

January 12, 2025

PASTORING WHEN FALSE TEACHING ARISES

2 Timothy 2:14-26

(4 of 8 in a series through 2 Timothy)

I want to begin by taking us to a moment in Paul's life well before he wrote this second letter to Timothy. It's recorded in Acts 20, and here's the context. Paul feels constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, but the Spirit keeps affirming to Paul that imprisonment and afflictions await him there. So, he decides to gather the elders in Ephesus, remind them of how he'd ministered to them, and charge them with what they need to be doing, not knowing exactly what his future held but confident that these men would not see his face again. It's obviously an emotional meeting, and Luke tells us that at the end they embraced him, kissed him, and wept. But right in the middle of Paul's goodbye, he warned them about false teachers arising. He said, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

Now, as Paul writes to Timothy, these very things have happened. We've already seen Paul charge Timothy to take measures to deal with false teachers in his first letter to Timothy, but now some false teachers remain. It may be that Timothy's first attempts to drive them away were ineffective, or it may be that others have arisen. But as we come to Paul's last letter to Timothy (and last letter period!), he is still exhorting Timothy about how to minister in the midst of false teaching that is circulating in the church there at Ephesus, and as we look at what he says, we need to pay attention as well.

When I note that we need to pay attention to Paul's exhortation about how to minister as falsehood is circulating in the church, my guess is that you could have two different reactions. One would be fear and alarm. Maybe you're looking around going, "What is going on at Cornerstone that I don't know about?" Still others could have the opposite reaction. Perhaps you're thinking, "Lee needs to drum up a good reason to motivate us to hear this sermon about a text that isn't applicable to us right now. We don't have some kind of cancerous false teaching running rampant in the church." And the reality is that both of those reactions contain something right and something wrong.

On the one hand, it's true that I'm not aware of some cancerous false teaching that's making its way through the church right now. However, it's also true that we have dealt with these kinds of threats before. Most of them have taken place addressing individuals behind the scenes. There was once years ago that we had to deal with someone doing this publicly as we charged the congregation not to have anything to do with this divisive person, as Paul tells us in Titus 3:10-11. And the reality is that this could happen again tomorrow. After all, we have an enemy who is not content to watch us seek to faithfully obey our Lord. He wants to destroy and divide us.

Therefore, as Paul writes to Timothy, telling him how to instruct his congregation and what to do himself as false teaching arises, it does us well to pay attention to what Paul says. After all, some of these things we need to be doing faithfully anyway in order to prevent false teaching, and others we may well need to employ any minute as false teaching arises.

With all of that said, I'm not going to walk through this text in a straightforward way. The reason for this is that Paul keeps circling back to what he's said earlier and seems to weave in a few themes along the way. Therefore, I want to note each of these along the way. First, we need to accurately teach God's Word and remind one another of what is true.

We need to accurately teach God's Word and remind one another of what is true

After reminding Timothy of the task the Lord has given him and giving him reasons to be encouraged and strengthened in that task in 2:1-13, Paul opens this section telling Timothy to "remind them of these things" (v. 14a). That is, part of Timothy's task is to continually bring people back to the truths that have been passed on to them. This is something Paul has modeled himself. You may remember him writing to the Philippians and telling them that for him to say the same things over and over to them is not burdensome to him, and it's safe for them (Phil 3:1). Timothy is to do the same. Faithful ministry requires us to remind one another of what we should know in order that we don't drift away from these truths. However, Paul says more to Timothy, telling him in verse 15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

With this, Paul is taking us to that final day of judgment as Timothy stands to give an account to the Lord, as all pastors will do according to Hebrews 13:17. And Paul is telling him that if he's not to be ashamed before the Lord but rather stand before him as one who would receive approval, then he needs to give himself to "rightly handling the word of truth." That is, Timothy needs to be someone who faithfully and accurately teaches God's Word to God's people.

There is more that we will say about dealing with falsehood, but the first way to deal with falsehood is to create a culture in the church where the Bible is faithfully and accurately taught. This is an absolute necessity. It's why the one distinct qualification for elders listed in Scripture is that we must be able to teach, something that Paul will reiterate later in this text in verse 25. Teaching the Bible and praying for God's people is the most fundamental task that the Lord has given pastors to be about. And we'll see in this letter that Paul is going to come back to this point repeatedly. He knows that the Word is God builds, shapes, and transforms God's people, and there's no substitute for it. So, let's always make sure that the Bible is being taught and proclaimed faithfully and accurately as long as we exist. The second thing we can gather from this text about walking faithfully as false teaching arises is that there can come a point when it's best not to engage with those speaking falsehood.

We must (at some point) stop engaging with those speaking falsehood

Now, yes, there are a lot of qualifications we can make here. No doubt everyone wants to say, “But aren’t we to confront and correct false teaching?” Yes. And Paul will get to that later. But there are times when the best thing we can do is starve out someone’s desire to spread false teaching by not giving them a hearing. But before I explain this more, let me show you how Paul repeatedly says this in the text.

