

2 Timothy 2:15 – Diligent Dispensing of Doctrine

INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul begins the verse under consideration – 2 Timothy 2:15 – with the word “study” – but he doesn’t include an object of the verb. Study what? What comes to mind when you see that word (“study”)? Could it be “school” homework, “burning the midnight oil,” or something like that? Was it was something that “turned you on” or “turned you off” (maybe still does)? Some people are bookworms; some even have a room in their house that they call “the study.”

A. The problem – The verse is commonly taken to mean that all individual believers should spend time alone (or maybe with family or a group) studying the Bible apart from church whenever and wherever possible. Is this what it says – or not? Is that what Paul had in mind? More importantly, is that something God wants all believers to do?

B. The solution – As with all of Scripture, a proper (the correct) understanding comes by **studying** not only the verse itself but also its immediate context and also the rest of the Bible. Keep in mind that this exhortation was given to Timothy – never given to anyone else in Scripture. Its uniqueness is part of the reason it has become a misunderstood passage. Let’s take a closer look at this verse to make sure we understand it correctly. It be divided into three sections.

I. The obligation (“study”) – The first word in the verse is an imperative – an exhortation – from Paul to Timothy.

A. Possible English meaning – Dictionaries give us a variety of meanings for the English word “study”:

(1) engage in study, (b) undertake formal study of a subject (e.g., agriculture, algebra, archeology), (c) meditate, reflect (dial.), (d) endeavor, try, (e) read in detail, (f) engage in the study of, (g) plot, design, and (h) consider in detail.

Three English translations that use the word “study” here (the James Bible, the Geneva Bible, and Webster’s Bible) do not elaborate on what is meant by the word; English readers are left on their own to decide what Paul intended here. The important fact to remember is that in the English of 1611 by the word “study” meant diligent endeavor, zealous work, striving, or deep devotion – similar to meaning (d) above – not detailed reading and examination of something.

B. Bible Translations – Other Bible translations offer a variety of words here: (1) “be diligent, give diligence, or strive diligently” (ASV [American Standard Version], CSB [Christian Standard Bible], DT [Darby Translation], LSB [Legacy Standard Bible], NASB [New American Standard Bible], NKJV [New King James Version]), YLT [Young’s Literal Translation], (2) “do your best” (ESV [English Standard Version], NIV [New international Version], RSV [Revised Standard Version], and (3) “make every effort” (NET [New English Translation]), “work hard” (NLT [New Living Translation]). Then, as one might expect, the Amplified Bible has two ideas: “Study *and* do your best.”

C. Other NT renderings of the Greek word – Perhaps it will help to see in what ways the KJV renders the Greek word used here (*spoudazō*) elsewhere.

1. Of the 11 times it occurs in the New Testament, it has the idea of being diligent 5 times (“be diligent,” “do thy diligence,” or give diligence”), endeavoring 3 times, and once each of being forward, laboring, or studying.

2. Its related words (2 adverbs, an adjective, and a noun) are used 18 times and have these ideas: being diligent 8 times, careful 3 times, forward or hasty 2 times, and once businesslike, earnestly careful, or instant.

D. Consistency – Even in passages that don’t use “striving” or “diligence,” that’s the idea that seems to be there. The idea of striving or being diligent fits quite well in the context of the rest of the verse (rightly handling God’s Word). In the previous verse Paul had just used told Timothy to charge believers to stop striving (*logomacheō*) unprofitably about words, and in verse 5 he spoke of striving (*athleō*) lawfully in athletics. He now speaks of proper striving.

E. A comparable Greek word – In the only other place “study” occurs in New Testament in some versions (ASV, KJV, WEB, YLT) Paul uses another Greek verb (*philotimeomai*). Significantly, it seems to have a core meaning similar to *spoudazō*. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to “study to be quiet” (1Th 4:11) – clearly having nothing to do with studying books. In its two other uses it’s rendered “strive” (“Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel.” – Rom 15:20) and “labor” (2Co 5:9 – as *spoudazō* is in Heb 4:11) – again, the idea of **mental striving, not academic studying**.

II. The objective – Paul goes on to tell in what area Timothy is to be diligent. It is in seeking to be approved by God.

A. Who is involved (“thyself”)

1. An individual recipient – 2 Timothy was written to an individual (using “thyself,” a singular personal pronoun) – as were 1 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 2 John, and 3 John – not to a whole group (e.g., all believers). We must be careful in trying to apply to the whole Church what was circumstantially intended just for an individual.

