

TO MY SON

An Expositional Study of II Timothy

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CHAPTER EIGHT -

THREE WORDS

II Timothy 2:14-19

14. Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers.
15. Study to shew thyself approved unto God. a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
16. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase into more ungodliness.
17. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymeneus and Philetus;
18. Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.
19. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

THERE is a rare lot said in Scripture about speech, and great stress is laid upon its very great importance - for good or ill. Take this one statement of the Master's, as found in Matthew 12:36-37, "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment, for by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned". This does not mean that we shall be condemned for making a joke, or indulging in jolly banter, or in clean happy fun - perhaps some of us need a little more of the humorous outlet than we at present allow ourselves; but it does mean that our words are to be examined, like our "thoughts" in Psalm 139:23-24, to "see if there be any wicked way" in them, in us. The exceeding importance, then, of words. Let us, in that spirit, look at the Three Words of our present passage; and first

THE PERILOUS WORD

You see it there in verse 14, "**words to no profit**" - they are, as we shall see, not only profitless, but perilous.

(a) A certain instruction is to be given. "**Of these things put them in remembrance. charging them . . .**" Who are these whom Timothy is to instruct?

(i) *Are they the believers, as a whole?* Certainly they need instruction, upon this matter, and that

matter, and all matters; and they who know most know how little they do know. A boy of fourteen, in explaining to me why he was leaving school, said, "They can't teach me any more" with the self-satisfied air of one who knew it all!

I have heard of Christians who have, in their own estimation, reached that exalted pinnacle of sublime perfection: you can't teach them anything. Well, well. How refreshing to turn to such a passage as Isaiah 50:4, "**he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.**" How we thank GOD for the HOLY SPIRIT, our Teacher, and for the Holy Scriptures, our Text-book: for we need constant instruction. Don't you feel that? Or

(ii) *Are they the teachers, in particular, that Timothy is to instruct?* These would be the local leaders who were placed under the young bishop's jurisdiction and administration.

Certainly they, too, would need it, for they who would feed others must heed themselves, as Paul says to this same Timothy in his First Epistle (4:16), "**Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine.**"

We note next that

(b) A right atmosphere is to be created. ". . . before the Lord," that is, as in His sight, as in His presence.

(i) *Speaking as in His sight.* What a difference that makes - there will be a loving care for our hearers, a straight faithfulness with them. Dr. Plummer says, "One is inclined to think that if ministers always remembered that they were speaking in the sight of GOD, they would sometimes find other things to say, and other ways of saying them." You may, on an occasion, have been speaking about some man, his words and views and actions, talking in a somewhat free and unrestrained fashion, when all of a sudden the man himself entered the room. That completely changed the whole atmosphere, he now could hear all you said - you were more careful to measure and moderate your words. Oh, that we preachers, when speaking of Him, and of His things, would recollect that He has come into the room, the church, indeed that He was there first (cf. "**There am I . . .**", Matthew 18:20), and that we were speaking "**before the Lord**".

(ii) *Listening as in His sight.* What a difference this makes in the manner of our reception of the message. Personal preferences will not operate so forcefully, and we shall find His word coming from even the preacher whom we dislike or despise.

We shall listen the more attentively, with something of the purpose of the old prophet, "**I will . . . see what He will say unto me, and what I shall answer,**" Habakkuk 2:1. We shall be alert to catch, through the human voice, the tones of the Divine voice. Yes, if instruction is to be given, it is well, to begin with, to get the atmosphere right - that GOD may grant Utterance to the speaker, and Understanding to the hearer.

Now we are ready to see that

(c) An important matter is to be dealt with. "Words".

(i) *They can be of enormous importance, as we have already indicated.* Often they are of nothing less than eternal significance. Take Luke 1:47, "**My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour**" - who can estimate the importance of that little word "**my**"? Take Galatians 3:16, "**He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but, as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ**" - everything hangs upon the one word; indeed, the one letter.

Take Matthew 22:43-44, "**How then doth David in spirit call Him Lord, saying, The Lord saith unto my Lord?**" - the whole argument turns on, the validity of the argument depends on, that one word.

