

Oct. 13, 2019

2 Timothy 2: 8-19

**Prayer:** Dear God, Go with us as we look at your ancient texts. Like Paul, we understand that words matter, and that your Word matters most of all. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### Wrangling Over Words

Many of you know our son Taylor, who visits once a year from Europe. He and Andy were band mates, so he joins our musicians for a couple of Sundays when he's home.

Well, Taylor was a bit of a handful growing up. His first grade teacher told him he was the class clown, and he thought it was a job assignment. So every year of elementary school, I got called in for clown-related behavior.

We were almost to the finish line, spring of fifth grade, when I got a call in the newsroom from the principal's secretary. "The principal wants to see you in her office *immediately*," she said.

I was on deadline, but I said I'd get there as soon as I could.

So a couple of hours later I arrived at the principal's office, and there was a mother with a 10-year-old boy sitting there. And the principal started in about

how she couldn't believe this kind of behavior came from Taylor. How unexpected it was. How hurtful.

So I was peeking at this kid to see if there were bruises or blood or a knife sticking out of his side. There weren't. He did, however, look as if he'd like to slide under his chair.

Then the mother jumped in about how Taylor had ruined her son's fifth grade year.

I said, "*What did he do?*"

And the mother shoved a yearbook at me, so I could see what Taylor had written in her son's book: "Have a good summer, doo-doo head."

So the principal was railing. The mother was all but wailing. And I'm looking around for *Candid Camera*.

*Doo-doo head?* That's what these women were upset about?

I could tell the boy wasn't upset. His mother said, "We thought Taylor was his friend!" And he said, "Mom, Taylor *is* my friend."

But he wasn't going to stop that train.

So I promised to replace the grossly defiled yearbook and drove home. Taylor met me at the door and said, "Mom, they are way over-reacting!"

And I said, “I agree. But tell them I whupped you good, OK?”

The only thing I was really concerned about was the lack of creative writing. *Doo doo head?* Come on.

Words can get us into trouble. That’s the curse of the digital age and social media. What you could once express privately to a few trusted friends now goes worldwide within minutes.

But the issue has been around, I suppose, ever since oral communication came into being. Our Scripture passage today calls it “wrangling over words.” I love that.

Think of the next 13 months of election fever we face. What I dread most is hearing so-called Christians not only wrangling over words, but twisting them, making them say something they don’t, in support of candidates who couldn’t be further from the true gospel of Jesus.

Our Scripture for today comes from letters to Timothy, written by Paul or more likely, a follower of Paul writing in his name. We call them pastoral letters because they address a pastor rather than an entire church.

In the first letter to Timothy, Paul mentions slavery. He encourages slaves to honor their masters. And if the masters are believers, he urges the slaves to honor them all the more.

Paul was writing out of a cultural perspective. The Roman Empire was built on a slave economy. He couldn't conceive of a society without slaves. He was preaching the Christian gospel in the context of the only society he knew.

But in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American South, pastors took his comments as proof that slavery was ordained by God. So while Christians in the North were among the early abolitionists, Christians in the South were claiming that the Bible upheld slavery.

No one is making that argument today .

This same letter – written in a patriarchal society in which men ruled their families – says that women should learn in silence with full submission. The writer said he permitted no woman to teach or to have authority over a man. And though he clearly indicated he wasn't citing God's authority – he was merely expressing his own opinion – that statement has been used to keep women out of the pulpit and off deacon boards and out of teaching posts in seminaries.

Many of our churches have gotten past that. Many have not, and still cling to a cultural distinction based in the first-century Roman Empire.

Passages in other of Paul's letters are used to beat up our gay brothers and sisters. I am confident we will get past that some day, just as we finally got past claiming that the Bible supported slavery. But we're going to hurt a lot of people before we do.

We in the Christian community are always, always focusing on peripheral issues, on *something* besides the gospel. Wrangling over words that are beside the point. And it has always been that way.

In the letter we know as II Timothy, Paul sat in a prison in Rome near the end of his life. The peripheral *something* that was going on then happened to be the timing of the resurrection. Apparently, two church members in Ephesus, Hymenaeus and Philetus, were telling people that the resurrection had already taken place.

Of course, Jesus' resurrection *had* already taken place. We assume they were talking about the resurrection of everyone else.

So when Paul wrote to his friend Timothy, to tell him how to carry on as a pastor, he mentioned this false resurrection teaching of these two men. But what I want us to notice today is how fleetingly Paul mentions it.

How offhandedly he speaks of it.

How his instructions to Timothy are to focus, focus, focus not on the disagreement – but on the gospel.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **II Timothy 2: 8-19**.

8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David — that is my gospel, <sup>9</sup>for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. <sup>11</sup>The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

<sup>12</sup> if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, he will also deny us;

<sup>13</sup> if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.

