

Paul and Timothy: Passing the Torch

How to Handle Controversy

Rough Transcript

Brett Clemmer

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Well, welcome. We're back here for our series on passing the torch. So look at 2 Timothy, and if you have a Bible turn to 2 Timothy chapter two. We're going to be in verses 23 to 26. And the title of our talk today is *How to Handle Controversy*, How to Handle Controversy.

"Tim Tebow is not cute, sexy, or hot, he's ugly. Sorry about that."

There's a segment on a late night show called Mean Tweets where celebrities get up and they read mean tweets that have been written about them. Many of them are actually pretty vulgar. Don't go look. They're pretty vulgar and even horrible honestly and the celebrities seemed to veer between like amusement and shock and anger as they read these mean tweets to the screen. And while the audience and viewers laugh, and honestly many of them sort of are funny in the context of a person reading it about themselves, it's pretty incredible to me that enough people think it's okay to write terrible things about people that they don't know and then share them publicly, that this would be a running gag on a late night show.

So this is probably an innocuous example of what I think is one of the worst sides of society right now, we live in an age where people who don't or barely know each other feel like it's appropriate to share outlandish personal opinions about each other, obviously fake articles, and make up facts just about anything. And if you've been on any kind of social media platform lately, you know exactly what I'm talking about. And Christians are not immune from this. I've seen Christians on social media post vitriolic comments on other people's posts over these fine technical theological points that theologians have been debating literally for centuries and apparently some 45 year old dude in Dubuque has completely figured out the theological significance of some Greek word despite the fact that he's never actually studied Greek and only opens his Bible on occasion. So I hate that. I hate seeing Christians treat each other that way on social media. So in light of that, let's turn to our passage.

We're in 2 Timothy 2:23-26 and Paul says this to Timothy, "Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies. You know that they breed quarrels and the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will." I'm sorry, there's the verses. As we look at the passage this morning, this is what we're going to talk about. We're going to talk about foolish arguments, foolish controversies, then we're going to talk about the attributes of a godly man and we're going to talk about the Coliseum or a conversation. I'll tell you more about what we mean by that in a second.

So before we jump into this, let's pray. Well, Lord, we just pray for you to speak to us through your word this morning again. Lord, that you give us understanding of what you were inspiring Paul to write. Would you help us to determine how you want us to apply this to our lives Lord and would you help us to go

out there and live a life that draws people to you and to the gospel Lord and draws attention away from ourselves? We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

FOOLISH ARGUMENTS

So in verse 23, he says, "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments because you know they produce quarrels." So the context of this statement for Paul in Timothy is that Timothy's having to deal with false teachers. A lot of the letters from Paul and Peter are really going against the false teaching that's going on. So Timothy is in Ephesus. He's leading this church. Earlier in this chapter. Paul tells Timothy to avoid irreverent babble from people who have swerved from the truth, so this is the context. But I think if Paul was talking to leaders today, he would refer to really probably any silly argument, any foolish controversy that gets in the way and pulls people away from the gospel. And people, I'm talking about church people now, they ask loaded questions about non-biblical issues and then try to apply some biblical principle to it out of context.

And I don't want to step on toes here, but I may. We argue about petty things in a way that anyone outside the faith looking in would wonder if we hadn't gone off the rails. I mean, don't you believe in science? I mean, masks don't work. I mean, there's, nanobots in vaccines. I've heard people argue about things... I mean, pick a topic. Global warming The only good thing about COVID is that it everybody stopped being a global warming expert right. Now, we're all virologists. So when we get engaged in these things and we get so vitriolic about it, what we're really doing is we're engaging in these foolish and stupid arguments. Jesus faced this with religious leaders in his day as well.

Turn over to Matthew 22 and let's talk about two foolish arguments that Jesus had to deal with; death and taxes. And we're going to start at verse 15 of Matthew 22, and it's actually taxes and death, but it is death and taxes in these two passages. So verse 15, "Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words and they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying teacher, 'We know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully and you do not care about anyone's opinion for you are not swayed by appearances.'" They're buttering him up, "'Tell us then what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'" But Jesus aware of their malice said, 'Why put me to the test, you hypocrites. Show me the coin for the tax,' and they brought him a denarius and Jesus said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' and they said Caesar's.'