Or let me take you to your Early Church History. Some of you will remember the Battle of the Word at Nicea, in A.D. 325: how that, as against the word of Arius for the nature of the Second Person of the Godhead, the word which means "*of like substance*," Athanasius brilliantly argued for the word that indicates, "*of one substance*". Fortunately, that great young scholar saw the vital issue that was at stake; the heretical Arius was defeated, and the word is in our Nicene Creed to this day - to being of One Substance with the Father." All that fuss over a word - in fact, one tiny letter, the Greek "iota" our "**i**," which is the only difference between the two words. Yet how much was involved. However, the contrary may also be said of words,

(ii) *They can be of trifling worth - "to no profit".* Alas, so much time, and heat, and energy, and temper have been wasted on "word-fighting", when the controversy has been unneedful and not called for. People have fought, and fought, over a word expressive of little else than their own personal opinion or preference. It is a little difficult to decide whether the apostle is thinking here merely of a word, or of an argument.

Dr. Moffatt is not the kind of man to disparage, or to discourage, the exercise of mental gymnastics, the battle of wits; but he sees in this passage the thought of the futility of most of that habit. Some of us lesser mortals are inclined to wonder whether, in spiritual things, argument ever does any good at all. One further thing about such words,

(iii) *They can be tragically perilous - "to the subverting of the hearers".* All this heat about matters of doubtful importance can have a very serious effect on those" outside the fight, those who are looking on, bewildered, disillusioned; so often they have been undermined, overthrown, and have let go their faith. The word translated "**subverting**" is the one from which our word "*catastrophe*" comes; and, in the light of this verse, one is constrained to acknowledge that while, in some circumstances, controversy is necessary, and even a plain duty, yet in many cases, and for many people, uncalled - for controversy is very near to catastrophe.

If we find ourselves involved in controversy, let us make quite sure that it really is a necessity for Truth's sake, and not for personal reasons, and, having decided that, then let our words be as "**before the Lord**".

Let me repeat that controversy may become incumbent upon us; but unless it be that, let us eschew it, lest it prove the perilous word, that leads to a soul's undoing. Above all, let us beware of the company of the man who really cares little about the right or the wrong of his word, so long as he wins his argument. And now for

THE PERNICIOUS WORD

There it is, in verse 17, "**their word will eat as doth a canker**". That raises at once

(a) The danger of false teaching. We shall note (i)

What was the form of these "**profane and vain babblings**"?

It was a teaching that "**the resurrection is past already**". This cult of Gnosticism, whose aberrations from the truth Paul had so constantly encountered in the course of his journeys - most notably, perhaps, at Ephesus, the very place in whose city and neighbourhood Timothy was working - admitted the future life of the soul, but denied the resurrection of the body. They insisted that the moral renovation, the spiritual resurrection, of believers in CHRIST, along the lines of Romans 6:3-5, was the only resurrection to be expected. It was past already, as soon as a man became a believer. And

(ii) *Who were the leaders of this heterodox movement?* "**Hymenaeus and Philetus**" are singled out for mention. We know nothing else of the latter; but there is an earlier instance of the first name, in I Timothy 1:20, and the likeness of the spiritual atmosphere of the context there to that which we have in our passage almost certainly establishes the identity of the personality. In those First Epistle verses a strange and solemn statement is found - "**whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme**" - that Satan might have power to afflict their bodies, as, for a quite different reason, he had in the case of Job 2:4-

For the same cause as we must assume in the instance of Hymenaeus, we find a like punishment is laid upon the sin of physical lapse, when the leaders are instructed, in I Corinthians 5:5, "**to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.**"

You see, these Gnostics held that the body is essentially and absolutely evil: that is why, in their view, there can be no resurrection for it. Holding this belief, some treated their body with harshness, by pains, and fastings, and neglects; others treated it with looseness, saying that you could do what you liked with the evil thing, and so they descended to all kinds of physical sin.

