

**THE SERMONS, LECTURES, AND SONGS OF  
SIDNEY EDWARD COX**

II Timothy – Sermon #2  
II Timothy 2:14-15  
Workman – Watch Your Words!  
Approved In Christ

**Editorial Note: What follows is a sermon that was part of a series that Sidney Cox delivered on the book of II Timothy.**

**In 1962, Sidney and Violet Cox retired to the Salvation Army retirement home in Detroit, Michigan known as, “The Eventide.” Violet was in failing health and ultimately died in 1967. Sidney continued residency there until a late in life move to Birmingham in 1972.**

**Certain clues contained throughout this series reveal that it was delivered in 1968, in the aftermath of the death of Sidney’s beloved wife, Violet. It was delivered to the Grace Bible Church of Detroit.**

**During this period of his life, Sidney was in great demand as a preacher and Bible teacher both within The Salvation Army and churches of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (“CMA”). He had a close relationship with The Salvation Army early in life and developed a close relationship with The Christian and Missionary Alliance late in life. CMA was a wide network of churches throughout the world that shared a common theology and emphasis and was similar in that regard to The Salvation Army. Grace Bible Church was a CMA church**

**John Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney Cox. December 29, 2008.**

Turn if you please to II Timothy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter, Verse 14. We have been following along the pathway of this book with its central theme – the Christian life is serious business. This is what the great Apostle Paul is saying to young Timothy all the way along – you don’t play at being a Christian. The Christian life is serious business. He states its seriousness in Chapter 1, he illustrates its seriousness in Chapter 2. There are as you know, seven illustrations and all of them thunder at us and to us – the Christian life is serious business. It starts with “Sonship”, it proceeds to “Soldiership”, it leads into the athletic arena, it leads onto the farmland and now, we are facing a workman. And this is the word that we find in the word of God. We’re not providing the word for it here, it is provided for us. Here is a workman.

Now one of the things that you’ll notice if you are thinking along the line carefully, and I trust you are, is that very little has been said in number of words on such matters as “soldiership”, the Christian as one who strives for the mastery, and even the farmer who tills the soil so wonderfully that he is proud to put the product of it upon his own table. Not very much is said. Two verses about soldiership. One verse about the athlete. One verse about the farmer. But when you come to this subject, the workman – the workman who is working with words, we find that much more is said about it. Let me read to you the words that are said and what is said about “the workman who works with words.”

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Verse 14, Chapter 2, this is what it says,

“Of these things, put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord, that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers. Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus, who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection has passed already, and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are his. And let every one of you that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”

We have read from Verse 14 through Verse 19 and in the center of it, a workman, working with words. And in the center of it, the importance and responsibility of words. And you will notice again how much as been said about it.

You know, it seems if you go through this chapter and follow these illustrations, as if there is some particular thing that is being said to each one of the characters that appear before us. For instance, when the son appears in Chapter 2, Verse 1, he has a responsibility – as if a finger is pointing to him and saying, “Your responsibility is to pass on your faith to somebody else. That which you have received, that which you have been given, that, pass on to faithful men who may be able to instruct others also.” That’s his responsibility. That’s where the finger is pointing. The first responsibility of a son is to pass on the privileges of sonship to somebody else, not to enjoy them for himself. It wasn’t given to us in order that we might enjoy sonship. We are to enjoy sonship, of course. But it’s given to us in order that the privilege of the sonship may be passed on to somebody else. Jesus came into your life my dear, not in order that you might stand somewhere or other, or sit somewhere or other and admire him. But our responsibility is to tell others how wonderful he is. That’s our primary responsibility.

When you turn to the soldier you can see the finger pointing at him and saying, “Watch out for entanglements.” And when you look at the athlete you can see the finger pointing at him and a voice saying, “You obey the rules.” And when you turn to the farmer, you can see again the finger pointing at him and saying, “You pull up the weeds.” Did you hear it?

Now when you come to the workman and the finger points at him, what does it say? It says a very simple thing, and the finger points right at him and says, “Watch your words.” Now having said that right at the very beginning, then we are told why we are to watch our words, what will happen if we do, what will happen if we do not and why is it so important to watch our words. Now that’s the pathway that we are following and we haven’t arranged it. I didn’t sit down somewhere or other and think out a series of subjects that I might bring to you. Not at all. We have simply turned to the word of God and we have followed the pathway of it and we have arrived at this place. And something is saying to us, “Watch your words.”

Now before we watch the words, let’s have a look at the man, this workman. And whenever you do, because the soldier is worth looking at, the athlete is worth looking at, the farmer himself is

worth looking at, the workman working with words, he's worth looking at - but when you look at anybody with the thought of summing up who they are and what they are, etc – you always observe three things about them.

