

Women's Bible Study Spring 2011

A Spiritual Legacy – Passing On What You Know

March 16, 2011

Handling Truth Correctly: 2nd Timothy 2:14-26

Gretchen Steer



In the past five days we have seen enormous destruction wreaked upon the nation of Japan. From the 9.0 earthquake which hit last Friday, to the tsunami which followed, to the terrible aftershocks, to the unfolding nuclear disaster, to the bodies washing up on the shore – a single seismic event lasting less than two minutes has done all this.

Where is God? The Bible tells us that the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. Jesus' disciples murmured in awe: **“What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”(Matthew 8:27)**

And the prophet Micah describes the physical presence of God:

“Look! The LORD is coming from his dwelling place; he comes down and treads the high places of the earth. The mountains melt beneath him and the valleys split apart, like wax before the fire, like water rushing down a slope.” (Micah 1:3-4)

Does this earthquake mean that God does not care about his creation? At times like this, with unprecedented damage that will affect all the world's economies and the very air we breathe, if more radiation escapes, we must remind ourselves that this Sovereign God cared enough to send his Son to redeem mankind. And his Son will eventually reverse the effects of the fall on creation itself. Even the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah trusted God's love enough to write these words when his world was collapsing during the siege of Jerusalem:

**“Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:21-23)**

A time of catastrophe is the very moment we must remind ourselves of sound doctrine, the same ideas that Paul drove home in his letters to Timothy and Titus: the power that God gives us through his Holy Spirit, the grace of Jesus' suffering and death, the concept of holy living that Paul keeps returning to.

In disaster, people are forced to ponder their mortality. Let's not waste this opportunity. Let's give, and pray, and go if God calls us, to help with that recovery. But above all, help us to understand God's truth enough to defend his reputation and speak of his love to people who might be ready to hear this message for the first time in their lives, because all else has been stripped away.

Today's passage is called “Handle truth correctly.” We need to be able to handle truth correctly when God's name and reputation are called into question. When the question is raised,

“How could God let such a thing happen?” we should answer truthfully about God’s loving mercy towards his people in all nations.

So please turn with me to 2nd Timothy chapter 2, verse 14, where Paul starts today’s passage by saying:

“Keep reminding them of these things.” (2nd Timothy 2:14)

What things? Sound doctrine, of course – everything he’s been talking about in the past two chapters. But with that foundation, Paul’s going to push into new territory. Look at the rest of verse 14:

“Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2nd Timothy 2:14-15)

In a few moments I’ll come back to this idea of quarreling about words. First, let’s look at verse 15 and ask ourselves,

I. Are We AWANA?

When our children were little they began attending the AWANA program at church. It seeks to teach children scripture and evangelize at the same time. The name AWANA comes from this verse 15: **“A Workman And Not Ashamed”**. During those years our kids memorized scripture week after week and enjoyed the fun they had at Cubbies and Sparks in Awanas.

So are you and I AWANA – a workman, and not ashamed? Let’s talk about what that means. Verse 15 contains three elements, and the first is that we are

A. Approved by God

In one sense we already know that we are approved by God, because if we have committed our lives to Jesus Christ, then when God looks at us he sees his Son’s righteousness. So in that large, theological sense we are already approved.

But there’s another meaning here, and it relates to passages like 1 Cor. 3:12-15, which talks about our work in this life, and Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the sheep and the goats, and Matthew 13:1-23, the parable of the sower and the seed. All of these passages tell us that in some way our service for God in this life will be evaluated or examined by him after we die. Does this mean that we have to work our way to heaven? Of course not! We are in God’s hands for eternity when we believe in Jesus Christ. But just as a parent might ask a child, “Did you do what I asked when I was at the store?”, God asks us “What have you done with the gifts I’ve given you?” And the fact that this verse says “Do your best to present yourself to God…” implies that there is something we CAN do to gain God’s approval. We already have his unconditional love. So this first part of AWANA tells us to be approved by God – to spend our time doing what he desires for us to do. Jesus said, **“As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me.” (John 9:4)**

Verse 15 also says that a workman approved by God is:

B. Not ashamed

What do we have to be ashamed of? Sometimes we're ashamed or embarrassed about Christianity. Maybe we cringe when we read in the news about a church who believes its mission in life is to disrupt military funerals in order to make a statement about homosexuality, or other fringe groups who call themselves Christian. So there's a sense in which we can be ashamed to call ourselves Christians because we're ashamed of how the church presents itself to the world.

