

# Jesus Is Worth It

## Part #7 - "Discernment"

### Text | 2 Timothy 2:14-19

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on June 23, 2019

#### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Some sermons are meant to inspire. Some to encourage. Some to correct. Today's message is about equipping you with a basic skill. That may not sound exciting but it is this skill that leads to inspiration, encouragement, and what keeps you from going wrong.
  - Driving a car really fast on a road with a lot of turns is great fun but only if you possess the skills to do so. This message is about learning to drive in the Christian life so that you get experience great moments.
- Today's passage is about discernment. Discernment simply refers to the ability to distinguish between things. To have a discerning eye in fashion means you know which colours match and which do not. If someone says you lack discernment it is just a nice way of saying you make bad decisions, like when a wife tells her husband that navy blue socks don't go with black pants.
  - In Christianity discernment means the ability to distinguish between truth and error, right and wrong, good and evil, wise and unwise. Discernment is the ability to think biblically about any situation or issue.
- Yet, as I have heard one pastor joke, discernment is not so easy because error never announces itself to us.
  - When you buy a book the introduction never begins by saying, **"80% of this book is truth. The other 20% is total baloney. You will find the false material in chapters 2, 5, and 10."**
  - When you watch YouTube clips, there is no disclaimer that says, **"I have no expertise on the Bible and my personal life is a disaster but I am going to post my opinions about the Bible every single day."**
  - No pastor starts his sermon with, **"Before I begin you need to know that I am really influenced by certain unorthodox teachers and parts of this sermon will subtly seek to lead you astray."**
- Error does not announce itself. In fact, error is almost always mixed with a lot of truth. This is why we need discernment. But discernment is not something you are born with. It is something you must grow in. It is a skill.
  - That is why we pray with Psalm 119:124 – **"give me discernment that I may understand your statutes."**
    - We want to be like those believers in Heb 5:14 who are described as mature because they **"have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."**
- In our passage today we find Paul trying to help Timothy and his church grow in their ability to discern good Bible teachers from bad Bible teachers.
  - This is such an important skill. It may not be the most exciting topic we ever talk about, but it is critical. True teaching leads to great joy and strength but false teaching leads to destruction.
- Let us pay close attention to this passage that we might mature in our ability to discern what Bible teachers we will listen to and allow to influence us.
  - I will develop our passage in three parts. Part 1: The issue of truth. Part 2: Discerning the good teachers. Part 3: Discerning the bad teachers.

## THE ISSUE OF TRUTH

- Let's begin then with part 1: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) the issue of truth.** In part 1, I simply want to identify the big picture of what Paul is talking about.
  - Paul has already used the metaphor of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. Now he introduces the metaphor of a workman. In Paul's day a workman was any kind of labourer. You can see the metaphor in verse 15. **READ 15a – Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed.**
    - There are three things to notice about this workman for Paul is using the metaphor to refer to a specific type of workman.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 3) First, the “workman” is the Christian who teaches.** Look at the end of the sentence. For the workman to be unashamed means that he or she **“rightly handling the word of truth.”**
  - So we are talking about anyone who teaches the Bible from a Sunday School teacher to a pastor, a blogger to an author, a podcaster to a parent, or Youtuber to people teaching through Facebook and Instagram.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 4) Second, there are good and bad workman.** The good workman we just saw in verse 15 is approved by God and does not need to be ashamed.
  - But this means there is a second type of workman whom we will simply call a bad workman. This type of workman is not approved by God and should be ashamed.
    - So what makes the difference between the two types of workman?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Third, the difference between the two workmen is how they handle the word of truth.**
  - The good workman is approved and has no need to be ashamed because he or she “rightly” handles the truths of the Bible. On the flipside the bad workman is not approved of by God and should be ashamed because he or she does not handle the word of truth rightly. We will develop this more but Paul uses powerful verbs to describe the two workmen.
    - The words “rightly handling” mean to cut straight so others can easily follow and be led the right direction, like the way we cut the highway over the Malahat so cars can easily travel it. The Greek word for straight has as its base the word “Orthos.” From that we get our word “orthodox.” So the good workman teaches orthodox truth.
  - On the other side, Paul gives examples of bad workmen in verse 17. **READ 17 - Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup>who have swerved from the truth.** This word “swerved” means to miss the mark like an archer who aims for the bull's eye but completely misses the target altogether. Their teaching is not orthodox and leads people off the highway into dead ends that go over cliffs.
- Let's bring this together now. In order to build discernment in us Paul says we must recognize that there is such thing as good workmen and bad workmen.
  - The distinction between the two is how they handle the word of truth. Do they handle truth correctly or do they lead people into error? Are they orthodox? Do they teach the truth?