2. A pastoral recipient

a. History – Biblical and extra-biblical history testify to the fact that Timothy was not just one of many believers in the first century. Paul had assigned him the ministry of leading the local congregation at Ephesus. 2 Timothy 2:15 is simply part of Paul’s instruction and encouragement of his young associate (sub-apostle, pastor-teacher) in the ministry during the first century of Christianity. It is addressed to a church leader.

b. Vocabulary – To confirm this fact, note the word Paul used for Timothy – “workman.” In Greek it’s *ergatēs*. Its root is *ergon* (“work,” “labor”), from which we get the English words “energy,” “ergonomics,” and “synergy.” *Ergatēs* is used sixteen times in the New Testament – **never referring to believers in general**. At times it is used for ordinary, secular “laborers” (Ac 19:25; Ja 5:4) – but also for false apostles and teachers (Lk 13:27; 2Co 11:13; Php 3:2). More positively and pertinently, Jesus used it regarding the disciples/apostles that He commissioned (Mt 9:37,38; 10:10; 20:1,2,8; Lk 10:2,7), and Paul used it for Christian leaders (for elders in 1Ti 5:17-18; for Timothy in 2 Ti 2:15). The term “workman” had special reference to those in “full-time Christian work” – not to all believers in Christ. Again, Paul’s use of the word “workman” (or laborer) – not “student” (or scholar) – shows he’s not writing about personal or professional study of Scripture. **Paul’s concern is the ministry of God’s truth, not the mastery of it.**

B. What is involved (“show ... approved unto God ... not ashamed”)

1. The presentation – The Greek word here for “show” is *paristēmi*. It’s most prominent ideas are that of presenting (including showing or yielding) and being present (standing or standing by). It is unclear as to when or how Paul envisioned this “presentation” as taking place – during Timothy’s life or afterwards (in glory).

2. The approbation

a. Stated positively (“approved unto God”) – The basic idea of the Greek word for “approved” (*dokimos*) is that of someone or something tested in order to approve it. It may be that Paul had in mind the awards ceremony at the Judgment Seat of Christ, when all believers will receive God’s praise (1Co 4:5) and some will receive crowns – including the crown of glory for those who faithfully lead groups of believers (i.e., “elders” – 1Pt 5:4). Timothy is a relatively young man, but Paul had placed him in the position of elder or bishop over the believers in Ephesus, and he encourages Timothy to work for God’s (not the Ephesians’ or even Paul’s) approval.

b. Stated negatively (“a workman that needeth not to be ashamed”)

1) The effort – Paul elsewhere uses the term “workman” (or “laborer” – *ergatēs*) to refer to evil and deceitful workers (2Co 11:13; Php 3:2 – as did Jesus in Lk 13:27) – but also to workers who are worthy (1Ti 5:18 “worthy of his reward” (again, similarly to Jesus in Mt 10:10 “worthy of his meat”). All these passages involve those who are leaders of groups of believers – not to individual members of such groups.

2) The embarrassment – The phrase “needeth not to be ashamed” translates just one word in Greek (*anepaischuntos* – found only here in the NT and nowhere in the Greek version of the Old Testament or in classical Greek). Paul wants Timothy to be an **approved leader (worker), not an ashamed one** (or one put to shame).

III. The operation – So, how was Timothy to achieve the goal of being approved rather than being ashamed? What, specifically, did Paul have in mind in which Timothy should strive or be diligent? “Rightly dividing the word of truth.” Let’s first consider what the term “the word of truth” means – and then to what “rightly dividing” refers.

A. What is object of the action? – It’s “the word of truth.”

1. The concept – The term “word of truth” occurs only four times in the New Testament – three times in Paul’s writings and once in the Book of James. Once Paul is describing his own evangelistic ministry – “by *the* word of truth, by *the* power of God, by the armor of righteousness” (2Co 6:7). Twice it is used clearly in connection with used in bringing people the gospel that results in their belief and salvation – “in Whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph 1:13) and “Of His own will begat He us with *the* word of truth” (Jam 1:18). Some Greek manuscripts have the definite article (English “the”) before “truth” (as in Eph 1:13; Col 1:5).

2. The context – In this same chapter Paul has referred to “my gospel” (v. 8; cf. Rom 2:16; 16:25), “the word of God” (v. 9 – cf. 1Th 2:13; Heb 6:5; 1Pt 1:23; 1Jn 2:14), and obtaining salvation (v. 10) just a few verses before mentioning “the word of truth.” Just ten verses after our text Paul mentions God giving “repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.” He doesn’t talk about “the holy Scriptures” till a full chapter later (3:15) – and then “All Scripture” after that (3:16).

