



good shepherd
presbyterian church

What Winning Looks Like

2 Timothy 2:14-26

Sermon by: Robert Austell

February 2, 2020

There is much in the news right now about winners and losers, but I am struck all the more as I've watched the impeachment hearings that it is important how one runs the race, not just what the end result may be. If that is true in politics (it should be true there!), it is all the more so for Christians professing to follow Jesus Christ and live out the teaching in God's Word. Ultimately we may not be able to affect our various leaders' behavior other than through our votes, but we can be responsible for how we run our race through our words, actions, and attitudes.

In today's scripture, the Apostle and Pastor Paul is writing to his student and friend, Timothy. He is encouraging him and the Church to become "approved workers" for Jesus. Along the way Paul highlights several challenges and several remedies that are not only good for Timothy's time, but I believe for ours as well.

That key encouragement and challenge comes in verse 15, with the surrounding verses serving to explain and unpack what it says:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a worker who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

I'll use the parts of that sentence to work through all that Paul had to say in our text today.

A Worker

Let's start with 'worker': we read in verse 19 that "the Lord knows who are His" and "everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness." So one baseline is those who claim to be followers, but that is

quickly refined by recognizing that God knows our thoughts and all observe our actions. This is consistent with the whole passage: those who truly partner with God for His work in the world are those who align words with thoughts and deeds. That is what the Lord desires, not just of pastors like Timothy, but of all who claim the name. God desires faithful workers and partners for His work in the world.

The phrase “present yourself... as a worker” reminds me of Romans 12:1, which helps amplify the meaning here as well:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

And our key verse points to three other characteristics of a worker: he or she is to be true to God’s Word, diligent and approved, and unashamed. We’ll look at each trait in turn.

Accurately Handling the Word

The first trait I want to focus on is at the end of the focus verse. The faithful worker needs to “accurately handle the word of truth.” Again, this is not just a word for pastors and teachers, but to all Christians. In order to do this we have to read, hear, and study the Bible. You can’t apply or interpret something you don’t know. This is why we put such a high value on Bible study, Sunday school, and preaching at Good Shepherd. At the core of faithfully following Jesus Christ is knowing what it means to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. And we discover that through studying his life and teaching and all that God has to say in scripture. That’s also why we teach HOW to read scripture at Good Shepherd. It’s not a collection of fortunes or one-liners, but a grand story of inter-connected history, poetry, preaching, and teaching. We teach and read *in context* and use other portions of scripture to help us understand what we are reading and hearing.

Paul emphasized this, not only because it is critical in general to being a faithful worker, but because he also recognized the specific danger of false teaching and incorrect handling of God’s Word. He warns Timothy specifically of examples of this in his church in verse 18, where he singles out the false teaching of two men in their community who were teaching falsely about the resurrection.

Whether it's a prosperity gospel or a works-righteousness or a name-it-and-claim-it theology, there is no shortage of false teaching in our own era. And whether it's something on the Internet that looks questionable or me preaching here among you, always weigh what you hear against scripture. Don't just take my word for it, but listen, read, and study for yourself. And don't just trust your own study and interpretation, but join in groups who are studying scripture together. That helps counteract error and wacky interpretations. That's one reason we offer classes and studies and groups! Taken together, that's how we all can attain to "accurately handling the word of truth" and becoming more and more faithful workers of the Lord and followers of Christ .

Approved, Not Ashamed

A second trait of a faithful worker is to be approved, not ashamed. That is, to be a worker not in God's name only, but in godly thought and deed. Paul notes two dangers of falling short in this area.

In verses 16-17 he warns, "Avoid worldly and empty chatter." It can have at least two negative results. It will "lead to further ungodliness" and "spread like gangrene." There is no place this is quite so evident as online, where rumor and gossip can multiply out to our friends and address book in mere seconds. And it's so hard to pull back once it's out there. Rumor and gossip can also wreak havoc in the real world. "Have you heard?" and speculating about people's motives can quickly hurt feelings, damage relationships, and more. In contrast, Paul urges Timothy and us to avoid this kind of talk, whether it's inside the church or outside (or online). Let your words be full of truth and substance, bearing witness to Jesus Christ. Don't engage in the chatter or add to it. Guarding the tongue is the best defense; grounding ourselves the Bible is the best offense.

