

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

August 2-9, 2020

Sermon Series: The Fine Art of Disagreement

Week Two: “Essentials and Non-Essentials”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, in wisdom You have created us and all things. Provide for our daily needs and grant us grace and strength to fulfill the ministry to which we have been called. We offer our prayers in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Our culture today faces disagreements with great energy - not all of it positive. Some disagreements tear down other people as arguments become name calling and finger pointing. Is it possible to have a difference with someone and love them? We Christians are called to it. Let's learn the fine art of disagreement.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

This week, we will look at the disagreements in life from the perspective of when to stand and when to stand down.

Sunday Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 2:14-26 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What value is there in “quarreling/battles about words”? What happens to those involved in it? (2:14)

How should we try to present ourselves to God? (2:15)

What happens to those who engage in “ungodly chatter,” and their teaching? (2:16-17)

What is the specific heresy of Hymenaeus and Philetus? (2:18)

Does their heresy affect the foundation of Christian faith? Why? (2:19)

How do we make ourselves useful to God for good works? (2:20-21)

What personality traits should be avoided, and which embraced? (2:22)

Why should Christians avoid foolish arguments and quarrels? (2:23-24)

With what attitude should Christians approach those who oppose their teaching? (2:25)

What is the desired end goal of confronting those who condone and proclaim false teaching? (2:26)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

In today's world, the idea of absolute truth is often questioned – we might wonder why Paul feels he can speak with such conviction about others who have “wandered away from the truth,” and how he can be so sure he's the one in the right.

We probably wonder why some people were teaching that the resurrection had already taken place, and why that was such a huge heresy.

We might wonder why Paul writes about how cleaning a bowl can change the way it's used – what is he getting at?

We probably wonder which kinds of controversies are considered “foolish and stupid,” and whether *any* argument that produces quarrels is “foolish and stupid.”

We might wonder how exactly we can oppose someone through “gentle instruction.”

We probably wonder whether it's really possible to disagree with people, and try to instruct them in the truth, without it resulting in quarrels. It seems like a lot of quarreling goes on in the church!

We might also ask why the language of “repentance” is used to refer to someone changing their viewpoint – is holding to bad teaching sinful?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: 1 Corinthians 15; Romans 6:1-14; Luke 20:27-40; Matthew 13:24-30; Matthew 13:47-50; Romans 2:4

Paul's letters to Timothy are full of some of the most practical church advice in all of Scripture, and this week's reading is a prime example. The passage begins with Paul's warning about the dangers of engaging in “battles over words.” As we discussed last week, the background for Paul's letters to Timothy is the emergence of false teachers who were proponents of what were often lengthy and elaborate philosophical and theological argumentations about God. Paul warns Timothy that he shouldn't get dragged into those discussions. William Barclay wrote, in his commentary on 2 Timothy, that “if the world's problems could have been solved by discussion, they would have been solved long

ago.” That is probably as good a summation of what Paul is teaching Timothy as you will find! But the problem was not only that we won’t solve the world’s problems by endless discussion, but that engaging in those discussions can actually be detrimental to some persons’ faith. Now, it is true that theological debate can be invigorating for those who enjoy intellectual challenges, but sometimes, a preponderance of unanswerable questions, alternative theologies and philosophies, and debates can actually do harm to the faith of those who are diligently trying to follow Jesus. It is interesting that the Greek word that is used here for “ruin” (NIV) or “destroy” (CEB) is actually “katastrophe” – a word that usually referred to tearing down, or demolishing, a building. Paul only wants us engaged in activities that “build up” faith, not that tear it down, and “godless chatter” tears it down. It truly is a “catastrophe” if our theological debate destroys someone else’s faith!

Paul specifically calls out two men in Timothy’s church who are causing harm – men named Hymenaeus and Philetus. We have no other reference to these men to try to understand just who they were, or even what role they had in the church. But Paul does tell us about one of the heresies they are proponents of – that the resurrection has already happened. Paul is not referring to the Resurrection of Jesus, which of course has already happened – Paul is talking about the bodily resurrection of Christians after death. Bodily resurrection at the day of judgment was, and is, a fundamental part of the Christian faith, as it was of many Jews’ faith in Paul’s day. Paul wrote on it extensively in 1 Corinthians 15. But Paul had also written in Romans 6:1-14 that at baptism, a Christian dies to the old self and rises to a new life in Christ – and there were those who taught that *this* was the true meaning of a *Christian* doctrine of resurrection, denying a bodily resurrection at Judgment Day. Others taught that resurrection was simply a metaphorical way of speaking about how parents “lived on” through their children, and that a parent who had instilled their values into their children could be spoken of as “living again.” In the evangelistic context of Paul’s day, the first of these interpretations would have been very attractive to Jews of the Sadducean school, who denied the bodily resurrection that the Pharisaic school, and Jesus, adhered to (see Luke 20:27-40). The second interpretation was attractive to the more philosophically oriented Greeks. Paul insisted that to teach that the resurrection has already happened, whichever of these interpretations Hymenaeus and Philetus were promoting, is to deny a central belief of the Christian faith.

