

**“Serving Satan’s Servants”**  
**2 Timothy 2:14-26**  
**November 29, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

To be a Christian is to be a fighter. Didn’t Jesus say, **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”** (Matt. 10:34)? In our passage this morning, Paul is writing Timothy to instruct him about the fight he is to enter with the false teachers. I considered entitling this sermon, “Christian Fighting,” but I couldn’t resist the irony contained in verses 24 and 26. In verse 24, Paul reminds Timothy that he is the Lord’s servant, called to be kind to all. Then in the last verse of the chapter, it is said of Timothy’s enemies in this fight for accurate doctrine that they have been captured by the devil to do his will. Without realizing it, they are serving Satan himself. As such, they are clearly Timothy’s opponents. Surprisingly, Timothy is to serve these servants of Satan, doing what he can to show them kindness, in hopes that God will grant them repentance and release them from the bondage of the devil.

Let’s consider the broad application of this passage before getting into its details. It is about those who have become opponents because they have swerved from the truth (v. 18) in some way. They are wrong and perhaps irritatingly so. Perhaps your case is similar to Timothy’s in that your opponents are in the church. In my years of pastoring, I have from time to time encountered those whose great passion is to oppose me. They take some offense at something I have done or not done, and long for my downfall. Every pastor has encountered some of these people. Or maybe your opponent lives under the same roof and would rather argue with you than do just about anything else. Maybe you are even married to your opponent. Or maybe your opponent is a classmate or a co-worker. At some point, this opposition may advance to such a level that your opponent is one who has been taken captive to do the will of the devil. In any case, we are talking about someone who has fallen into error and needs to change. What can we learn from Paul’s advice to Timothy about how such needed change occurs? Are there things we can do to help others change? Consider the following three points.

**I. The Devil’s Servants**

The most striking thing to me about those Paul describes as being captured to do the devil’s will is that they are inside the church, not outside. He even names two of them—Hymenaeus and Philetus. They weren’t just church members either, but teachers and leaders in the church. Of course, they would not have agreed with Paul’s description, and their nametags wouldn’t have said “Hymenaeus, the devil’s servant.” Nevertheless, these church leaders were in fact doing the devil’s

work, though that would not have been immediately evident. I notice three qualities Paul lists of them that will help identify these people.

First, they are argumentative. Throughout Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, this trait seems to be the one that most typifies the false teachers. They quarrel about words (v. 14). The Lord's servant, by contrast, is not to be quarrelsome (v. 24). These false teachers were described elsewhere by this same quality. For example, in 1 Timothy 6:4, the false teacher is said to have **"an unhealthy craving for controversy."** Their interest is not to know the truth, but to win arguments. Their responses to others are not characterized by the humility, teachability and openness of the person who wants to learn, but rather by the pride of the person who just wants to be seen as right.

Second, they teach what is contrary to the teaching of the apostles. Paul names their specific error, saying that they were teaching that the resurrection had already happened. This is one of the few places where Paul actually states their precise doctrinal error. Since their bodies had obviously not been raised, and since they were teaching that the resurrection was in the past, we can infer that they were viewing the resurrection as only spiritual in nature. Their denial of a bodily resurrection had two different results, both very harmful. One result was to make anything done in the body irrelevant, which led to the error present in the Corinthian church, where they said you could do anything you wanted with your body and it would have no effect on your spirit. In such a belief system, sexual promiscuity flourished. The second possible result of this realized resurrection is the asceticism that seems to be present in this church, an asceticism in which they forbade marriage and the eating of certain foods.

Third, their influence is negative. Their ways **"lead people into more and more ungodliness"** (v. 16). They help people make progress, it just happens to be progress in the wrong direction. Then he uses a medical image of someone afflicted with gangrene. If left alone, their arguing and false teaching will spread and bring death, just like gangrene. The result of their leadership in the church is to lead people away from godliness.

Even with the help of this list of three qualities, it is not always easy to spot these servants of Satan. On the outside, they look just like everyone else. That was the case with Judas. When Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him, no one said, "I bet it's Judas; I never did trust that guy." The fact is that we don't need to identify these false teachers with 100 percent accuracy. God knows who they are, as Paul reminds us in verse 19. He states it positively, saying that **"The Lord knows those who are his."** By extension, he also knows those who are not his, though they may be in the midst of his people. How can you fight those you can't identify? That brings us to our next point.

## **II. The Lord's Servants**

Did you notice how much of Paul's advice to Timothy about entering the battle against these opponents is focused on issues of Timothy's character and work? So he tells Timothy to be a good worker who has no need to be ashamed of his work. Sometimes the most effective thing you can do to oppose Satan's servants in their destructive work is simply to focus on the job God has given you. Timothy's job was teaching the Bible, and he was to make sure his work was of the highest quality he could make it.

Paul also focuses on issues of character for the Lord's servants. He says that the church is like a house with different kinds of goods, some for honorable use and some for dishonorable. Every house needs a toilet plunger, but you don't display the toilet plunger in your china cabinet with your finest china. The Lord's servants are to make sure they are among the parts of God's household that are honorable. They do so by fleeing youthful passions and pursuing godly virtues. Both of these verbs indicate a sense of urgency. To flee means to run away from something as quickly as possible. To pursue something means to make a single-minded effort to follow a certain course. This is so helpful precisely because it is contrary to our instinct when in battle with an opponent. Warfare always includes urgency, but we need to be careful to apply our urgency in the right direction. Our instinct is to apply all sense of urgency toward winning the argument or persuading the other person to change. Paul is urging that we do so toward the changes needed within us.