14 Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid *wrangling over words*, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. <sup>15</sup>Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

<sup>16</sup>Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, <sup>17</sup>and their talk will spread like gangrene.

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup>who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting the faith of some.

<sup>19</sup>But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his', and, 'Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness.'

**“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel....”** Bam! There you have it.

In those few words, Paul encapsulated Jesus' divinity and his humanity. Jesus was God because he was raised from the dead. Jesus was human because he descended from the earthly King David.

Paul's gospel was that Jesus was God come down to earth.

Amen. He could have ended right there.

But he didn't. Because he knew that Timothy was a pastor, and that as a pastor, he was going to face questions and controversies, doctrines and disagreements. He was going down a lot of rabbit trails with his congregation.

So he wrote: **“Remind them of this,”** Timothy. **“Warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.”**

*Remind them that wrangling over words does no good but only ruins those who are listening.*

Have you ever been guilty of that? Wrangling over the extent of Satan's power or whether Muslims are going to heaven or if God blesses us with financial gain? Expressing so much venom over immigrants or another race that non-Christians pulled back in horror?

As you may know, I was raised Baptist, ordained Baptist and still am Baptist, though Triune is a non-denominational church. In the past two decades, some Baptist churches have removed the name Baptist from their signs. Many community churches were founded without the word though they follow the theology.

The reason is that potential Christians are turned off by all the **“wrangling over words”** they have heard from Baptists in the past 40 years. They won’t listen to the gospel because they are so appalled by all the bickering, all the hatefulness.

How horrible is that? Nineteen hundred years ago, Paul warned us that wrangling over words **“does no good but only ruins those who are listening.”** My goodness, what an indictment! What we are going to have to answer for!

We are going to disagree. But how we express that disagreement will determine whether others are drawn to Christ or whether they don’t want to have anything to do with him or his church.

Not so long ago, we read the story in Luke’s gospel where Jesus stood up to preach for the first time in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Do you remember what he said?

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,**

**To let the oppressed go free....” (Luke 4: 18-19)**

*This* is the gospel. Not who is pro-life and who is pro-choice, or when the end is coming, or whether women can preach, or whether gay people can be ordained to the ministry.

*This* is why Paul warns Timothy: *Remember Jesus Christ! Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David.*

Paul tells Timothy to simply do his work, which is proclaiming the truth of the gospel.

But he can't quite let go of this idea of losing focus. Sitting there in his prison chains, he gets all wound up again and circles back to this idea of wrangling over words. This time he says: **“Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, and their talk will spread like gangrene.”**

He mentions Hymenaeus and Philetus who are giving out false information about the resurrection – which was a pretty critical point for the early church. And indeed, Paul recognizes that such talk is **“upsetting the faith of some.”**

But that's all the space he gives the men and their false teaching. **“God's firm foundation stands,”** he writes.

*God's firm foundation stands.*

That's the part worth focusing on. Not false doctrine about the resurrection. Not the next *something* we come up with to fight over.

Paul tells Timothy and Paul tells us to remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David. That is Paul's gospel. That is our gospel.

The word gospel means good news. And so we have the good news according to Matthew. The good news according to Mark. The good news according to Luke. The good news according to John.

Four stories that tell not of wrangling over words but of a time many years ago when God came to earth.

He was born as an infant to a lowly family. He was announced by even lowlier shepherds. He grew to manhood in a Jewish outback of the Roman Empire.

He began his ministry as a wandering rabbi, who called 12 disciples. He performed many exorcisms, many healings, many miracles – including the changing of water into wine that has been the source of much wrangling over words.

He taught about the kingdom of God, and the uselessness of earthly wealth there. He taught about self-sacrifice, about suffering, about taking up one's cross to follow him.

He taught about the love of God and the corresponding love of neighbor.

He ran afoul of the Jewish and Roman authorities, and was crucified until death. And on the third day he rose from the dead.

That was the gospel that Paul preached. And in a prison cell at the end of his life, Paul desperately wants Timothy to stick with that story.

**“Remember Jesus Christ,”** he pleads, **“raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel....”**

Shortly after the doo-doo debacle at Taylor's elementary school, I was back at my desk in the newsroom. I got a call from Sheriff Johnny Mack Brown. And he was not happy.

I panicked, thinking, “Did I write something that released some violent criminal onto the streets?” But that wasn't it. In a story, I had referred to the Greenville County Sheriff's Office, on a second reference, as the sheriff's *department*. He was furious.

When I finally understood, I said, “You're really mad about that?” He was.

Apparently, to those in law enforcement, there is a huge difference between an office and a department.

We will never win when we get into wrangling over words. I hope we will always be so busy with sharing the gospel, with living out the gospel, that we won't get pulled into wrangling over the resurrection or women or gays or anything else.

Focus on the gospel, Brother Timothy. Focus, focus, focus.

Amen.