## TRUTH IN AN AGE OF RELATIVISM

- Now we need to pause right here because some of you are thinking, **“This is exactly why I find Christianity offensive. Why do Christians always have to talk in true and false? Why do you have to say some people are wrong? What's true for you may not be true for me.”**
  - This sounds good but with a few moments of reflection you will quickly realize that although people love to say that truth is relative, and you have your truth and I have mine, no one truly believes that or lives like that.

- I saw a great commercial a little while ago that hammered this point home. There is a stage with a grand piano at the centre. A young man walks out in a tuxedo. He bows the audience and they clap. He then sits down. Suddenly he smashes his head down onto the keys creating a terrible sound. He lifts his head and drops it again on the lower keys. He drags his fingers all over the upper keys.
  - On the screen it says, “**Creativity is subjective**” and then in bold letters it says, “**The truth isn’t.**” It’s a commercial for *Advertising Standards Canada* and ends with “**truth in advertising matters.**”
- That is a great commercial. On the one hand, it is saying that there are some things that are true that are subjective. They can be true for you but not for me.
  - You may think salad makes a better dinner than steak. You may think Taylor Swift is more talented than Jimi Hendrix. You may think high waisted jeans are the pinnacle of fashion.
    - I disagree on all accounts but hey, on things like food, fashion, and music, what’s true for you does not have to be true for me.
- Yet on the other hand, this commercial is saying there is such thing as truth that is true for all of us, regardless of personal opinion. Here’s the thing: you do believe in absolute truth. Moreover, you are very dogmatic about it.
  - You believe it is wrong to break into someone’s house, wrong to embezzle funds, wrong to bully someone because they are gay or transgender, and wrong to treat someone poorly because they are Indigenous, Chinese, or black. You don’t believe that these are just matters of personal preference or merely social conventions. You believe they are absolute truths that all people should abide by.
- So you see, you believe in right and wrong, true and false. So I am asking you to realize that a message about true and false teachers, a message that says some people are right and others are wrong, is not offensive at all because we all believe in absolute truth.

## DISCERNING THE GOOD TEACHERS

- So that is part 1: the issue of truth. With all that said we are now ready for **(SHOW SLIDE 6) part 2: discerning the good teachers.**
  - Paul is here calling Timothy to be a good workman. But this letter would have also been read to the congregation and so they would have heard Paul’s call to Timothy. They would have heard Paul speak about these two types of workmen and thus would have learned to discern the good workman from the bad workman.
- In verse 15 we see a few marks of a good workman – a good teacher of the Bible. **(SHOW SLIDE 7) First, the good Bible teacher operates from the fundamental conviction that the Bible is God’s truth.**
  - Look again at verse 15. The good workman is very careful how he or she handles the Bible. Why? Because it is “**the word of truth.**” This is the absolute starting place for discerning the good teacher from the bad, namely their view of the Bible.
    - It is disagreement on this issue that we have what are called “Mainline” or “liberal” churches like the United Church of Canada and “Evangelical” or “conservative” churches like Mennonites, Baptists, Evangelical Free, and Alliance Churches. They split from each other over this issue of the Bible.
  - In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Mainline churches grew skeptical of the Bible. They taught that it is full errors and that one cannot believe the miracles such as Christ’s resurrection. The Bible, they taught, was the best thoughts about God from ancient people but we must evolve with the times.

- Evangelicals disagreed and said the Bible is the inspired and inerrant word of God, meaning that although men wrote the Bible God so superintended the process that what they wrote was exactly what God wanted them to write and it is therefore free from error. In short evangelicals believe the Bible is reliable and authoritative because it is truth.
- A good Bible teacher then believes what Paul says in chapter 3. **READ 3:16** – ***“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”***
  - So to grow in discernment then is to recognize that the most important question to ask about any Bible teacher is simply what they believe about the Bible? Do they believe it is God’s word, that is reliable, and that it contains absolute truth?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Second, the good Bible teacher seeks to be approved by God.**
  - Paul calls Timothy to seek God’s approval on his teaching ministry. Look at verse 15. **READ 15** – ***Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed***
    - To grow in discernment means to discern *why* a person is teaching the Bible. Are they doing to make money or to serve those who hear? Are they doing to try and build their own fame or to build the fame of God?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 9) Third, the good Bible teacher works hard to teach exactly what the Bible says so as to benefit others.**
  - You will notice that verse 15 begins with Paul’s call to ***“Do you best.”*** This points to great effort and activity. But what is he to do his best at? Correctly handling the word of truth. We already said that this means to cut the word straight. It means not to deviate from it.
    - Cutting the highway through the Malahat was a major job. But now you can drive on good roads that accurately take you to your destination. You do not need to worry that the road will suddenly drop off a cliff. That is because good workmen built it.
- In the same way a good teacher of the Bible cuts a road for you – a road that accurately reflects what the Bible says. A good teacher does not deviate from the truth of the Bible but stays on the straight path. A good teacher cuts this path so as to lead you to see what the Bible actually says. A good teacher does not create roads that lead you to believe the Bible is not true, that sin is not that big of a deal, or that Jesus is just another good teacher. A good teacher expresses his or her love for you by cutting a straight path that leads you to what the Bible teaches.
  - This will inevitably mean pointing you to Jesus for as Jesus himself showed the disciples on the road to Emmaus all of the Scripture points to him. So a good teacher is always pointing you to Jesus, always showing you his saving work, always lifting up Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.
    - Growing in discernment then means be able to recognize a good teacher. A good teacher then has a fundamental conviction that the Bible is God’s truth, is seeking God’s approval, and works hard to teach exactly what the Bible says so as to benefit others.

## DISCERNING THE BAD TEACHERS

- That brings us then to **(SHOW SLIDE 10) part 3: discerning the bad teachers.**
  - Paul introduces a second metaphor to describe the bad teacher. Look at verse 17. **READ 17** – ***their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup> who have swerved from the truth.*** For now, simply notice that the teaching of these two men is described as swerving from the truth. This metaphor is from the world of archery. The teacher

then is likened to an archer. Truth is the target. But a false or bad teacher completely misses the target.

- As we develop his further we see in this passage a few marks of the false or bad teacher.

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 11) First, the bad/false teacher goes against major truths in the Bible.**

- In verse 18 Paul mentions what these two men, Hymenaeus and Philetus were teaching. **READ 18b** – *saying that the resurrection has already happened*. This is not referring to the resurrection of Jesus but to the general resurrection at the end of time when Christ raises us from dead and gives us new bodies. We don't know exactly what these two men were teaching but it seems like the same thing Paul dealt with in I Cor 15.
  - You see in Greek thinking, the spiritual is far more important than the physical so it was kind of an embarrassment that Christians believed in a future bodily resurrection. It seems that some Christians wanted to downplay this and so argued that the resurrection is a spiritual events and therefore has already happened. But as Paul argues in I Cor 15 our future bodily resurrection is a key doctrine for if we are not bodily raised then neither was Jesus. And if Jesus was not raised then our faith is in vain and we are still in our sins.

