct. As the Lord's servant he is gracious and gentle in manner. Or, in alliterative terms: committed in work, clear in teaching, clean in living, courteous in speaking. Only so can we be of use to the Lord. What a tall order. No wonder Paul began the chapter with **my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus**