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PREACHING AND HEARING GOD'S WORD

2 Timothy 4:1-5

By

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2 Timothy Lesson 19

Preaching and Hearing God's Word
2 Timothy 4:1-5

If you were here on May 31, 1992, the first Sunday that I preached here as your pastor, I thank you for hanging in with me over these years. You personify Paul's exhortation in our text to "endure sound doctrine"! On that Sunday you heard me preach from this text, when I explained my major task and yours. I said that my major task would be to preach God's Word. Your task would be to hear it receptively.

I repeated the same basic sermon on March 15, 1998. If you have already heard it twice, I apologize for making you hear it a third time. But, if the Lord tarries and if He allows me to continue as your pastor over the next few years, you may hear it yet again, because the subject is of utmost importance. We live in a time when many churches have abandoned the preaching of the Word, so it is of critical importance that we understand Paul's words here and make certain that this church never veers from them. If for whatever reason you ever need to search for another pastor, I hope that the main benchmark would be that he faithfully, systematically preaches God's Word of truth.

In recent years, the seeker church movement has minimized and softened biblical preaching so as to attract "seekers" to the services. If the potential "customers" want upbeat, pragmatic 20-minute messages, the customer is king! Give them what they want so that they will keep coming! If they prefer drama and touching stories above doctrine, give them drama and stories.

Now, the emergent church has moved away from the seeker church, tailoring the message for a postmodern culture that does not accept the idea of absolute truth. The emphasis is more on having a self-satisfying spiritual experience in a completely non-judgmental atmosphere. Last summer, a cover story in the *Phoenix New Times* [June 22-28, 2006] told about a radical emergent church there. One of the pastors, who is also a student at Phoenix Seminary, is quoted, "A lot of us are just sick of churches that make you follow these certain requirements, or you're just not welcome.

What kind of load of [unrepeatable expletive] is that?" Evidently Paul's command here to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort" does not fit their agenda!

Our text is Paul's final charge to Timothy just before the apostle's execution. He senses that the time of his departure has come (4:6). He is handing off the baton to his younger friend and understudy. Inspired by the Spirit of God, Paul realized that Satan would relentlessly attack God's Word. Having just emphasized the trustworthy nature of that Word and its vital importance (3:16-17), he now charges Timothy (and every pastor after him) to be faithful in preaching the Word, no matter what the opposition or hardships. But preaching is a two-way street. So Paul's words are not only a solemn charge to pastors. They also are a solemn charge to all believers to welcome solid preaching.

Preaching and hearing God's Word are of the utmost importance in view of eternity.

If Paul had said, "I solemnly charge you, preach the Word," it would have been a strong exhortation. If he had said, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, preach the Word," it would have been a *really* strong exhortation. If he had said, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead," we're off the charts on strong exhortations.

But when he says (4:1-2a), "I solemnly 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, preach the Word," it is hard to imagine how he could have said it any more emphatically! It's as if he reached out and grabbed Timothy by his shirt, pulled him to within six inches of his face, and screamed at him, "Preach the Word!" Paul uses nine imperatives here, five in verse 2 and four in verse 5.

In 4:1-2, Paul shows why preaching is of utmost importance. In 4:3-4, he shows why hearing the word is of utmost importance. Then (4:5), in light of inevitable opposition, he shows why a faithful pastor must persevere in preaching the Word.

1. Preaching the Word is of utmost importance in view of the coming judgment and kingdom (4:1-2).

Paul answers four questions: *Why* preach? *What* to preach? *When* to preach it? *How* to preach it?

- A. *Why* preach? The Word must be preached because Christ Jesus is coming to judge everyone and to establish His kingdom.

The word translated “solemnly charge” (1 Tim. 5:21; 2 Tim. 2:14) had a legal nuance, of taking an oath in a court of law. Paul is calling Timothy in front of God’s judicial bench and charging him under oath with the serious task of proclaiming God’s Word to those who also will someday stand in front of that bench for judgment by Christ Jesus who will return to reign over all.

