

2 TIMOTHY 2:20-26

CHARACTER COUNTS

“In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. 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.”¹

“**E**veryone makes us happy here—some by coming and some by going.” This pithy saying was printed on a sign displayed prominently on the reception desk for the Chairman of the Department of Biochemistry when I was conducting doctoral studies. The saying spoke volumes, and is assuredly applicable to the situation found among the faithful. There are Christians, and there are Christians; not all of our fellow saints cause us to rejoice, though we do not doubt their sincerity in the Faith.

In the broader realm of life, though sometimes neglected, the principle likewise holds true—character counts. Even here in Canada, considerable attention has been focused recently on the American presidential primaries. Numerous individuals have asked me to explain the different caucuses and primaries conducted by the various states. I am frequently asked my thoughts on the candidates. It appears that the choice Americans will face is now between an individual whom ongoing investigations could demonstrate to have performed acts that can only be considered treasonous and a pathologic, amoral, unprincipled, narcissistic, vulgar liar. Either candidate for President appears prepared to distort the laws to enrich themselves through graft and sleaze. Spurgeon has correctly strated, “Of two evils, choose neither.”² Character counts.

I am very much aware that significant numbers of professed evangelicals—and especially supposed evangelical leaders—have supported these particular candidates. To do so, they have been compelled to justify the perfidy, the incivility, the immorality, the wickedness, the unrighteousness while focusing on one or perhaps two tenuous promises uttered by people willing to say whatever is necessary to gain the prize of election. Nevertheless, character counts.

While it is true that character counts in the broader world, we are not necessarily shocked when earth dwellers fail to demonstrate righteous character. We understand intuitively that those identified with this dying world cannot—*cannot*—be men or women of character. Ultimately, these dying souls expose the poverty of life through acquiescing to that which is opposed to God.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² This appears to have been a rather common maxim employed by Spurgeon. I have found the citation in: C. H. Spurgeon, “Jude’s Doxology,” (No. 2,994) **The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, vol. 52** (Passmore & Alabaster, London 1906), 315; C. H. Spurgeon, **The Salt Cellars: Being a Collection of Proverbs, Together with Homily Notes Thereon, vol. 1** (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 297; and Charles Spurgeon, **Spurgeon Commentary: Jude**, ed. Elliot Ritzema, Spurgeon Commentary Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014)

Though benighted souls may preface unrighteous tolerance with weasel words intended to excuse their silence such as, “I don’t personally approve, but...” or “I wouldn’t do that, but...” At other times, those marked as belonging to the world will attempt to absolve themselves of blame by saying, “I wouldn’t do that; but who am I to judge?” However, when fellow Christians choose what is against righteousness or even approve of such acts, we are rightly shocked. Character counts.

The truth of God’s Word still stands: “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” [JAMES 4:17]. Thus, we turn to the situation among the faithful as we consider the Apostle’s instructions concerning character. What is taught in the verses comprising our text this day assumes exaggerated significance in light of the prophecy that follows in 2 TIMOTHY 3:1-9. That prophecy reads, “Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.”

VESSELS OF THE FAITH — “In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.” In light of the verses preceding the text, it is obvious that Paul has the congregation as a whole in view. He sees the individual members as those that make up the house, but he has an obvious and high regard for the congregation.

In the previous verses, he cautioned the pastor to avoid “word wars,”³ warning that such battles not only are worthless, but that they ruin the hearers [see 2 TIMOTHY 2:14, 16]. He then urged Timothy to strive for God’s approval in his own labours in the Word [see 2 TIMOTHY 2:15]. Never uneasy about exposing destructive individuals, Paul names names, exposing two men as religiously toxic, gangrenous to the Faith, detailing their particular heresy [see 2 TIMOTHY 2:17, 18].

Having established this background, Paul then writes, “God’s firm foundation stands” [see 2 TIMOTHY 2:19], citing in rough fashion two statements from the Law. When Paul writes, “The Lord knows those who are His,” he possibly refers to Moses’ statement delivered when Korah rebelled, that the Lord would show who was His through either accepting or rejecting those who drew near [see NUMBERS 16:5]. This can only be seen as a serious word of warning to those who presume as leaders of the congregation. The second rough citation, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity,” perhaps recalls two verses of Scripture. The first of the two latter references is given as a warning to the congregation issued subsequent to the earlier warning Moses gave. Moses warned the congregation, “Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins” [NUMBERS 16:25]. The second possible reference is to God’s warning through Isaiah:

³ See the audio sermon, Michael Stark, “A Workman Approved,” (Sermon) 2016/04/24, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/sermon-audio/>

“Depart, depart, go out from there;
touch no unclean thing;
go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves,
you who bear the vessels of the LORD.”

