

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH
SUNDAY, JANUARY 3, 2021
SERMON: CUTTING STRAIGHT PATHS
TEXT: 2 TIMOTHY 2:15-19 (CONTEXT: 2:15)

I have lived many places in my lifetime. One of my favourite places to have lived (and still to visit) is the province of Nova Scotia. As a child, we lived in Hebron, which is down near Yarmouth, for 3 years, and for two years we lived in Middleton, which is in the heart of the Annapolis Valley. It is one of the most beautiful spots you can visit. It is known for the bounty of apple orchards and the drive during “apple blossom time” is spectacular (in sight and smell).

It is amazing how perception of time changes from childhood to becoming an adult. While we lived in Nova Scotia, we would often, during Christmas break, visit my grandparents who lived in Fredericton, New Brunswick. When we were about to undertake this trip, we would pray that Dad would surprise us with the fact that, instead of driving the LONG way around, we were going to zip down to Digby, Nova Scotia, and take the ferry across the Bay of Fundy to Saint John, New Brunswick and drive the final way. Not only did we love the trip on the ferry but, to us children, the trip, by land, to Fredericton, seemed to take forever!

It has been interesting to revisit Nova Scotia as an adult. Since the early eighties, Hwy 101 has been built that cut through the heart of the Valley and it is amazing how quick the trip seems now. The Trans Canada Hwy use to curve through all the little villages, which was very picturesque, but slowed the trip. The new highway cut through the landscape sacrificing some of the scenic drive for speed and convenience.

Today we are building on last weeks topic of the importance of reading, knowing, and applying Scripture. We turn to the advice given by Paul to his young friend Timothy about the importance of how you handle scripture in order to properly understand and lead others.

Our scripture lesson today is 2 Timothy 2:15-19:

¹⁵ Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth. ¹⁶ Avoid worthless, foolish talk that only leads to more godless behavior. ¹⁷ This kind of talk spreads like cancer, as in the case of Hymenaeus and Philetus. ¹⁸ They have left the path of truth, claiming that the resurrection of the dead has already occurred; in this way, they have turned some people away from the faith.

¹⁹ But God's truth stands firm like a foundation stone with this inscription: "The LORD knows those who are his," and "All who belong to the LORD must turn away from evil."

Timothy was a young man from a mixed marriage. Luke tells us in Acts 16:1, that his father was Greek and presumably not a follower of Christ, and his mother, Eunice, was a Jewess who converted to Christianity. Timothy's grandmother, Lois, was also a follower of Jesus. Timothy was raised with godly influences in a strong Christian home. There has been some suggestion that Eunice and Lois may have become believers through the Paul's ministry. However it happened, Timothy was raised as a believer in Jesus. If you read Paul's words to Timothy, you very quickly catch on to how loved Timothy was by Paul and Paul considered him to be like a son to him both literally and spiritually. As Timothy embarked on his own ministry, Paul mentored and guided the young pastor.

An emphasis in Paul's letter to his young disciple is to be very cautious of false Christians teachers. It is incredible how quickly false teaching sprung up after Jesus returned to the Father. Many words in the New Testament, the teachings of the Apostle John and Peter, are concerned with "wolves in sheep's clothing." The problem is still rampant today.

Why would Paul spend so much time teaching Timothy the importance of not only knowing scripture, but knowing how to interpret and use scripture? Why? Because knowing the truth intimately is the only way to guard OUR hearts and minds and the hearts and minds of those entrusted to us.

Paul tells Timothy (and all who call themselves Christ-followers) that our goal should be to become a worker for Jesus who is unashamed. This is not just advice to a young pastor but to all who believe. Paul taught it in Romans 1:16:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. ¹⁷ This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.”

What does it mean to be a “worker” for Christ? John Stott, in his commentary on 2 Timothy gives us some definitions:

1. The “work” of a worker (a Christian) is teaching. Whether you consider yourself a professional or a layperson, as a Christian, all that you do is watched by others and you “teach” others what it means to be a follower of Jesus.
2. There are two types of workers. There are those, who through diligence, faith, and perseverance, have been spiritually tested and passed the test. They are considered by Paul to be “approved.” Their teachings can be trusted and, as Paul states, “need not be ashamed.” On the other hand, there are those who have decided to manipulate scripture, faith, belief, and the understanding of God’s word in order to make it say what best suits THEIR desires, needs, and wanted outcomes. These people have failed the test and should be very “ashamed.”

How can you discern between the two groups? You look at how they handle the written Word of God.