The most severe measures were adopted, in those First Days, to maintain purity of doctrine and purity of life; and this extraordinary power was vested in those church leaders to consign to Satan's machinations, that, after moral lapse, the culprits might through physical suffering, come back to spiritual health again.

Do we not see, then, how appropriate it is to find here a suggestion of

(b) The disease of false teaching? "**As . . . a canker**", a gangrene, as the word is. False teaching is not an isolated blow; it is an accumulating, growing thing. "**They will increase unto more ungodliness,**" more impiety, as our passage says - deeper into error, further into sin. Let us not forget that there is a close connection between what we believe and how we behave. Sometimes the question is asked, Does it matter what we believe? There are several answers to that silly question; one of them is this very fact, that, sooner or later, belief is bound to affect behaviour.

"Shun" it, says Paul, give it a wide berth, as you would a poison or a plague.

A word is added concerning

(c) The damage of false teaching. It will "overthrow the faith of some", in addition to all the other results that have been suggested. There was a time when, in the simplicity and reality of their trust in their Saviour, they walked so closely, and so happily, in the ways of GOD; but then came those who "**wrest the Scriptures**," not only, as II Peter 3:16 says, "**unto their own destruction**," but to the destruction of many another. It isn't merely that their faith in the old doctrine is undermined, but that their faith in the Lord Himself is overthrown.

But let us turn from all this consideration of the pernicious word of false teaching, and dwell for a bit, ere we pass to the last of our Three Words, on

(d) The domicile of true teaching. We have here

(i) *The house itself - "the foundation of God standeth sure."* That word "**foundation**" is used with various implications in the New Testament - sometimes it is the Scriptures on which we build, sometimes it is the Master Himself; but I think we may say that in our present passage it is not the foundation of the house, but the whole house itself which is intended - the house that He founded.

Just as you may speak of, shall we say, a college as Somebody's foundation - for example, of Eton as Henry VI's foundation, or of Christ Church, Oxford, as Cardinal Wolsey's foundation - so you have here "**the foundation of God**," His house and household, the Church, the "**great house**" of verse 20. Then we have

(ii) *The inhabitants thereof, as represented in the two-sided "seal" of the building.* There was, in those days, a widespread practice of engraving inscriptions over doors - "**thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates,**" Deuteronomy 11:20; and on the pillars and foundations - "**Him . . . will I make a pillar in the temple of My God . . . and I will write upon him the Name of My God, and the name of the city of My God**" Revelation 3:12; "**the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles,**" Revelation 21:14.

Well, these two inscriptions "**seal**" the house which is His Household:

First, on the obverse side, God-ward - "**The Lord knoweth them that are His.**" And that "**knoweth**" implies that He loves them, cares for them, surrounds them, supplies them, saves them. All this, and all else, is in the thought as in the similar words of the Saviour Himself, in John 10:14, "**I . . . know My sheep**". He knows; He cares - what comfort is this! It may, alas, be the case that those who know us best do not know us as His - perhaps through the cowardice of our silence, perhaps through the inconsistency of our conduct, they have no idea that we are Christians. Yet, in spite of our failings and failures, He knows we are His. What an incentive to be, and to do, better.

Then, on the reverse side, manward - "**Let everyone that nameth the Name of Christ depart**

from iniquity". We said some might not recognise as Christians because of our unchristian behaviour, but that is, of course, all wrong. Those who name His Name - that is, who are His - should be easily recognised by the holiness of their walk, they should "**depart from iniquity.**"

Attached to the house, as descriptive of its inhabitants, is the two-faced seal - one side says of them, "**His**"; the other, "**Holy**". It is for every member of the household to level up consistently to those two qualities.

We have spoken earlier of those who have had the foundations knocked away from under their feet - controversy has subverted some (verse 14), heresy has overthrown others (verse 18); but here is a Foundation that abides, that remains unshaken, that "**standeth sure**". We look upon the difficulties of the world around us; we note with attention the delusions of Satan, for "**we are not ignorant of his devices**", as II Corinthians 2:11 says; we observe with sadness the defections of some - but we rejoice in those who abide undismayed, and unmoved, in the unchanging "**foundation of God**". David once asked, "**If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?**" (Psalm 11:3). Ah, but this foundation won't be - it "**standeth sure**". And now it's time we turned to look at that other foundation, that Mr. W. E. Gladstone called "The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture!"

