



WATERMARK
COMMUNITY CHURCH

Watermark Community Church
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Series: The Last Word
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The Lost Art of Argument
2 Timothy 2:23-26

Good morning. There are some news stories that happen to get our attention more than others. The most recent news story I paid particular attention to was the story about that massive ship that blocked the Suez Canal. I know this is kind of a strange story, but it fascinated me. Do you know the Suez Canal (I did a little research) is about 101 miles long? This massive ship called the *Ever Given* is 200,000 pounds. It's a massive ship.

One insurance company estimated that for one week in which that ship blocked the canal, that blockage reduced global trade by as much as \$10 billion a week. That's amazing. Because this ship blocked the canal, hundreds of other ships couldn't pass through. The Suez Canal is what allows ships to move more quickly from Europe to Asia. I mean, if you've been wondering, "Where is my package?" well, the *Ever Given* blocked the canal, and now boats have to go all the way around Africa. Just think. One boat dramatically changed world trade.

It made me stop and think. "Hey, Blake, what in your life is having such an impact on other people...for good, but primarily for bad? What is hindering you right now, keeping you, blocking others from seeing the goodness of God?" As I was thinking about this, I thought about what we're called to be. We're called to live as light, Matthew 5 tells us. We're called to live as ambassadors for Christ, 2 Corinthians 5 tells us.

How we live impacts people's perception of God and the credibility of the gospel. We're called to be God's ambassadors, to represent a different value system, to represent our King, the one who loves us, who sent his Son into the world to demonstrate his love for us, and he allows and uses us to represent him. We are to be able to say, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11, "Follow me as I follow Christ."

That's my prayer. "Lord, may I live in such a way that I can say with integrity to my friends, to my neighbors, to my family, to my kids, 'Follow me as I follow Christ.' Not always perfectly, obviously, but help me to set an example, to not live in such a way that people look at me and go, 'Hey, you know what? What you do right there, the way you live, the way you speak, what you exemplify...it causes me to stumble. I don't see the goodness of God flowing through your life, Blake.'"

So I spent time thinking about what's keeping us, church, from being all God would have us to be such that the blessings of God would flow freely through us and we could be the light God calls

us to be. We're continuing our series on 2 Timothy. This is the last of Paul's letters, and he's writing to his protégé Timothy from a prison cell.

He's awaiting execution, and these are his last words to tell Timothy, "Hey, this is what it looks like to live as a godly leader, to live as a light, to live as an ambassador of Christ, to make a difference, to live such that the blessings of God would flow through you and impact a dark world that so desperately needs to know the love of Christ."

Two weeks ago, we talked about how to flee youthful passions and that we're to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Today, we're going to talk about how to engage others in a very polarized and divisive culture. I think what is hindering, blocking us from being the effective witness God calls us to be is a quarrelsome spirit, an argumentative spirit, an unkind, unloving, prideful, arrogant spirit.

I was sitting here rereading this passage over and over again. Second Timothy 2:23-26. I'm going to read it to you. If you have your Bibles, I'd encourage you to turn and mark this passage. I thought, "Well, Lord, maybe there's no more relevant passage in 2021 than *this* one." It reads this way:

"Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will."

Based on this short passage today, we're going to ask and answer three questions. Those questions are these: *When should I argue?* Secondly...*How should I argue?* And thirdly...*Why?* When you hear "argue," that may bring up a negative connotation to you. That's not what I mean. Arguing in itself is not a bad thing. To reason with others, to plead with others, to present your case, to defend. Those aren't bad things. But there's definitely a time when we should speak, there's definitely a way in which we should speak, and we most certainly should examine our motives for whenever we speak.

So, the three questions: when should I argue, how should I argue, and why should I argue? Let's look at verse 23. ***"Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels."*** Paul warns us against engaging in foolish and ignorant controversies. We're to have nothing to do with them. Your translation may say, "Refuse, avoid, reject them." That's the idea. At all costs, have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies.

One of the things I reject out of hand, that I want nothing to do with... Top of mind: sushi. I do not like sushi. It's like, "Hey, Blake, avoid ignorant, foolish controversies like you avoid sushi." For some of you, it's snakes. You see a snake. It doesn't matter if it's red or black or yellow or a friend of Jack. You're like, "I want away from snakes." I get it.