But I really think this verse is talking about God being ashamed of us. We had an adorable two year old and her family join us for Sunday lunch. Frankly, it's been a long time since I was around a two year old, and it was very entertaining watching her try to blow out the candles, pick up the stick of butter, and so on. She was a perfectly well behaved child acting like, well, a two year old. But I think her parents were a bit more uncomfortable than I was because they are her parents, and therefore feel responsible for her behavior. I wonder if we sometimes embarrass God by the way we act. This verse is telling us to comport ourselves in such a way that God our Father will not be ashamed of us. After all, we bear his Son's name. That means we need to demonstrate his Son's nature in the world around us.

Finally, this verse also carries the idea that a workman approved by God is

C. Correctly handling truth

The Greek word used here for "handling" has two very specific meanings. The first is to "Cut straight". When we see those words we think of scissors and giftwrap, or scissors and fabric. But in fact a better picture would be a machete which hacks a straight path to the truth through a thicket of lies and a tangle of sins. When we rightly handle the word of truth, we explain and live it in such a way that other people are directed straight along a path to Jesus Christ with no obstacles in their way.

The second meaning of this word is to "shoot straight". Again, there's that idea that our treatment of God's word and God's truth shoots directly to the heart of things and makes a bullseye every time.

You and I know that the only way we can shoot straight and cut straight is if we know, understand and live the word of God ourselves. And that's what it means to be AWANA – a workman and not ashamed. I suspect it takes a lifetime to be a really good AWANA, but that's why we need to start as young as possible with memorizing and understanding Scripture so that it can work its way into our lives.

But Paul has much more specific advice than that on

II. How to be AWANA

There are two simple strategies, and they are intertwined within the next several verses, so I will be moving around within verses 16-26.

The first strategy in how to become AWANA is to

Flee from.

This passage contains four elements that we are to run from as fast as we can in the opposite direction. Yes, in Christ we are victorious over sin, but many times that victory comes from not

being in its vicinity – and we move out of sin’s neighborhood by running away from it, not towards it.

The first pastime we’re supposed to flee from is:

A. Quarrelling

“Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.” (2nd Timothy 2:14)

“Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.” (2nd Timothy 2:23)

Why is quarrelling so bad? Because it is one of those activities, like nagging, that drives people crazy. What starts out as a simple disagreement becomes more irritable as it’s chewed upon and eventually people have words, and fall out with each other, and then, as Jesus tells us, our worship is impeded, we fail to forgive and so miss the grace of God in our own lives, and the consequences multiply.

We all know how quarrelling starts. It begins when two people are trying to impose their views or their wills upon the other, and no one budes. This passage also carries the idea of pompous people who like the sound of their own voices and like to air their views on everything. Do you remember the Lady Catherine De Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*? She was so absolutely used to having the only opinion in the room, that she was completely floored when Miss Elizabeth Bennett faced her down about marrying her nephew Darcy. We’re not supposed to quarrel, but to listen.

Paul also says that

B. Godless chatter works against our unity in Christ.

“Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.” (2nd Timothy 2:16-19)

Paul’s referring to a very specific form of godless chatter – a type of speculative theology that draws folk away from true, biblical Christianity and away from the central message of the gospel. In the church at Ephesus, this was being done by Hymenaeus and Philetus, who were apparently teaching that the resurrection of Jesus was not a bodily one, but only in a spiritual sense. Paul wrote some of his most eloquent words on the subject of the bodily resurrection in 1st Cor. 15: **“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1 Cor. 15:14)**. The physical resurrection of Jesus is incredibly important to our faith, because it validates his claim to be the Son of God and the One who has conquered death on our behalf.

In our modern churches there are other types of godless chatter that go on. It might be open theism, the idea that God doesn’t have foreknowledge of the future. It might be the view that says there is only one way to worship, and all others are wrong. See what I mean? An idea can take hold of congregations, split them and destroy them. It’s no accident that Paul uses the term

“gangrene”, which carries the idea of something bacterial that spreads virulently and destroys healthy tissue as it grows. Other translations use the word “cancer” and one even refers to it as “septicemia” – blood poisoning.

Next Paul tells us to flee from

C. Evil desires

“Flee the evil desires of youth...” (2nd Timothy 2:22)

Sadly, it’s not just youth who have evil desires. But just as the workman approved by God and not ashamed carries the idea of maturity, so we’re told to flee from immature and evil desires. Those might be sexual. They might be a desire for power or control over others. Whatever they are, if they are evil, we need to run in the opposite direction.

