



THE BOTTOM LINE OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

2 TIMOTHY 2:15

By: H.B. Charles, Jr.



SERMON MANUSCRIPT

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In the business world, the BOTTOM-LINE is the last line of a financial statement that shows profit and loss. It is about whether the company is earning or losing money. And, as they say, the bottom line is the bottom line. This is primarily a business term. But every field of life and labor has a bottom line, crucial factor, or intended outcome. In BUSINESS, the bottom line is making money, earning profits, and increasing revenue. In EDUCATION, it is passing tests, making grades, and earning degrees. In SPORTS, it is winning games, awards, and championships. Every field has a bottom-line. What is the bottom line of Christian ministry? Admittedly, that is a strange question. You would think the answer would be assumed. A ground ball. A no-brainer. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The sad indictment is that many pastors, congregational leaders, and local churches suffer from a ministerial identity crisis, a lack of gospel mission, and misplaced priorities. We do not seem to be clear about what on earth the church of Jesus Christ is to be or do.

So I want to go back to the basics and remind you of the bottom line of Christian ministry. It is succinctly stated in 2 Timothy 2:15: *“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.”* This exhortation is a part of the warning Paul gives Timothy about the danger of false teaching in the church at Ephesus. In verse 14, Paul says, *“Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.”* And verse 16 warns: *“But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.”* Paul instructs Timothy to guard the church against false teaching that leads to ungodliness. An illustration of this dangerous error is given in verses 17-18: *“And their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.”* Hymenaeus was such a threat that 1 Timothy 1:20 says that he had been handed over to Satan that he may learn not to blaspheme.

The imminent threat, great danger, and corrupting influence of false teachers demanded diligent pastoral oversight. So Paul called Timothy to vigilant congregational watch. But in this context, Paul issues the exhortation of our text, which states the priority of vigilant self-watch over the practice of vigilant congregational watch. Timothy couldn't guard the church if he didn't faithfully guard his own motives, lifestyle, and

doctrine. The ultimate issue to Paul was not what Hymenaeus and Philetus were doing and teaching. It was what Timothy did and taught. So Paul says, *“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.”* This is the bottom line of Christian ministry: Please God in everything you do.

PAUL SANGSTER, in his biography of his father, DR. W.E. SANGSTER, wrote of his father's first pastoral assignment. It was to care for two churches in North Wales, one called St. Johns, which was established and predominantly Welsh, and Rhos, which was new and predominantly English. In his first meeting at Rhos, the members were anxious to tell their new young minister what was what. Each department leader proceeded to tell him what was expected of him, stressing the importance of his department, and making it clear that the kingdom of heaven was at hand only if Sangster devoted his chief energy to that department. The long series of speeches and the tension-filled atmosphere made it impossible for SANGSTER to give a detailed reply to all he heard. So he stood up and said, *“That you for your advice. I will try to please you all, but I shall try most of all to please God.”* He then sat down. And the meeting was over.

I repeat: The bottom line of Christian ministry is to please God in everything you do. Ultimately, the only thing that truly matters is whether or not you will be able to end your ministry by hearing the Lord say, *“Well done, good and faithful servant”* (Matthew 25:21). I see three fundamental requirements for living and ministering in a way that pleases God in 2 Timothy 2:15.

I. GOD-PLEASING MINISTRY REQUIRES PERSONAL EARNESTNESS.

A young preacher asked CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON how to draw a crowd like those who came to hear him. SPURGEON answered: *“Simply douse yourself in gasoline, strike a match, and set yourself on fire. Then people will come to watch you burn.”* That's a great strategy for reaching people. It is an even greater strategy for pleasing God. Colossians 3:23 says: *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.”* You ministry labor will not be rewarded unless you are a God-pleaser, not a people-pleaser. The opening clause of 2 Timothy 2:15 outlines both the practice and the purpose of earnestness in ministry.

A. THE PRACTICE OF EARNESTNESS

2 Timothy 2:15 says: “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved.*” The KJV says, “Study.” That’s a valid translation, for pastoral earnestness definitely requires diligent study. The late DONALD GREY BARNHOUSE once said that if he knew the Lord was coming in three years, he would spend two studying and one preaching. God-pleasing ministry requires diligent study. However, the Greek term here conveys more than book study. It means “to use speed” or “to make haste.” By implication, it means to exert oneself, to give diligence, or to make every effort to do one’s best. So the NKJV is a better translation: “Be diligent.” And the ESV may be even better: “Do your best.” Mark it down: Ministry deserves your best. That has to be an essential element of your philosophy of ministry if you are going to please God. You must live and minister with the blood-earnest conviction: “If it bears God’s name, it deserves my best.”