By the way, save your emails. I don't care what kind of sushi you like, where you go eat sushi. I mean, any of those things. All of my friends have tried it. "Oh, try *this* sushi" or "You should go to *this* sushi place" or "Hey, I'm going to surprise you. *This* one you're really going to like." I don't like sushi. We live in Texas. Let's go eat barbecue. Let's go eat steaks. Let's go eat hamburgers. You can go eat sushi with your girlfriends. Too far, too far. All right. Focus.

We are to avoid foolish and ignorant controversies. I love this. The Greek word for foolish is *moros*. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what word we get from that: *moronic*. Do not get drawn offside by moronic controversies. *Ignorant*, or unlearned. Some translations say *speculations*, the idea of those arguments which have no basis in truth. We're to avoid them. We're to run from them. We're not to engage in them.

Let me be really clear. Paul isn't saying we shouldn't engage people with the truth. Time and time again... I could read you many passages. Acts 17:17 says, "***So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.***" Acts 18:4: "***And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.***"

The idea here is not that we shouldn't engage people with the truth. We absolutely should engage people with the truth. But there are some things that are not worth fighting over, and that's what he's talking about here: speculations, foolish, ignorant controversies. He's very clear. The reason is because they lead to unproductive quarrels. This idea was so important to Paul he repeated it multiple times in his letters.

First Timothy 4:7: "***Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness...***" Second Timothy 2:14-17, which we studied recently: "***Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. 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. But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.***"

Some conversations are like poison. Titus 3:9: "***But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.***" I could give you passage after passage where Paul repeats this idea. Some things are not worth fighting over, so stop it. Far too many of us love to argue, and I include me in the *us*. Now I'm going to step on some toes here. Look no farther than your social media feed. We love to argue.

Before the pandemic, we argued over food, music, books, sports, politics, fashion, and everything in between. After the pandemic, we argue everything from travel (when to travel, how to travel, if you should travel), vaccines (get the vaccine, don't get the vaccine), social gatherings (should you gather, yes you should gather, how big should you gather), statues, should schools reopen, how they should reopen, when they should reopen, going to church, singing in church, seating in church, masks in church, and I could go on and on. We love to argue.

Quite frankly, what do you think *this* is? That's right. This, friends, has come to represent so many things. It's not just a mask. I've read all of the emails. I've received dozens of them. This has come to represent a political statement, a left-wing conspiracy, a test of one's Christian faithfulness, a way to stay healthy, a way to protect and serve other people, and everything in between. I've been told I don't believe in the sovereignty of God because I wear a mask. I've been told I must not love people because I encourage others to gather responsibly, and everything in between.

Here's what's sad: some of you I've never even met, but I know where you stand on a mask. Here's my hunch. I imagine many of your neighbors know more about where you stand on a mask or where you stand politically than they ever, ever have heard a word from you about how to have a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I think that's true. Are your neighbors more convinced about what you believe politically than they've ever heard you speak of Jesus?

Are they more drawn to Jesus because of your example over this past year or more confused and more polarized? Just stop and think about it. We argue over insignificant and significant topics with the same ferocity. We need a guide. We need a way to prioritize "When should I argue, and when should I walk away?" So I want to offer something to you, three questions. The first is...*When must I speak?* Secondly...*When should I speak?* Thirdly...*When could I speak?*

Not everything should rise to the level of a 10, as if we walk around with a microphone, shouting as loudly as we can on every subject of every belief we have with no filter, and everything goes to a 10. You lose your voice, and it confuses people. Think about when you *must* speak in the category of essentials. What are those things that have eternal impact? I mean, quite literally, eternal impact. I hope you are loud when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I hope you are loud when it comes to the gospel, the deity of Christ, the Word of God. Please be loud.

But then there are things where you might hold convictions, and these aren't necessarily the essentials, but they are important. They guide your decisions, how you spend money, where you spend your time. I have friends who lead in certain ministries, and every time I'm with them, their conviction, their passion bleeds through, and I love it, because God has them on mission serving in certain ways. You can tell in their conviction they are passionate, but it's not an essential.