The verb “is” (before “to judge”) literally means, “is about to.” It implies the urgency of the task. The day is soon coming when Christ will return. He came the first time as the suffering Savior to redeem us from our sins. But the second time He will come as the Sovereign King, to put down all rebellion and to judge the living and the dead. That includes almost everyone (some of you may be hovering somewhere between those two realms)! Although as believers in Christ, we will not face condemnation, we all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

This means that you need to take life seriously. One day you will stand before the living God to give an account of your life. The Word of God tells us how to live so that we will hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.” Preaching is important because of the seriousness of this fact.

Christ will appear and set up His kingdom to reign over all. The word “appear” was used of the Emperor’s visit to a province or town. Just before his visit, things were put in perfect order. The garbage was cleaned up, the streets were swept and the buildings were scrubbed clean for his appearing. When I was in the Coast Guard, we heard that an admiral was going to visit the clothing warehouse where I worked. We worked for days to get it ready. That’s the idea here: Christ, the King, is coming. Preach so that people’s lives are clean and ready for His return.

- B. *What* to preach? Preach the Word!

Some scholars argue that “the word” means the gospel. I don’t object to that, as long as by “the gospel” you include the

whole counsel of God as contained in all of Scripture. In the original text, there is no chapter break between 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 4:1-5. All Scripture is profitable for teaching. "Instruction" (4:2) means teaching or doctrine. A preacher must explain and apply the doctrines of the Bible so that when he is done, you can look at the biblical text in its context and say, "I understand what it is saying and how it applies to my life."

The preacher's message should come out of the text and be governed by the text. "Preach" means "to herald." The herald was the king's messenger who relayed the king's message to the people. He wasn't free to make up his own stuff. He wasn't a politician or diplomat or a spin doctor. His job was to proclaim faithfully the king's message so that the people understood it.

There is a sad lack of that kind of biblical preaching in the pulpits of America. I once heard some tapes titled, "The best of ..." a well-known preacher. He took his theme loosely from a biblical text, but then he'd jump off from there and tell a lot of uplifting stories. But when he was done, he had not explained or applied the words of the text in its context. Others give positive, upbeat, self-help messages with a few verses sprinkled in for good measure. But you could remove all the verses and the result could appear in *Reader's Digest*, not much altered by the absence of the Scriptures.

But Scripture gives us "the wisdom that leads to salvation" and equips us for every good work (3:15-17). Scripture reveals to us "everything pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3). If a man doesn't explain and apply Scripture, his preaching may be entertaining and inspirational; but it will lack life-changing power.

Although I disagree with much of Karl Barth's theology, I admire him for a story told of him. During the 1930's, he was preaching on John 3:16. Even though many in his German audience professed to be Christians, they were going along with the persecution of the Jews. Barth made the point that Jesus was a Jew, that He had died for all the world, and that the Jews were part of that world. Thus anyone who loves Christ would not participate in the widespread ill treatment of the Jews.

Many in his congregation walked out in disgust before he finished the sermon. One wrote a scathing letter denouncing him.

Barth's reply was a single sentence: "It was in the text." That kind of preaching takes courage! But the man who proclaims the Word of God must not pull his punches. He must be patient and gentle, but he must proclaim and apply the text of Scripture.

Thus Paul tells us that we need preaching because of the coming judgment and kingdom; and that the man of God must preach the Word of God. Third,

C. *When* to preach it? Be ready to preach the Word at every opportunity.

"Be ready in season and out of season." The idea here is that a preacher is not just to play at preaching. Rather, it must be a life-consuming passion. He is never off duty. All his life and his walk with God go into the preaching of the Word, because biblical preaching is God's truth imparted through a man who walks with God. "Be ready" imparts a further sense of urgency. Picture a paramedic unit on call, ready to save someone's life. Souls are perishing without Christ. Christians are straying from the fold. Proclaim God's Word whenever and wherever you can!