What he says. What he does. And what he is. And that's the right order. Because what he says leads to what he does, and what he does leads to what he is. And we're looking at a workman, he's working with words, fashioning them to fit into God's plan, God's structure. He is to "rightly divide" them. He is to put them where God wants them to be so that they fit not his plan but God's plan. And this is the man that we are looking at. This word. And we are told, he is to work with words and then a word of warning is there. It would be the same thing exactly if a man was working with wood. He would have to observe that there is some wood that is worth dividing. Some wood that would accomplish the purpose, would last. There is some that isn't. And he would be responsible for choosing not only the size of wood, but the quality of it as well.

Now in words you find exactly the same thing and the two kinds are stated before us. It's all so simple that even a child, the youngest child could follow it. There are words profitable. There are words unprofitable. And the words are used. They are right before us. This isn't something that someone is fashioning into what we call a sermon, not at all. There are words profitable, and the workman is told, "give your attention to words that are profitable, and not only leave alone the words that are unprofitable, but avoid them. If you see one coming, cross over the street and get over to the other side. Get away from it." That's what "avoid" means. And here we are told that there are words that are profitable, words that build up, words that bless. And there are words that tear down and there are words that curse instead of bless.

Now we don't have to extend our thinking processes to put this thought into the midst of circumstances with which we are familiar. I've lived much longer than most of you and in the matter of churches, I've seen more than most of you have seen. I've seen churches that have been smashed to pieces by an "unprofitable" word. And so have you. I have seen families that have been broken into pieces by an unprofitable word, a poisonous word that was dropped into the midst of it. I've met men by the dozens whose lives have been injured for eternity because of a word that was spoken. The unprofitable word – I don't wonder when you think of it that there's more said about that than there is about any other subject in this chapter. These words that are there, the word for which we are responsible, that we are responsible for God not only to release a word, but to hold it back sometimes. That word that just gnaws at our insides to be let out. How difficult it is sometimes to restrain it. What a relief it would be, how easy it is to release it. And how impossible it is to recall it. It's gone, never to be recalled. Never. Forgive me if you please the quotation, I'm quite sure you've heard it before, I'm quite sure you heard me say it before, but somebody wrote these words, "Boys flying kites haul in their white-winged birds, but we can not do that when we are flying words."<sup>1</sup>

Workman, watch your words. Now that's the picture that's before us here, and if he does, he will be approved. And if he doesn't, he will be ashamed. I was going over this ground again yesterday, thinking it out again and I noticed that there doesn't seem to be any middle ground – no halfway house between "approved" and "ashamed." Doesn't seem to be there somehow or other, it's either one thing or the other. And I thought, well now that's rather difficult, isn't it? Because the average

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<sup>1</sup> Will Carleton, *The First Settler's Story*. December 20, 1912.

Christian lives in that middle ground, neither one thing nor the other. Now that's scriptural, I'm not just saying that. And I don't think Paul was interested in it and I don't think God's interested in that middle ground at all, where most folks live, neither one thing nor the other. You'll remember what the Holy Spirit said to the church at Laodecia and he was talking in terms of temperature and he said, "I would you were either hot or cold, and because you're neither one nor the other, I shall dispose of you." You upset God's digestive system, is what he's saying there. Neither one thing nor the other, that middle ground. There isn't any middle ground apparently. It's either approved or ashamed, according to how we handle God's word. And remember, the words we are to handle the gift of God – he has given them to us and we are responsible for the way in which we handle them. There doesn't seem to be any middle ground.

A very dear friend gave me a book a little while ago, last few days. It's a book written by J.B. Phillips, his little book called *When God Was Man*.<sup>2</sup> Now when you read J. B. Phillips you expect every once in a while to come across a sentence that startles you and maybe hits you over the head like a sledge hammer. And if you read his books carefully you are not disappointed. You find them every once in a while. And I followed the pathway of this lovely little thing from one end to the other and found sentences like that, but on the very last page, he's talking about the difficulty God faces in getting out his light into the dark places of the earth. How difficult it is for God to accomplish what he wants to do. And he talks about the man who wants to be neither one thing nor the other, and this was the tremendous sentence that he used, let me read it to you. He said one of Gods difficulties in getting out the light of the gospel is this, and this is what he said, "Man's frightening preference for the grayness of mediocrity." Now if you've caught your breath, I'll say it again, "Man's frightening preference for the grayness of mediocrity." The man who prefers to stay in the middle of things so that he's neither black nor white, nor hot nor cold, and he stays in the middle, this middle realm of mediocrity. And Phillips describes it in color and he talks about "the grayness of it." It's neither one thing nor the other.

