

Creekside Community Church
Be Strong – Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy
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A Leader’s Character (Part 3): 2 Timothy 2:14-26

Correction is necessary. At some point, every human being needs to be corrected. I’m alive today because my dad said, “*Jeff, stop running in the street.*” Because my Mom said, “*Jeff, don’t drink the detergent.*” Because countless adults intervened, and prevented me from doing countless destructive things. Correction is necessary. It keeps us safe. Correction also helps us grow. In fact, you can’t grow unless you acknowledge your need for correction. You can’t acquire a skill until you admit that you’re unskilled. You can’t mature until you admit that you lack maturity. And once you acknowledge this, you’ll go to someone who is more skilled, or more mature, and receive correction. So correction is valuable. And according to Scripture, we never outgrow our need for correction.

And yet, correction can be difficult to accept, can’t it? And it can be even harder to give. Sometimes, we make issues too personal; like the time I told my buddy Will that he was a lousy friend because he spent too much time with his girlfriend, and not enough time with me. I wasn’t really concerned about him. I was just annoyed, and wanted to air my grievances. Other times, we speak with the wrong tone. *What* we say doesn’t have an impact, because of *how* we say it; like when I say to my kids, “*EVERYONE NEEDS TO CALM DOWN?! STOP FREAKING OUT!*” Other times, we have the best of intentions. But we pick fights that aren’t worth picking; like when Kshelle and I were dating, and I encouraged her to lose some weight by saying, (and I quote), “*honey, it just seems like you’ve let yourself go....*” Yeah. Thankfully, she didn’t let me go after that little conversation. But correction is challenging, isn’t it? Knowing when to correct is hard. knowing how to correct can be even harder.

But if you follow Jesus, a time will come when you need to speak words of correction to a fellow believer. Paul says, “*if [anyone] is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual [or mature], restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.*”¹ According to Paul, we’re responsible to speak restorative, corrective words to each other; words that help a person see the destructive path they’re on; and, that help them turn from that path, so they can be restored to right relationship with God, and with others. And there are times when the unloving thing isn’t to speak, but to remain silent. The book of Proverbs calls this “*hidden love.*”²

Correction is a lot like surgery. There are times it’s absolutely necessary. And yet, there are about a million ways to screw it up, aren’t there? So how can we grow in this area? How can we become people who are gracious, and patient; who aren’t nitpicky or harsh; and yet, who can discern error, and correct others in helpful, redemptive ways? That’s the question we’ll try to answer today. We’re not going to focus on the “*how-to’s*” of correction; on questions like,

“when is correction necessary?” or, *“what tactics should I use?”* Instead, we’re going to answer a more basic question; *“what kind of character do I need to cultivate to be persuasive? To be winsome?”* Because that’s the question Paul is focused on in today’s passage. If you have a Bible, you can turn to 2 Timothy 2:14.

We’re in a series on Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy, entitled *“Be Strong,”* which is the theme of this letter. This was a dark time for the church. Paul is in prison, awaiting execution. The Roman Emperor Nero has declared war on the church. Christians are being routinely tortured and killed. And many believers have either renounced their faith or have gone underground. Additionally, some Christians are turning from the gospel to embrace new, heretical ideas. The church desperately needed strong, courageous leadership. And that’s why Paul writes this letter to his good friend, Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus.

In chapter 2, Paul describes the strength of character Timothy will need to lead God’s people. In the first half of chapter 2, Paul describes the character Timothy will need to engage the broader culture. In the second half of the chapter, Paul describes the character Timothy will need to engage people in his church.

There were three kinds of people in the church at Ephesus. First, there were false teachers; people who were turning their back on the Christian faith, and were trying to lead others astray. Second, there were faithful people, who rejected the false teaching, and were holding fast to the truth. Third, there were people caught in the middle. These people were wavering. They were intrigued by the false teachers’ message. They were being led astray. But they hadn’t completely rejected the truth. And Paul wants Timothy to confront these issues; to refute the false teachers, and to persuade this church to reject falsehood, and embrace truth. And to carry out these tasks, Timothy must possess three things; first, a critical mind; second, a clean heart; and third, a calm spirit. A critical mind. A clean heart. And a calm spirit. And if we wish to become persuasive people, we must cultivate these virtues as well.

