

2 Timothy 2:15

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] What do you think of work? Is it something that you view as a necessary evil or as a good thing in and of itself? One of the serious consequences, I don't think to speak of tragic consequences, would be overly dramatic, of the economic crisis that has engulfed much of the globe, and thinking particularly of the European Union, is the phenomena of youth unemployment.

I was reading recently that across the European Union, it stands at something like 22%, but in some nations, in some countries, it's dramatically more acute. I think in Spain and in Greece, over 50% of folks in the late teens into mid-twenties age group are unemployed, and one can only imagine how frustrating that must be, young wives who want to work, who want to get on, and no doubt wish to have their families, and yet are frustrated by the lack of employment, or certainly paid employment. The text that we want to look at this evening is addressed to a young man, a young worker, for whom unemployment does not figure even as a possibility. And I refer to Timothy, to whom Paul is speaking in this letter, and particularly the words that we read, the final verse of the passage that we read in 2 Timothy 2 and verse 15. And it's on this verse that we want to focus our attention this evening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

Paul addresses Timothy as a workman, as a worker, as a laborer, and that is what we are as Christians. It's not all that we are, but it is central to what we are. I think we are clear that the work that we do does not make us Christians, but the work that we do demonstrates that we are Christians. We think of the words of Paul as he wrote to the church in Ephesus in chapter 2 of that letter, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. So it is clear that as Christians we are saved, we are brought into God's family for this purpose, that we would work for God. That is what we are. We are workers, God's workers. Now it's true that in the verse that we want to think about this evening, Timothy is being addressed very particularly as a leader in the church, a teaching elder set over other believers with a fundamental responsibility of instructing God's people in

God's Word. And there is no doubt that in that sense the application of this verse is particularly relevant for those who have that responsibility. But I think it is entirely legitimate to draw from these words an exhortation that applies more broadly, applies broadly to all those who have leadership of one kind or another in the church, and indeed beyond, all those who are Christians.

We are all workers, and so a great deal of what Paul says is applicable to all, even if we do recognize that it is particularly applicable to those who are entrusted with teaching responsibilities.

[4:18] Well, the text that we have commented and that we are going to be focusing on answers a number of questions that revolve around the subject of our work as Christians. I will just mention the questions that we can pose and answer in the light of this text. First of all, we will be able to notice for whom we work. Who do we work for? A worker, and perhaps not always, but almost invariably works for somebody, be it his employer or if he's self-employed, in any case for his client. But in the case of us as Christians, for whom do we work? It's the first question we want to just notice. But then also the verse, in few words, addresses the question of how we are to work, the manner in which we are to work.

But the verse also identifies for us what is our principal tool. A worker will often, perhaps always, in one way or another, make use of tools. And in the case of us as Christians, we also have tools, and one in particular that Paul highlights in this verse, and we'll notice that also. And then finally, there is a reference here to what is our reward. Those who work invariably will do so, not only for this reason, but as part of the purpose of their work is the reward that will be received in return for the work done. Well, Paul also speaks here of a reward that is to be given, to be granted to those who work in the work of the gospel. So, let's go through these questions briefly and see what Paul has to say to Timothy and the manner in which what he says to Timothy is applicable and instructive for us. First of all, then, for whom do you work? For whom do you work? Who's your boss?

Well, in the case of Timothy, where we read that Timothy is urged to present himself to God. Notice there in verse 15, do your best to present yourself to God. It is to God that Timothy must answer. It is to God that Timothy is accountable. He does not work in the first instance for the congregation where he has been placed. He does not work even for the apostle Paul. He doesn't answer to Paul in the first instance. No doubt that Paul was one who Timothy looked up to and respected, and of course, would have, in a sense, felt accountable to. But in the first instance, it is not even to Paul that he answers. He is to present himself to God. God is the one for whom he works. God is his boss. God is in charge of the work that he does, and it is to God that he must answer. And of course, we don't need to spend much time drawing out an application for us. It's so evident. The same is true for us. If you are a Christian, then you work for God. Indeed, there's really quite astonishing language that Paul uses in that regard in 2 Corinthians 6 and verse 1 that we can maybe just look at. A very astonishing and, I suppose we might say, very dignifying language that describes us. In 2 Corinthians 6 and verse 1, we read, "...as God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain." If it wasn't there in black and white we might question how appropriate it is to speak of Christians in that way, and yet Paul is directed by the Spirit, is able to speak of

Christians in that way as God's fellow workers. That is a great privilege, but it's also a great responsibility. Just to develop a little more, the language that Paul uses, the verb that is translated here in verse 15, present yourself, do your best to present yourself, can be understood in one of two complementary ways in terms of the manner in which the verb is used. And we can just mention these two ways that, as I say, together give a helpful picture of what Paul has in mind. The first way in which this verb can be used and can be understood is in the sense of, to place at the disposal of. To present yourself in that sense, to place at the disposal of. Just to give one example of how that verb is used in that sense on another occasion. In Acts chapter 23, when Paul was to be taken from Jerusalem to