[ISAIAH 52:11]

“God’s firm foundation” points unquestionably to the congregation of the Lord, of which Christ Jesus must be recognised as the Head [cf. **EPHESIANS 4:15; 5:23; COLOSSIANS 1:18; 2:19**]. He is likewise the foundation of the Faith. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” [**1 CORINTHIANS 3:10, 11**]. We who are united to the Faith by the grace of God are established on Christ and we are being built up on Him. In the Letter to Ephesian Christians, Paul wrote, “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” [**EPHESIANS 2:19-22**].

Having established that Paul has the congregation of the Lord in view, the opening words of the text are dramatically clarified. “In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” [**2 TIMOTHY 2:20, 21**]. The vessels to which Paul refers are the members of the congregation.

Perhaps it shouldn’t have to be said, but Paul is speaking of those who are truly members and not pretenders. By such a provocative statement I am stating openly that it is inevitable that some who are unsaved will always align with a congregation. This is taught in a parable Jesus related that is applied in a broader context when He spoke of His coming. This is the parable. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” [**MATTHEW 13:24-30**].

Paul is focused on those who are born again and who are part of the assembly. The unsaved, whether claiming membership in the assembly or not, cannot lay claim to the solid foundation. Those who have never put faith in the Risen Son of God are lost, and they must therefore face eternal exclusion from the love of God. Therefore, Jesus explains the parable so there is no question of His meaning. “The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send His angels, and they will gather out of His Kingdom all causes of sin and all law breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace” [**MATTHEW 13:37-42a**].

The unsaved are not in the Kingdom of God. Just so, the unsaved, though perhaps having their names listed as members of a church, cannot claim to be founded on the solid foundation. They are lost and under sentence of death. Therefore, when Paul speaks of vessels he is speaking of those who are truly members of the household of faith.

Having established this understanding of what is written, what can we make of the vessels, some suited for honourable use and some for dishonourable? Let's establish in our minds that any pot or pan that is used properly is useful. Some older individuals may remember chamber pots or, as they were sometimes referred to during my childhood, thunder mugs. No one is going to argue that these pots were suited for storing foodstuffs or fine linens; nevertheless, they were useful. One of the first jobs I had during college was working as an orderly in a hospital. No one is going to argue that an emesis basin would make a good soup bowl; however, they were essential for assisting those who were nauseous so that they would not soil themselves. The point of thinking of the use of the vessel is that any vessel must be considered useful when it is used for the function for which it is reserved.

The association with wickedness is in view! Look at the twenty-first verse once again. "If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" [2 TIMOTHY 2:21]. It is cleansing oneself through dissociation with wickedness that makes a vessel honourable. Whether the vessel is gold or silver, or whether the vessel is wood or clay is not important for determining whether it is useful or not. To store a chamber pot together with food bins would not degrade the chamber pot, but it would cause revulsion when using the food bins. To store an emesis basin with containers holding medications would not contaminate the emesis basin, but it would make anyone using the medications uneasy. In short, regardless of your position in the congregation, you are responsible for separating yourself from errant people. You are responsible to purify yourself by refusing to listen to or even to tolerate people that are engaging in word wars or blathering with irreverent babble.

Look carefully at the purpose of self-purification through segregation from errant people. According to the text, we purify ourselves, dissociating from the actions and the attitudes of disruptive, divisive people, in order to be *reserved for honourable use*, to *ensure sanctification*, to *make ourselves useful to the Master* of the house and to *ensure that we are ready for every good work*! The goal of each Christian must be to fulfil these four purposes. Let's briefly consider each of these purposes in order to equip ourselves as followers of the Risen Saviour.

We dissociate ourselves from errant people, whether they are indulging in heterodoxy or whether they are guilty of heteropraxy, in order to be *reserved for honourable use*. The refusal to associate with such attitudes and actions is a decision made once and thereafter maintained. To rationalise continued association with disruptive people, however much we may wish to maintain long-standing friendships, is to expose ourselves to contamination with their spirit, thus becoming like them! Should we adopt the attitudes and mimic the actions of those who are opposed to Christ—grumbling, accommodating error and reflecting the spirit of this dying world—we will cease to honour Christ the Lord and cease to be a vessel fit for continued service.

Our bodies are nothing more than jars of clay. As such, they are unsuited to perform service for the Master. The Apostle acknowledges this when he writes, "We have this treasure [i.e. the Gospel of Christ] in jars of clay" [2 CORINTHIANS 4:7]. However, by the power of Christ we can be changed from that which is suited only for dishonourable use to that which is recognised as suited for honourable use [see ROMANS 9:21-24]. It is necessary that we refuse to embrace or even tolerate the evil perpetuated by spiritually dissonant church members.