First, after telling Timothy in verse 14 to remind the church of what Paul has been saying, he adds, “And charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good but only ruins the hearers.” So Timothy is to charge the church not to quarrel about words which is almost certainly a reference to false teaching that some are trying to spread in the church. I’ll show you why I say that in a second. But for now, just note Paul telling Timothy to charge the church not to engage in quarreling about these “words” (v. 14) that have potential to ruin those who hear them.

Then, note in verses 16-17 gives this same kind of exhortation, writing, “But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.” Just like those “words” Paul refers to in verse 14 that can “ruin” those who hear them, this reference to “irreverent babble” and “talk” also refers to false and dangerous teaching that threatens the church. We know this because Paul actually names some individuals spreading it and the false teaching they were spreading. He writes in verses 17-18, “Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened.”

We don’t know exactly what they were saying. Perhaps they were saying that when Paul refers to the resurrection he only means the eternal life experienced by us now, and there’s no resurrection of the body to come, and maybe even what we do with our bodies doesn’t count. We can’t be sure, but it seems some kind of false teaching like that had taken root in the church at Corinth as well. But for our sakes, note that Paul again tells the congregation to avoid getting caught up in discussions and arguments with those in the church who were spreading this false doctrine. And that’s twice he’s said that, but it’s not the last time.

Once more, in verse 22, Paul tells Timothy to “flee youthful passions,” which could be a reference to a hundred sinful desires one might have. But I think Paul may well have in mind the youthful desire to get engaged in arguments with others about these things because he follows it up in verse 23, saying, “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.” Therefore, for a third time Paul has told Timothy (and through Timothy, the church), “[Do] not quarrel about words,” “avoid irreverent babble,” and “have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies.” It’s clear Paul doesn’t want conversations and quarrels about this foolish teaching to keep happening. He wants to shut it down. But why?

Paul answers that question by laying out all the things that come of continuing to engage with those who want to argue falsehoods. I’ll list them for us:

- It does no good for those arguing the falsehood (v. 14b)

- It “ruins” the hearers, corrupting their hearts and minds (v. 14b)
- It leads those spreading the falsehood to more and more ungodliness (v. 16b)
- It leads to the falsehood spreading to others like gangrene (v. 17)
- It will unsettle the faith of some (v. 18b)
- It will simply breed more quarrels (v. 23b).

Now, Paul’s conclusions of what will happen if the congregation continues to engage in quarrels with those spouting these falsehoods may feel exaggerated, but this is one of those texts I’ve seen play out. So, I’m going to put these consequences on the screen to keep them in front of you, and then I want to lay out how we as pastors have seen this play out.

We get news of someone who is challenging some doctrinal truth or teaching in the church, and then the news keeps coming, and we realize this is becoming an issue. And so we meet with the source of the false or unsound doctrine, address it gently but directly, and think all is well. We’ve been heard. But then we realize that our meeting wasn’t as effective as we hope, and bad news comes at us quickly. We get news that the people spreading this unsound doctrine are continuing to have conversations with others. And though people are correcting them, they’re not budging (v. 14b). Not only are they not budging, but some others are beginning to be affected by it, thinking there may be truth in this falsehood (v. 14b). Then we get news that the people espousing unsound doctrine are diving into questioning other doctrines (v. 16b). Then we get news that others are indeed buying in, and this unsound doctrine is indeed spreading to others (v. 17). Then we get news that sincere believers are feeling unsettled, starting to question things in their hearts that they’d not question before engaging with the person spreading falsehood (v. 18b). And we realize that there’s no end in sight because any engagement with the people is only leading to more quarreling (v. 23b).

And so, in addition to confronting the source of the falsehood again, we begin to tell members of the church, “Don’t engage with them anymore. Avoid giving these arguments any credence. Have nothing to do with them. It’s like giving oxygen to a fire. It’s not changing the people’s minds, and many negative things are happening.” Do you see how that can happen and why Paul would give these exhortations not to engage the foolish arguments anymore? It needs to be starved out. There needs to be a message sent in the church that there’s no audience for this.

And you might say, “But why isn’t the initial response to these challenging the truth, just to say, ‘Get out of here, you wolves’”? And the answer is that false and threatening teaching doesn’t always arise from some outsider who is coming in to destroy. Sometimes these things arise from members of the church whom we love and believe will walk well. You approach them, correct them, and are hopeful they’ll heed your warnings. You’re trusting. You want them to repent and hope they will (Paul will even address this later). But in the meantime, you need the church not to give attention to this fire that that has started and could potentially destroy much. Again, you need it to be starved out. That seems to be what Paul is facing here and why he exhorts Timothy to charge the congregation not to quarrel with these people, to avoid irreverent babble, and to have nothing to do with these foolish controversies. What Paul shows us there can come a point where it’s best not to engage with those speaking falsehood. But Paul also wants the church to

see that they have another responsibility. We must make a clear stand against unsound doctrine and falsehood.

