

Fact Sheet for **“Approved Workmen
Are Not Ashamed”
2 Timothy 2:14-26**

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Last week I mentioned two verses from Paul's second letter to Timothy that have long been favorite memory verses for many people... 2 Timothy 2:1-2. There is another verse in this same chapter that is a great memory verse... verse 15. This is the verse AWANA gets its name from. It is an acrostic for “Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed.” The normal understanding of this verse is that you should do your best to interpret the Bible well, to rightly handle the word of truth. Then you will be an approved workman. But is that what this verse really means? Let's go to our text this morning, beginning with 2 Timothy 2:14. The instruction of the previous verses was not just for Timothy. Timothy was to keep reminding others of the things Paul had been communicating.

ESV 14 ¶ Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.

The verb “remind” is not just a present tense verb. It is a present imperative. It has the force of a command from Paul to Timothy. There was a problem in Ephesus with those who wanted to quarrel about words (1 Timothy 1:3-4; 4:7; 6:3-4; 2 Timothy 2:23). 2 Timothy 2:15 is the verse we want to take a good hard look at.

15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

The word translated “rightly handling” means literally “to cut straight” and is used in the NT only here. In the Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint (LXX), it is used in only two verses of Proverbs (3:6 “he will make straight” and 11:5 “keeps... straight”). We'll come back to 2 Timothy 2:15 later, but let's see what's in the following context. It's *not* instructions on how to study and interpret the word of truth!

16 But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness,¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.

Irreverent babble is right in line with verse 14 and quarreling about words. The medical image of gangrene here is also striking. It calls for amputation. And Paul had already mentioned Hymenaeus whom he had handed over to Satan (1 Timothy 1:18-20). But don't miss the end of verse 16 in 2 Timothy 2, “for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.” The irreverent babble, the speculations, the quarreling over words was leading people into sinful behavior. As we go on again notice Paul's emphasis on godliness.

19 But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”

And Paul still continued writing about godliness instead of how to study and interpret the word of truth.

²⁰ ¶ Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. ²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. ²² So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. ²³ Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. ²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Wow! Those who quarreled about words certainly were not in line with godliness! And notice, Paul never came around to instructions on how to study and interpret the text. Context should tell you that there is more going on in 2 Timothy 2:15 than meets the eye. Let's revisit that verse now.

¹⁵ **Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.**

Does being an approved worker have to do primarily with studying and interpreting the text? Context would seem to say, "No." The context of this verse, and of both letters from Paul to Timothy, is about godliness. Let's take verse 15 apart a little. Sentences can be thought of like trees. They have the main thought (the trunk), major additions (the large branches), and other thoughts (the smaller branches). Here is the trunk of verse 15, "Do your best (literally "be eager") to present yourself." Think about those words for a second. Paul is giving Timothy instructions that are very important. Then there are two large branches. Timothy was to present himself 1) "approved to God" and 2) as "a worker unashamed." The word "approved" is the same word used in Romans 12:1-2 as a verb. It has the idea of approval by testing. In 2 Timothy 2:15 God weighs our character to approve us. He puts us to His test. Stop here for a second. What would make Timothy both approved to God and unashamed? Would it be his academic skills with the text or would it be his godliness that was consistent with the word of truth? Obviously it would be his godliness, not his academics. There is one smaller branch that modifies "unashamed. It is "cutting straight the word of truth." What Paul was saying to Timothy was, "Be eager to present yourself approved to God in your character, as a worker who is unashamed due to godliness, which is consistent with cutting straight the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15 is primarily about character, not academics.

If you give into a secret sin are you unashamed? Before others you may be, but not before God. Does God ever give you a pass to respond caustically to someone because they have treated you harshly? Never! *Try that on for size if you are ever are called on to do marriage counseling!* All of us who have worked in AWANA have seen kids doing their best to memorize verses only to turn briefly to say something mean to another child while they are in the middle of memorizing.

Are you eager to present yourself in godliness to God for His approval and as a worker who is unashamed? This is consistent with cutting straight the word of truth. Think about 2 Timothy 2:15 in this light.