But remember that those putting forth these views – Hymenaeus and Philetus – were *members of Timothy’s church*. How are we to understand the presence of heretical views such as theirs *inside* the church? Paul’s answer is given by way of metaphor. Just as there are utensils in every household that are used for noble purposes (think, the best china that you only take out on special occasions), and there are utensils used for ignoble purposes (think, the plunger or toilet scrubber), so it is in the church. As long as the church is an earthly institution made up of human beings, it will contain a cross-section of humanity. Jesus had taught the same thing in the parable of the weeds (see Matthew 13:24-30), and again in the parable of the net (Matthew 13:47-50). Jesus’ point, that Paul restates here, is that the church *will* be a mixture of people, and that only God’s judgment, at the end of time, is capable of separating the noble from the ignoble. Until then, Christians are advised to “cleanse themselves,” to stay free from polluting influences – not so they can receive special honor, but so that God can then use them to do special, noble, and holy work.

Paul’s last bit of practical advice for Timothy returns to the primary theme of avoiding foolish arguments that lead to quarrels. The implication Paul now makes is that the temptation to get involved in these kinds of arguments is simply part of an “evil desire of youth” (NIV) or an “adolescent craving”

(CEB), that we need to grow up and out of. Rather than succumb to this temptation, we are to grow into a pure heart, and a righteousness that comes from God. Some controversies, like the theology of resurrection that Paul has addressed earlier, requires one to stand firm on the foundation of their faith. But sometimes churches get involved in other controversies – like what color the choir robes should be, or what time a worship service should be held – that really are unimportant in the long run. Christians need to discern the difference between the essentials and the non-essentials – and Paul advises Timothy to stay far away from getting wrapped up in arguments over non-essentials.

Ultimately, though, Paul tells Timothy that the expectation for Christian leaders is that they exhibit kindness to everyone, even those with whom they disagree. When there is a point of disagreement of doctrinal importance, Paul tells Timothy he must “gently instruct” his opponents. The point is to love someone into the truth, not batter them into it, in the hope that God will work on their heart to lead them to repent of the error of their ways, and come to a knowledge of the truth. In Romans 2:4, Paul wrote that “God’s kindness leads you toward repentance.” The role of the Christian leader or teacher is to keep the doors of the church open to *all* those who are seeking God, gently instructing them in Christian faith, patiently correcting false teaching, and providing a nurturing environment where God can awaken repentance in their souls. When an opponent insists on antagonistic debate, Paul insists it’s better to just back away.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Do you consider yourself someone who enjoys vigorous intellectual debate or discussion? If so, do you enjoy it for the exercise itself, or do you believe that by engaging in it you might change someone’s mind?

Do you find yourself engaging others in disagreement in a way that leads to argumentation and quarreling?

What would you consider a theological point worth standing firm on, the way Paul felt about the resurrection of the dead?

How willing are you to accept the fact that there will be a mixture of opinions and beliefs within any given church body? Would you prefer a homogeneous church where everyone believed the same things?

How do you feel about Paul’s insistence that there *is* a standard of truth, but that it is the Lord who knows “those who are His”?

Have you ever found yourself in truly foolish church arguments, like what brand of paper towels there should be in the bathrooms? Why do you think we get dragged into such “thoughtless discussions”?

What positive steps could you take to become someone capable of correcting others with kindness, gentleness, and patience?

Do you behave towards others you disagree with as if it is *your* job to change their minds? Or do you behave toward others you disagree with “in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth”?

In other words, do you seek to win arguments, or to win people?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, we pray that You would form us into people who “correctly handle the word of truth.” Help us to know the difference between essentials and non-essentials, and to avoid foolish arguments. May we always seek to build others up in faith, and never to tear each other down. Cleanse us for Your own noble purposes, so that we can serve You in the ways You call us to serve, and open our hearts to Your word, that all of us might be led to a knowledge of the truth. We pray in the holy name of Christ our Lord, Amen.