

# A Charge to Keep

*Series on 2 Timothy*

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**Bible Text:** 2 Timothy 4

**Preached on:** Sunday, June 16, 2013

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Do take your Bibles in turn with me this morning to 2 Timothy 4. This is the last letter we have of the Apostle Paul. He is conscious, probably his final letter ever and therefore its contents are significant for the Christian church. What is in view as Paul writes is, in fact, the survival of Christianity. Will the Christian movement survive the death of the immediate eyewitnesses of the events upon which it is founded, the eyewitnesses who had seen Jesus alive after his passion. And the reason that was a big question is because already there has been unleashed a tidal wave of persecution by Nero, the result of which finds Paul in prison, perhaps Peter is in prison also or will shortly be in prison. Paul will die within short order and shortly after Paul dies, Peter will die and the big question in people's minds is: will the Christian movement survive? Will Christianity go anywhere else going beyond having now reached Rome?

Not only were people dying but people were departing, they were departing from the faith. It seems as if Christianity from its earliest days spawned false doctrines and false teaching and heresies of one kind or another. No other religion has spawned so many different aspects, ideas, false ideas as Christianity did from the very beginning of the story. Yes, I think there are 3 or 4 different branches of Islam, for example, but those took a long time to evolve but from the beginning Christianity was afflicted. It was almost as if the lid from hell was taken off and out of hell came a great army of scorpions with false ideas and false notions to put in and implant into the minds of men and women and lead them away from the purity of the Gospel. Paul knows that. He knows that's a feature of the last days in which we live and as the apostle is writing Timothy, he wants Timothy to know this because Timothy is not doing well. Timothy, as we have discovered, is not doing well and Paul has been building up a case for Timothy and now he comes to the climax of that case, now he comes to the punchline: what will preserve Christianity into the future? What will cause it to survive long-term? "Here's your job, Timothy. Here is what we have been building up to throughout all of this letter. Here is the great charge."

Paul cranks up the weight of responsibility behind this charge as he addresses Timothy. He puts it in the context, he's saying this, he's abjuring Timothy as if he's in a court in the presence of God, not just that God is everywhere present but that God is especially present in the church, among his people. In the presence of that God, that God who will

judge the living and the dead in Christ, that God who will appear as we have just been seeing, who will appear again at the end of history as Christ is revealed to the nations, that God, that God who will bring the kingdom in, whose kingdom representative Timothy is as a herald, as an ambassador charged with the King's message as Paul has been explaining in the former chapters of this book, charged with this great deposit, sacred, holy, royal deposit, to care for it, to keep it intact, to pass it on intact to future generations, this deposit that is the Gospel, the truth of the Gospel, he is to proclaim. He is to preach the word. "Preach the word, Timothy. This is vital," Paul is saying, "for the survival of Christianity. This is vital for the salvation of men and women's souls. This is the crucial proposal for the future. Timothy, I charge you, preach the word."

Now, without going over stuff I did last week, I want to kind of refresh your minds and take you into avenues new because I've been reflecting on this more this week which is always dangerous because you're worried that I'm going to come and preach on the same passage next week. Word is that Paul is worried about that as well so we'll try and finish it today if you listen and give me your full attention for the next hour and a half, you will be fine. We'll be okay. Here's what we've been learning: we've been learning that God speaks by his word preached. God is a speaking God. He speaks his word. They are so powerful these words are described in metaphors. So, for example, one of the great prophets of God said that the Lord roared from Zion. God's word is like the roaring of a lion, the lion that is the king of the beasts. It's the roaring of the King from his throne. His voice goes out into all the earth. The roaring of the lion. In Hebrews 1 when we're reading about the revelation of his Son, we read these words, "God spoke to our fathers at various times and in various ways by the prophets and in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." He sent the prophets, he sends his Son but he has spoken to us. God is a speaking God when his Son comes into the world.