Then there are the things where you *could* speak, but you don't always have to speak about it. It's kind of like Baylor winning the national championship in basketball. I mean, I could talk about that or I could let it go because we have so many Longhorn and A&M fans in here, so maybe I'll leave that one out. But honestly, we need a grid. We need a guide to where we recognize, "Hey..." When it comes to the things that are essential, let me tell you what *doesn't* matter: Baylor basketball.

There are things on which we *must* speak, there are things when we *should* speak, and there are things we *could* talk about, and not all of them are equal. We must discern when we should argue. Another way of saying this is "major on the majors and minor on the minors." While we're all friends here speaking transparently, let me tell you where I often blow it in my home: *this*. Let me tell you what drives me absolutely crazy. Observe. *That* drives me crazy.

How many of you in your home have kids who will open up a water bottle, take one sip, put it down, and leave it there for 48 hours? Then when you ask, "Hey, whose water bottle is this...?" "Oh, I don't know." "Guys, look. There are only six of us in this family. Somebody picked up this water bottle and put it down on the table, and then they walked away." You would think in my home this would rise to the category of essential because of the way it drives me crazy. When I respond as if that's an essential, it discourages my kids.

So, when I see a water bottle which someone has had one sip out of, I want to demand the \$3 it cost to buy the water bottle. I want to tell my kids, "Hey, we're just going to take all this water and shake it up. We're going to toss a coin, since nobody is going to admit to it, and somebody is going to drink all of it." I want to do all of those things, but that's not going to bless them. I've blown it because I have not known when to argue. It discourages them. It hinders my effectiveness in loving and leading my kids.

So, how should we argue? Well, verse 24 is so clear. ***"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness."*** Paul warns us against a quarrelsome spirit, and instead he promotes kindness, clarity, patience, and gentleness. Notice he says here, ***"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone..."***

I stopped and thought about that this week. He says, "To everyone." Not just to those who agree with you, look like you, vote like you, think like you, but kind to everyone, not just to those who agree with us. We are to be skillful in our teaching. This doesn't mean you have to have a master's in every subject, but what it *does* mean is that you're to speak with clarity when you do speak on different matters.

We're to be patient when wronged. I love the New Living Translation. What they say in this text is we are to be patient with difficult people. We all have a category for that, don't we? It's the person you work with that when you see them, you take a deep breath. We're to be patient with difficult people, and we are to correct our opponents with gentleness.

Ephesians 4:29 says, ***"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear."*** It may be good for us to put Ephesians 4:29 right over our phone so every time we're tempted to get on social media and say anything, we can go, "Hey, does that pass that test?"

Or Colossians 4:5-6: ***"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."*** How is your speech this week? Is it seasoned with salt? What you argue and how you argue are equally important, but, gang, we have lost the ability to respectfully engage with each other.

I see it time and time again. We commit the logical fallacies we learned about in high school in speech class. We shout. We attack people's character. We mischaracterize their arguments. We

lazily appeal to our favorite sources of authority. None of those strengthen your argument. It's an ad hominem when you attack the person rather than engage with the idea.

It's a straw man when you misrepresent what someone else believes or their argument and then tear it down. They never would have explained it that way. It's an appeal to authority. Just because your favorite politician believes something doesn't make the argument true. We've lost the ability to reason and engage with others.

What I want to suggest to you is you're never just responding to an argument but to a person. Each time you're engaging with others, you're not just wrestling with ideas; you're speaking to a person... a person who has a story, a person who is loved by God, and a person who represents an opportunity the Lord has given to you to love them. Behind every argument is a person we have the opportunity to love, and what you say and how you say it are equally important.

One person said this. When people on the streets were asked, "What is a Christian? What do they stand for?" on nearly every occasion, words came back such as *anti-abortion*, *anti-gay*, *anti-feminist*, *anti-welfare*, anti-this, anti-that, and words like *harsh*, *self-righteous*, *intolerant*, or *mean-spirited*. Yet another poll of people asked what they thought Jesus was like and almost universally returned with words like *compassionate*, *nonviolent peacemaker*, and *reconciler*.