1. A Critical Mind: First, Paul says Timothy must possess a critical mind; a mind that’s sharp, and discerning; that can differentiate truth from error. He tells Timothy, *“Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers”* (v. 14). Paul gives Timothy two tasks. First, Timothy is to remind his congregation of *“these things.”* *“These things,”* probably refer to the basic gospel truths that Paul talked about earlier. Second, Timothy is to discourage his people from wrangling about words. In other words, Timothy and his people must not quarrel with the false teachers about their teaching.

Paul reiterates this second point a few times. In verse 16, he says, *“But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness.”* And in verse 23, he says, *“But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.”* Now, Paul isn’t saying, *“Timothy, avoid arguments at all costs. Any time there’s a doctrinal disagreement, just plug your ears, and pretend like everything is okay.”* That’s not Paul’s point. In fact, later in the

passage Paul tells Timothy to correct those in error. There's a time for correction. So Paul isn't saying, *"don't ever argue."* Rather, he's saying, *"don't engage these teachers on their level; don't bicker."* And, *"don't give their views the time of day."*

The false teacher's views were foolish, uneducated, speculative and empty. And so, discussions about their teaching tended to be foolish, and speculative, and empty. And these teachers loved to engage in verbal brawls. This was their preferred method of communication. They battled over words. They changed the subject, and shifted the goal posts. They played rhetorical games. It's like the *"Comments Section"* on an internet article, right? I've read lots of comments on the internet (far too many, really). And one thing you almost never see is a person acknowledge they're wrong! Like, who ever says, *"wow, that's a substantive point you just made, I'll have to reconsider my position."* No. Usually, it's just a big rhetorical game. And Paul is saying, *"Don't get sucked into a stupid, emotionally-charged quarrel about non-sense. These are fools promoting folly. Don't dignify the folly by paying attention to it. And don't stoop to their level of discourse."* Paul thinks debating this teaching will be fruitless.

Worse, it's dangerous. This teaching isn't just false. It's damaging. Paul says it's worldly. It leads to ungodliness. And it ruins those who hear it. Paul doesn't want Timothy or his people to engage with this teaching, because then, the teachers have a platform to present their views. And if the teachers have a platform, *"their talk will spread like gangrene"* (v. 17). Paul likens the false teaching to a flesh-eating disease. If this teaching is given a hearing, it will infect the church. And almost imperceptibly, it will begin eating away at people.

So why was this teaching so dangerous? Well, Paul goes on to tell us. He says, *"Among them [the false teachers] are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some."* Paul singles out two of the false teachers; perhaps because they were influential. And he identifies their error. These men claimed the resurrection had already taken place. The New Testament teaches that believers experience two kinds of resurrection. When we trust in Christ, we experience a spiritual resurrection. We're made spiritually alive in Christ. But our bodies are still filled with sin and death. However, when Jesus returns, our bodies will also be resurrected. And all of creation will experience liberation from evil and decay. But apparently, these teachers denied any future resurrection of the body. They thought the resurrection was purely spiritual; and that believers had already experienced it. So basically, they believed that Christians were *already* living a heavenly existence; that you could experience perfection in the present; that you could live your best life now. They denied any future hope. This was the *"Fake News"* of Paul's day. And you can see why this message would've been so devastating; because it under-delivered. *"You can heaven now!"* the teachers said. *"Yeah, but heaven seems to be filled with suffering, and death, and loss. This is what heaven's like? This is resurrection? This doesn't look like redemption to me."* This message left people hopeless and disillusioned.

And by the way, this kind of teaching exists today. Sometimes, Christians are too

optimistic about life on this side of eternity. And then we have unrealistic expectations. Maybe I think, *"I know God is calling me to make an impact. So he'll give me a meaningful, high-impact job (that happens to pay 6 figures)."* Maybe. Or maybe my job will be arduous. Maybe it will feel insignificant. Maybe I think, *"I'm saving myself for God's best. So I know that someday, God will bring that special someone into my life."* Maybe. Or maybe he won't. I can't find any promises in the Bible about God pre-selecting an ideal spouse for each and every believer. Maybe I think, *"My kids will obey, because I will parent them the right way."* Maybe. Or, maybe I'll have difficult kids, who are unresponsive to my perfect parenting methods, because they have depraved and rebellious hearts. Redemption is both already, and not-yet. We've already been redeemed from sin's penalty. We're being saved from sin's power. But we've not yet been freed from sin's presence. We're surrounded by sin and evil, which means life can be very disappointing, and very painful. And that should cause us to *long* for God's future. It should remind us that we aren't home yet. But if we forget that, we very easily become disillusioned, and despairing.