Paul says about him that Jesus preached peace. He preached peace to those who were near, that is, to Jews, and to those who were far away, that is to Gentiles. He preached shalom, the peace, the wholeness of God. John describes Jesus as the Word, the Word of God. God uses words to reveal the Word. God addresses the human race through the Torah and through prophecy. He announces his saving purposes to Adam and Eve outside the gates of the garden of Eden, a promise of the son of the woman who would come and would crush the serpent. God speaks to us because God, when he is revealing himself to humanity, speaks words to us. When he is making the universe, the Trinity conspired together to make what is and it is the Word, the second person of the Trinity that is the great vehicle of the power and authority of God and God speaks and things come into being. God speaks. He is a speaking God. By these words spoken by prophets and by apostles, he communicates to us what is happening when Jesus arrives on the scene. He is the Messiah promised to Israel. He is the Word made flesh. He is the seed of the woman. He is the seed of the house of Judah. He is the Lion of Judah. He's the one who comes and contains in himself both the human and the divine. He is the God man, the one Mediator between God and man, the man, Christ Jesus. He comes to be the rescuer, the Savior. He comes to be raised from the dead. He is a descendent of David who does not see corruption. He is raised and seated on David's throne.

God uses words, he speaks these words. He proclaims these words through prophets and through apostles in order that we might understand what God is doing and whatever God speaks through human instruments, he comes to speak to us currently, today as our contemporary whenever we gather together in worship. Listen to the writer to the Hebrews, he's warning a Christian congregation and he says to them, "See that you don't refuse him who is speaking." What he's talking about, the preacher who is preaching it to them, but he's talking about the one who stands behind the preacher, the one who is speaking through the preacher. "Forget about the preacher, think about the one who is speaking to you behind the preaching of the word of God," and he uses the illustration of the children of Israel, "For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth," Moses, "much less will we escape if we reject him who warns us from heaven." In other words, behind the preaching of the word there is the word of the one who is preached. He is addressing us. He is speaking to us. He is warning us.

So whenever the children of Israel were gathered together after the exile, organizing themselves in light of that horrific event and horrendous experience, what did they do? They gathered together under Ezra who blesses the Lord and they have a time of worship and Ezra reads to them from the law of God and the Levites take what is read and they go out into the congregation of the people and they give them a sense, they explained the meaning, they unfold and unpack the Scriptures so that people will hear God speaking to them. Speaking to them. Speaking to them because God is a speaking God. In the New Testament, in the Jewish synagogue where Jesus goes to his local church, as it were, he comes to Nazareth in Luke 4, he enters the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolls the scroll. He reads from the scroll and he announces the shortest sermon ever, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

God speaks to us and he speaks to us because we need to know there is a person behind the words that we have written. You know, the presence of the spoken word tells us, doesn't it, signals to us, "There is someone here." Now, I know today and it could be simply that somebody is playing their CD player or have left their iPad on or whatever and there is some disembodied voice and somewhere in the world today, somebody has left their kitchen and sitting on their kitchen top work surface there is a computer and it's been plugged in and it's been geared into listen to this webcast and they've heard the beginning of the sermon and then they have gone out into the yard to have coffee and left it on. Someone comes into the house, hears my voice and they're thinking, "What's going on here?" But in the ancient world, of course, and up until fairly recently, until my grandparents' time, I guess, there was no other way of hearing anything except somebody was there to speak to you.

Now, wouldn't it be enough if we had pictures of God? Photographs of God? Well, you can't take a photograph of God but supposing you could? Or you perhaps had a movie of God doing stuff and you could see that God is great and God is big and God is beautiful but that's not much of a relationship, really. I mean, it's alright guys, you see a girl and you find that girl attractive but supposing all you could say about her is that she is attractive? You're never going to actually ask her any questions. You never hear her

speaking. You never heard her say anything. You're too busy taken up with the looks that you don't know who the person is. It's better to actually start off getting to know someone as a person, listening to them speak, speaking to them, getting to know them, getting to have a relationship with them. before you pay attention to anything else, pay attention to who they are. God speaks to us so that we pay attention to who he is. We are going to see him one day. That will leave us speechless. Breathless. But he speaks to us today. He uses a human voice to speak to you so that you know he is the living God. He is the living God. He has a personality and an image-bearer of God gets to be the word-bearer of God so that you know that there is behind the image a personal God who is speaking to you.

