



## Approved and Shameful Workers

*Series: 2 Timothy: The Final Charge From a Faithful Apostle*

2 Timothy 2:14-19

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Beloved, as the people of God, we are engaged in, what John MacArthur has most appropriately coined, a “Truth War.” It has been that way since the day that that serpent, the enemy of our souls, Satan, approached our parents, Adam and Eve, and hissed that insidious question: “Did God actually say?” It did not end in the garden, but after the Fall, continues to be one of the chief themes -- this battle for truth – throughout redemptive history, beginning with the life of the nation of Israel. Moses knew that this battle for truth would be ever-present in the life of God’s people. As far back as Deuteronomy 13, Moses wrote this strong and clear warning for the nation. Moses says: "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. Grasp the intensity of Moses’ words. Love God so much, the God who has redeemed you out of slavery, love Him supremely and with all of your heart and all your soul, so that you will not tolerate false teachers and prophets who bring reproach upon the glorious name and person of the Lord, but expose them and put the false prophet in your midst who would lead you away from God’s word to death.

Unfortunately, for the majority of the nation, that love for God and for His truth waned significantly as many in generation after generation traded the truth for a lie, traded their identity as the people of God – the vast majority of them – for the lie of idolatry and spiritual falsehood. Still, men like Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and the like, fought the good fight, proclaiming

the truth of God and shining as lights for His truth in the midst of an evil and darkened world. It was the same battle that Christ waged in His day and which He commissioned His followers to continue in.

Just a survey of Paul's writings shows us the seriousness of this battle for the truth that continues in the age of the church. Just consider some of these passages, by no means all of them: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:6–9, ESV)

"See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." (Colossians 2:8, ESV)

"As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3–7, ESV)

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." (1 Timothy 4:1–3, ESV)

“But 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.” (2 Timothy 3:1–8, ESV)

“But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him,” (Titus 3:9–10, ESV)

In light of this battle, in his first letter Paul exhorted Timothy saying: “This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience...” (1 Timothy 1:18–19, ESV) “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Timothy 4:13–16, ESV) And in this, his second letter to Timothy, Paul exhorted him saying, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:1–5, ESV)

There was a truth war in Paul and Timothy’s day and in our own and these strong words from Paul serve as a clear and clarion call as to the seriousness of falsehood and deception in the church. I’m not so certain that we take this as seriously in our own day as we should but we need to. Truth matters. This truth battle is alive and well and we cannot bury our heads in the

sand and pretend that it does not exist. If we care about the church, if we care about God, if we care about souls, we must care about the truth. To love God passionately is to love His truth passionately.

This is a very real battle in our age, just as it has always been, and I want us to understand something that is very vital to grasp. It is not only “recognized” pastors or church leaders that are in view as it regards false teachers or spiritually destructive whisperers in this text today, in the texts that I read to you, or in the texts we will look at over the next few weeks. Whenever we think of false teachers or enemies of the gospel or something like that, we often narrow the view simply to people with the title of preacher or teacher, but that is simply too thin. That group includes those in the ranks of the household of God who would elevate themselves to assume a position of self-appointed spiritual authority, leadership, and teaching over another, with no official office. It’s those who would present themselves as fellow pilgrims or students of Scripture but who undermine the authority and truth of God’s Word by misinterpreting it, confusing its clear teaching, rejecting its authority and truth, calling it into question, or refusing to live in accordance with it and encouraging others to do the same.

What makes falsehood so dangerous is that it is subtle and patient in its approach and not always really obvious – like, for instance, a dispute over the virgin birth. Instead, they are more subtle arguments, insinuations and suggestions designed to erode confidence in the Word of God and the character of the Godhead, to erode the fundamental truths of the gospel, to erode one’s stability and standing in the gospel, to erode a biblical perspective on the nature of the church, to erode a biblical perspective on proper leadership and soul care, to erode a biblical perspective on worship, fellowship, liberty in Christ, submission to the Lord and legitimate spiritual authority, and erode obedience to Christ and a commitment to real holiness. The whole strategy of falsehood and spiritual deceit is to render a Christian, sub-Christian, to render the professing church, sub-Christian. Some whisperers of falsehood do it knowingly and deliberately, while others are unknowingly in the snare and grip of the devil to do his bidding, but the goal, from Satan’s perspective, is always the same – spreading spiritual falsehood, bondage to the flesh and destruction while masquerading as truth, freedom and spiritual enlightenment. This is a serious message this morning.