So Paul calls Timothy to teach truth; to keep reminding these people of the gospel; and to ignore this false teaching; teaching that's so bad, and so destructive, that it's not even worth consideration. In other words, Timothy must show this church, from Scripture, why they should adopt his position, rather than the false teachers'. And in verse 15, Paul outlines the character Timothy must possess to accomplish this task. He says, ***"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."***

The false teachers have a shallow understanding of God's word. Timothy, however, must be different. Paul likens Timothy to a master tradesman. Timothy's tool is God's Word. And his trade is teaching. Timothy must immerse himself in Scripture, so that he can handle it accurately. Literally, so that he can *"cut it straight."* Timothy must cut a straight line through Scripture. He must not teach anything crooked; anything that promotes crooked beliefs, or behavior. And why must Timothy labor so diligently? Because God will hold him accountable. God himself will evaluate Timothy's teaching. So Timothy must labor as one who will submit his work to God for evaluation. And Timothy must be confident that God would approve of his teaching.

So in order to teach others, Timothy must first be taught by God's word. His mind must be governed by Scripture. And the same is true for us. In order to become persuasive people, we must possess critical minds; minds shaped by the truth of the Bible. And if our minds aren't immersed in the truth of God's word, we won't be able to point people towards truth. And this means we too must become diligent students of Scripture. Maybe you say, *"But Jeff, I'm not very studious."* The truth is, almost *everyone* is studious about something. Knowledge is a byproduct of desire. When you love something, you want to know about it. Listen, I know people who can recite entire episodes of *Friends*; who can sing entire *Pink Floyd* albums from

memory; who can name every second-string lineman on the Raiders; and where they went to High School. I know people who can name every former contestant on the *Bachelor*, and who know their current marital status. We want to know about the things we love. And Scripture is *valuable*. Paul says it's God-breathed. God breathed out a book. God *wrote* a book. What could be more interesting than that? What could be more valuable? There is no book more worthy of our attention.

We must immerse ourselves in God's word. And as we read, we must ask questions to determine if we're understanding it correctly. Here are some questions to ask. The first two are really simple.

First, "*what is this passage about?*" and second, "*what's the author's point?*" Sometimes we begin Bible studies by asking questions like "*what stands out to me?*" Or, "*what do I like about this passage?*" Or, "*what does this mean to me?*" And those aren't terrible questions. But they aren't the most fundamental questions we can ask; because my goal in reading Scripture isn't to discover what I like, or what I resonate with. My primary objective is to discover what the biblical author is saying to his audience. And once I discover that message, I can determine how it's significant for me. And I may like what the biblical author says. Or, I may not like it. But either way, my aim is to submit to what God is saying through the author; not to cherry-pick the parts I like, and ignore everything else.

Third "*does my interpretation align with what other believers think; or have thought?*" We live in a culture that prizes innovation and novelty. But when it comes to reading Scripture, innovation and novelty aren't necessarily good things. Lots of Christians have been reading this book for a very long time. And I shouldn't presume that I'm able to see things in Scripture that no one else has seen. So if I come up with an interpretation that no one in my Community Group agrees with; or, that every commentary seems to disagree with; or if I find something in the text that no one in church history has noticed, I better have some *really* good evidence for my position. Now, I do think we can still learn new things about Scripture. But any time our reading is really unique or original, we need to exercise caution.