We must make a clear stand against unsound doctrine and falsehood

How do we keep false teaching that arises, even from one of our own, from destroying the church? Well, we've already noted two ways. We keep teaching the truth, accurately expounding the Word of God. And, if it festers, we starve it out by refusing to engage in conversations and arguments about such foolish teaching. But Paul also notes our responsibility to refuse to accept false teaching and cleanse ourselves of it. He shows us this in an interesting way. He writes in verse 19, "But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'" Now, what does he mean here?

First, his reference to "God's firm foundation" is a reference to the church. He envisions the church as a building, a house, and he's already made reference in 1 Timothy 3:15 to the church being "a pillar and buttress of the truth." Here again, he's using a part of a building the "firm foundation" to signify the whole. He's saying that God preserves his people against threats. He's put his seal on his own people, as Paul notes, in essence, saying, "These are mine." That's why Paul quotes from Numbers 16:5, in which the Lord declares, "The LORD will show who is his" (or as Paul rephrases here: "The Lord knows those who are his").

But Paul's reference here isn't just to remind us that the Lord will preserve his true people from ruin. He also wants us to see that we bear responsibility. We know that because of a few things. First, we know it because of the next text he quotes, which is a command: "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." So, though God preserves his people, but bear responsibility to separate ourselves from sin, including false teaching. Also, we know this because of the context from which these two references come.

They're both from Numbers 16 (v. 5 and v. 26). Here's the context. In Numbers 16:1-3, we read that a rebellious group of Israelites led by a man named Korah "assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?'" That is, they were saying that Moses and Aaron shouldn't be regarded as Israel's special, chosen leaders.

What happens after that is that Moses prays and the Lord instructs him to have a showdown. Korah and his group should gather themselves against Moses and Aaron, and the Lord would judge. And the Lord ended up opening the earth under Korah and his followers so that they fell to their deaths, and Korah's rebellion was obviously over at that point. But here's a key moment for us in the story. Right before the Lord judged Korah and those with him, Moses said to the Israelites, "Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins" (Num 16:26). I think this is what Paul is referencing with

his second quote/allusion to Numbers 16 in v. 19. He's telling us that like those in the wilderness, we need to choose to separate ourselves from the false teaching and make a clear stand.

The third and final reason for why I think this is what Paul is saying is because he says it explicitly, while using an analogy. In verses 20-21, he uses an analogy of the church being like a great house with all kinds of vessels. Some vessels are used for honorable uses and others for dishonorable uses. You might think of a vase for flowers as compared to a trash can for, well, trash. And Paul wants all of us to be "vessel[s] for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master, ready for every good work" (v. 21). But in order to be that, we must be one who "cleanses himself from what is dishonorable" (v. 21).

So the message is clear. Anytime unsound doctrine and false teaching arises in the church, we must cleanse ourselves of it and make a clear stand against it. After all, if it persists, those promoting it will ultimately face discipline (as Korah did), and you don't want to be among those who are declared to give all appearances of not belonging to the Lord.

And there's one final thing we must add. You've no doubt been anticipating it all along, but Paul makes it explicit in verses 24-26. Pastors must confront and correct false teaching.

Pastors must confront and correct false teaching

In verse 24 Paul describes to Timothy what qualifications "the Lord's servant" must meet, which seems to be a reference to pastors. One reason that seems to be the necessary conclusion is because Paul is going to note that the Lord's servant must be "able to teach," which is a qualification that is not required of all believers but is required of pastors. Paul says, "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness" (vv. 24-25a).

Paul knows that as men pastor the church, sometimes those within the church will rise and challenge truth. They'll promote unsound doctrine and falsehood. And a pastor could go ballistic, angrily respond, "How dare you come against me," etc. But Paul says that's not the way to go. You must not be easily offended but "patiently enduring evil." In kindness, you need to the person (or persons) and teach and correct in gentleness, showing what they're saying is wrong and what the Bible teaches.

But why approach that way if this person is saying something wrong that could be dangerous and even destroy the church? Shouldn't you come in aggressively, as one might run off an intruder? Paul answers, saying, "God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" (v. 25b-26).

The pastor's first response isn't to say when a member begins to declare something false, "Let's get this wolf out." Rather, it is to approach this brother or sister in kindness, gentleness, without offense, and teach and correct them from God's Word in hopes that might come to repentance.

If not, ultimately the person will need to be removed from the membership of the church in accordance with Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. But our first approach is to win them.

Paul told the church at Ephesus years prior that false teaching would arise in the church, even from within. And now we see how it should be dealt with. We need to keep teaching and preaching the truth. If it persists, refuse to engage in discussion and argumentation, as it would be like giving oxygen to a fire. Make sure to make a clear stand against it and separate ourselves from it. And the pastors should lovingly confront and correct in hopes of bringing repentance. Finally, the Bible gives further instruction if there is no repentance. We are to remove them. But before then, let's make sure simply to obey what the Lord has laid out here. Why would we want to do anything other than obey every word of the one who lived, died, and was raised for us? Amen.