

Leadership Principles & the Pastoral Epistles – 2015
WEEK 5: HANDLE THE WORD ACCURATELY

Interpretive comments on 2 Tim. 2:14-19a

Read 2:14-19a. Paul contrasts two kinds of road workers here. Timothy must be a worker who “handles the Word accurately” (2:15). What does it mean to “handle the Word accurately?”

The emphasis here is not specifically on the importance of Bible knowledge and navigation, or on preaching skill (though these are very important)—but on interpreting God’s Word accurately and (especially) communicating its central message in a way that “cuts straight” (*orthotomeo*), making it easy for those who follow your teaching to get to the proper destination.

Over against this are false teachers (like Hymenaeus and Alexander), who “swerve” (*astoecho*) from this path and lead others away with them.

How do we do this? The key lies in understanding that this command is synonymous with Titus 2:1 (read). To handle the Word accurately is to teach both “sound doctrine” and “the things that are fitting” for that sound doctrine. John Stott says: “This compressed phrase indicates that two strands are to be interwoven in (our) teaching. On the one hand there is ‘the sound doctrine,’ the definite article . . . implying that an identifiable body of teaching is in mind. On the other hand, there are ‘the things which fit it,’ namely the ethical duties which the sound doctrine demands.”¹

What is this teaching? Titus 2:2-3:8 answer this question very clearly.

The “sound doctrine” is “healthy” (*hugaino*, from which we get “hygienic”) teaching (cf. Lk. 5:31; 7:10). In context, it is the message of God’s grace through Jesus Christ (2:11-14; 3:3-8). The rest of the Pastoral Epistles confirms this understanding of “sound doctrine.”²

The “things that are fitting for sound doctrine” is the lifestyle of Christian love toward others that Paul describes in the rest of this passage.³

Of special importance is the *order* of this teaching. Namely, it is the teaching of God’s grace that motivates and empowers people to live a lifestyle of love and good deeds.

Titus 2:11,12 says that this lifestyle of love is based on (“for”) the grace of God, which “instructs” (*paideuo* – “trains”) us to say “No” to inordinate/selfish desires (*epithumia*).

Titus 3:8 says that it is essential to “speak confidently” (*diabebaiomai* - affirm strongly and consistently) about God’s grace “so that” people will engage in good deeds. The message of God’s grace frees us from living selfishly (because God loves us and will meet all our needs) and teaches us to take joy in freely giving his love away to others.

“Let no one say that (sound) doctrine does not matter! Good conduct arises out of good doctrine. It is only when we have grasped clearly who we are in Christ, that the desire will grow within us to live a life that is worthy of our calling . . . as God’s new society.”⁴

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 185.

² It is the teaching that is “according to the glorious gospel” (1 Tim. 1:10b,11), whose center is “the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13).

³ Paul refers to these same two aspect in 1 Tim. 6:3—those “sound words” that go along with the “doctrine conforming to godliness.” 1 Tim. 1:4,5 is another reference to this couplet of Christian orthodoxy. The teaching about the “administration of God which is by faith” is the message of grace; the goal of this instruction is “love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.”

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 194.

Although Paul does not use the terms “sound doctrine” or “the things fitting for sound doctrine” outside of the Pastoral Epistles, this is clearly the structure of his letters to the churches—beginning with the doctrine of grace and leading to the lifestyle of holy love for one another and for non-Christians (cf. Romans; Ephesians, Colossians.).

In John’s words, handling the Word accurately is focusing on: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

It is both Jesus’ example in Jn. 13:3-5 (because He knew the Father loved him, He loved His disciples), and his command for us (Jn. 13:12-14,34,35).

It is “Abide in my love and love one another” (Jn. 15:9,12).

It is how God’s love “reaches its goal in us” (1 Jn. 4:12,17,18)—“We love (one another) because he has first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19) and “Since God has loved us this way, we also should love one another” (1 Jn. 4:11).

Therefore, being a workman who handles the Word accurately involves consistently feeding your flock the radical grace of God (in-depth), *and* calling them to respond to God’s radical grace by embracing a radical lifestyle of sacrificial, self-giving, ethical love to others.

Why is this teaching focus so important?

Because this is the focus that ignites and sustains genuine spiritual renewal and healthy church growth (Col. 1:6).

“A wave of authentic revival sweeps over the church when three things happen together: teaching the great truths of the gospel with clarity, applying those truths to people’s lives with spiritual power, and extending that experience to large numbers of people. We evangelicals urgently need such an awakening today. We need to rediscover the gospel.”⁵

Corporate spiritual renewals are therefore *always* accompanied by gifted preachers who have been radically changed by the gospel and “handle the word accurately” in this sense (e.g., LUTHER; WESLEY & WHITEFIELD; SPURGEON; MOODY; CHUCK SMITH, etc.).