But the startling thing is that when you turn to this passage of scripture you don't find any middle ground at all. If there is any middle ground it certainly isn't mentioned. There is no middle ground for us at all. We are either approved or ashamed and there doesn't seem to be any place at all where in our handling of God's words, and in our handling of God's word, there doesn't seem to be any place at all for this halfway place, for the man who likes to live in the state of compromise, live in the little town with the strange name of, Let George Do It. Ever hear of that place? There's lots of folks who live there you know. But there doesn't seem to be any of it here at all, it's either one thing or the other. We either are. . . . now if you want to put the rest of it in, well you just go ahead. I'm going to hesitate a moment right there. You want to fill it in, all right.

But here is this thing: words profitable, words unprofitable. The unprofitable word is still unprofitable no matter how you decorated it. And this is the thing that's before us – we are responsible for them. Now the danger of unprofitable words is pointed out to us and it is pointed out to us in a very interesting way. You heard it just a moment or two ago, I read it to you and this is what it says, "Put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit," now here's the reason – "because words to no profit subvert the hearers." They don't just vanish into thin air, they reach a mark somewhere. The word "subvert" my dear is the

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<sup>2</sup> First published in 1954. Reprinted six additional times through 1980.

same word from which we get our word “catastrophe.” The unprofitable word brings catastrophe. It breaks things into pieces. It causes physical and spiritual stomach ulcers. The unprofitable word.

And the finger is pointing at somebody. And I don’t suppose if you looked at Timothy he’d look very much different to the rest of us. He looks just about like you do and like me. I’m a little older of course. Looked just about the same. The finger is pointing at him and saying, “Watch those words,” because if words are released that are unprofitable, they will do damage not only for time, but for eternity.

Words. Now, if a workman uses words given by God and handles them all right, because that’s the meaning of the word “rightly divided.” Now you can read into that word something that I believe in as much as you do, but you can go to seed on that. We’d better take it as it means right before our eyes, we’re to take God’s word and use it for God’s purpose and in God’s way. We are to rightly divide the word of truth, and when we do, God himself approves, and if not, then there comes to us that dreadful condition that is described by the word “ashamed.”

By the way, approved – isn’t it a beautiful word? Can you imagine anything more desirable than to be approved of God? A workman approved of God. It’s one of God’s beautiful words. It’s just fragrant. It’s like an alabaster box, but when you break it the perfume of it goes everywhere. Perfume, beautiful, this word “approved.” It’s one of the few words that were first applied to the Lord Jesus when he became what Calvary had given him the right to be – the head of the church. When Peter preached his sermon on the day of Pentecost, and remember my dear that when he did, that wasn’t Peter preaching, that was the Holy Ghost preaching through Peter. And one of the things he said in that sermon of his on the day of Pentecost was this, when he pointed his finger at the Lord Jesus and drew attention to him, and he said, “A man, approved of God among you, and you slew him!” Approved of God. You turn to the 16<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Romans, you will find in that list of magnificent folks a man named Apelles, “approved in Christ.”

Someone said to me last Monday morning, just last Monday morning. I was riding along in a car and I was going from Guelph, Ontario to do a noon-hour Bible class in Woodstock, Ontario and then get on the train and come on back home again. On the way we passed a little church with a graveyard around it as you usually do, and the driver said, “You know I’ve always been interested in those old graveyards and I like to read the inscriptions on the tombstones.” And most of us have got a little bit of that, perhaps we could understand it to some extent. But you know I sometimes wondered, what would you think if you went into a cemetery somewhere and you saw on a stone these words, “John Smith.....” and underneath these words, “Approved in Christ.” What would you think? What would you think? What would you do? If we’d been doing as we sometimes do in our bad manners, walk around amongst graves with our hats on, I know what you’d do if you saw that. You’d take your hat off. And you would feel like taking your shoes off too. Approved in Christ. A man approved in Christ.

When Paul prays for his friends in Philippi, among the many things he says to them is this, “that you may approve things that are excellent.” This word, this is the garment that God puts upon the workman who handles his word correctly. This is the thing. It doesn’t matter too much what other people see, it matters what God sees. It doesn’t matter too much whether other people approve, not

even his own congregation. It matters what God sees and what God approves. Approved in Christ, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed. He is approved of God.

And “ashamed”, we’ve come across that word, haven’t we? We found it three times in our study of the first chapter – “Timothy, you must not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.” And Paul triumphantly, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” The man came seeking him until he found him, “he is the man who was not ashamed of my bonds.” Approved or ashamed, and it seems as if there is no middle ground at all. And into the hands of every last one of us, God gives in some form or other the precious life giving thing that we call his word. And he expects us to handle it correctly.

Now we do more than handle it by just our lips. Our most effective way of handling the word of God is by our life. We are the living epistles read and known of all men. And so the word of God talks to our hearts and it reminds us that words are very important, and it points his finger at us and says, “Watch your words.” Not only the word that comes from your lips, that may be one thing, but the word that flows out of your life, because that my dear may be something entirely different. And let’s remember that there isn’t any middle ground according to this, and that one of God’s great difficulties is man’s frightening preference for the grayness of mediocrity