

An old Arabic proverb says: *“Choose your enemies wisely, for you may become them.”*

The proverb is right. ... When you oppose someone... there is a great danger of subtly taking on that person’s qualities. ... If your enemy uses sarcasm... you may become sarcastic yourself. ... If your enemy exaggerates and conceals... you may start to rationalize such behavior of your own. ... If your enemy is insulting and rude... you may begin to act that way, too. ... After all... you’re just *“fighting fire with fire.”*

Walter Liefeld tells of a Christian apologist who debated the famous atheist Madeline Murray O’Hare with harsh and sneering tones. Liefeld writes:

*“After one such appearance, some were troubled by this man’s combative, demeaning attitude to the antagonist. His response was, ‘I did not go there to save souls but to destroy a heretic.’*

Then Liefeld concluded...

*I believe the apostle Paul would have hoped rather to destroy heresy and save a soul.”*

“Choose your enemies wisely, for you may become them.”.. [ P A U S E ] ..

Frederick Buechner, in his book, *Wishful Thinking* wrote:

*“Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back- is in many ways a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”*

There is so much truth in those words! ... Whenever we have a conflict with someone... the more right we feel that we are - the more we tend to chew

on pretended dialogue... rehearsing our words to slash and penetrate like razor sharp swords. ... We feed off the throbbing hurt we have received and the grief that we intend on inflicting back. (And just like ***THAT***... without even realizing it)... we have become just like our enemy!

Our passage (today)... presents “guidelines for controversies.” ... Last week God led many of you to make a conscious choice to be a vessel of honor... and I have been praying for you.

(Now) Today’s passage is a great follow-up. You see Satan doesn’t WANT you to be a vessel of honor... and he is about to put controversy in your life (if he hasn’t already.) And God will allow it. It is all part of making you into that vessel of honor. ... So these guidelines are a very proper follow-up to last week’s verses.

But before we move on to our passage today... I think that it would be beneficial for us to re-cap where we have been in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy... and how it leads us to our passage today. ... Paul has encouraged Timothy to confront the false teachers in the church at Ephesus. Most recent in his discussion of how to confront them... he has reminded Timothy to know God’s Word and handle it accurately (2 Tim. 2:15).

The call is for painstaking accuracy when it comes to teaching Scripture. To maintain the integrity of a workman... Timothy must not compromise even a little.

We must not be sloppy in studying Scripture. With some things in life... we can settle for “*close enough*”... but other things demand 100% accuracy. If 99.9% were close enough for maternity wards... then 12 babies would go

home every day from the hospital with the *wrong parents*. ... Some things you just have to get right.

The Bible is one of those things. ... God has taken care to communicate with us in words that can be clearly translated... grammatically diagrammed... contextually studied... and personally understood. ... He chose certain things to say... and *not* say... particular words to use... and not use... and we honor God when we pay careful attention to them. Others may be sloppy workmen (whose careless teaching tears down those around them.) ... We are called to be *workmen of integrity*... building up those around us with careful biblical teaching.

Then (we saw last week) that God has some vessels of dishonor in the church... and He has some vessels of honor. Those who flee youthful passions and pursue the things that make for righteousness... faith... love... and peace... *will* be vessels of honor. ... And with *that* - Paul continued with today's verses.

## **2 Timothy 2:23**

I think that a fair question would be to ask:

*“Does this mean that we are never to be involved with any kind of controversy here in the church? Does this passage say that we are never to take up sides or press an issue to the point that it creates an argument?”*

... [ P A U S E ] ... Another question may raise... after reading a passage like this: *“How do these verses fit with what Paul wrote in 1 Cor 11:19...?”*

## **1 Corinthians 11:19 (ESV)**

*<sup>19</sup> for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.*

On one hand Paul seems to say that controversies and factions are to be avoided... BUT (on the other hand)... he says that they are necessary and serve a useful purpose. ... So... How is it that we should we regard controversies?

We can be very grateful indeed to the great controversies of the past in the church... which have served to clarify truth. We would not have the doctrine of the Trinity if heretics like Sebellius and Arius didn't present false teaching about God. A church council was convened... the issue was vigorously debated... and the Nicene Creed was developed. ... (Several centuries later) I praise God that Martin Luther never backed down in the face of great controversy over the doctrine of justification by faith.

The church had developed a system of works... rather than grace through faith. At the turn of the last century another man by the name of R.A. Torrey led the charge of another controversy for which I am also grateful.

Churches in America had become so liberal that the Bible was no longer accepted as the infallible Word of God. Jesus was considered a good man, but not God. R.A. Torrey wrote a series of books called the "*Fundamentals of the Faith*" and mailed copies to every pastor and deacon in America whose name and address he could get hold of. R.A. Torrey's actions stemmed the liberal tide that had engulfed America's churches.

Should these controversies have been avoided...? Of course not!