Now like every instruction in Scripture, this text that we are looking at has a specific context. Remember that Paul is concerned with the preservation and proclamation of the gospel after his death, for Timothy to remain strong in the Lord and faithful to Christ, and for the spread of

the gospel to continue throughout the world and the ages – pure, uncontaminated, and uncorrupted. And particularly, Paul is concerned for the situation in Ephesus. The church in Ephesus was dealing with real turmoil and conflict as a result of spiritual and biblical error. There was great disputing over words, church squabbles breaking out, and the attempt to divide the church into factions. There were false teachers both outside and inside the church. Some within the church were falling prey to the pressure to be accepted by certain “spiritual” cliques or leaders, losing their firm grip on the truth of God and trading God’s approval for the approval of the self-proclaimed spiritually enlightened. Like Paul had warned them: “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, ESV) It was a perilous time in the church. What was to be done? Paul shifts his focus to explain how to deal with false teachers, with the whisperers of error, with the self-appointed authorities in the midst of the church that were undermining the gospel. He gives to Timothy, and us, some vital instruction. First, he explains

How to Respond to the Opponents of the Truth (v.14,16-17a) He writes in verse 14: “Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.” (2 Timothy 2:14, ESV) There are some words here that we need to define so we can understand what is being said. “Them” refers to both the men whom Timothy is to train and entrust with the ministry of the gospel, but also the entire congregation. “These things” is everything that has been said in the letter so far. So, Paul is saying in effect, “Timothy, remind the church, the faithful in the congregation, of everything that I have been saying to you. Remind them to hold fast to the gospel truth that you have heard from me, to pass on the truth to others who will receive it and rejoice in it, to commit themselves unreservedly to Jesus Christ, to remember who the hero of the gospel really is, Jesus whom we serve, risen from the dead, Lord over all, in whose hands is all power and who has all glory. Remind them of Christ, who He is and who we are in Him.”

That’s the first thing Timothy was to do and then second, Paul tells him to charge them before God not to quarrel about words. Now this is serious. To “charge them before God” was a very grave thing. It meant to remind them of God’s presence with them, that God was seeing all that was going on, that God was the source of this instruction to them. It was intended to foster a healthy fear of God and an awareness of their accountability to the Lord for how they responded to the instruction they received.

The instruction is simple and straightforward. Don't quarrel about words. Literally, don't engage in word fights. These spreaders of spiritual falsehood were trying to draw Timothy and other faithful brothers into arguments and Paul's instruction is clear. Don't wrangle and wrestle with these arrogant and unteachable false teachers and whisperers of deceit and spiritual error. Now, Paul is not saying that we are not to contend for the truth, like Jude instructs us. No, "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, ESV) There are words that we need to contend for, words like: redemption, justification, sanctification, election, propitiations, fellowship, gospel, Messiah, Heaven, Hell, and more. We need to contend for those words. That is not what is in view here.

What is in view here is arguing over spurious and unimportant things, arguments intended only to obscure the gospel message and silence the bold proclamation of the Word of Life, to confuse and undermine the truth being taught in the local church, to distract and draw attention away from the clear teaching and implications of the gospel, arguments and vagaries designed to draw the heart away from obedience and submission to Christ, arguments designed to elevate human reason and to puff up the false teachers and whisperers self-inflated view of their own spirituality and importance, twisted interpretations that are absent any practical application, debate with the sole intent of invalidating the truth being taught and expositing from the Word of God. Do not get into these arguments, just faithfully proclaim the truth.

And Paul gives us two reasons why. First, he says, it does no good. It is not profitable nor is it helpful. Why is that? Well, it is because of the character of the false teacher or the spiritually destructive whisperer in the congregation. Paul said of these sorts of people in his first letter to Timothy: "If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain." (1 Timothy 6:3–5, ESV) The false teachers and the whisperers that oppose the clear teaching and application of the truth that leads to godliness are both arrogant and ignorant. That's the worst combination possible. They love to dispute and argue and

undermine the preaching and teaching of the truth. They have no intention of acknowledging the truth of God's Word, of responding in humility and faith and conforming to its commands. And their whispering of falsehoods only leads to envy among the brethren, dissension within the body, slander of the faithful, evil suspicions of the sheep and the of the undershepherd in the flock of God, and constant friction between themselves and others. Engaging in their war of words does no lasting good.