God speaks through the word preached and God acts through the word preached. At creation, he creates the universe. When he sends his Son into the world, he sends his Son as a preacher. Mark tells us, he begins, in the beginning of the Gospel, "Jesus goes preaching the kingdom of God." Luke tells us, "Jesus goes everywhere, speaking the words of God, teaching the word of God and as he teaches the word of God, as he proclaims the word of God, as he speaks, seas are calmed, fevers are cooled, demons are cast out, sins are forgiven, the blind receive their sight and the dead come back to life," because the word works. God works by his word. In the first Psalm, "The wise man yields fruit in their season, the leaf does not wither and whatever they do prospers." Why? Because they meditate on the word of God. The word, which is shorthand for the preaching of the word. The word of God is living, active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It can pierce as far as the division of soul and spirit. It can divide things that are indivisible, and the marrow, the joints and marrow. Able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The word of God convicts. The word of God sanctifies, "Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth."

God acts by his word so Paul writes to Timothy and he says, "Preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season. Always be ready. Be on hand to stand. Stand poised to do something, to preach the word." Why do I take the time to talk about preaching to people most of whom will never preach? Because if you're a Christian, you're going to spend a lot of time listening to preaching and you want to know why, don't you? You want to know why. And Paul is writing to Timothy, this preacher, and he's saying, "Timothy, this is what you were made for. This is what you were wired to do. This is what you are called to do."

When he says, "Be ready in season and out of season," he's saying to Timothy, "Not just always be on the watch, not just be enthusiastic when you speak," he is saying, "Be ready to drop everything. Be ready in all circumstances. There are times when it's easier than other times to be a preacher of the Gospel but whether it's easy or hard, whether people want to hear or not, whether you're in danger if you speak or whether it's the thing of the day to be preaching the Gospel, whatever it is, always be ready to preach the Gospel. Preach in season and out of season." What he's saying to Timothy is, "Timothy, you actually have no option. You have no option. You are one of those men that I have described," Paul is saying to Timothy, "in my first letter to you, one of those elders who has been set aside and you are paid. You are paid," he uses that word, "you are paid to do

the business of teaching and preaching. That's your job. That's your day job. That's your business. That's what you are created to do. You can't be doing anything other than that."

Now obviously, there are other things you have to do as a minister of the Gospel but what he's saying to Timothy is, "This is what is to get you up in the morning. Do this. Not just at stated moments but at any other opportunity that arises. Preach the word. That is what you were made to do." And is there ever a good time to be a preacher? I guess the 19th century, preaching was a kind of fashionable thing. In churches all over America and in England and Scotland, people came in large numbers to churches just to hear preachers. In fact, what they did was they would go to one in the morning and another one in the afternoon and another one in the evening and they would go home and they would compare notes about all these preachers because there was so many splendid, amazing wordsmiths and that's what they were. They uttered these great disquisitions on preaching and so on and people went to hear them. It was fashionable. It's not fashionable today. You are doing the most countercultural, radical thing people in our society could even think about doing. Socialism isn't radical anymore, it's just the normal way that people think about doing stuff as a way of getting other people to pay their bills. It's not radical. One of the few things that is radical anymore in our society is to be here in church on Sunday morning listening to the preaching of the word of God.