Fourth, "*does my interpretation square with what the Bible teaches elsewhere?*" If I believe that God has inspired the entire Bible, then the Bible has one divine author. It tells *one* story. And therefore, its message is *internally* consistent. So if my interpretation of one passage conflicts with other passages, that's a reason to pause and reevaluate my interpretation; because Scripture should agree with Scripture. I had a friend back in college. He was a really nice guy. And he was brilliant. But we understood the Bible very differently. We had major disagreements. And we'd spend hours at coffee shops arguing about the Bible. It was glorious. And one day, we were discussing the role of works in the Christian life. And my friend was talking about the importance of doing good works. And I agreed with much of what he was saying. But then he began to say that our standing before God was uncertain; and that we could never really know we were in right relationship with him. And his argument sounded very

convincing. In fact, I couldn't come up with a good rebuttal. But it just didn't seem to square with other passages. So I said, *"But what do you do with all those passages that say we already have peace with God; that we've already been forgiven by God; that we can have assurance in God's presence now?"* And I was blown away by his response; because I expected a brilliant rebuttal. But instead, he said, *"I...don't know what to do with those passages."* And I was shocked by his honesty. At face value, some arguments seem very persuasive. But we always need to take a step back and ask, *"Does this line up with everything else Scripture teaches?"* To become persuasive people, we need critical heads. We need minds trained by Scripture to discern truth from error. And as we are trained and corrected by the Bible, we'll be better equipped to speak words of correction to others. We need critical heads.

2. A Clean Heart: But we don't need critical hearts. It's important that we're able to think clearly about truth and error. But in so doing, we must not become prideful, or harsh, or condemning. Instead, we need clean hearts; hearts that are filled with faith in God and a genuine love and concern for other people. This is the second character trait Timothy must cultivate as he seeks to correct others.

The false teachers didn't just reject the truth with their words. They rejected it with their lifestyles. They lived in open disobedience to God's commands. And this, Paul says, demonstrates that they don't truly know God. In verse 19 he says, *"Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness.'"*

Paul doesn't want Timothy to be discouraged by the presence of false teachers in his church. So he reminds Timothy of a truth etched into the foundation of the church. And the truth is this; God knows his own. Even though the false teachers are leading people astray, the Shepherd knows his sheep. And the sheep hear his voice. And the sheep will not follow the voice of another. Sincere believers will not fall away.

And then, Paul gives Timothy a warning. He says that those who trust in God must depart from evil. God's people demonstrate their true relationship with him by avoiding evil, and pursuing what pleases him. The false teachers are actively pursuing evil. They don't show signs of repentance. And this, Paul says, demonstrates that they don't know God. And Paul encourages Timothy not simply to reject these teachers' ideas, but their lifestyle. He says, *"Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. ²¹ Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work."* (vv. 20-21) Paul compares the church to a house. And he says some vessels in the house are for honorable use, while others are for dishonorable use. There's fine china in the house. There are also garbage cans. In other words, there are people in the church who are seeking God. And there are others – like the false teachers – who are filled with filth. And Paul encourages Timothy to cleanse himself of dishonorable things; to reject the lifestyle of the false

teachers. And if he does, he'll be sanctified; set apart to God. He'll be useful to God; a person God can work through. And he'll be ready to do good.

So what does this look like practically? What does it mean for Timothy to cleanse himself. Paul tells him in verse 22; *"Now flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."* When we hear the word, "lusts," we almost automatically think, "sex." But in the Bible, a lust is any over-powering desire; any controlling ambition. Fee translates this phrase, *"the headstrong passions of youth."*³ Timothy is to flee youthful passions. What are these? The passions the false teachers exhibit. They love innovation for innovation's sake. They want to teach things that are interesting, and original; just not necessarily true. They love to win arguments, more than they love to win people. They don't resolve conflict. They seek it out, and almost revel in it. And they care little for obeying God's commandments. By contrast, Timothy is to pursue righteousness and faith in God; and love and peace towards others. He is to exhibit genuine care; to seek the good of others; and to seek peace, not conflict. And this will make him persuasive.

Paul is getting to heart level issues; to what motivates us as we correct others. And Paul says we correct out of conscience towards God, and care for others. To have a clean heart; a heart with pure motives; I need to be concerned with God's glory, and your good. We need to evaluate our motives before we seek to correct someone else. Here are two questions to ask yourself?