The 18th century evangelical preacher John Berridge was called in by the Anglican bishop and reproved for preaching at all hours of the day and on every day of the week. "My lord," he replied, "I preach only at two times." The bishop pressed him, "And which are they, Mr. Berridge?" He quickly responded, "In season and out of season, my lord" (*The Inextinguishable Blaze*, A. Skevington Wood [Eerdmans], p. 212).

D. *How* to preach it? Preach the Word with application to life.

"Reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (4:2). A preacher once asked a class what they did with the commands of Scripture. A little old lady raised her hand and said, "I underline them in blue." That's nice, but the point of biblical preaching is not to get people to underline their Bibles or fill their notebooks. Biblical preaching should show people where their lives are not in line with God's truth and help them to make the necessary corrections to obey that truth consistently.

To do this, a preacher must make an *appeal to the reason* of the hearers: "Reprove." This is a legal term that means to present your

case in such a manner as to convince your opponent of his wrong. A preacher must present his case in a logically convincing manner from the Word, so that his hearers are persuaded that what Scripture says is right even though their behavior is wrong. The Holy Spirit's task is to reprove (convict) the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). He does this largely through Spirit-filled biblical preaching.

Second, a preacher must make an *appeal to the conscience* of the hearers: "Rebuke." This moral aspect of preaching says, "You are sinning against God; you need to repent!" We tend not to like that sort of thing, but it is desperately needed in our day of watered-down, feel good Christianity. William Barclay was right when he wrote (*The Daily Study Bible* [Westminster Press], p. 207): "Any teacher ... whose teaching tends to make men think less of sin is a menace to Christianity and to mankind."

Third, a preacher must make an *appeal to the will and emotions* of the hearers: "Exhort." The word means strongly encouraging someone to right behavior. Some people need rebuke and some need encouragement. If you encourage those who need rebuking, you assist them to go on sinning. But if you rebuke those who need encouragement, you'll discourage them. Someone has said that the preacher's job is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. Only the Holy Spirit can take the Word and apply it individually to a congregation made up of all sorts of needs.

The preacher becomes the channel for the Spirit's working when he appeals with "*great patience and instruction.*" People require time to change. They don't always get it the first time around. So the preacher of the Word must say it over and over again as he teaches the Word of God. Patience does not mean tolerating open sin, but rather, bearing with people's weaknesses. But the preacher doesn't just leave the people in their weakness; he gives them careful instruction so that they can grow in Christ.

Thus Paul is saying that preaching the Word is of utmost importance in light of the coming judgment and kingdom of Jesus Christ. But even great preaching that falls on closed ears and hardened hearts is not effective. Thus,

2. Hearing the Word is of utmost importance in view of the sinful human propensity to turn away from the truth (4:3-4).

Paul warns Timothy (4:3), “For the time will come when they [those in the church is the implication] will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate [lit., ‘heap up’] for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires.” They will find teachers who tell them what they *want* to hear, not what they *need* to hear.

“Sound doctrine” is one of Paul’s frequent themes in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1; “sound words” in 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13). “Sound” means healthy (we derive our word “hygienic” from it). Sound doctrine results in healthy Christian living. Note that such healthy teaching is set in contrast to what people like and thus it must be *endured!* This implies that, like health food, it doesn’t always feel good at the moment, because it confronts our selfish desires, but in the long run it yields healthy Christianity. Why didn’t God make spinach bad for us and ice cream good for us?

In 4:4, Paul says that people will turn aside from the truth to myths—the religious ideas of men as opposed to God’s revelation in the Word. The propensity of the sinful human heart is to turn away from God’s truth and to embrace what feels good at the moment. There is a powerful temptation to the preacher, especially if he wants to be liked, to give people the ice cream of popular worldly myths instead of the spinach of God’s truth. But you should not judge a man’s preaching by whether you like him or not, but rather by answering the question, “Does his preaching line up with what God’s Word says?” Is it in the text?