Early in the history of the churches, Chrysostom commented on these verses, “Seest thou that it is not of nature, nor of the necessity of matter, to be a vessel of gold or of earth, but of our own choice? For otherwise the earthen could not become gold, nor could the golden descend to the vileness of the other. But in this case there is much change, and alteration of state. Paul was an earthen vessel, and became a golden one. Judas was a golden vessel, and became an earthen one. The earthen vessels, therefore, are such from uncleanness.”⁴

Tolerating disruptive people, even though we may have enjoyed a long association with them, will hinder sanctification. Our goal as Christians is *to be holy*, to be sanctified. We can say with authority that God’s will is holiness for His people. Paul writes, “We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-3a].

Elsewhere, Paul has written, “Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification” [ROMANS 6:19]. Elsewhere, we read, “Strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” [HEBREWS 12:14]. Peace and holiness are inseparable. The disruptive person and the arrogant individual can never know peace; hence, they cannot be holy for their actions cannot promote holiness.

Each Christian wants to be *useful in service to the Master*. I know that some church members stand out for their gift of warming a pew; however, the best case scenario for such people is that they are disobedient. In many instances, it must be admitted that such individuals are senescent and unproductive because they never had a living relationship with the Master.

In one congregation I pastored many years ago, one particular member never did anything in the church. I wasn’t even certain whether he prayed or even read the Bible. He had a Bible, which he proudly showed me because it was given him by the lodge to which he belonged. He certainly was not conversant with what was written in the Book, however. He was present each Sunday, smiling benignly as he dispassionately observed all that transpired; nevertheless, he never participated in the ministries of the church in any meaningful way.

On one occasion I challenged him to become involved in the work of the congregation. He smiled and dismissed my invitation with a wave of his hand and the statement, “I’ve done my time doing that. I’ll just sit back and watch, now.” I performed his funeral not more than a year after that conversation. It was difficult, for there was little positive I could say about his life. He was a drone, at best, draining energy from the assembly and contributing nothing of substance. God calls us to service, not to senescence; God seeks workers, not shirkers.

Christians are to be *ready for every good work*. This theme of being ready for good work is repeated in these Pastoral Letters. In 2 TIMOTHY 3:16, 17 the Apostle writes, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” This is iterated in TITUS 3:1, 2. “Remind [Christians] to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.”

⁴ John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy,” in **Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon**, Philip Schaff, (ed.), James Tweed and Philip Schaff (trans.), vol. 13, **Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series** (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 496

TO BE A VESSEL FOR HONOURABLE USE — “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.” The Apostle has just written urging Timothy (and thus, all believers) to purify himself; now he will provide general instructions for those who would be vessels suited for honourable purposes.

In order to accomplish this goal, Paul employs two imperatives—“flee” and “pursue.” These imperatives have appeared previously in these Pastoral Letters. In Paul’s former missive to Timothy, he wrote, “As for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness” [1 TIMOTHY 6:11]. The previous list of what Timothy was to flee were unhealthy controversies, quarrelling about words and allowing money to dominate his life. Turning from those evils, Timothy was to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness and gentleness. Timothy (and all believers) was admonished to labour ardently to inculcate those very characteristics we associate with Christ Himself.

In the immediate text, Paul counsels Timothy, and thus he counsels all believers, to turn away from “youthful passions.” Seeing the Apostle’s words, modern readers almost automatically assume Paul is speaking of sexual desires when he insists that Timothy flee youthful passions. In part, this is because sexual desires loom large in the mind of youth, and assuredly this is true in the modern context. However, Paul likely has in view something other than sensual desires. Youth are not especially noted for restraint, which comes with maturity.

Paul details the specific concerns that must be rejected when he writes, “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” [2 TIMOTHY 2:23]. This verse seems to have been included for emphasis since Paul has already spoken of this very issue. While it is a good thing to know what you believe, it is even more important to know why you believe the things to which you hold. Understanding what others believe and why they believe as they do can only make the child of God stronger. Many people appear unwilling to stand firm in their convictions. Rather, they give the appearance of holding beliefs rather tenuously when they insist that others must not speak of contradictory positions. This fearful stance is driven more by a fear of discomfort than it is an inability to articulate one’s own faith.

My goal is for each Christian to know what is believed and why they believe as they do. I do not want any of you to be like the man who responded to the question of what he believed by saying, “I believe what my church believes.” When his interlocutor pressed him by asking what his church believed, the man responded, “My church believes what I believe.” We need to heed Peter’s instruction to believers. “In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame” [1 PETER 3:15].