How do we explain the contradiction here? Either the popular conception of Jesus is mistaken or we in the church have been following the wrong agenda. How we say it and what we say are equally important. Wisdom offers us a better way in which we should reason and present our arguments and engage in a culture that's antithetical to what the Bible teaches. Wisdom gives us a better way. I want to give you five proverbs. I would encourage you to write these down and to think about what each of them teaches us and how we should engage.

1. *Seek first to understand and to empathize.* Proverbs 18:2 says, "***A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.***" Do you hear that? It's a fool who doesn't try to understand the perspective of someone else. What do they do? They just talk, talk, talk and share their view. That's foolish. Seek first to understand.

2. *Check your emotions.* Before you speak, check your emotions. Proverbs 29:11: "***A fool gives full vent to his spirit [to his anger], but a wise man quietly holds it back.***" If your emotions are getting the best of you, it's best to remain silent.

3. *Measure your words.* Proverbs 15:1: "***A soft [gentle] answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.***"

4. *Limit your words.* This is what our moms taught us. Sometimes less is more. Proverbs 10:19: "***When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.***"

5. *Know when to shut up.* My mom is watching this online right now, and she will send me an email, because she raised me better. "Blake, don't say 'shut up.'" But, Mom, there are times when we need to know when to shut up. Proverbs 17:14: "***The beginning of strife is like letting out***

water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out." Stop. Be quiet. Stop wrangling over words. That leads to quarrels and division.

The Barna Research Group, which is a polling group, if you will, reported this recently. The number-one quality... I want you to think about it. What do you think is the number-one quality non-Christians look for in a person with whom to talk about the faith? Think about this. They interviewed hundreds of people. "Hey, what's the number-one quality you look for if you're going to speak to someone about the Christian faith?" The number-one quality is someone who listens without judgment.

Sixty-two percent. "Hey, I just want somebody who can listen to me without making me feel like I'm less than, that I'm being judged, that I've blown it." Here's another fact they put out: only a minority, 34 percent, say the Christians they know personally possess this quality. I hate that. I pray that Watermark is a place where our nonbelieving friends can come and ask their questions and know we're going to love them. We're going to tell them the truth, but we're going to love them.

I recommend this. One of my favorite books I've read in the past few years is called *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*. It's written by a woman named Rosaria Butterfield. I want to quote a little extensively from her book. She used to be the head of the English department at Syracuse University, a militant lesbian, if you will, a very strong progressive activist and political in her views. She wrote an op-ed piece in the paper criticizing Promise Keepers, which is an evangelical ministry. I just want you to listen to her story.

"After I published in the local newspaper a critique of the Promise Keepers for their gender politics, I received a batch of mail: hate mail and fan mail. I received so many letters for this little editorial that I kept empty Xerox paper boxes on both sides of my desk, one for hate mail and one for fan mail. [...] In this batch of mail, I also received a letter from Pastor Ken Smith, then-pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. It was a kind and inquiring letter.

It encouraged me to explore the kind of questions that I admire: How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know you are right? Do you believe in God? He didn't argue with my article; he asked me to explore and defend the presuppositions that undergirded it. I didn't really know how to respond to Ken's letter, but I found myself reading and re-reading it. I didn't know which box to file this letter in, and so it sat on my desk and haunted me. [...]

By the way, I hate a messy desk, one where papers litter the surface. Pastor Ken's letter sat on my desk for a whole week—this is six days longer than I can normally stand. It really bothered me that I didn't know where to file it. I threw it away a few times but always found myself digging through the department's recycling bin to reclaim it at the day's end. [...] The letter invited me to call its author to discuss these ideas more fully. It was the kindest letter of opposition that I had ever received. After a week, I called."

Church, what would it look like if this week you and I responded like Pastor Ken and lovingly engaged those who disagree with us, if we were kind, clear, and patient in such a way that it would

cause our opponents, if you will, to sit there and go, "Man, I don't know how to respond to this. I don't know which box to file it in. There's something about the way you speak to me." It was that letter that led to a conversation that led to a dinner that led to a friendship that radically changed her life.