I try to serve the spinach of the Word along with the ice cream (the Word contains both, in proper proportions). That is one reason for preaching verse by verse through the Bible. It gives us the right proportions of spiritual spinach and ice cream. I try gently but firmly to confront sin with God’s truth as well as tell you God’s prescription for spiritual health. But my job is only half the task. You have a responsibility as hearers of the Word not to reject the spinach and want only the ice cream or to go find a place that only serves ice cream. You will not be spiritual healthy if you do.

But what if people don't listen? What does a preacher do then? Paul tells Timothy in verse 5:

3. Perseverance in preaching the Word is required in view of inevitable opposition (4:5).

When people won't listen, the preacher must keep preaching the Word anyway. This is the third time in this section dealing with the difficult last days that Paul has said, "But you ..." (3:10, 14). It is a pointed reminder that a man of God must go against the flow, even, at times, against the "Christian" flow. Paul gives four commands that show Timothy how to conduct his ministry even if people aren't responsive:

First, "*Be sober*" (literally, "Don't be drunk"). When people get intoxicated with the latest winds of false doctrine, you're the designated driver. Keep your head about you and continue preaching the truth.

Second, "*Endure hardship*." If you preach the truth of God's Word, you will catch flak. Harry Ironside said that he sometimes received letters from people (invariably people he didn't know personally) who would say, "I resent your personal attack on me last Sunday. I don't like your preaching; and I don't think you had any right to expose me in the way you did. I don't know who has been talking to you about me." And invariably they closed by saying, "It's not true." His comment was, "If you throw a stone into a pack of dogs and one of them yelps, you know who got hit" (*Timothy, Titus, & Philemon* [Loizeaux Brothers], p. 236).

Third, "*Do the work of an evangelist*." Don't get sidetracked by critics in the church, but keep preaching the gospel and going after lost people. Evangelism is the cutting edge of the church's ministry. I agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who said (*Preaching and Preachers* [Zondervan], p. 150), "There is something essentially wrong with a man who calls himself a Christian and who can listen to a truly evangelistic sermon without coming under conviction again, without feeling something of his own unworthiness, and rejoicing when he hears the Gospel remedy being presented."

Finally, "*Fulfill your ministry*." Paul is saying, "Don't bail out of the ministry and go into an easier line of work just because you run into opposition. Fulfill your calling as a preacher of God's truth!

Follow me in fighting the good fight so that you will finish the course" (4:7).

Years ago in California, I was going through a time of unusual attacks against my ministry. On a day off, Marla and I were driving somewhere and stopped by road construction. As we sat there waiting for the flagman, I watched a guy driving an earthmover and thought, "That looks like a nice line of work to get into!" It was tempting, but Paul is saying, "Don't bail out!" John Calvin makes the point that rather than giving up because of opposition, the more intense the opposition, the more vigorously we must fight, to ward off Satan's attacks on the church (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 255). So don't concede the battle to the enemy. Defend the gospel against all attacks.

Conclusion

Once after the famous French preacher, Jean Baptiste Massillon had preached, one of his hearers exclaimed, "What an eloquent sermon! How gloriously he preached!" When the comment was reported to Massillon he replied, "Then he did not understand me. Another sermon has been thrown away!"

The point is not eloquent sermons, but a message from God's Word that the Holy Spirit anoints and applies to our lives. After I'm done preaching, my aim is that you can look at your Bible and understand what it is saying and how it applies to your life. Very shortly, the time of your departure and mine will come. We all will stand before the Sovereign Lord Jesus Christ, Judge of the living and the dead. In view of that solemn day, it is essential that as your pastor, I preach God's Word. It is essential that you listen to the preaching of God's Word with a view to obedience. Then on that great day when we stand before Christ, we all will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Preaching the Word and hearing the Word are of utmost importance in view of eternity.

Application Questions

1. What are some reasons that biblical preaching is not being emphasized today?
2. Agree/disagree: Sound preaching of the Word is the most important factor in choosing a church? Why/why not?
3. Even Jesus warned His audience about listening well (Luke 8:18). How can a person improve his listening ability?
4. Why does Paul say that sound doctrine must be “endured”? What are some implications of this?

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