"Then he said to them, 'Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.' And when they heard it, they marveled and they left him and they went away." So the issue here that the Pharisees and the Herodians are presenting to Jesus seems to be it's about taxes, should you pay taxes, but it's really a trap. Because if Jesus says, no, you shouldn't pay taxes, he's an insurrectionist and he's rebelling against the government that God has placed over the nation of Israel. The Herodians would've been unhappy about that. But if he says, yes, you should pay taxes, then he's a collaborator because the Jewish people consider themselves to be living in an occupied country. So either way, it's really just meant to undermine Jesus's ministry. So his response is to do what? He rejects the premise. He rejects the options that are given to him. And instead, he focuses on a deeper truth, which is your devotion to God.

He starts by calling them hypocrites because he knows that they're really on two different sides of this issue and all they're really trying to do is trap him. So a little side issue here. When people put you in false dilemmas like this, beware of arguments where people with different agendas are agreeing with each other. That's a trap that somebody's laying for you. The denarius he asks for has an image of Caesar on it. Now, we know from earlier in this passage that they're in the temple courts. So basically when they bring him a denarius with the image of a man on it, they've brought a graven image into the temple courts and they know this. They're like somebody pulled a coin out and all the Pharisees just went, "Oh, no. We just got caught."

So he says that famous line, "Render under Caesar what is Caesar's and render under God the things that are God's." So he ignores the trap. They marvel at his answer. If you look at the next passage, we won't go through the whole thing, but the next passage is a challenge by the Sadducees. The Sadducees didn't believe in the afterlife. They didn't believe in eternal life and so they ask him a question about what? Eternal life. They say if a guy's married, if a woman is married to a guy and she dies childless, then it's the next brother's responsibility to marry her. But let's say they're seven brothers and she marries each one successively and gets widowed over and over and over again. Who will she be married to in heaven? And Jesus goes, "Are you kidding me? You guys don't even believe in the afterlife. Why are you asking me this question?" So he chastises them.

He says, "You don't even believe in the scriptures. Why are you arguing with me about heaven?" And he does give them the theological answer, arguing from the various scriptures that the Sadducees are supposed to be experts in. And he tells them, "Nope, we're not married in heaven. We're not bound together like that in heaven. It's a different situation." So look, guys, don't get trapped, don't get sucked into theological arguments where people are trying to trap you with your own words or with people who don't even believe in the theology that they're arguing with you about. These are foolish controversies, stupid arguments. These are then the foolish arguments.

ATTRIBUTES OF A GODLY MAN

Let's talk about what then are the attributes of a Godly man that Paul talks about that help us to deal with this. So look at verse 24, "And the Lord's servant must not be...." Sorry, I'm in the wrong passage. "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but must be kind to everyone. Able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed," the first part of verse 25. So look at this list just from this passage. I'm just going to pull the list out here. Not quarrelsome, kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful, and a gentle instructor. So older guys in the room, like if we're being spiritual fathers to younger guys, this is a list of how we need to interact with guys that we're discipling. We need to not be quarrelsome, we need to be kind, we need to be not resentful. I'm going to skip to that one, not resentful. So as you're interacting with somebody that disagrees with you or says stuff that you're like, "Well, that's crazy," or is arguing with you, don't be quarrelsome, be kind. Don't be resentful if somebody speaks ill of you or insults you. Don't be resentful, just let it slide. Let it bounce off you. Instead, you need to be able to teach. But when you do that, you need to be gentle. That implies that you're prepared.

As I was looking into these verses, I was thinking about... I said, "We're in a series in my church right now in Proverbs," and so it reminded me of some verses in Proverbs 15. So turn to Proverbs 15. Each verse here is a simple, excuse me, is a individual proverb and then Solomon is just listing these Proverbs out for his sons. Look at verse one. In verse one, he says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." In verse two, "The tongue of the wise commences knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly. In verse three, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place keeping watch on the evil and the good." Verse four, "A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit." And you can see having a soft answer, commending knowledge, recognizing that God is in charge, having a gentle tongue in these first four verses.

Look at verse seven, "The lips of the wise spread knowledge, not so the hearts of fools." Verse 12, "A scoffer does not like to be reprov'd, he will not go to the wise." Verse 23, "To make an apt answer is a joy to a man and a word and a season. How good it is." And verse 28, "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, don't be quick to answer, but the mouth of the wicked just pours out evil things without thinking." So again, for the older guys, these Proverbs give us some ways that we need to interact. Well, what about for younger guys? Well, go back to verse five, "A fool despises his father's instruction, but whoever heeds reproof listens to correction is prudent." Verse 14, "The heart of him

who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly." And verse 18, AA hot tempered man stirs up strife, but he was slow to anger, quiet contention."