It would seem, therefore, that – in the context and elsewhere – the term does **not** refer to all of Scripture or even just the Old Testament. Some of the New Testament had not yet even been written, much less organized together as part

of Scripture. Rather, Paul has in mind that portion of God's truth that he elsewhere called "my gospel" and "the gospel of the grace of God" (Ac 20:24) – as can more clearly be seen in his expanded expression "the word of the truth of the gospel" (Col 1:5).

B. What is the action upon the object? Paul wants Timothy to be "rightly dividing (*orthotomeō*) the word of truth." This Greek verb occurs only here in the New Testament. It is used twice in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) – both times with the word "way" (Prov 3:6; 11:5).

It is a compound of two Greek words. The one, *orthos* (2 NT uses = Ac 14:10; Heb 12:13), literally means "straight, straight up" or "straight, in a straight line" and figuratively means "correct, true." The other word, *tomos* (1 NT use = Heb 4:12), means "sharper" – and comes from the verb *temnō*, literally meaning "to cut" or "to divide."

Thus, originally the Greek word *orthotomeō* literally meant to "cut straight." It's origin is unclear; suggestions include plowing furrows, cutting stones for building, constructing roads, making tents (Paul's occupation – Ac 18:3), or a father's cutting and distributing bread to children. In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul appears to use the term in the then-current non-literal sense – much as is said today "Give me the straight scoop" does not refer literally to ice cream, and "straight from the horse's mouth" means getting information from a reliable or original source (not from a horse).

A similar Greek word (*orthopodeō*) is likewise used only once in the New Testament. It is rendered "walked uprightly" (Gal 2:14) – again, clearly, not referring to literally walking but rather (as a figure of speech) to one's life.

Clearly, the idea of "cutting in a straight line the word of truth" (as John Darby put it in his translation) implies that there is a wrong way to cut "the word of truth." This, it would seem, is what Paul goes on to discuss as he warns Timothy to "shun profane and vain babblings" and names (v. 17) two men who had deviated from the truth (v. 18) – elsewhere warning against those who were corrupting the word of God (2Co 2:17). These ways of perverting the truth – **hollowness** (or emptiness) and **heresy** – were already present during Paul's life – barely 30 years after Jesus' ascension!

So, how are we to understand the concept of cutting the gospel truth "rightly" ("in a straight line")? Well, one would no doubt need to assume that Paul may have had in mind any changes to the truth of the gospel (such as he refers to in verse 18 – namely, saying that "the resurrection is past already"). Such alterations of truth – as additions, omissions, revisions, or distortions of the gospel – are still taking place in this 21st century (in cults, denominations, and movements that claim to be Christian). Remember, the 5 key 5-letter words that are essential to a full presentation of the gospel of the grace of God (Ac 20:24): Jesus, blood, mercy, grace, and faith.

In his homily on this verse in *The Pulpit Commentary* (publ. 1913, p. 30) titled "The qualifications of the gospel-preacher," Rev. Thomas Croskery (a 19th-century Irish Presbyterian minister, author, and professor) aptly wrote: "He must be able to 'divide it aright,' distributing to babes in Christ and to full-grown men according to their capacities and their circumstances." Paul realized that some believers varied in the knowledge of God's truth from one might say kindergarten to college level, so Timothy (and other teachers) needed (and still do) to teach accordingly – explaining and emphasizing proper "portions" of truth according to people's different levels of prior teaching. As we grow from childhood to adulthood both the quantity and variety of food we need changes; so it is with our doctrinal diet. Paul was thus most likely writing about **the distribution of God's truth rather than the detection or division of it.**

CONCLUSIONS

A. The person – Paul is addressing just one individual and writing something found only here in Scripture. It was meant for Timothy in particular (as a sub-apostle, pastor/teacher/elder in the 1st-century Church). This is not to say that today's pastor-teachers cannot learn and heed much from what Paul wrote to Timothy almost 2,000 years ago.

B. The process – Paul's emphasis ("study") was a diligent striving in life, not a study of literature. He could not have been referring to finding or making divisions in the Bible, since God was still using His apostles to write other Bible books for another 30 years or so – and even then the Bible's 66 books were not put together into one volume.

C. The product – By being diligent (a good worker), Timothy would be approved (not ashamed) in God's eyes.

D. The precepts – Timothy's responsibility was to correctly present the word of truth (the wonderful doctrinal truths that had been entrusted to him as Paul's associate). The passage and its context do not seem to warrant applying it to the various divisions (dispensations) in the Bible and world history – though they are clear from other Bible passages.

In brief, Paul wrote about **God's workman working well, the Lord well pleased, and God's Word well used.**