"And Timothy," Paul says, "be ready whether you're popular or unpopular. Whatever condition it is, you be ready to preach the word." There may come a day when someone will walk into the church and shoot the preacher. A friend of mine was teaching in Thailand, somebody did just that. They walked in and they emptied their shotgun, 2 barrels into him. Timothy was afraid. Timothy was afraid something like that might happen to him and Paul is saying, "Timothy, it doesn't really matter. Your life doesn't count for anything. You need to preach the word because you have been called to preach the word." Like the Apostle Paul, who said, "Necessity is laid upon me. Necessity is laid upon me. Woe is unto me, woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." And I want to say to any young man who wants to be a preacher, who wants to be a minister: if there isn't something in your heart that is driving you, this sense, you cannot do anything else, there is nothing else that you would rather do, there is no other purpose for your life than this, then you should give yourself unstintingly for the remainder of your days to this one task of getting into the word of God and proclaiming the word of God and that you cannot do anything else and that you would not do anything else, then I'm saying to you right now, if that spirit is not in you, please do something else. Please don't come into the ministry because you would be a disaster. Paul says to Timothy, "Preach the word whether it's in season or out of season and be ready at all times to administer the word of God." Martin O. writes this, "The attending physician does not pick the time to serve the patient but administers medication when the moment of illness arises whether pleasant or unpleasant for the patient," we might add, for the physician, whether the recipient is eager or resistant. Whether it be convenient or inconvenient. Whether welcome or not.

That's the business of the preacher because God speaks and God acts by the word preached and God reigns. He reigns by his word preached. There are other ways to learn the Bible: small group study, Bible studies. Those are all good. Reading the Bible for

yourself, that's good. But in all of those situations, it's you and the Bible, perhaps other people gathered around it, talking about it, looking at it, studying it. You want information about what it means. You want to understand how it applies. But when we are in church on Sundays it's an entirely different dynamic. You're not sitting around the Bible. We all don't get to air our views as to how the Bible applies or what the Bible is saying. When we gather for church on Sunday morning apart from those holy ones who are in the gallery, of course, the rest of us are under the word of God. Actually, we're all under it in terms of its authority because Jesus reigns over the church through his word. David justly said, "Gospel preaching is the chariot that King Jesus rides to victory." Edmund Clowney pointed out that, "Biblical theology reflects the authority and the character and the content of preaching. We bear in our hands," he writes, "that which Moses carried down from the mountain that thundered with the presence of God. We have before us the whole witness of the Father to the Son, those things that are written in the Torah and in the prophets and in the Psalms concerning him and in the kerygma and the didache of the New Testament."

So Timothy, knowing that the word of God reigns over the church, is told to use it that way: reprove, rebuke, exhort, says the apostle. Reprove means to correct. It means to clarify misunderstandings; to correct wrong ideas; to say this is true therefore that, that and that aren't true. Sometimes you learn what's true by looking at what isn't true and seeing how it differs. To rebuke is to get a big tougher. To rebuke is to speak sharply as Paul writes to Titus using the same word, "Rebuke the cretins sharply that they may be sound in the faith." Sometimes what you need to be as a preacher is a kind of the Jack Bauer figure, I had to get him in somewhere, where you just get a bit of shock treatment. You just have to slap people around with it, with the Gospel. Tim Keller uses the illustration of Gospel preaching. He talks about a soda machine in the basement of the building of the apartment where they live in Manhattan and for years and years and years this particular soda machine, you could put the money in, you press the button and nothing would happen. Money in, press the button, nothing happened. A bit like my sermons every week I just think of that: money in, press the button, nothing happens. The only way you could get anything to happen from this soda machine was you had to kick it in the right place and then slam it on the side very hard in the right place. Kick and hammer. And there are times in Gospel preaching when the only way you can get the word of God into people's minds and hearts is with a kick and a hammer and I'm your man. Seriously, Paul is saying to Timothy, "Look, the word of God sometimes needs to be a shock treatment to the system of men and women in the church in order to get it through, get it in." And he says, "You are to do these things."