In verse 22, Paul warns about immaturity and distraction: "Flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord for a pure heart. Refuse foolish and ignorant speculations..." This is not just about the young or about physical lusts, but broadly about the things that can so easily grab our attention. And even the spiritually mature have moments of immaturity and distraction. But therein is danger. Besides cautioning us against less-than-godly thoughts and behaviors, this warning also underscores the value of being in relationship with wise and spiritually mature friends, mentors, and teachers... those who "call on the Lord from a pure heart."

Now this is not to say that we can be perfect. But we also usually know the difference between what God approves and disapproves. Generally, I think we know when we have fallen into either of these traps. It's hard to extricate ourselves, repent, or accept God's grace and re-start. But that's why I appreciate the language of "need not be ashamed." We do have a path to a new start if we are willing.

Be Diligent

A third trait of a faithful worker is to be "diligent." Again, I appreciate the difference between being 'perfect' and being 'diligent'. We are to strive for the good and godly, recognizing that God is gracious when we fall short. But that diligence is far different from never aiming for faithfulness in the first place.

In verses 24-25, Paul does break out four qualities of "the Lord's bond-servant." Pursuing these and avoiding their opposite will certainly help us be diligent in the right way.

Kind to all: This kindness is contrasted with being quarrelsome. It is not a doormat, let people walk over you kindness. Rather, and especially given the context of this chapter, it is winsomely and effectively standing up for truth. God's truth is a kindness and is worth extending with love and grace to all we come in contact with. Kindness comes more easily to some than others, but it's also a Fruit of the Spirit and something we must be diligent and intentional about.

Able to teach: This is a reiteration of the plea to read, listen to, and study scripture. It doesn't mean that you must teach a Sunday school class or Bible study, but it does mean that you become conversant with God's Word, able as previously said to "accurately handle the word of truth." Such study doesn't come accidentally or by osmosis; it requires commitment and diligence.

Patient when wronged: Like kindness, patience is not only one of the Fruit of the Spirit, but also a sign of spiritual maturity. Again, it may come more easily to some than others, but it's also something we all have to be diligent and intentional about. Patience "when wronged" hearkens back to Jesus' teaching to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). Often we want to hit back or 'wrong' back, but patience seeks something else than revenge; it is the work of God's Spirit.

Correcting opponents with gentleness: Another Fruit of the Spirit... it seems like a common theme here! There are ways to teach (or argue) that are helpful and those that are hurtful. What is the goal of correction? Is it winning? Is it simply truth for truth's sake? Is it helping? Is it growing? Part of our diligence as followers of Christ should be the health and growth of others, even our enemies.

The implications of these qualities of diligence are played out at the end of our text today in verses 25-26. The goal of spiritual fruit and truth and our diligence isn't taking a victory lap around our enemies and opponents. It's not gloating that we are 'in' and they are 'out'; rather we are to share the heart of the Heavenly Father who desires that ALL come to repentance and a knowledge of the truth. Paul expressed this in his first letter to Timothy when he wrote:

[God our Savior] desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

As faithful workers we are joining God in that desire and in His mission to free the captives and grant repentance leading to truth, hope, and salvation. That's winning and it comes from an intentional and diligent commitment to align ourselves with God's heart and purpose. We experience it when we resist the dangers of worldliness, immaturity, and false teaching. We embrace it when we dig into and live according to God's Word and invite His Spirit to flow through us. In this series we are talking about what comes before repentance. Today we have seen that not only is God at work to use winsome truth to bring people to repentance, but he asks us to be active and diligent participants in that work.

This is my prayer for myself. This is my prayer for you.

Not so we may be great but because God is great.

Not so that we can build something we can brag about but so we can participate in something we can give praise about.

Not so that we can win, but so we can worship, so we can serve, so we can follow the one who is worthy.

May it be so! Amen.