Caesarea for an audience with Felix, you may recall the occasion. And in order for that journey to take place, horses were required. And the verb used there of these horses is this verb, that they were placed at the disposal of the soldiers and Paul in order for the journey to be made. And so here the picture is of Timothy being at God's disposal. So when Paul says to Timothy, present yourself to God, there is this element to it, or there is this sense to it. Place yourself at God's disposal. Place yourself before God and declare to him, here I am, Lord, and send me whatever you would have me do, I will do. I'm at your disposal. I wonder if that's true of us. Is that true of you? Are you at God's disposal? Or are you of those who would pick and choose how you would serve God? It's maybe a rather silly example, but if we think of these horses that were at the disposal of their riders, of the soldiers, as they took

[10 : 41] Paul to Caesarea, we can't imagine any of the soldiers, or rather any of the horses, questioning their task. We can't imagine them saying, well, I don't really want to go to Caesarea. I'm quite happy here. Of course not. They're at the disposal of their riders, and if they need to go, then they go.

Well, that is what ought to be true of us. We are to present ourselves to God. We are to place ourselves at His disposal. But the verb here also has another meaning, and I don't think we need to choose between the two meanings. They complement each other. The other meaning of the verb, and perhaps the one that is predominant here, is the idea of standing before God for inspection or approval.

Do your best to present yourself to God. And I think this is the primary idea, especially given what immediately is said by Paul, present yourself to God as one approved. Indeed, the words, do your best to present yourself, implies standing before God following the performance of a duty or the fulfilling of a commission. God is interested in the work that you do for Him. Even if you may wonder if others are. You may wonder if others give importance to what you do in your service of God.

Maybe it's something that's often unseen and below the radar, and people aren't even aware of what you're doing. And you maybe sometimes feel unappreciated and perhaps are unappreciated by many. Well, be assured that God knows the work that you do, and He is interested in your work, and you are called to present yourself before God with the work that you have done for Him. God sees and inspects all that we do for Him.

And this, of course, in the case of Timothy and in our case as well, has a present and a future aspect. There is, I think, here a clear allusion to the final judgment when we stand before God and present to Him the work that we have done. And how will that stand up? We think of the words that Paul uses or how Paul broaches this matter as he writes to the Corinthians. And we may be, there may be merit in just reading what Paul says in this regard in 1 Corinthians 3, from verse 9, where he addresses this matter of Christians presenting themselves before God with the work that they have done.

[13 : 22] Notice there the same language that we noticed in the second letter to the Corinthians, from verse 9, for we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it, but each one should be careful how he builds, for no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as one as one escaping through the flames. While we don't want to delve into that particular passage in any detail at all, it does remind us of the importance to examine what we are building with as Timothy is exhorted to present himself to God. And as there is this future aspect of that great day, the day, as Paul describes it in the passage in Corinthians. So, we too will present ourselves before God, and it will be revealed what our work was, what materials we were using. But in addition to the future aspect, there is,

I think, very clearly, especially in this verse, or these words of Paul directed to Timothy, a present aspect. We present ourselves before God on a daily basis. His interest in our service for Him is permanent. And so, we must work each day conscious that the Lord sees what we do and the motives that drive us. You know, we can fool others, but we cannot fool God. He sees us. He sees what we do, and He sees what we leave undone. So, that in regard to who we work for, present yourself to God. But how are you to work? How are you to work? Well, the verse begins with these words, do your best to present yourself to God. And these words speak of the manner in which we are to work. What is God looking for in you as a worker? What are the qualities that He values? Is He looking for charisma? Is He looking for perfection? Is He looking for finely honed and impressive gifts exercised with aplomb? Well, none of these things. Do your best. Do your best to present yourself to God. He doesn't ask for more than your best, but He doesn't ask for less either. We do need to take these words in their literal sense, do your best. And it really must be our best. You know, that's a phrase that we use often, you know, do your best. But we often use it in a devalued way. Maybe think of a situation where,

I don't know, in primary football, and you've got a group of seven-year-olds, and they're going to go and play against another team. And it becomes very evident that the other team are way superior.

And you can just imagine one of the dads or the coach saying to the kids, well, do your best. And really what it means is, well, just see how you get through this. And so it has a, in a sense, we use it in a devalued way. But here when Paul says to Timothy, do your best, he really means that.

Do your best, your very best. Only your best will do. But your best will do. Even if you think your best isn't up to much, if it's your best, then God will be approved, or God will approve of that.

[17 : 21] And the word carries with it this do your best, carries with it the idea of zeal and diligence. The Christian is to work zealously and passionately and enthusiastically, wholeheartedly.