➤ So let's be clear here. False teachers are not Christians or pastors who you disagree with you on whether speaking in tongues is for today, whether you should homeschool or not, what Bible version you should use, the place of Israel in the end times, whether Christians should go to movies, or drink alcohol.

- I know far too many churches and Christians who claim to specialize in discernment. They find a small disagreement with another Christian and immediately brand them as a false teacher and separate from them.
  - They are like the man who was finally rescued from a deserted island. The rescuers notices that there were three huts on the island and said, ***“We thought you were alone on the island? Why are there three huts?”*** The man said, ***“The first hut is my house and the second is my church.” What about the third?” “Oh, that is the church I used to go to.”***
- A bad or false teacher is someone who denies major Christian doctrines not someone whom you have small disagreements with.

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 12) Second, the bad/false teacher is argumentative.**

- Look at verse 14. **READ 14** - *Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words*. So they are contentious people and very argumentative. They want to debate every fine little word and start arguments about them.
  - But doesn't Paul quarrel about words? I mean most of his letters are written to refute the words of false teachers. So which is it? Are supposed to quarrel or aren't we? Again, we come back to the difference between major and minor doctrines. When it has to do with minor issues Paul calls us to maintain the unity of the Spirit, to forbear with each other, and to love one another. But when someone starts teaching things that deny the message of Jesus Christ Paul brings down the hammer because our eternal souls are at stake.

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Finally, the bad/false teachers have a destructive effect in the lives of those who follow them.**

- This is all through the passage. Look at verse 14 again. **READ 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*.

- Look at verse 16. **READ 16 - But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.** So we are not to let false teachers have a major influence in our lives. Why not? Because their teaching is like babble. It is useless. And then in great irony Paul states that such teachers do lead people but it is not to maturity. They only lead people into more and more ungodliness.
  - What should we say then about teachers in our day who deny the Bible's teaching on sexuality, on homosexuality, or teach that Christians should be rich and spend their money on themselves? Do they not lead people into sin? If a teacher leads people to sin they are a bad or false teacher.
- There is a further description of their destructive effects of their teaching in verse 17. **READ 17 – and their talk will spread like gangrene.** Gangrene spreads and poisons a person's whole body and will ultimately kill them unless it is removed. False teaching then is so serious because it spreads around the church. It infects people and ultimately spiritual kills people. That is why at the end of verse 18 Paul writes, **"They are upsetting the faith of some."**
  - This is why discernment is so important. The church must take discernment of its teachers so seriously because the eternal souls of people are at stake.
- A few years ago I read a historical novel about the 300 Spartans warriors who stood against the armies of Persia. One young warrior named Alexandros is quizzed on why a Spartan warrior receives no punishment for losing his helmet in battle but loses all his rights as a citizen if he loses his shield:
  - **"Have your instructors taught you why the Spartans excuse without penalty the warrior who loses his helmet or breastplate in battle, but punish with loss of all citizenship rights the man who discards his shield?"**
    - They had, Alexandros replied. **"Because a warrior carries helmet and breastplate for his own protection, but his shield for the safety of the whole line."**<sup>1</sup>
  - In the same way the church must be discerning about who teaches because teachers influence for good or for bad. We take this seriously because we love people and want them to grow in health and truth.
- Lest we get too discouraged about the fact that there are false teachers in the world Paul ends with an encouragement. **READ 19 – 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."**
  - So we are to picture a cornerstone of a building with two inscriptions on it. The first one reminds us that God knows who his people are. He will distinguish between his loyal and disloyal servants so don't feel discouraged. The second inscription reminds us what our focus should be on. If we confess Jesus then let us not follow the false teachers but rather strive for holiness.

## CONCLUSION

- Discernment. We must grow in it. We must ensure that we are being influenced by good teachers. And we must guard the church what we believe matters. May God grant us discernment.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*, Kindle Edition, Location 612.