Cathy Rigby, a gymnast in the 1972 Olympic games, wanted to be the best in the world. But she fell short. So she went over to her parents in the stands and cried, saying, “Mom, I’m so sorry. I really wanted to win. I even prayed that I would win. And I didn’t.” And her mom said, “Cathy! Listen to me! You did your best.” And we love you just the same. And we’re proud of you no matter what.” Then her mom said ten words that changed her life forever: “*Doing your best is more important than being the best.*”

Paul did not challenge Timothy to be better than anybody else. He exhorts, “Do your best.” You don’t have to compare yourself with others, compete with others, or come in ahead of others. Just give God your best – nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. If you give God your best, it will sustain you when the work is difficult, frustrating, and tiresome. You will be able to end the day by saying to God, “Lord, I know I am not everything I ought to be. I know that they may not have received my ministry. I know that my service doesn’t seem like it made much of a difference. But, Lord, I

gave you my best.” If you can say that, you will be able to go to sleep at night, hang in there during the tough times, and live with a sense of the smile of God on your life and ministry. LUCIE CAMPBELL said it well:

IF WHEN YOU GIVE THE BEST OF YOUR SERVICE
 TELLING THE WORLD THAT THE SAVIOR IS COME
 BE NOT DISMAYED WHEN MEN DON’T BELIEVE YOU
 HE UNDERSTANDS AND HE’LL SAY, “WELL DONE.”

B. THE PURPOSE OF EARNESTNESS

Not only does this clause teach the practice of earnestness; it also teaches the purpose of earnestness: “*to present yourself to God as one approved.*” The word present was used of offering a sacrifice of worship to God. It is used in Romans 12:1, where Paul says, “*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.*” It’s used in Colossians 1:28, where Paul says, “*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*” And Paul uses it here to exhort Timothy to present himself to God as one approved. The point is that every one act of ministry should be viewed as an act of worship.

The goal of ministry is to be approved by God. If you use a credit card, ATM card, or debit card, you know what it means to be approved. When they swipe your card, the submitted cost of the item is either approved or declined. And one day your life and ministry will be swiped through GOD’S SOVEREIGN SCANNING SYSTEM to determine your heavenly reward. So live and minister to win God’s approval. That ought to be the holy standard of your work for God, because it’s the holy standard of God’s work in you. God is at work in you to make you fit for divine approval. This term approved referred to the process of testing precious metals. So it should be understood as the state of being approved after the process of being tested. Did you get that? Before God approves you, he tests you. A.W. TOZER said: “It is doubtful if God can use a man greatly until he first hurts him severely.” That’s the way it is.

- A candle must be sacrificed for it to give light.
- Coal must be burned to furnish heat.
- Wheat must be ground to produce flour.
- Grapes must be crushed to get wine.
- And we must be tested to be worthy of divine approval.

If you are going to be a God-pleasing minister, you must go through the furnace. So don't curse your furnace. Job 23:10 says: *"But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold."*

II. GOD PLEASING MINISTRY REQUIRES MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE.

JOHN MACARTHUR has said: "Now is the time for the strongest men to preach the strongest message in the context of the strongest ministry." This provocative statement is a good definition for excellence in Christian ministry. It is not about style or size or sensationalism. It is about being *"a worker who has no need to be ashamed."* 2 Timothy 2:15 outlines two aspects of ministerial excellence.

A. MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE IS HARD WORK.

Again, Paul says, *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed."* The word worker or workman is a general term that refers to one who works or labors. But the verb from which this noun is derived speaks of hard labor, tiring toil, and wearisome work. So let me use this as an opportunity to warn you about THE DANGER OF MINISTERIAL SLOTH. Many ministers and ministries fail to make a lasting impact for God, not because of a lack of giftedness, talent, potential, opportunity, or resources. We often fail to do great things for God because we are lazy about the things of God.

But epicenter ministries are not built on spare time, pocket change, or halfhearted service. You just can't have a significant impact in this pagan society at a bargain basement price. The service that costs is the service that counts. I

Corinthians 15:58 says: *"Therefore, by beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."* Colossians 1:29 says, *"For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."* And 1 Timothy 4:10-11 says, *"For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially those who believe."* Ministerial excellence takes hard work.

- Godly living is hard work.
- Humble service is hard work.
- Wise leadership is hard work.
- Unconditional love is hard work.
- Steadfast endurance is hard work.
- Sound doctrine is hard work.
- Intercessory prayer is hard work.

The bad news is that ministerial excellence is hard work. But the good news is that it's worth it. Hebrews 6:10 says, *"For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love you showed for his sake in serving his saints, as you still do."* People may forget your work. But God will never forget.

B. MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE IS HOLY WORK.

The New Testament writings of the Apostle Paul motivate believers to Christian service in various ways. Paul's epistles use duty, giftedness, judgment, love, opportunity, reward, and many other means to motivate believers to Christian service. But this text records one of Paul's favorite motivations for faithful service to Christ. Paul exhorts Timothy to be *"a worker who has no need to be ashamed."* Paul had A DOCTRINE OF SHAME that was both personal motivation and the means by which he motivated others. For instance, in Romans 1:16 Paul tells why he was ready to preach in Rome: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel."* In Philippians 1:20, Paul rejoiced in prison because he said, *"it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed."* In 2 Timothy 1:8, he tells Timothy, *"Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner."* And in our text, Paul exhorts Timothy to be a worker who has no need to be ashamed.