She could not make sense of what she believed Christians stood for and what they were like and the stereotype she had in her mind... She couldn't figure out how to reconcile that with the loving witness of Pastor Ken. She ran into a real Christian who loved her. He didn't compromise the truth but recognized, "What I say and how I say it is really important. There are some things over here, Rosaria, that aren't worth fighting for. I want you to understand the essentials. I want you to understand where life is found. Everything else is second place."

Finally, why should I argue? Paul warns us against any motive other than a repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth. Look at what he says. ***"God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will."*** The goal, friends, is not to win the argument. The goal is not to be right. The goal is to win your brother. *That's* the goal.

You see, Satan is our true Enemy. *Satan* is a Hebrew word which means adversary. You have an adversary, and so do I. He is the true Enemy. Jesus referred to him as the Father of Lies. John 8:44: ***"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."***

Second Corinthians 4:4 is very clear about his tactics. It is he who blinds the eyes of unbelievers. ***"In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."*** Satan is our true Enemy, not those who disagree with us.

We are to pray for God to lead our opponents to repentance. That should be our prayer. That's what Paul says here. ***"God may perhaps grant them repentance..."*** To *repent* means a complete changing of the mind. ***"...to a knowledge of the truth..."*** That they might understand the truth of the gospel, what we just celebrated.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

When we engage those with whom we disagree, our motive is not to win. Our motive is not to belittle or impugn. Our motive is to win our brother's heart, that they might come to repentance and a knowledge of the truth such that they may come to their senses, he says, and escape the snare of the Devil after being captured by him to do his will.

Notice it is Satan who is the intoxicator and captivator. "Come to their senses" literally means so they would return to soberness. False doctrine, anything antithetical to the gospel, is intoxicating. You don't think rightly. But we engage people with the truth of God's Word so they would return to soberness, they would see clearly, they would repent and come to have a relationship with the one true God.

As much as anyone, I love to argue, and I love to win, and I forget these truths. In my home growing up, we argued for sport. If you didn't interrupt, you must not have anything important to say, and if you didn't speak up, you must not really have believed it. That has not always served me well. Two weeks ago, I went to dinner with my brothers, and I failed in the very thing I'm talking about.

I looked forward to that dinner. We don't get dinner as often as I want. It was just the three of us sitting down. I got drawn offside, not by a water bottle but by something that is about as insignificant as water bottles. I left that dinner and went, "What a blown opportunity." Why? Because I didn't know when to argue, how to argue, and why I was arguing. I failed. I walked away and went, "Man, what a blown opportunity. I got drawn offside."

So, I ask the Lord constantly to help me remember three truths. First, the goal of our instruction is love. First Timothy 1:5. Paul says, "***The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.***" When I speak to my nonbelieving neighbors and friends, I remind myself, "There but for the grace of God go I." It wasn't I who figured this out. Notice it's God who leads to repentance.

First Timothy 1:15: "***The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.***" Finally, Proverbs 18:19. It is hard to win back those whom we offend. "***A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.***" Friends, we must learn when we should argue, how we should argue, and we have to examine our motivations for why we are arguing.

Paul says we are to live as the aroma of Christ. Quite literally, when you walk in and out of your schools, your neighborhoods, your friends' homes, your workplace, there should be a distinct difference in the way you speak, engage, and love people. There is an aroma, and not a stench. They may not be able to explain it, but they go, "Hey, there's something different about your letter. There's something that makes me want to know the God you say you serve." I need to grow in this area. I think we all need to grow in this area. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we come before you this morning grateful that it is you who has changed our hearts. Father, we don't seek to earn your love, earn your grace, but we freely receive it. So, Lord, would you remind us of the gospel that would inform our lips such that we would be an aroma of Christ, that we would know when to argue, how to argue, and why we are arguing, and our neighbors would not just know our political convictions or what sports teams we cheer for but they would know what really matters to us.

I pray, Lord, the first thing they would think of is our love for you and the way in which the gospel speaks through our lives. Father, thank you for your kindness and grace toward us, for changing our hearts, and for giving us the opportunity, Lord, to be your salt and your light, ambassadors for you this week. In Christ's name, amen.