THE PRECIOUS WORD

It is seen in verse 15, "**the word of truth.**" Those who remember the great Torrey and Alexander missions in this country, will recall how that this verse was a kind of watchword, what we should now call a "slogan" of their campaigns. In sending letters people would put on the envelopes "II Timothy 2:15"; they would dispatch telegraphs bearing the message "Two Timothy Two Fifteen"; they would greet one another in the street with the same words; there were placards on the boardings, posters at the houses - everywhere was "Timothy 2:15." Well, here it is again: we might very profitably adopt it as the slogan, the motto, of our own life. It seems to me to be a most delightful summing-up of a satisfactory Christian life, with a revelation of its secret, "**the word of truth.**" See here, then

(a) The work well done - "**a workman that needeth not to be ashamed.**" This is just another illustration of the strenuousness of the Christian life, which this Second Chapter has so urgently underlined. We have already learnt that the believer is intended to be a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer - now he is an artisan: he is expected to be a worker. Evidently, the Christian life is no picnic; How will this workman become ashamed?

(i) *If he do his work badly* - we ought all, and always, to put our very best into it; but do we? How often we go to it very ill prepared. A Sunday-school teacher, for instance, puts hardly anything into the task of getting his Lesson ready, scarcely looks at it until Saturday evening, has got so into the habit of slackness that he has come to feel almost that anything will do for the children. In the day when our Christian work is judged (I Corinthians 3:11-15), such a man would stand dreadfully ashamed. He had better be thoroughly ashamed of himself now. Look at Jeremiah 48:10, "**Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully** [negligently]."

(ii) *If he do it easily* - with little cost to himself, and with no sort of sacrifice. I have heard of Christian people refusing to take up spiritual work offered to them because it would mean giving

up some bit of selfish enjoyment, or because they are so shy and would feel so dreadfully nervous, or because they fear they would get very tired. Make no mistake about it that a service without sacrifice is a shame worthy thing. The service that counts is the service that costs. So then, how much does your Christian work cost you?

(iii) *If he do it fitfully* - doing something if he feels like it, dropping it (and leaving the church!) if anyone dares to criticise at all, taking it up again if the inducement is powerful enough, or if the flattery is sufficiently agreeable. What a terrible way to treat what is one of the highest privileges of mankind.

(iv) *If he do nothing at all* - a drone in the hive. A stranger was talking with one of the monks at the St. Bernard Hospice when one of the grand, magnificent dogs came home. It just slunk by, its tail down, its head dejected, its whole bearing the picture of misery. "What's the matter with that dog?" asked the visitor. "Oh, it has found nobody to help, and it is feeling so ashamed."

My friends, we could never have that brave animal's excuse - lost on the bleak mountains is a multitude of souls, needing desperately the help that we Christians alone can give: when we come Home at the End of the Day, how terribly ashamed we shall be, if we have never attempted to do a thing to help them. Some of us Christians are content to remain in our arm chairs, never moving a foot, never stirring a finger, to serve. Any such will have painful cause to hang their heads with shame when we meet the Lord. How grand, though, to be one of those faithful servants of His who have no need to be ashamed.

That leads us to the thought of

(b) The Master well pleased - "**study to shew thyself approved unto God.**" "**Present thyself,**" it means.

(i) *As one He can use.* Like a workman who comes each morning to his governor's office, to present himself for duty, ready for orders - GOD approves of that attitude. May we thus present ourselves every day - "**present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable (logical) service,**" Romans 12:1.

(ii) *As one He can trust.* Alas. He cannot always trust all His servants. In all the exquisite reality of His Humanity, we hear of His leaning upon the sympathy and fellowship of His friends, in a time of direst need - "**tarry ye here, and watch with Me**" (Matthew 26:38); but He found He could not rely on them, they went to sleep and let Him down.