Well, there's something else he says, he says to exhort. Exhort means to encourage, come alongside people. Very often we think of that as comforting which it is an element of that. Interestingly this word, though, is also used in the Bayeux Tapestry that describes the wars between the French and the English. They were always at war with each other, the French and the English. The Scots were very often on the French side for some obscure reason because the French always lose. Ultimately they always lose. Sorry if you are French but you know it's true. Not only do you lose but when you are depended on to come to the aid of people that you have an alliance with, you don't turn up or Scotland

would be the top dog today instead of England. Okay, that's a little historical insight. But in the Bayeux Tapestry, it shows you the Bishop getting the troops ready to march into battle and in the Bayeux Tapestry it pictures the Bishop on his horse with a spear in his hand behind the troops and he is prodding them, prodding them forward into the battlefield as they try to run away. There's the Bishop prodding them into battle. That's a nice way to comfort people and encourage people, isn't it? That's part of what preaching is, it's prodding and encouraging and saying, "You can do it." But here, you just need a bit of a push to do it and it's part of the ongoing work that we have to do.

Paul says, "Do that," because preaching is the way that God uses to keep the church going and to keep the church from error and evil. What is the worst thing that God can do to the church universal? What is the worst thing that God can think of to do to his church? It is to withdraw biblical preaching. "Behold, the days are coming declares the Lord when I will send a famine on them in the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water but of hearing the words of the Lord." A famine of biblical preaching and when God withdraws that from a people who don't want to hear that, that's judgment on his church. Jesus speaks to the churches in Revelation and to every one of them he says, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." May God keep us from that.

But notice his reason as we come to a close, which is for my sake, by the way, not yours because I know one and a half hours would be a really bad thing. Today is Father's Day and they are desperate to do something, I know. My kids are in England so I'm okay. I've got plenty of time so look at verse 3. Why do we need to preach the word urgently, in season, out of season? Why are we to do this? Look at the reasons he is giving, "For the time is coming," Paul says we are in the last days. He has already said that, verse 1 of chapter 3, "We are in the last days." "The time is coming," he says, "when people will not endure sound teaching." They will not endure it. The default setting of the human heart is to move away from truth. They will not hear it. It started in the garden of Eden. There the ultimate false witness, Satan, raised a question about the truthfulness of God's word, "Did God say?" And the culture around us raises questions about the word of God, "Did God say that he created the universe? That's nonsense. The consensus in the scientific community, it says he didn't. We are right, the culture is right, Scripture is wrong. Did God say that Adam and Eve are our first parents? Well, that's ridiculous. Culture is right, Scripture is wrong."

Not only the culture around us but the church. Do you as a reformed believer believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone and that you are justified now by faith so that you know you are in a right relationship with God? "Well, no. Judgment and justification is something that happens in the future on the day of judgment on the basis of the whole life lived." The church says to us, or people in the church say to us, "You say God is sovereign but do you really think that God has got a script for your life and for the life of the world? Doesn't it look more like God is rolling with the punches, making it up as he goes along? Rewriting it for every mistake and obstacle that comes across his path?" There are those who just will not endure sound doctrine. They will tolerate anything like Israel tolerated the idolatry of the indigenous people in the

Promise Land until eventually they embraced that idolatry and worshiped the idols and the God of Israel at the same time through most of their experience. But what they didn't realize was that when they broke the word, they were not just breaking a command or a promise, they were breaking a relationship. We preach in the context of the church that reminds us of the covenantal relationship that we have with God. He is a great King. I am only an ambassador. His words are what are important, his words to his covenant people. The great King on his throne addresses his church by his word and he does it through a weak and fallible person.

People naturally move away from truth. To Jeremiah God says, "The prophets prophesy lies and my people, they love to have it that way." To the prophet Ezekiel, God says, "You know, Ezekiel, you're really so gifted at speaking, you're so gifted in public speaking, people love to come along and listen to you. They come regularly to listen to you. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear the words but do not put them into practice."