Paul then tells us to run from

D. Controversies

“Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.” (2nd Timothy 2:23)

Theological controversies, differences of opinion that cause bad feeling, are a magnet for quarrelling and godless chatter. This does not mean that we cannot take a stand on the truth. We know that Paul urged Timothy to be bold and not to be ashamed to testify about God’s work. But the Ephesian church was being troubled by a lot of pointless spiritual controversy, as churches often are. We get people of different faith traditions and backgrounds, and those ideas can often be hard to shuck off even when they are not biblically based. Sometimes we present as biblical truth ideas which are actual just tradition or preference. That is why any church must be crystal clear about its non negotiable core beliefs, and gracious in discussion towards differences in worship styles or preference that stem from our background or secondary doctrine.

So why flee?

Paul assures us:

“Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his.’ And ‘Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.’” (2nd Timothy 2:19)

Let’s think for a moment about our spiritual legacy. Our attitudes and actions do not just affect us. They ripple outward into the lives of people who love us, our co workers, our friends. Those who might admire us even though they don’t know us. Anyone, in fact, who knows that we call ourselves by the name of Christ, and looks to see whether our actions accord with our word.

So if we’re leaving a spiritual legacy, one of the best principles we can teach and model is to *Flee from evil*. The victory belongs to God; he’ll bring it about. If we’re called to stand up and fight, he gives us the spiritual armor to do that. But more often the Bible tells us to FLEE. To run from temptation, evil, self absorption.

But where do we run to when we flee? We’re actually running *toward* something while we’re running away from evil.

We are supposed to

Run towards four things:

First,

A. Cleansing

“In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” (2 Timothy 2:20-21)

This illustration of Paul’s may not ring so true in our modern day houses, where sanitation is taken care of with plumbing and garbage is neatly hauled away from our curb. It’s all pretty sanitary. But think about your toilet brush. Would you use it to comb your child’s hair? I hope not.

Or how about backpacking? Every item you carry has to have a multiple use. Instead of a spoon and a fork, you carry one item called a spork which can be used for both. But there’s one thing in your pack that is used for only one purpose. It’s a bright orange plastic trowel, and it’s used to dispose of human waste in the wilderness by burying it. Now I wouldn’t dream of using this trowel to serve dinner, even though it might be a handy ladle. Nor would I wash it in the cooking pot. No, it’s a utensil for ignoble use and it’s going to stay that way if I have anything to say about it! That’s what Paul means. There are tools we use for coarse purposes and there are tools, like an heirloom silver spoon, that are used for beautiful occasions. And Paul says, which do you want to be? The plastic trowel, or the silver spoon? When Christ cleanses us from the evil in our past he makes us into clean utensils, washed, shiny and ready for the best possible use.

We’re also supposed to run towards

B. Righteousness

“... and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” (2nd Timothy 2:22)

If you have to run somewhere you will never go wrong when running towards righteousness, faith, love and peace. Those characteristics will always shine in the life of someone who is following Christ.

Next, we are to run towards

C. Kindness

“And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.” (2nd Timothy 2:23)

Here’s this idea again of quarreling. To quarrel means to bicker, to argue, to fight. That is not a very winsome way to get across the gospel. If we are to be effective we need to do it graciously, with kindness, with an understanding sufficient to allow us to teach, and not resentful when people don’t listen to us. How many pastors have become embittered by pouring out their soul in sermons which people don’t take any notice of? Yet a pastor who becomes resentful ruins his ministry. We just cannot afford to lack kindness if we are to be effective in God’s kingdom.

Finally, there's
D. Gentleness

“Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that 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.” (2nd Timothy 2:25-26)

The person who has these things is indelibly marked with the presence of Christ. On Ash Wednesday last week, Christians around the world attended services to mark the beginning of Lent. At these services, the pastor takes a pinch of ash and intones, “From dust you came, and to dust you shall return,” and the worshiper goes away with an ash-colored cross on their forehead.

Our son Nick attended an Ash Weds. Service at Duke Chapel last week and then went off as usual to the school where he teaches in the afternoon. An older woman who works in the office, who has seen him come to work every school day since last October and never spoken to him, stopped him and asked, “Are you a Christian?” They got into a long discussion about their respective churches. And why did that happen on that day instead of any other? Because Nick had a cross marked in ash on his forehead

On all the other days of the year we have the chance to live in such a way that the cross of Christ marks all our interactions with others. If we are running towards cleansing, righteousness, kindness and gentleness, inevitably others will see Jesus Christ in our faces and hear him in our words. Oh, they may not know who he is, or the right questions to ask, but the indelible mark of grace in our lives will give us the chance to answer the question, “Why are you different?” and part of being different is learning not to always put ourselves first. Paul advises us in Romans:

**“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”
(Romans 12:3)**

But gentleness is best understood by looking at Jesus:

**“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”
(Matthew 11:29)**

You see, in God's kingdom, there is no room for these people:



No bossy know it alls.