Because, conversely, wandering away from this focus always makes a church sick and weak. This can happen in two ways—either by succumbing to heresy or by focusing on doctrinal “tangents”—emphases that may be non-heretical or even biblical, but not centrally focused on God’s grace and a lifestyle of Christian love.

The Ephesian church was listening to people espousing doctrinal tangents (2 Tim. 2:14; see also 1 Tim. 1:3,4,6) as well as to heretics (2 Tim. 2:17,18). The Ephesian church eventually warded off heresy, but became sick because it prioritized doctrinal discernment and perseverance in ministry more than these two priorities (Rev. 2:1-5).

Doctrinal “tangents” are appealing because they provide counterfeit growth, joy, etc., and because they justify a lifestyle selfishness instead of Christian love (2 Tim. 4:3,4). They come in many shapes and sizes. In Ephesus, there was inordinate interest in myths, genealogies, etc. In American evangelicalism, there are *many* examples:

“Imagine the evangelical church without the gospel. I know this makes no sense, for evangelicals are defined by the evangel. But try to imagine it for just a moment. What might our evangelicalism, without the evangel, look like? We would have to replace the centrality of the gospel with something else, naturally. So what might take the place of the gospel in our sermons and books and cassette tapes and Sunday school classes and home Bible studies and, above all, in our hearts? A number of things, conceivably. An introspective absorption with recovery from past emotional traumas, for example. Or a passionate devotion to the pro-life cause. Or a confident

⁵ Raymond C. Ortlund, *Afterward from Passion for God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994).

manipulation of modern managerial techniques. Or a drive toward church growth and 'success.' Or a deep concern for the institution of the family. Or a fascination with the more unusual gifts of the Spirit. Or a clever appeal to consumerism by offering a sort of cost-free Christianity Lite. Or a sympathetic, empathetic, thickly-honeyed cultivation of interpersonal relationships. Or a determination to take America back to its Christian roots through political power. Or a warm affirmation of self-esteem. The evangelical movement, stripped of the gospel, might fix upon any or several of such concerns to define itself and derive energy for its mission. In other words, evangelicals could marginalize or even lose the gospel and still potter on their way, perhaps even oblivious to their loss."⁶ (ALSO: end-times speculation; biblical food diets; etc.)

"We must avoid the view that, while the Gospel provides a sort of escape ticket from judgment and hell, all the real life-transforming power comes from something else—an esoteric doctrine, a mystical experience, a therapeutic technique, a discipleship course, etc. That is too narrow a view of the Gospel. Worse, it ends up relativizing and marginalizing the Gospel, stripping it of its power while it directs the attention of people away from the Gospel and toward something less meaningful."⁷

Which of these emphases has Xenos resisted? To which have we been/are we currently vulnerable?

Because this teaching focus is the best prevention against wandering away from the truth.

"Treatment" medicine is vitally important, but "wellness" training promotes health which may cut down on the need for so much treatment. Similarly, a positive, in-depth, passionate diet of this kind of teaching makes people "healthy" so that they are less vulnerable to "tangents" and heresies.

QUALIFY: This does *not* mean that warning about and refutation of "wandering" is unnecessary (see New Testament letters), but that our overall *emphasis* should be on positive exposition of the gospel more than on refutation of theological error. Our people need to "replace" in order to effectively "resist."

EXAMPLES:

Preaching against the world-system is essential, but this will not disarm the world-system unless we also teach how to live grace-motivated Christian (SINCLAIR FERGUSON'S ARTICLE ON "THE EXPULSIVE POWER").

Preaching against EMERGENT CHRISTIANITY is essential, but omitting this focus will leave EMERGENT's false beauty intact (e.g., community & service).

Because only a steady diet of God's grace enables Christians' to persevere through the difficulties involved in genuinely loving lost people and one another.

"A lot of talk about . . . (ministry) focuses on excitement. It can result in people coming to serve who do not expect the suffering which will inevitably come. We must draw people into Christian ministry by speaking those unchanging truths . . . Foremost among those these is the content of the gospel itself . . . Such truths remain the same when there are problems and when things are going fine. When Christians come fired with passion for people based on such awesome, unchanging truths, they will not give up or get disillusioned when the going gets tough."⁸ (CONTRAST THIS TO OUR LACK OF PERSEVERANCE WITH JOY DURING "OUT OF SEASON" PERIODS)

⁶ Raymond C. Ortlund, *Afterward* from *Passion for God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994).

⁷ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, Vol. 2, March 10.

⁸ Ajith Fernando, *An Authentic Servant* (OMF International, 1999), pp. 13,14.