Even more than that, Paul says, it only ruins the hearers. This wrangling over words, this quarrelling only draws those who are exposed to it away from the words of truth, away from the work and worth of Jesus, away from sound teaching that leads to godliness. It is catastrophic for the hearers not directly involved – that is the word for ruin that is used here -- katastrophe. It does serious destructive harm to the hearers. It turns unbelievers away from the words of life that can save their souls and it causes confusion, doubt, disillusionment and discouragement in faithful believers who are truly seeking to follow Christ. And that, after all, is Satan's whole goal –whether the false teachers are deliberate and purposeful in undermining God's truth or they have been taken in the snare of Satan to do His bidding unawares. Paul is saying, "Don't give them legitimacy. Don't give them the opportunity to have a voice in the church. Refuse to get into a war of words with them."

Then if you jump down to verse 16, Paul says: "But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene." (2 Timothy 2:16–17a, ESV) He calls the false teaching and the destructive whispers of deceitful and spiritual lies – irreverent babble or worldly, godless, foolish and empty chatter. It treats the Word of God and the God of the Word with contempt. It is the kind of talk that fails to consider the weight and the glory of God. This kind of habitual speech comes from those who regard themselves more highly than God and other people. From their perspective, their views, no matter how misguided or erroneous or outright blasphemous, are the only ones that matter and that, Paul says, is irreverent babble.

The fruit of their babble is more and more ungodliness. There is a play on words here that you cannot see in English but that is a piece of divine irony. From the perspective of the false teachers and the whisperers in the congregation, they were the only ones who had really arrived spiritually. They were the ones who were enlightened and really saw things as they were. They were the only ones, they thought, who really had a grip on reality. And they sold

their irreverent babble in that way. If you wanted to really advance in your spirituality, you had to see things like they did and become like them. They had become their own authority and were attempting to exalt themselves over everyone else as the authority on “truth” spreading falsehood and doctrinal error, or simply obscuring the truth with trivialities. Playing into their self delusion, Paul literally says here basically, “Oh yeah. If you listen to their irreverent babble, you will advance; you’ll make progress all right – that’s the word here for “lead” – you will make advancements, but not into spiritual maturity but rather into more and more ungodliness, into darkness. Irreverent babble is godless talk, godless trivial chattering, words that become a substitute for the reality of faithfulness to Christ, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. For all their talk, these false teachers and whisperers have lives that are devoid of real godliness, filled with talk about Christ but absent real love and submission to His Lordship, but instead they go deeper into error, deeper into sin, casting off all restraint and authority and their end, apart from repentance, is destruction.

And their talk, Paul says, is like a repulsive infection. It will spread like gangrene. What a picture Paul gives here. Gangrene is the decay and death of tissue caused by infection in the blood or a lack of circulation. It stinks. It’s putrid. It looks horrific. It spreads, killing more and more tissue as it goes. This is the effect of false teaching and spiritually erroneous and destructive deceitful whispering in the church. It leads more and more people farther away from God. It spreads through the church like some horrible disease - spiritually maiming and killing as it goes. There is only one thing to do with this gangrene – amputate it. Cut it off. Shun it – that is the meaning of the word “avoid” in verse 16. Keep yourself away from that sort of talk.

How do we identify gangrenous talk? Let me give you some questions to consider that will help you to differentiate between healthful and gangrenous talk. Do the words being spoken, the message being conveyed, honor God, and exalt Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? Is it in keeping with the letter and the spirit of the Word of God? Does it humble proud and fallen sinners? Does it promote holiness? Sound words always result in obedience to the Word of God and progress in holy living. It leads to genuine love for God and love for others. That is what Paul said was to be the goal of godly instruction: “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (1 Timothy 1:5, ESV) Does this talk “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” (Ephesians 4:12–13, ESV) Does it “urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the



Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:1–3, ESV) Healthful, sound, godly, truthful teaching and instruction and speech do all of these things. Gangrenous talk, irreverent babble, and quarrelling over words do not. Do not engage in talk that undermines the gospel, its proclamation, that does not promote Christlikeness, the authority of God, and the truth upon which the church is founded. Instead, in light of the presence of these opponents of the truth, you

Labor to Be Approved By The Lord (v. 15, 17b-18) Paul tells Timothy, the congregation at Ephesus, and us: “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.” (2 Timothy 2:15, ESV) In contrast to the false teachers and the whisperers of spiritual deceit, you labor to be an approved before the Lord. That is the goal – not the approval of the false teachers, not the approval of the self-appointed spiritually elite, not the approval of erroneous and mistaken – labor for the approval of God. That is the sense of the words. It is the picture of hard work, labor and sweat, of diligent and ongoing effort, of zealous and strenuous effort and motivation to do something. Labor so that you can present yourself to God as one whom He can approve –who has been tested and examined and is deemed reliable and solid and genuine, one whom He can use for the sake of His gospel, one whom he can trust, one whom He can reward. That is the idea of being approved of God.