What our passage this morning in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy is saying is that there are certain kinds of controversies that we must never get involved in. "Have nothing to do with them," Paul says. He tells us the two kinds of

controversies that we are to avoid. Let me paraphrase them for you: They are: stupid controversies... and senseless controversies.

The Bible that I am reading from has them listed as, “foolish” and “ignorant controversies”. Those designations don’t sound as harsh as “stupid” and “senseless”... but I believe these more abrasive sounding words are more of what the Apostle Paul had in mind.

The word that I am translating as “stupid” (here) is the word *moros* (from which we get our word, *moron*.) ... Paul is talking about moronic controversies... foolish... trivial matters which - even when they are settled after long and loud debate – they do nothing for you.

~ **They do not advance the Christian cause in the least degree.** ~

Such trivial matters may be interesting in some limited way... but they should never be allowed to become controversies and have people divide over them. Some people may find a discussion about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin very interesting... but it won’t advance the cause of Christ even one little bit!

Years ago... before I met Patti (and before I went to seminary) I lived in Denver Colorado. The church that I attended had just called a new pastor... who was a world re-known Bible scholar (Harry Stack Shields.) His very first sermon series – I will never forget. It was several weeks long. His subject...(?) ... “*Do angels sing?*” ... For several weeks he diligently argued his case that they don’t. They chant. As I listened to his imaginary debate with any who might disagree with his conclusions, I kept wondering, “*How does this advance the cause of Christ?*”

You all probably know that I believe the return of Christ is VERY imminent. I believe that the sign's of Jesus' return being close are all around us. But we have to be very careful. Let's not argue about whether this or that is a critical sign. ... Let's not argue if Noah's Ark has been found on Mt. Ararat in Turkey. ... It's OK to discuss these issue and to believe one way or the other – but divisive debating should be avoided. (Let's not stop fellowship over these matters.)

Now Paul also used another word... in addition to “moros.” The second word that he used to describe controversies that are to be avoided is translated as “senseless.” This carries the idea of “untrained”...“*arising out of ignorance.*” You know... I am always amazed when I hear someone say that the King James Bible is the only translation of the Bible that we should use today. “*Oh... are you aware that it is based only on the best archeological manuscripts that they had available in 1611...? How many more clearer manuscripts do you think they have found since 1611...?*”

And I have no use for those who have told me with great certainty that the newer translations were made by godless men who are used of the devil. “*How many of these men do you know personally?*”, I have asked two people who told me that. And then I told them that I DO KNOW two men personally who worked on modern translations – and they are very Godly men.

Do not get involved in such ignorant controversies. I still recall (from not too long ago) when guitars in the church was a big controversy. “*Those are the devil's instruments! Oh! And drums...? ...*”

There are so many other issues that keep Christians dividing up and debating... which will never be known for sure - until Heaven. ... These types of controversies do not advance the cause of Christ and are not to take up our time. ... There are matters of much greater importance.

So... what about the proper controversies then (the kind we should discuss?) ... How are we to handle attacks on vital doctrines and questions on the proper Christian response to the burning social issues of our day? The Apostle has some very clear guidelines for us.

### **2 Timothy 2:24-25a**

The vessel of honor... must not be an argumentative, pejorative, belligerent type of person who is ready to come out with guns blazing. There are so many people like that who shoot from the lip (always ready for an argument.) ... But the Lord's servant is not out to win arguments. He is not out to squash the opposition... or silence dissent by overbearing... heavy-handed approaches. ... He does not put down opponents... or resort to name-calling. He is not argumentative - not contentious.

Charles Spurgeon spoke about those in his day who, he said, "...*went about with theological revolvers in their ecclesiastical trousers.*" ...The Lord's servant does not do that. What then is the Lord's servant to be?

First, he is to be "kind to everyone."

Leaders don't fight - they influence. ... There is a different manner by which a vessel of honor influences those in opposition to divine truth.

The false teachers Timothy must face are proud... full of hot air... and attack others with criticism. ... And it would be very easy to attack back. But

a vessel of honor doesn't do that. ... Evangelist Dwight L. Moody once received a note containing a single word: "Fool." ... Moody said he'd received many critical letters where the writer left off his name... but this was the first time the writer had left off the message ... and signed his name!

A vessel of honor must not become like his enemies by retaliating. ... The word "kind" — is a word used of a nurse taking care of her children (1 Thess 2:7). ... He must lovingly nurture (which Paul will say more about in verse 26.) ... This is how a servant of God (a vessel of honor) is to treat false teachers and anyone who causes dissention and trouble in the church.

That does not mean wishy-washy. A person can hold a strong conviction and be gentle at the same time. A better English translation (perhaps) would be approachable. ... He is someone who remains approachable.

Second (we see in verse 24) that the Lord's servant to be "able to teach," i.e., skillfully dealing with the facts involved, not with feelings, not with fantasies, but with the facts of Scripture. There is where we must always return. It is so easy for an argument to slide off the facts and onto feelings, experiences, and reactions to things. The Lord's servant must call people back to facts and especially principles contained in God's Word.

