

How to Help the Deceived

John Morris

Paul was on death row. The time of his departure was at hand (**2 Timothy 4:6**). The brethren he was leaving behind were under assault from false teaching. Hymenaeus and Philetus were overthrowing the faith of some with lies about the resurrection (**2 Timothy 2:18**), and others were promoting similarly profane ideas. And the damage to the body had only just begun. Paul prophesied, “*their message will spread like cancer*” (**2 Timothy 2:17**). Paul was on his way out, and the responsibility of contending with these teachers and their disciples would fall to others. Timothy would be such a one. And so Paul wrote one final letter to his true son in the faith, instructing him, point-by-point, how to engage with those who oppose the truth.

“*A servant of the Lord,*” Paul wrote, “*must not quarrel*” (**2 Timothy 2:24**) — that is, argue. The flesh may want to argue with those who assert lies, but arguments are the fancy of false teachers (**1 Timothy 6:3, 4**). Christians *discuss*. The difference between the two has to do, in part, with goals: Do I seek a (spiritual) victory for the *deceived* or a (carnal) victory for *me*? Discussions can be passionate and intense — a soul is on the line! — but they become arguments when anything other than love is the driving force. “*Love... does not seek its own*” (**1 Corinthians 13:4, 5**). If my goal is God’s glory and the other’s salvation, arguing will hold no appeal. I will “*earnestly contend*” (**Jude 3**), but I will not earnestly argue.

Seeking to turn a sinner from the error of his way will also require that I “*be kind*” (**2 Timothy 2:24**, NASB/ESV). In discussing doctrinal differences, there can be a temptation to yield to unkindness, to allow frustration to get the better of us. But in this case, as in all others, we must follow the Lord’s example. Jesus’ enemies were often malicious, and He *did* at times rebuke them, but always calmly and rationally. He was never hateful or unkind. He did not return “*evil for evil or reviling for reviling*” (**1 Peter 3:9**). He never responded to ridicule with ridicule. He was civil and self-controlled. “*Love... does not behave rudely*” (**1 Corinthians 13:5**). “*Love... is kind*” (**1 Corinthians 13:4**).

Helping someone who is deceived will require being “*able to teach*” (**2 Timothy 2:24**). Lovers of truth *can be* and *are* convinced by effective teaching. “*Convince...*,” Paul told Timothy, “*with... teaching*” (**2 Timothy 4:2**). To be able to teach will require knowledge (**Romans 15:14**). A particular situation may not require *extensive* knowledge, but it will require *sufficient* knowledge to address the issues involved. And there’s no other way to gain that knowledge than hard work. People can be very helpful (perhaps even necessary, at times), but no one equipped to teach others has ever come to that place without diligent personal effort. Lost sleep is better than a lost soul.

The concerned Christian must be “*patient*” (**2 Timothy 2:24**). The Greek word Paul used here appears nowhere else in the New Testament. It speaks to a particular variety of patience: remaining “*patient when wronged*” (NASB), “*patiently enduring evil*” (ESV). Sometimes the person we’re trying to help may sin against us. He may speak harshly to or about us, or about the brethren. She may misrepresent what we believe. He may be haughty and dismissive. She may not keep an appointment—repeatedly—when you made special arrangements to be available. But we cannot allow ourselves to take umbrage at or become resentful because of such indiscretions. Firstly, we’ve been told to do otherwise. To do so may damage the relationship, our credibility, or sever the line of communication completely. No, it is better to “*accept wrong*” (**1 Corinthians 6:7**) in the hope that he/she may yet accept the truth.

Finally, efforts to correct must be made “*with gentleness*” (**2 Timothy 2:25**, NASB/ESV). This was Jesus’ approach. “*I am gentle,*” He said (**Matthew 11:29**). And Isaiah said of Him: “*A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench*” (**Isaiah 42:3**; **Matthew 12:20**). Jesus engaged with people who were on the brink of emotional and spiritual collapse, and yet He never pushed them over the edge. To a woman who had been through five husbands and was now shacking up with a man she wasn’t married to

—and who knew better—He was gentle. Forthright, yes, but gentle. To a woman who had been willfully committing adultery, He was gentle. And who knows better than the Lord how to help a sinner? Who *wants* more than the Lord to help a sinner? Jesus' way is the only way. *“A harsh word stirs up anger”* (**Proverbs 15:1**). Rough treatment of any kind, arrogance, impatience, unkindness, irritability, condescension — these only harden a sinner's heart and make repentance harder, less likely. *“Let your gentleness be known to all men”* (**Philippians 4:5**).

Refusing to argue, being kind, equipping oneself to ably teach, being patient (even when wronged), and exercising gentleness — these are the “secrets” to cooperating with the Divine work of granting repentance to the deceived (**2 Timothy 2:25**), *“so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will”* (**2 Timothy 2:25-26**).