We will never bully or bludgeon others into a knowledge of Jesus Christ. Yet one of the most difficult things in the world is to go on being gracious to people who continually contradict, quarrel, argue or disagree. So what's the right thing to do? I think that a natural grace flows from a

person who is spending a lot of time with Christ. The key to making progress is gentle instruction coupled with genuine care and affection.

So all this fleeing from (quarrelling, godless chatter, evil desires and controversies) and running toward (cleansing, righteousness, kindness and gentleness) leaves us with a big question:

III. How Can I Change from “I Wanna” to “AWANA”?

I know, it’s a truly terrible pun. But “I wanna”, which is a life filled with “me first”, is the way that many people live in this world. My goals. My priorities. My viewpoint. My will be done. And that is exactly the opposite of the Christian life. God’s goals. God’s priorities. God’s viewpoint. And His will be done. Most dangerous of all is when we give lip service to God but continue to live our lives unchanged in attitude and action. Where is our new heart? Where is our new guidance system?

What “I wanna” leads to is quarrelling. Contentions. Anger. Dysfunctional relationships. What AWANA, a workman and not ashamed, leads to is a fulfilling life marked out by God’s grace.

The pictures already given by Paul in this letter included the farmer, the soldier and the athlete. As Myrna pointed out in her lecture, these occupations were made successful by God’s enabling followed by HARD WORK. That work, or discipline, meant change and training that led to a productive outcome.

Sometimes, though, we just get bogged down in our spiritual lives. The old specters of anger or resentment hold us back from making spiritual progress. What we need is an agent of change, which includes information and accountability.

So let me tell you a story.

Last fall my van’s heater died. At 193,000 miles I couldn’t really countenance putting a lot of money into fixing the car, but at the same time, I was not looking forward to a winter without heating. So I ended up purchasing a used Suzuki in January. This car has a HEATER. This car has an AIR CONDITIONER. It’s also very, very tiny, which makes it fuel efficient and easy to drive. But there was one thing my new car had that I wasn’t sure I liked. There is a red number on my dashboard called “the range”. It tells me how many miles I have left to drive before I have to put gas in. This car has a 10 gallon gas tank. So the Distance To Empty drops below 20 a couple times a week, given the amount I drive. But this wasn’t just your normal DTE which shows when the tank’s getting low. No, this number fluctuates constantly based upon the fuel mileage you’re getting. So one minute your tank is full and it says 245 miles. But a few bad habits later, it will say 150. And I’ve only gone a mile.

I learned to drive in LA and I still drive like a city girl – jackrabbit starts, quick braking, lane changes. I never drive below the speed limit. Those skills work well on an LA freeway. But I live and drive in Rochester, where they are not necessary and are considered impolite. Year after year I run through sets of brakes and tires like other people run through a gallon of milk. In 35 years of driving I have not changed my habits. Yet this little red number, set infuriatingly in front of my eyes all the time, showed me that if I accelerated gently away from a stoplight, my gas mileage improved. If I drove more slowly, even better. If I avoided sudden braking, stop and go

traffic, great. I could eke out many more miles from my ten gallons of gas than if I drove my old way.

So gradually, what I thought was impossible happened. Between the rising price of gas and the constant monitor on my dashboard, I have changed my driving habits so that I now get far more miles to the gallon than when I first purchased that car. And it all happened because that little red conscience on my dashboard was unavoidable.

What caused me to change, was information and accountability. Oh, I'd had information. John had been deploring my driving habits for years. But I never actually saw the EFFECT of how I drove on the mileage. So with that new gauge I got not only information, but immediate accountability as it showed me the outcome of my choices on the gas in my tank.

I figured if I could change my driving habits after all these years, I could certainly change my spiritual habits. You see, there's a little red light called the conscience which helps guide us into right choices. The conscience does not control our actions. We can ignore it so thoroughly that it becomes hardened and no longer functions. But when we pay attention to it, and when we don't ignore its promptings, the Holy Spirit can use this natural indicator to guide us towards truth and grace and away from sin. We just have to pay attention. That's the information part.

But there's also the accountability part, and that is where others come in. Those around us can give the sort of feedback we need to discern if we are really handling truth correctly – whether we're using that red light of the conscience or just ignoring it.

So think about it. Moving from "I Wanna" to "AWANA" may be as simple as listening to our conscience, and asking the Holy Spirit to guide us into truth. Which is, after all, one of his purposes in our life. All we have to do is listen, then act.

WBS is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church – Rochester, MN 55902
Questions: email wbs@autumnridgechurch.org
www.autumnridgechurch.org