So we are to flee youthful passions. This is normally applied to the area of sexual lust, but I don't think that's what is in view here. In this context, I think it's more likely to refer to the qualities of youth that make them more susceptible to false teaching. For example, youth tend to despise the old and be attracted to the new, just because it's new. Youth tend to love debate and to seek human approval. These are the youthful passions Timothy is to flee. He is to pursue four qualities that summarize Christian virtue: righteousness, faith, love, and peace. And other Christians are an essential part of this pursuit, since Paul says to pursue these virtues **"along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart"** (v. 22).

To summarize, then, Paul's advice for Timothy and other Christians who desire to make a difference in the lives of the devil's servants is to keep the focus upon their own work and character. As they do so, the battle will progress in the manner we are going to look at in our final point.

### **III. The Battle of the Servants**

Verses 24-26 describe how this battle progresses. The big gun that turns the tide and makes all the difference is the gift of repentance, a gift that comes straight from God himself. Notice how God defeats his enemies. He doesn't do what we might expect of the most powerful being in the universe. We might expect him to wave his hand and wipe out all enemies in one decisive action.

What he does instead is described in verse 26. He grants them this gift of repentance that **“they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”** Notice here God’s view of these enemies. It may be that they have brought great damage to many people through their false teaching. They have indeed been victimizers of others. But they have also been victims, being ensnared by the devil, captured to do his will. Theirs is the worst kind of bondage because they are in bondage without fully realizing it. It is the gift of repentance that God brings that will free them from this bondage.

Since repentance is the difference maker in this battle, let’s look a little more carefully at what this passage teaches about repentance. I notice first that it is a gift from God. **“God may perhaps grant them repentance.”** The one thing these opponents most need is something we cannot give them—only God can. One effect of believing this is to free us from feeling like we need to be responsible for the change needed in others. We cannot change people. Only God can.

A second thing I notice about repentance is that it leads to a knowledge of the truth. God may **“grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.”** Note the order. Most of us tend to think that the order is just the opposite—that knowledge of the truth leads to repentance. So if we know someone who needs to change, we think that their biggest need is to have their knowledge deficit filled by us. But the Bible’s view gives more emphasis to the heart than the head. People cannot come to a knowledge of the truth until something happens in the heart.

Perhaps an illustration will help. There’s an old story about a young man from the city who makes his first trip to the country. While there, he sees men doing what he thinks is the most ridiculous thing imaginable. They start with a beautiful field and begin marring it with this metal disk pulled by a horse. It buries the pretty grass and exposes the ugly dirt. Then he sees these men do something even more incredible. They take perfectly good kernels of corn and bury them in the dirt. He begins to hate these country people for what he views as their foolish and wasteful behavior. His knowledge of the facts is sound. They are indeed taking perfectly good corn and burying it in the ground, after scarring the earth with a plow. But if we were to supply him with one key component, everything would change. If he were to understand and accept the fact that the delicious corn he eats is only made possible when the potency of the seed is released after being buried in the freshly turned earth, then he would come to love instead of hate what he sees these farmers doing. Then he would see the same facts but come to know them fully.

The same is true in the spiritual realm. In order to know the truth, there is a need to grasp the key to it all. The key is the acceptance of God’s truth through Jesus. The need is to get straight their relationship with God, after which everything else will fall into place. This act of getting one’s relationship with God straight is called repentance. It means to forsake our self-centered approach to life and accept a God-centered approach. It means to stop living life as if it all

depended on us and accept God's provision for us through Jesus. It comes as we see that the smile of God is upon us through Jesus.

This is where we come in. We cannot give repentance to anyone. What we can do is model for them what the key is like, who Jesus is. This is exactly what we are called to do in this passage. We are to embody the patient gentleness of God in our attitude toward our opponents. There are several components to this. **“The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone.”** It is easy to be quarrelsome with our opponents. I received a call not long ago from someone who is not part of our church but who wanted to argue about some small point of theology. After asking me my view of this particular topic, my caller didn’t let me finish my first sentence before entering into a long speech to tell me how wrong I was. The temptation is to be drawn into such an argument and use any weapons I have acquired over the decades I have been studying and teaching. But to do so would not be appropriate for the Lord’s servant. Jesus didn’t argue in that way, and neither must we.

We are called even to endure evil. The servants of Satan, like the one they serve, often don’t fight fair. Their goal is to win, not to come to a knowledge of truth. So they will do anything to defeat those they see as opposed to them. There was an article in yesterday’s religion section of *The Birmingham News* about a recent conference at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in which evangelicals were called to repent for the sin of wanting successful churches, and being willing to forsake biblical truth in search of such success. The call was given to preach all the Bible, including the Old Testament prophets. One of the pastors attending responded, “It’s very easy to lose a job by taking your advice. It’s even harder to find another one by taking your advice.” Of course, this pastor is right. The servants of God will suffer as they take a stand for the truth. This passage urges us to take our stand with the truth. That’s why the Lord’s servant must be able to teach and must correct his opponents. But the Lord’s servant must do this with gentleness, not the harshness that attempts to put others down and just win the argument.

## **CONCLUSION:**

We cannot change our opponents into worshipers of God. But by our response to them, we can show them the one who is the key—Jesus. With our Christ-like response, they can come to see the true nature of God through Jesus. We see this true nature of God in the Lord’s Supper. In Jesus, God has suffered and died for us. We were captured by Satan to do his will, but God has freed us. Now we have all things through Jesus. Let us thank him and live for him.