First, am I buying what I'm selling? In other words, *"do I believe in the correction I'm offering, and have I applied it to myself?"* Jesus says, *"...take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."* (Matthew 7:5). Before we can correct with clean motives, we must see how we've committed the same kinds of errors we seek to correct in others. We must be humble enough to see that we need correction just as much as this person does. And once we acknowledge this, we can come to them in a spirit of genuine concern. We can talk from experience of how correction has been helpful to us in this area. We're not talking down to the person. We're coming alongside them. So first, ask yourself, *"am I buying what I'm selling? Do I take my own advice in this area?"*

Second, ask yourself, *"what do I want for this person?"* Remember, correction is a restorative action; it seeks to restore a person to joy, to peace; to holiness. So the motivation for correction is rooted in a desire for the person's good. And if you can't articulate that – to yourself, or to the person – you might not be correcting for the right reasons. If correction is just, *"this person deserves this,"* or, *"You hurt me, now I'm going to hurt you,"* or just, *"you need to feel bad about this, and I intend to make you feel bad about it,"* then it's not restorative. We speak out of concern for their good; which means that when we're correcting the person, we should be able to articulate what we want for them. *"Here's why I'm doing this. Here's the future I want for you. Here's the blessing I believe God has in this for you."* Before we open our mouths, we need to examine our hearts. Otherwise, we can have the most

legitimate concern in the world, but we can sabotage ourselves in communicating it, because we're communicating from a place of superiority, or vindictiveness, or retaliation; not out of conscience towards God, and care for the other person.

3. A Calm Spirit: We need critical minds. We need clean hearts. Finally, to be effective correctors; to be persuasive people; we need to have calm spirits. Put simply, we can't freak out. We can't freak out as we're correcting error. Paul concludes by saying this, "*And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged,*²⁵ *with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth,*²⁶ *and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.*" (vv. 24-26)

This church is in a chaotic situation. People are being deceived by Satan. They're being carried away in error. And it would've been tempting for Timothy to freak out; to get in shouting matches; to panic; to manipulate; to do whatever he could to steer the ship. But Paul won't allow it. The false teachers love fighting. Timothy must not. Instead, he must remain calm in the chaos. He must be kind, even to those who mistreat him. He must not make this a personal issue. And he must patiently direct people back towards the truth; again and again. And the hope is that maybe, just maybe, God will grant repentance to these people.

Calmness is effective. It's hard to argue with a calm person, isn't it? Because you can't make things personal. It's not about interpersonal dynamics. It's about the issue. I always hated arguing with my dad for this reason; because he is like, robotically calm. In High School, I'd come up to him and be like, "*Dad, I want to girlfriend, what do you think about that?*" And he wouldn't react. He'd say, "*ok, why? Tell me about it?*" And then he'd begin gently asking me all of these probing questions, like, "*how will it bring God honor?*" and, "*what's your hope for the relationship?*" And it was so frustrating, because he wouldn't make it personal. He just made me think through the actual issue! Calmness is effective. Conversely, raising the volume doesn't raise the impact. In fact, volume often has an inverse effect on impact. Calm, gentle speech speaks more deeply and truly to the heart. Just listen to these Proverbs, "*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*"⁴ "*Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*"⁵ "*With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.*"⁶ A calm, gentle demeanor is non-negotiable for being persuasive.

Ultimately, a persuasive corrector is someone whose heart has been softened and shaped by the gospel. Think about how God corrects us. Jesus comes to earth full of grace and truth. He is brutally honest about our condition. He speaks the truth perfectly. And yet he loves us enough to enter our condition; and even, to assume the consequences of our condition, so that we don't have to. Jesus demonstrates that he is utterly concerned for our well-being; so concerned that he gives his life for us, in our place. No one is more truthful. No one cares more

about our well-being. And when he corrects; when he tells us to repent and trust in him; we receive life. So we know the beauty of correction. We see it in Jesus; in his grace and truth towards us. And if we have received that; we can give that kind of honest and gracious to others; correction driven by a concern for the truth and the person's well-being. Let's pray.

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¹ Galatians 6:1.

² See Proverbs 27:5-6: *“Better is open rebuke Than love that is concealed. ⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”*

³ Gordon Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus* (UTBCS: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); 263.

⁴ Proverbs 15:1.

⁵ Proverbs 16:24.

⁶ Proverbs 25:15.