Then for all of us... I'm sorry, verse 22, "Without counsel, plans fail. But with many advisors, they succeed." Verse 31, "The ear that listens to life giving reproof will dwell among the wise." And verse 32, "Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence." Then finally, verse 33, which is sort of the summation really of Proverbs itself, "The fear of the Lord is instruction and wisdom and humility comes before honor," and that brings us to our **Big Idea**. I'm just going to use what Solomon wrote. **Humility comes before honor**. Why is this so important? Well, let me ask you a question. Where does honor come from? Can you take it? Can you take honor? No, honor has to be given to you. You can't take honor, it has to be given to you. So the opposite of humility is pride and one way to define pride is taking honor that you don't deserve.

So in all of our interactions, we need to avoid foolish controversies and arguments and instead approach each other with humility. Humility comes before honor. Because ultimately what's your goal? Your goal is not to win an argument, your goal is to lead someone to God. So let's look at verse 25 then, "Paul says opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil who has taken them captive to do his will." If you look at these verses, there's this little progression here, repentance leads to knowledge of the truth, leads to people coming to their senses, leads to them escaping the trap of the devil, but I think too often, we guys, we think that repentance starts with us helping somebody feel convicted of their sin.

But we don't convict people of sin, it says God will grant them repentance. Repentance is a gift from God. It's not a gift of your excellent oratory skills or your excellent rhetoric, it's a gift that comes from God. That's how men can escape the path of the devil. I think we often become so concerned about being right that we become prideful. I think this is the problem, for instance, with the way that some people use apologetics because what they want to do is they want to approve facts. They want to say, "Well, there's this many scrolls and there's this many other people that wrote at the same time that said the same thing. See, it's true." But instead, what we need to be doing is pointing people not to head knowledge and rhetoric, but to heart transformation and Godly effective. Remember, humility comes before honor.

THE COLISEUM OR A CONVERSATION

So this brings us to our third point, the Coliseum or a conversation. So I was listening to a podcast this week with a noted Christian leader and he was interviewing this guy named Jonathan Haidt. Jonathan Haidt's a social psychology professor in New York. He's a Jewish atheist, but he was talking, and I'm not extolling him to you as a spiritual leader, but he had a very insightful perspective on social media so I'm going to paraphrase him. He said, "Imagine you have a disagreement with a friend and you offer him two options. Option one, we can get together over coffee and we can discuss our disagreement and we can figure out where each others coming from and we can just discuss our viewpoint face to face. Or option two, we can set up an appointment at the Coliseum and we can invite a horde of strangers to come watch us fight it out. That's social media.

This is what arguments over the internet are like. They're trying to solve arguments with the potential for a blood bath. And in fact, that's what everybody else wants. They want to see you get into a rhetorical argument, a blood bath of an argument over a disagreement in as public a way as possible. And guys, all that does is hurt the cause of the gospel. Just don't do it. This desire to be right and to prove our point, it's pride at its most dangerous. And whether it's a public display of self-righteousness or self rightness, which is I'm right and you're stupid, or I'm good and you're evil, this is the cancer that splinters God's people. And in the context of spiritual fathering, if you think about this in terms of interacting with another man, it's a death blow. We have to approach our brothers, younger and older,

with humility and gentleness. We must be ready to teach, but with a gentle tongue and a soft answer, Paul sends us to spread knowledge, not to win an argument so that if there is sin, God will lead them to repentance.

I'm not asking you to dumb down your theology, I'm not asking you to ignore error, I'm suggesting that if we would all approach each other with humility, we would get out of the Holy Spirit's way so that we could learn from each other and open our hearts to the truth of a father who loves us, Jesus who died to pay for our sins, and the Holy Spirit who counsels and encourages us towards deeper repentance and faith. Let me leave you with a famous saying often attributed to Augustine. It's also attributed to other people though, but it's this phrase, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." And back to our big idea... Oh, I'm sorry. Here's my corollary. Sorry, here's my corollary to that. Stay away from foolish arguments and don't argue in foolish places.

So here's our **Big Idea, Humility comes before honor**. Let's pray. Father, thank you for this passage from Paul to Timothy. Thank you that you are cautioning us to stay away from foolish controversies and arguments, Lord. We pray, Lord, that you would bring people to repentance, you would use us as a tool, Lord, merely to spread knowledge gently, that we would love each other well, Lord, and that your kingdom would be built and your name would be glorified. In Jesus' name, amen.