In context, it seems obvious that Paul is warning Timothy against surrendering to headstrong passions, allowing such impulses to rule his life. Many times, youth are attracted to novel ideas; they are quite prepared to engage in meaningless debates and arguments that lead to quarrels. Paul has just been cautioning against engaging in word wars and entering into dialogue with those spewing what he has called “irreverent babble”; these actions must be equated with immaturity. Such battles are seldom strategically vital to the advance of the Faith. Moreover, battling over words plays into the hand of the false teachers, leading to ungodliness and error that contaminates the entire congregation. Instead of responding to error through a combative stance, the apostolic counsel is to run!

Paul's counsel is not so much that the believer must run away (though he must flee youthful passions) as it is to run toward that which is beneficial. The believer must always run toward those things that will build him in this holy faith. Thus, Paul instructs believers to pursue those qualities that mark a mature believer—"righteousness, faith, love and peace"; and this pursuit is to be conducted in concert "with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." Though you undoubtedly have a clear understanding of what is meant when we speak of "righteousness, faith, love and peace," let's ensure that we are all on the same page.

In considering these virtues that must be pursued, it will be helpful to recall a well-known passage that the Apostle included in his letter to the Churches of Galatia. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" [GALATIANS 5:22, 23a]. In the text, Paul speaks of righteousness and faith. "Righteousness" speaks of right-standing and "faith" refers to a trusting response. Both righteousness and faith are given by God. Reading the Word reveals that righteousness and faith, though divine gifts, are also Christian virtues; as virtues they are to be pursued. God gives these gifts, and we are to ensure that they are always in the forefront of our effort to live Christianly. Likewise, "love" is included in the virtues given by the Spirit. And yet, we are responsible to work at loving one another and to work to reflect the love of God to a broken world.

Though "peace" is given by God, it is nevertheless necessary for the believer to pursue peace. In the Letter to Roman Christians, Paul writes, "Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" [ROMANS 14:13-19].

Take note that our pursuit of the graces of righteousness, faith, love and peace must be "along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." The Christian walk is never to be attempted alone; the Christian walk must always be conducted in fellowship with the faithful. Those who claim to love God while absenting themselves from the fellowship of the faithful delude themselves. At best, such benighted souls consign themselves to a fearful existence in a world hostile to their presence; at worst, these pitiful individuals expose themselves as frauds and fakes. As God's sheep, safety is found in fellowship with the flock of God. Outside the fellowship of the assembly of the righteous, a sheep soon obtains a new name—"victim."

You may recall that when Paul was made aware of a member of the congregation engaged in an immoral relationship; his immediate and unhesitating counsel to the Corinthian Christians was, "When you are assembled in the Name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" [1 CORINTHIANS 5:4, 5].

Note, that separation from the assembly allows Satan opportunity to destroy the flesh. This understanding is corroborated by something that Peter wrote in his first letter to the saints scattered in the Diaspora. Peter wrote, "Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" [1 PETER 5:8]. Though God has redeemed the believer, saving that individual's soul, when she is not sheltered with the flock of God she will shortly discover that Satan destroys believers lives, tearing their flesh.

In our text, Paul calls on us to see the church as more than a place where we gather on some regular basis; he calls us to realise that the Body of Christ is the means by which we unite to pursue the graces that must characterise believers more and more as they move through this world. Meeting together is more than merely singing songs in harmony, reciting prayers and feeling good about what we are doing within the community. Meeting in assembly we are building one another in this holy Faith, we are encouraging one another, we are comforting one another [see **1 CORINTHIANS 14:3**].

Let me caution quite plainly that those who disregard the congregation of the faithful hold the Bride of Christ in contempt. Holding the Bride of Christ in contempt is tantamount to holding a low view of Christ. I remind you that God's view of the church to which you belong is exceptionally exalted. This is demonstrated in the instructions Paul gave to the Ephesian elders. "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood" [**ACTS 20:28**].

How much does Christ esteem the congregation of the faithful? He willingly laid down His life for her. In fact, His willing sacrifice for the church is to be the model for the love husbands have for their wives. The Apostle will write, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" [**EPHESIANS 5:25-32**].

THE LORD'S SERVANT — "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. 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." The letter before us is addressed to a young preacher. Therefore, it is appropriate that admonitions included in the missive be directed to the young preacher. All messengers of the Living God should take to heart Paul's admonitions; what he writes to Timothy applies to all preachers. However, no Christian must imagine that what is written has no bearing on his or her life.