Practical ideas on handling the Word accurately

Be an *example* of one who is growing in God's grace and loving others! This will attract people to your teaching and make it credible. Otherwise, your teaching will be shallow, hollow, and hypocritical—or (worse) you will modify your teaching to suit your unhealthy spiritual state.

Provide a *consistent* and *balanced* diet of teaching that focuses on God's grace and sacrificial love.

What happens when we teach biblical love/ethics without rooting and nourishing them in God's grace? We will either lower the standard from radical love to "insipid, superficial niceness," or our teaching will be crushing and/or self-righteous.

What happens when we teach grace without radical biblical love? We may unintentionally promote super-spiritual selfishness. And unless people see the lifestyle of self-giving love that God commands, they ultimately lose their appreciation of His grace!

This is one reason why teaching our way through whole Bible books is important. Especially the New Testament letters emphasize "sound doctrine" (God's grace) and "the things that are fitting" (a lifestyle of love).

Expose your people to *other gifted teachers* who have this focus.

EXAMPLES: XENOS CENTRAL TEACHINGS; www.thegospelcoalition.org; KELLER (www.redeemer.com); FERNANDO; "GLORY OF THE GOSPEL;" NEE; CHUCK SMITH. Become a "clearing house" of these resources!

Teach the New Testament *proportionately* more than the Old Testament. While all of the Bible is the inspired revelation of God's redemptive plan and therefore all-important, the New Testament is the revelation of the beginning of the fulfillment of the Messianic age (see Mk. 1:14,15; Heb. 1:1-4; Rom. 16:25,26). Therefore, it is appropriate that we focus more on the New Testament even though the Old Testament contains four times as much material. Paul's emphasis on the importance of teaching the "full counsel of God" should be understood in this light.

Teach the Old Testament with this focus. The Old Testament does teach us important practical lessons on how to live (1 Cor. 10:6,11 – e.g., CHARACTER STUDIES; PROVERBS), but these lessons need to be connected to the indicatives of God's grace through Jesus—or they can become mere moralism.

For example, you can teach Ex. 17 only as a lesson on "do not grumble or God will discipline you," or you can also connect this lesson to Jesus taking the punishment for our grumbling so God can pour out the Holy Spirit on us (see Jesus' reference to Ex. 17 in Jn. 7:37-39).

For example, you can teach Proverbs passages on the importance of receiving reproof, or you can also connect this lesson to how our security because of God's grace helps us admit that we need correction.

WARNING: Be careful not to go beyond what is written in uncontrolled allegorizing (EXAMPLES)! Even a well-intentioned desire to see Jesus in the Old Testament without clear textual and/or New Testament support moves authority from the text to the interpreter.

When teaching the ethical "things befitting" passages (imperatives) of New Testament epistles, supply the "sound doctrine" (indicatives) in which to root them.

Sometimes the indicatives have been supplied in the early part of the letter. For example, the ethical imperatives of Rom. 12-15 are based on the indicatives of Rom. 3-8. You will need to remind people of these earlier indicatives as you teach the later imperatives. This is how the author meant them to be understood.

It is also appropriate to refer to indicatives from other New Testament books as the basis for the imperatives you are teaching. When teaching the Sermon on the Mount, for example,

Jesus supplies few clear indicatives. Unless we supply those indicatives from elsewhere, the lessons of this Sermon for Christians are moralistic.

When you advocate ministry methods or structures, explain that their importance lies in that they facilitate these two priorities. These priorities must be facilitated through practical methods/structures, or they become nebulous. But not connecting them to these two priorities results in people relating to methods and structures in legalistic or pragmatic ways—which makes them ineffective or even destructive. EXAMPLES:

Why should we go consistently to CT? To be fed and challenged in these two priorities by gifted teachers, and to expose others to this.

Why should we be welcoming to new people at CT/home group? Because we have been loved as a stranger by Jesus, and we want to express his love to others.

Why should we get involved in Christian community – including personal discipleship? Because this is a key way to deeply and consistently receive and give God's love.

When you reprove and rebuke (2 Tim. 4:2), don't just address behaviors and attitudes. Help people to see that their wrong behaviors/attitudes are a lack of love and often a symptom of ignorance or unbelief in some aspect of God's grace. Call for repentance on this deeper level (NEXT WEEK).

"This sounds like a lot of work!" Yes it is—that's why Paul says "Be diligent" (2 Tim. 2:15)! Laziness in this area will result in a shallow, unhealthy church. But diligence in this ministry will provide the spiritual environment for healthy evangelism and discipleship! And God will empower you as you give yourself to this ministry of the gospel (Col. 1:28,29)!