THE GOOD WORKMAN (V.15)

As a child, I memorized 2 Timothy 2:15 in Sunday School (as many of you did), and I memorized (and often still quote it) from the King James Version:

¹⁵ Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

What does it mean to “rightly divide” the word of truth? In this context, to “divide” something does not mean to slice something up as you would a loaf of bread or divide something into small sections as you would divide up a large lot of land into smaller parcels. The original language does not mean to “divide up” but rather to “cut straight.” Stott tells us that the word is unusual and only used three times in the Bible. It is used in our context today. It is also found in a well-known verse in Proverbs 3:5-6:

**⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
⁶ in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.**

It is also found in Proverbs 11:5:

**The righteousness of the blameless makes their paths straight,
but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness.**

In Timothy’s context, the “word of truth” that has been entrusted to him, is what is called “apostolic faith” or the teachings, understandings and truths about Jesus that Paul taught him. For us today, we have been entrusted with the words and teachings of the inspired written word of God – otherwise known as the Bible.

What does it mean for us to “rightly divide the Word of Truth?” We have been given the two-fold responsibility of being accurate with our teaching as well as being plain or understandable.

THE BAD WORKER (V. 18)

What is the definition of a bad worker? Stott tell us a bit more about the metaphors that Paul is using. When Paul talks about truth, he likens it to a target that must be hit and the language he is using has to do with marksmanship using a bow and arrow. He doesn’t talk about highways to be built or fields that need a nice straight furrow, rather he talks about hitting or missing a mark with an arrow. When a bad worker (false teacher) deviates from the truth, they are missing the mark or the target. They are purposefully deviating their aim. How can you tell if you are a good or a bad worker? When you aim for the truth, do you hit or miss it? What is the result of your aim on the those you have been entrusted to teach?

Have you set a straight course to the truth that is easy for others to follow or have you deviated with twists and turns?

In Timothy's day, Paul was warning about specific teachers who were teaching false doctrine about the resurrection of the dead. It was intrusive enough that Paul will address these issues with several other churches. I love how Paul describes the effects of false teachers and their teachings. It is "gangrenous!" It is like an infection, that if not treated, will spread, and invade all open spaces. We are to take Paul's instruction to Timothy to "AVOID" such teachers literally like we would avoid the plague!

The dangers of false teaching is just as invasive and infectious today as it was in Paul's day. False teaching has the opportunity to latch on and spread worldwide through out global digital technologies and platforms. As I mentioned last week, sadly many followers of Christ have neglected the Bible and have opened themselves up to false teaching. The danger of false teaching is that often there are nuggets of truth mixed in. The Christian cults like Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses will take our terms and redefine them. They sing our hymns and use our scriptures but will twist the meanings. They have spent many years and numerous resources trying to brand themselves as Christian, but they are not!

Within Christianity there are dangerous beliefs systems that tickle the ears of the most desperate. It is Word/Faith theology, otherwise known as Prosperity theology that twists the scriptures into believing that with enough faith you should never be sick. With enough faith you should have all the material possessions you can dream of...if only you claim it and believe. This theology twists individual scriptures out of their contexts. This theology deviates from the "mark" where we are called to take up our crosses and follow in the Suffering Servants footsteps and replaces it with the idols of money, possessions, and health. Prosperity theology replaces a Sovereign God and makes faith an idol. For the belief system to work, you must put your trust in your "faith" and if you have enough faith then you can force God to give you what you want! I once heard it said that if your theology works in North America but not in Haiti...then it doesn't work at all. The truth of God's written word must be applicable in every situation you find yourself in!

WHAT TO DO TODAY?

Are you a disciple of Jesus? Whether you are a baby in Christ or a seasoned follower, never let up on your personal study of the Bible. Only by being in the word will following Jesus be vital, exciting, and fruitful. How can you claim the promises of God if you don't know or understand them? How can you refute false teachers if you don't know WHY they are wrong? How can you help a seeker into the Kingdom of God if you don't know how to present the Gospel?

I want to encourage you once again to daily be in the Word of God. I have posted a reading schedule on the "growing daily" page of our website. If you are like me, I appreciate a well thought through plan to aid in my bible study. Be watching for a video (hopefully within the week) on a simple plan to use with your bible reading to help you personally interact with what you are reading. It is called the SOAP method.

Faithfully learning scripture will allow you to grow and be excited about life with Jesus. It will allow the Holy Spirit to work more effectively through you as you teach and model what it means to be a follower of Christ to those who are watching all around you. May you grown in love with the Bible and may it truly guide and direct your path in 2021. May you learn to "rightly divide" the truths of God.

Let's pray...