

Shawn's Sermon Thoughts

Dr. Shawn Newberry – Senior Pastor BGBC

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Speaking Truth in Love: The Art of Pastoral Relationships

In his first letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul offers what appears at first glance to be a simple set of instructions: treat older men like fathers, younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, and younger women like sisters. But beneath this short passage lies one of the most demanding charges in all of ministry; the call to know people so well, and to love them so genuinely, that you can speak hard truths without breaking them. This is not a skill most seminaries teach. It is a wisdom learned only in the lived reality of community, earned through years of proximity to people in all their joy and brokenness.

Paul knew this firsthand. He spent three years in Ephesus; not as a distant teacher, but as a man who wept with the people, who taught in the public square and in private homes, who endured plots and trials while never shrinking from saying what was profitable. When he commissioned Timothy to pastor those same churches, he wasn't handing him a theological textbook. He was handing him a map drawn from his own scars. Timothy's task was vast: a major city, a church composed of every age, gender, social class, and ethnicity. And every one of those people, regardless of class, needed to be loved, challenged, and led closer to God.

The Weight of Words

Before Paul even speaks about people groups, there is a word worth pausing on: *rebuke*. The word he uses for what Timothy must **not** do to older men is not the same Greek word used in 2 Timothy 3:16 where Scripture is said to be useful for “rebuking,” that word means to restore something to its proper place, like a broken bone set right (it is often translated as “correcting”). The rebuke Paul forbids here is something else entirely; a verbal tearing-down, a dressing-down that strips a person of their dignity. Paul is telling Timothy that no matter how right you are, if the person across from you walks away diminished, you have failed.

Proverbs knew this long before Paul wrote his letters. “*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*” And Jesus made clear that the words we speak are not incidental; they are the overflow of the heart. If your correction of others is harsh, contemptuous, or self-righteous, the problem is not a communication style. It is a heart problem. You cannot bring someone to a place spiritually that you have never been yourself. You cannot speak of grace you have not received. Ministry, in this sense, is not a role you step into; it is a condition of the soul you grow into, slowly, through surrender and transformation.

Treating People Like Family

What makes Paul's instruction radical is its intimacy. He doesn't say treat the older man with *professionalism* or *deference*. He says treat him like your *father*. This changes everything about the posture. You don't argue with your father the way you argue with a stranger. You don't approach him with arrogance or impatience, even if you know something he doesn't. You come alongside. You encourage. The Greek word Paul uses (*parakaleō*) carries the same root as (*paraklētos*), the word used for the Holy Spirit in John 16, translated as "the Helper." When Timothy approaches an older man in need of correction, he is meant to embody something of that same spirit: not judgment from above, but support from beside. He is to walk with that man respectfully in order to build him up.

This understanding of family is the posture required for every group Paul names. With younger men, who are often driven, proud, and competitive, the approach must be brotherly: loyal, invested, genuinely wanting their success because you are *for* them, not above them. If you arrive arrogant, you will be met with arrogance. But if a young man knows, in his bones, that you are on his side, he will receive what you have to say. Paul understood the culture of Ephesus: a city of ambition and passion. To reach those men, Timothy needed to be the kind of friend who had their back.

With older women, the instruction is to extend honor, respect, and dignity; to listen with understanding not just to respond, but to truly hear without bias. There is a deep well of wisdom in the older women who have walked faithfully with God through decades of difficulty. A pastor (or person) who cannot honor that, who does not see those women as spiritual heroes, is missing something essential about the body of Christ. The church, after all, would not be the church without them.

Purity as More Than Avoidance

Paul's instruction about younger women carries an additional qualifier: *in all purity*. This deserves more than a surface reading. Purity here extends beyond the obvious matter of sexual temptation; though that is real and must be guarded against seriously. Purity of motive means serving without agenda. It means not thinking about what you can gain, extract, or benefit from the people you serve. It means the kindness you offer is simply the kindness of God flowing through you, with nothing added and nothing hidden.

Practical wisdom matters here. A word of encouragement spoken to a young woman in front of her parents, or to a married woman in the presence of her husband, is the same word; its purity is visible and protected. Guarding appearances is essential; it is love for the other person, preserving their dignity and your integrity simultaneously. You leave people better than you found them. When these women praise God for what He has done in their lives and they mention you by name because you are a blessing, not because you sought that recognition, but because your motives were clean is commendable.

The Uncommon Work of Knowing People

What Paul is ultimately teaching Timothy (and what every person called to speak truth to another must learn) is that ministry is inseparable from relationship. There is no shortcut that bypasses knowing the person in front of you. You cannot approach everyone the same way, any more than a physician can prescribe the same treatment to every patient. The same truth lands differently depending on whether it is carried by judgment or by love, delivered in isolation or in the context of years of faithfulness.

Paul himself modeled this. He served the Ephesians with tears. He taught them in their homes. He endured trials for them. And when he writes to Timothy, he is not offering abstract principles; he is passing on the hard-won knowledge of someone who loved people enough to stay, to weep, and to speak because he treated them like family. That is the standard. Not perfection. Not eloquence. But a heart that has been shaped by grace, slow to speak, quick to listen, committed to leaving every person more whole than it found them.

You can get more from a teaspoon of sugar than a pound of salt. It sounds simple. But practicing it (day after day, with father-figures and brothers, with spiritual mothers and sisters) is the lifelong work of anyone who dares to love people in the name of Christ.