Then third, he must be "*patient when wronged*". That is a great word. It means he must keep his cool, be unruffled and not respond in kind to what people are handing him. That is not easy to do. When somebody attacks me personally and unfairly... I want to attack back.



So... how do we overcome our natural tendency...? ... Let me share with you a very vital verse thjat is outside our passage today. It is found over in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter. We are to do what Christ did!

**1 Peter 2:22-23 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> *He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.*

<sup>23</sup> *When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

“Whenever we are reviled... instead of reviling in return... we can trust Him who judges justly.” ... .. What that is saying is **you** cannot keep your cool by merely deciding not to get angry. ... Will power alone will not handle this kind of pressure. I have tried it. I have determined not to get upset in a certain controversy and found that as the pressure mounted, and I was attacked personally I could not keep my promise to myself and I would strike back.

No, it is not will power alone, 1 Peter 2:23 shows us it is dependence on Divine aid. It is an inward reliance on God... a calling on God to help you at that point... to recognize your weakness... and help you to stand and not respond in kind. ... [ P A U S E ] ...

The fourth thing the apostle says sums up in a kind of a harmony of action of all of the above. He says in the first part of verse 25: “*with gentleness, correcting those who are in opposition.*” Here the word gentleness is really the word *mEEK*. And meekness is not weakness. We often think of it that way — a kind of Casper Milquetoast type of response... where one remains meek and quiet. But **that** is not the idea. Meekness in Scripture is selflessness. ... And once again we will need God’s ability inside of us for this.

That bring us to the last (and in many ways)... the most important thing of all. ... Paul concludes with these words:

## **2 Timothy 2:25b-26**

In dealing with controversy... the one thing the vessel of honor must remember is the Divine possibilities that are always present. ... He must understand that... if he conducts himself as Paul has outlined here... there is a very real possibility that it will trigger a Divine process of three steps:

The first step is: God will grant the person repentance. ... It is very important for us to see that repentance is not something the person concerned does. ... Nor is it something that our persuasive efforts can produce. It is something God does! ... (I'm going to repeat that.) ... Timothy's arguments could not produce repentance - only God can do that.

(LISTEN!)... The goal of such an attitude and such an approach... is the opponents' salvation. ... *"Perhaps God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth."* ... The vessel of honor is **not out to win arguments - but to win souls!** ... [ P A U S E ] ...

(And by the way) Repentance does not mean to feel sorry. It means to change your attitude... change your heart... take a different view... a different stance on the matter. This is what we want to see God do in them.

Once repentance is granted: *"They come to a knowledge of the truth,"* Paul says. The way you can tell that repentance has been granted is that they agree with the Scripture. They accept it (they know it to be true) and though it may involve painful adjustments on their part... they are committed to it... and they follow it.

The third step is, *“they escape from the snare of the devil.”* ... Remember who the real enemy is. ... It’s true that when confronting these false teachers... Timothy must not “become like his enemies.” ... But the fact is: the real enemy is Satan.

In verse 26 (here)... Paul says that Timothy’s opponents have actually been taken captive by the devil. ... Though they oppose the true gospel... at the end of the day they are prisoners of war - not enemies. ... They are victims of our real nemesis. ... When we remember this... we will seek not simply to win the argument. We will seek to win their souls.

The devil’s traps are always designed to destroy... to wreck... to ruin... to hurt... to harm... to leave people “shells”... (full of meaningless actions that go nowhere)... to take away joy and peace and love and delight (especially in the service of God in His kingdom.) ... The devil does this by trapping people in controversies (and the mishandling of them.)

But when we are vessels of honor... (when we conduct ourselves as Paul describes here)... we trigger a Divine process that can result in release for the person we oppose in a controversy. ... But if we come on argumentatively, angry, and contentious, we make that process highly unlikely to occur. That is the thrust that Paul leaves us with this morning in our passage.

Are there some changes God would have you make in your life this morning? Would you like to be better used of Him in times when you are embroiled in a controversy?

Becoming a vessel of honor might mean (for you) a character change. Make no mistake about it. This is something that only God can do.

The character of your pilot... or your surgeon... or your mechanic... may be *irrelevant* to his or her occupational competency. ... But Christian(!)... in spiritual matters... the character of God's servant is everything. Your being made into His vessel requires a radical cleansing... so it can be used for honorable purposes.

These challenges make us cry out with Paul: "*Who is sufficient for these things?*" (2 Cor 2:16 ESV). Remember, "*our competence is from God.*"

**2 Corinthians 3:5 (ESV)**

*<sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,*

While **we** will fail at these tasks... we should take heart in the fact that *in Him and through Him* we CAN live out these exhortations faithfully! ... Let's pray for that now. Let's pray for one another as we close.