Paul is not talking about being ashamed before men. He's talking about being ashamed before God. It is the God-induced shame of Matthew 7:21-23, where Jesus says he will tell many people who have done great things in his name, *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."* You can be a smashing success with man and a horrible failure with God. You can be a famous minister and yet stand before the Lord and have to introduce yourself. That's the great shame that Paul warns Timothy to avoid. He says, "Be a worker who has no need to be ashamed."

When my Son was in kindergarten, he would bring home a journal everyday. His teacher would either stamp a happy face or a sad face on it to indicate his behavior in class. We warned her up front that a sad face should only be given for punishable offenses. So if he got a sad face, she would add a note of explanation. H.B. understood this system of rewards and punishment we associated with these daily stamps. When he got a happy face – which was most days – he would show me his journal as soon as he got home. And he would ask, "Are you proud of me?" If I was asleep when he got home, he would wake me up, show me his journal, and ask, "Are you proud of me?" Or if I was at the office or out of town, he would call me when he got out of school to ask me if he could show me his journal when I got home. He would then tell me he got a happy face and ask, "Are you proud of me?" I remember the first time he got a sad face. I awoke from afternoon from a nap to find my wife sitting on the bed with a troubled look. I asked what was wrong. She told me that she was disappointed in my son. He got a sad face for hitting a classmate. Crystal told him he would have to deal with me when he got home. When they arrived, she placed his journal next to me on the bed, so I would see it when I woke up. When she came back upstairs later, I was still asleep. But the journal was gone. Instinctively, she looked under the bed to discover her son had hidden the journal there so that I wouldn't see it when I woke up. His explanation was logical but inexcusable: "I didn't want to get a whipping."

Our father in heaven is keeping a journal on you. And one day you will have to answer to the Lord for how you have lived your life. No one will need to tell on you. He already knows. There is no hiding place from him. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."* So live and minister to be a worker who has no need to be ashamed. The picture is that of a workman who has done his work well and therefore can submit it to his superior without hesitation or embarrassment. Live that way. Minister that way. Teach that way. Make it your ultimate goal to hear the Master say, "Well done."

III. GOD-PLEASING MINISTRY REQUIRES FAITHFUL EXPOSITION.

The last clause of this verse records the third fundamental requirement for God-pleasing ministry: *"rightly handling the word of truth."* This term rightly dividing is hard to translate. It simply means, "to cut straight." It was used of a doctor making an incision on a patient for surgery. It was also used of an architect who designed a house so that all sides and angles fit together properly. It was also used of a tentmaker who made sure all the sides were straight so that the tent would stand up right. And it was used of a construction crew making a straight path or road. The term is only used here in the New Testament. But it is used in the SEPTUAGINT in Proverbs 3:6, which says: *"in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."* It is also used in Proverbs 11:5 that says: *"The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight."* Scholars are not sure what particular nuance Paul intended to express here. But the big idea is very clear: The minister who pleases God must have an unwavering commitment to the faithful exposition of the word of truth.

In 2 Timothy 4:1-2 Paul says, *"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom..."* Stop right there for a moment. What pastoral assignment could be so important that Paul calls on the authority of God, Christ, the final judgment, and the kingdom of heaven to witness as he issues it? Is it church administration? Nope. Is it committee meetings? Nope. Is it pastoral counseling? Nope. Is it hospital visitation? Nope. Is it church growth? Nope. It is none of those things, even though they all have their place. The pastor's primary and central work is stated in the first three words of 2 Timothy 4:2: preach the word. That imperative is all-important for pastoral ministry:

preach. But so is the object: the word. Don't preach personal opinion, trendy theology, political viewpoints, motivational speeches, self-help advice, popular psychology, or sociological theories. Preach the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Cut it straight. Tell the truth. Stand your ground. And don't sell out!

Let me say it this way. God's word is marked: "Handle with care." You must be careful how to handle the word of God. The way you handle God's word determines the way God is going to handle you. If you abuse or misuse the word of truth, God will put you to shame. Proverbs 30:5-6 says: *"Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar."* Don't mishandle God's word. Handle it carefully and correctly. Make it your top priority to study, trust, obey, teach, preach, and defend the word of truth. And diligently pass it on to the next generation so that it will continue to be faithfully proclaimed and defended after God moves you off the scene. And if you handle the word of God right, the Lord will be pleased. And the Lord will reward you. Or if I can say it the way I like to say it: If you take care of God's business, God will take care of your business.

An old missionary was sailed home from Africa. PRESIDENT TEDDY ROOSEVELT was on the same ship, returning home after an African safari. When the ship arrived at port, a crowd of reporters and well-wishers were there to welcome him. But no one was there to greet this missionary and his wife. And this bothered him so much that he told the Lord, "This isn't fair. The president came home with a band, dignitaries, and a crowd to welcome him. And I've been doing your work, but no one was there to welcome me. Why?" The Lord simply replied, "They celebrated Teddy because he came home. But you're not home yet."

YOU MAY BUILD GREAT CATHEDRALS, LARGE OR SMALL
YOU MAY BUILD SKYSCRAPERS GRAND AND TALL
YOU MAY CONQUER ALL THE FAILURES OF YOUR PAST
BUT ONLY WHAT YOU DO FOR CHRIST WILL LAST