Now do you do that? By rightly handling the word of truth. What’s the word of truth? First, in light of what Paul says in Ephesians 1:13 and Colossians 1:5, the word of truth, at the very least is the gospel. In both of those passages he calls the gospel, the word of truth. But I think it is safe to say that Paul also has in view, here, the entire counsel of God, all of which points to Christ and His Lordship.

Paul says “rightly handle” the word of truth. That phrase “rightly handle” comes from a word that means to plow a straight furrow, to cut a straight road or cut a straight line. Cut a straight furrow – the word is a fruitful field, and like the farmer cuts a straight furrow so as to receive the full harvest of the field, you cut the Word of God straight and true to receive its full bounty. Cut a straight road through the word of God, like an engineer cuts a straight road to a desired destination, so you cut a straight line through the Word to the heart, will and mind of God. Cut a straight line. Calvin saw it in this way. He thinks of straight slices. The Word of God is a wonderful loaf of spiritual bread, the Bread of Life; to enjoy the nourishing strength of the truth, like a steward cut the bread into straight slices for yourself and for the whole household.

How do you do that? Read the word diligently. Study it. Know what it teaches. Believe the Word of God with all your heart. Keep it in context. Interpret Scripture with Scripture under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Labor not to view Scripture through any personal lens or read into it but let it shape your thinking. Continue to renew your mind through the word at the feet of Jesus. Apply the truth to yourself first, seeking to obey it, faithfully and fearlessly submit to it, in real life situations for your lasting benefit and then do the same with others. Teach others the way of life -- what true communion with God and fellowship with Him and with His people looks like. Be mastered by the Word and by the Lord of the Word and seek to instruct and encourage others seeking to see them grow in love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Especially focus on gospel fidelity-- the glory of God, the sinfulness of man, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gratitude that should flow from a grace filled heart. Study the Word, know it, live it, obey its teaching, have your mind renewed and your emotions refreshed, seek to apply the Word rightly in your own life first and then to your brothers and sisters in Christ having a sincere love for them that desires their spiritual good.

The prophet Ezra is an excellent example of this. Ezra 7:10 says: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." (Ezra 7:10, ESV) He first put the law in his mind. Then in his life. Then, and only then to others. It's the right pattern for all of us to follow.

If you do this you will have no reason to be ashamed before the Lord. You will have been faithful to your calling as a Christian. It doesn't mean that you will never make any errors, that you will never fail, that you will never fall short. It just means this. You will be able to live before the Lord with a clear conscience, having demonstrated the motive and effort to live and love in a manner pleasing to the Lord, as before His face and for His glory's sake. "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." (2 Timothy 2:15, ESV)

Those who should be ashamed before the Lord are the unfaithful handlers of God's truth. Verse 17b-18: "Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some." (2 Timothy 2:17-18, ESV) Here, Paul mentions two people by name, as examples of men who did

not handle the Word of God rightly, men who were false teachers and spiritually destructive whisperers of falsehood, Hymenaeus and Philetus. Hymenaeus must have been like a bad penny, always showing up. He had already been excommunicated from the church. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul wrote: “This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” (1 Timothy 1:18–20, ESV)

So here was Hymenaeus, already excommunicated from the church for blasphemy, but still trying to stir up strife and shake, trying to overturn and undermine the faith of the flock and this time with a new accomplice, Philetus. I told you before what he was teaching. He was teaching that the resurrection from the dead was not a physical one, but only a spiritual one, one that had taken place for all believers. For that reason, they taught, Christians should be enjoying all of the blessings of the Kingdom in its fullness now and that, they said was health, wealth, privilege, power, sinless perfection. If these Christians weren’t it was because of a lack of this special spiritual knowledge that they alone, Hymenaeus and Philetus, possessed. It was all a lie, of course and it was upsetting the faith of the people – literally overthrowing, subverting, destroying their faith. Paul could have been writing of them when he wrote to the Philippians: “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” (Philippians 3:18–20, ESV)

Well, here is the question. If we don’t get down on their level and wrangle over words and argue with them in their irreverent babble; if we just avoid and shun this kind of behavior; if as Paul will say later, we are not “quarrelsome but kind to everyone... patiently enduring evil, correcting our opponents with gentleness...” (2 Timothy 2:24–25a, ESV); if we don’t slug it out with them and get down in the trenches with them but just plainly and calmly contend for the truth, how will these people like Hymenaeus and Philetus, false teachers and deceitful whisperers in the church ever be dealt with? Paul reminds us of

The Promise of God’s Faithfulness (v. 19) Paul writes: “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.”” (2 Timothy 2:19, ESV) Knowing that this battle for the truth

rages and knowing that the truth that leads to spiritual life and vitality is always under attack, both in obvious and subtle ways, it could lead us to be discouraged, to lose heart, and even to give up. But we cannot. To guard our hearts from despair and to keep us faithful even in the most trying of circumstances, Paul gives us these words.