Paul reminds us that the things that have been written in the Scriptures "were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" [**1 CORINTHIANS 10:11b**]. Very soon in the letter we are studying, Paul will assert, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" [**2 TIMOTHY 3:16, 17**]. It is apparent, therefore, that what is written in these final verses of our text will prove profitable for each Christian. They are to be studied and applied in each believer's life. What follows in these final three verses is to be applied in the life of each believer.

The church of the Living God is not to be a debating society. It is not our purpose to engage in quarrels. It is one thing to teach truths that challenge those who hear to think. It is quite another thing to engage in quarrels, pronouncing devastating judgements on others who do not agree with our particular view of the Faith. This proscription is but an iteration of the warning, "Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies" since they "breed quarrels."

Pronouncing a proscription should not be taken as solely a matter of avoiding some particular activity; the positive side of this debarment is that we who will honour the Saviour will endeavour to be “kind to everyone.” Kindness does not mean that we cannot hold contrary views of matters; it does mean that we don’t seek to destroy those who disagree with us as we present our understanding of the Faith and its application in the matter under review. Underscore in your mind that this admonition is attitudinal; Paul has in view the demeanor with which we conduct ourselves rather than a particular action.

This understanding is emphasised in the next admonition that we who will serve God must equip ourselves so that we are “able to teach.” To be certain, all who wish to serve within the eldership must be “able to teach” [see **TITUS 1:9; 2 TIMOTHY 2:2; 1 TIMOTHY 3:2**]. However, all Christians must be growing in understanding and in knowledge of the truth. Surely, this is the intent of Peter’s benediction as he concludes his second missive, “Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” [**2 PETER 3:16a**].

Then, the Christian that will serve and honour the Master must be noted as one “patiently enduring evil.” The concept presented in this admonition implies patience especially when one is wronged. When those who disagree are not winning the argument, they often resort to demeaning us, to casting aspersions or calling us names. The godly person does not respond in kind, but rather patiently continues in presenting the truth. The godly individual who will honour the Saviour durst not grow heated in responding to such provocation. Moreover, the verb implies that there must be no lingering resentment resulting from the disagreement. Obviously, this admonition is once again attitudinal. It means that the godly person must rule over his spirit.

Then, the Apostle admonishes the godly person that they must be noted as “correcting his opponents with gentleness.” The verb used in this instance can mean to instruct, but it may also mean to educate, to correct or to discipline. Overall, I agree with this translation that the godly person must instruct, though recognising that the instruction will obviously contain elements of education and may well contain aspects of correction and discipline. More problematic is the question of who is to be instructed. The word that is translated “opponents” is a hapax legomenon, a word occurring only once in the New Testament. It could refer to the people teaching false doctrine, or it could refer to those who have been ensnared by false teaching. Both those teaching false doctrine and those embracing false teaching are trapped by Satan.⁵ I err on the safe side in this instance in stating at the least the godly person is to instruct with gentleness those who are ensnared by false teaching and possibly the false teachers themselves so long as doing so does not degenerate into a verbal brawl.

This instruction is given in light of a warning found in the Proverbs. Solomon wrote:

Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.
Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

[**PROVERBS 26:4, 5**]

These twin sayings imply that attempting to reason with an unreasonable or errant person is a no-win situation. We must not debate teaching that is clearly errant; to do so lends legitimacy to the error. Should those holding to error respond with choler, treat them as the fools they are. This may mean studied silence or it may mean stern dismissal. They must not be given legitimacy.

⁵ See **1 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2; 3:7; 6:9**

In our interactions with disruptive, combative people, we must always hold in mind the goal of seeking their salvation. We refuse to quarrel in the hope that God may grant repentance. We are kind even to those with whom we disagree in the hope that God may grant repentance. We teach the Word in the hope that God may grant repentance. We tolerate even verbal assault in the hope that God may grant repentance. All that we do with those who persist in error is done in the hope that God may grant repentance. We who are redeemed know that the divine gift of repentance always leads to knowledge of the truth. Because we know God, we want the obstreperous to “come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil.” We seek the salvation of all through gentle presentation of the truth of God.

We are fully aware that those who disseminate error have been taken captive to do the will of the devil. They do the will of the devil in ignorance because Satan has blinded their eyes and they cannot see the truth [cf. **2 CORINTHIANS 4:4**]. Because we who believe are fellow workers together with God [e.g. **1 CORINTHIANS 3:9**], we seek the freedom of all who are captives of Satan. We will not see them freed from their captivity through quarrelling and combative attitudes. Perhaps through kindness, through gentle firmness, we will be instruments of righteousness.

May God give us grace to be used to the praise of His glory. Amen.