On the other side of the matter, we shall recall that word He spoke to Elijah, in I Kings 17:9. "**Behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee**" Having commanded, He knew He could rely on her to do it. Mind you, if ever a person would have been justified in saying that she couldn't do it, it was she. There was nothing left in the larder, the last little scraps were about to be used in the last bit of food, before she and her boy must give themselves over, in that time of drought and famine, to death from starvation. How could she possibly feed the prophet besides? Was she willing? That was the crux of the matter; for, if she were willing, GOD would arrange for the doing of it - however impossible it appeared.

In all questions of GOD's service, He asks only for willing obedience - he will see to the means for doing it. How He "**approved**" of that woman of Zarephath that day, seeing she proved He could absolutely rely on her. And, on us?

A poor, ragged little fellow, who had no one to care for him, and who had recently been converted, was asked, "If GOD loves you, why doesn't He tell somebody to look after you?" To which he rather sadly replied, "I expect He does tell somebody, but somebody forgets", Is that somebody you? Has some poor, sin-stained, needy soul crossed your path, whom GOD expected you to help, and did you forget - or fail?

Oh, to be so in touch with GOD, day by day, that we may almost instinctively know His mind, and do His will, and so be "**approved unto GOD.**"

(iii) *As one He can reward.* When Life's Day is ended, and we go into His presence on finishing our Job, may we be able to present ourselves "**approved - not ashamed,**" and to receive the supernal recompense of His "**Well done, good and faithful servant, . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord,**" Matthew 25:21. To enjoy His approval, and to share His joy: what a rich reward for any pains and sacrifices that our work may have involved. But such an approval will probably mean a considerable curtailment of others-pleasing, and certainly a complete end of self-pleasing. So we come to a last thought, which will supply the secret of this satisfactory Christian life, which has, all this while, been on our minds - the precious word:

(c) The Book well used - "**rightly dividing the word of truth.**" This word is placed in every "workman's" hand: it is his Tool, which he must, by much study and practice, learn how to use skilfully, and which he must, on no account, allow to become blunted by misuse, or rusty from disuse. He must be, in every sense, a Man of the Book. What is this "**rightly dividing**"? It is one word in the Greek, and means "*cutting straight.*"

All sorts of suggestions have been made by the commentators.

Some refer it to Straight Furrows: the Book is a very fruitful field, to receive whose full harvest the ploughman cuts his straight furrows.

Or, may be, it is Straight Roads: the Book is a great domain, to gain access to whose many benefits the engineer cuts his straight roads through.

John Calvin has a delightful suggestion. He thinks of Straight Slices: the Book is a wondrous loaf, a Bread of Life, to enjoy whose, nourishing strength the steward cuts his straight slices, for his own use, and for that of the whole household.

Straight furrows, shall we say, of painstaking Study; straight roads, perhaps, of Dispensational Study; straight slices, of Regular Study - not just lumps pulled off the loaf from any part, not isolated texts and bits, torn from their context, to feed some favoured theory, but the straight slices of orderly system, the Scripture Union, perhaps, or the International Bible Reading Association, or the Bible Reading Fellowship, or the Chapter a Day method, or the regular Church Calendar; something like Jehoiachin's "allowance" from Evil-merodach, in II Kings 25:30, "**a daily rate for every day, all the days . . .**"

But, perhaps, what we are especially taught here is, not so much the importance of the "cutting", as the value of the "**straight**" - to deal in a straightforward way with the Bible, to the exclusion of all fanciful deviations and all "**private interpretation**," Peter 1:20.

To be "**approved unto GOD**" we must "**study**" - or, be diligent; above all we must "**study . . . the word of truth**" - "**the scripture of truth,**" to borrow the phrase of Daniel 10:21.

Both in our personal life, and in our spiritual work, the Bible must have prime place; and we shall soon discover that it is not enough merely to read our daily portion, admirable though that laudable custom is, but we must give ourselves to diligent study making time, and taking pains.

~ end of chapter 8 ~