God's firm foundation stands – this unalterable truth that is the foundation of reality – God's truth stands forever established, bearing this seal – “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, .” Paul quotes these words from the Book of Numbers and chapter 16, the rebellion of Korah, who was the ringleader, along with Dathan, Abiram and On. It's a long story, so I'll only give you the highlights. The people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness when these four men along with “250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men...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?”” (Numbers 16:2–3, ESV) They rebelled against God, against Moses and Aaron, and sought the priesthood for themselves, the leadership of the people for themselves. They wanted to be their own authority and to throw off all restraint. Moses declared in verse 5: “In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him.” (Numbers 16:5, ESV) The words translated “the LORD will show who is His” is literally, in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), “the LORD knows who are His.”

On the next day, Moses stood before Korah and his followers and this is where the second half of the quotation comes from -- “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.” Knowing what it was that God was going to do, he commanded the congregation of Israel: “Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins.”” (Numbers 16:26, ESV) They were to depart from the iniquity of Korah, his family and his followers. When they had cleared the area, Scripture says: “And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.” (Numbers 16:31–33, ESV) Not only that, but fire came out of heaven and consumed the 250 men who followed them in their rebellion.

Here is the point of this lesson from Numbers 16. God knows those who are his. He knows them savingly. He knows them intimately. He has known them from the foundation of the world. Just as God delivered Moses and Aaron from rebellious usurpers and those who the LORD knew were His remained standing in the end. In that same way, God will deliver Timothy and other genuine believers in the church, all of us whom He knows as His own, from the influence of the false teachers and the spiritual spoilers and whisperers who are in rebellion. Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:27–30, ESV) Those whom the Lord knows are His will respond to the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word. You won’t have to get into worthless wrangling with them. Those whom the LORD knows are His will remain standing firm.

And those that are His, who name His name, will depart from iniquity – from the iniquity of teaching and believing falsehood, from being the one who would shamefully handle the word of God by undermining the authority and truth of God’s Word by rejecting it, calling it into question, or refusing to live in accordance with it. Paul says that those who are genuine will depart from iniquity and that, beloved, is the test of a true believer. There is a life in him, the life of Christ, which will not let him compromise with or pursue iniquity forever. It may take a while for some, but God will not let them continue in iniquity. They must leave false teaching or spiritually destructive deceit and whispering once and for all because the child of God can never be at peace while living in sin. They are called to something higher and greater and nobler, and deep in their souls, even though it may be overshadowed for a time, they truly want to please the Lord and they want to depart from wickedness. And those who don’t will prove they never were the Lord’s.

The point is this. God will deal with the false teacher and the spiritually destructive in the ranks of the church in his own way and in his own time. In some cases, it may be through the hard but righteous means of church discipline and the excommunication of some people from the church if they continue in unrepentant false teaching and whispering deceit – like Paul had to do with Hymenaeus, for instance. Other times, God may cause them to depart on their own from the fellowship when they find no traction for their falsehoods. John mentions those who “went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” (1 John 2:19, ESV) Sometimes God judges those false teachers and whisperers of spiritual deceit as He did those in Numbers 16, with swift and terrifying judgment. And sometimes, out of grace

beyond degree, “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.” (2 Timothy 2:25–26, ESV) And that, quite frankly, should always be our hope. God will preserve His church and His truth – that is His business. But you fulfill your role. You, you labor to be approved by God. Labor so that you can present yourself to God as one whom He can approve, one whom He can use for the sake of His gospel, one whom he can trust, one whom He can reward. Labor so that you can be unashamed before the Lord.

Rightly handle the Word of God. Cut a straight furrow, cut a straight road through the word of God. Cut a straight line. Study it. Know what it teaches. Believe the Word of God with all your heart. Apply the truth to yourself first and then do the same with others. Teach others the way of life -- what true communion with God and fellowship with Him and with His people looks like. You labor to be faithful, rightly handling the Word of God – for the sake of your own soul, for the sake of the church, which is the body of Christ, for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ, for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of Christ and His glory.

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