And that is true of everything that we do, not only of work that is directly connected to what we might consider church work. If we're involved in one way or another in the life and work of the church, and of course that is good and important, we are to do it to the best of our abilities. But we are to do everything we do in the employment where God has placed us in our life, in our families, be it as parents or as sons or as husbands or wives or whatever it is, whatever work we are involved in, we are to do to the best of our ability. Zeal and diligence, responsibility, discipline, and perseverance, constancy. These are the characteristics that are to mark out the work of the Christian. And we have to be very clear that zeal and diligence are not gifts. They are not the exclusive domain of an elite. Zeal and diligence are within the reach of every Christian. You may be able to honestly say, I can't preach. But what you can't say is, I can't be zealous. You can be zealous.

Whether you are or not is another matter, but you can be. You may be able to say, I can't sing. I certainly couldn't lead the singing. But you can say, I can be diligent. Diligence is something that you can be. Again, whether you are, whether we are or not is another matter, but it's something we can be.

And what is clear in Paul's words to Timothy and applied to us is that whatever we do for God, and everything we do, we do for God, ought to be done zealously and diligently. Maybe just one final thought regarding this matter of how we are to work. The original Greek verb there that we are considering that is translated there, do your best, do your best, evolves from or has in it the idea of haste. There is the sense of urgency implicit in the verb. And the suggestion seems to be that, you know, God's work is today's work. It's not something that we are to put off or postpone or wait for a more convenient season, to use the language we sometimes use. We are not to postpone our service to God. If we are Christians, then we are to identify and exercise the gifts that God has given us now. But moving on to the third question, having looked at the matter of who we work for, the matter of how we are to work, there's also the question of what we work with. What is our principal tool? It is said that a worker is only as good as his tools. And if that is so, then as Christians, we are devoid of excuses because we have a formidable tool. As we notice in the verse, the word of truth, do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Paul identifies and describes the tool and gives instructions regarding its use, the word of truth. Now, the word of truth is, of course, the Bible. And very evidently, I hope, I'm sure we agree, the Bible is the essential and irreplaceable tool of a preacher and teacher like Timothy, but it is also the tool of every Christian. We are the people of the book. The Bible provides us the message that we proclaim. It describes the mission and the work that we are to do, and indeed the manner in which we are to do it. The Bible will correct us when we go awry. It will encourage us when we stumble, and we could go on. Notice how Paul describes the Bible as the word of truth, the word of truth. It would be easy, perhaps, to just pass over that quickly and lose sight of the profound implications of this description of God's word of the Bible as the word of truth. We are privileged in being part of a tradition, a Christian tradition, that holds a high view of

Scripture. And we have every reason to hold a high view of Scripture as the reliable and inspired and inerrant Word of God. And that is something we must hold to with conviction. This book that we read and that we study and that we hear God speaking to us through is true. It is the word of truth. It is absolutely true. It is unchangeably true. It speaks of where we have come from, and what it says is true. It speaks of where we're going, and what it says is true. It describes the condition of the human heart, and its diagnosis is true. It tells us who we are and why we are here, and what it says is true. It tells us of how we can know and experience forgiveness and friendship with God, and what it says is true. If you want to know the answers to the big questions, well, they are here in God's word, the word of truth. They are here, they are all here, and they are all true. Our tool is the word of a truth. Now, in the case of Timothy,

[23 : 25] Paul highlights this precisely because Timothy was battling with false teachers and false ideas, and the only possible response to falsehood is the truth. And so it is with us today. We have the truth in our hands, not a truth, not the truth for me, not one of a selection of truths, but the word of truth, the word of truth. And the truth must ring out. The truth must be lived out. The truth must be proclaimed and declared confidently and yet winsomely, passionately, and humbly. Some will hate us for it.

Some will ignore us. Some will mock us. But some will listen and, by God's grace, believe. How is this tool to be employed? Well, Paul speaks of correctly handling the word of truth.

Present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Apparently, the verb there literally means to cut straight or to make a straight way. And the suggestion is of a skillful use of the tool. But it also has the idea of a use that is with integrity. And when used in such a way, it will help those who require instruction. It will help those we teach or counsel walk in the right direction and in the right manner. And of course, we know that to correctly handle any tool requires training and practice. And the more we work with it, the more we work with our tool, the greater capacity we will have to correctly handle it and so more usefully use it for the benefit of ourselves and others. So, this is our tool. But then finally, the verse also touches on the matter of reward. What is your reward as a worker for God?

You work zealously. You work diligently. You labor sacrificially and perseveringly. And what is your reward? Well, it's not riches or fame or praise, but something far greater and a far greater value of eternal value. And it is this, the approbation of God. To be approved by God. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved. There can be no greater blessing, really, for a worker of God than to know and to experience God's approbation. The smile of God as He delights in your zeal and diligence, in your best, in your best, that maybe others think isn't really much, but as you give your best. So, God looks down approvingly. Indeed, for us as Christians, the sheer pleasure of hearing these words that will be directed to us as we would serve Him faithfully. Well done, my good and faithful servant. And so, as we identify ourselves, as I trust we do, as God's workers, let us work with that reward in mind. And that God would daily reward us with these words, this is my son, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased, for He is doing His best to serve me and to work for me. God help us so to work. Let us pray.