They will not endure sound doctrine. Why? Because they have itching ears. Perhaps they want novelties. Gregory of Nazianzus referred to people in his day who wish to be titillated with whatever is novel. They want new things. From the beginning it was always so. And for those who want new things, there are always those who are willing to teach them and so we read that they accumulate, can you imagine it, they heap to themselves multiple teachers to meet the growing dissatisfaction of their heart, to tell them exactly what they want to hear. There is always somewhere you can go, some book you can read, some teacher you can hear who will tell you what you want to hear. Do you want to be told that believing in God will bring you health and wealth and prosperity? There are people who will teach you that. Do you want to be told that God doesn't want you ever to suffer pain or be ill and that all he wants is for you always to have a perfectly healthy life? There are people who will tell you that. Do you want to be told that living the Christian life is simply discovering the steps for success that can make you successful as a husband and a father, or as a business person or whatever it may be? Is that what you think it's all about?

You'll find teachers to tell you all that stuff but it's not healthy doctrine. It's not sound doctrine and so what happens? People wander off into myths and while that's happening to people, there is a danger of the preacher being distracted. Paul is writing to this man Timothy and he says to this man, "You know, when all of this is happening, you'll be tempted to despair." He says to Timothy, "Be sober minded. Keep your head," or as they say in Glasgow, "keep your he'd." I don't know why they say it that way but that's the way they say it, which just means, be balanced, be self-controlled. Don't be put off.

Paul goes on, endure suffering. "You can't avoid it, Timothy. You've been called to be a preacher. It may go with the territory. It may happen to you someday. They may cart you to prison. They may behead you. They may come into your worship service. They may assault you. They may tear apart your character. Timothy, endure suffering. Take it as read and do it patiently. Don't imagine for one moment it's any different for you than it is



for everybody else that you have been teaching all these years that following Jesus means a ticket out of trouble. It doesn't. Do the work of an evangelist. Keep getting the Gospel out. Just seize any opportunity that comes along. Do what you need to do. Don't think that once you have preached your 2 sermons or one sermon or however many you do once a week in church that's all you do. No, be always aware of this thing: that you, like the rest of the people of God, have got the good news of the Gospel and seize any moment, any opportunity. Take it to explain the Gospel. To preach the Gospel. To reach out to people with the good news of the Gospel. You are always on duty. You are always on duty and you're always to be ready to proclaim the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. And in that way," says Paul, "you will fulfill your ministry which is to preach the word and it's only that that will keep us from being distracted by all the stuff that is going on in the world around us."

Why do you need to hear this? You need to hear this because you need to pray for those of us who preach. You need to hear this because you need to understand the importance of what goes on in the 40 minutes that we will shortly have spent this way together. You need to notice because you need to know that God speaks to you. You hear him when you hear his word. You hear him speaking to you. He is a living God. That's why he uses a living instrument to speak. He acts by that word. He acts in your life. Do you know, more good is being done to you than you are even intellectually conscious of? The word of God is washing over you. Even when you're not absorbing and taking it in, it's washing over you. It is cleaning out your system. It is bringing health into your heart. It isn't all intellectual. The preaching of the word of God is more than intellectual, even more than emotional. It is spiritual succor. It is the bread of life. It satisfies the parts of you that nothing else reaches. It is an event. It is an event. It is a moment of time in which we hear God speak. And in the aftermath of that, here is this great summary from Paul for those that are in the job and for all of us, "Be sober minded. Keep the head. Endure suffering. Be ready for whatever lies ahead. Do the work of an evangelist." For me that means taking opportunities to preach the Gospel in any context to however many people in any place wherever I'm asked. And for you it means being ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that you have and so fulfill the ministry that God has given to you.

In a moment we're going to sing a hymn, it's in your bulletin. We sang it at my ordination which was 150 years ago. John the Baptist was invited but he didn't come. When I started preaching, nobody wanted to hear me so I preached to the cows. I knew I had to preach, although I was terrified of speaking in public and I was quite shy in those days. The first few public, in front of real people events were horrendously embarrassing. A 25 minute sermon lasted 5 minutes. I was told that by the man at the door. He said, "You know, you only spoke 5 minutes." I said, "Are you sure? Are you sure it wasn't 10 minutes?" "No," he said, "it was 5." I said, "Are you sure it wasn't like 8 minutes?" "No, no," he said, "it was definitely 5." I said, "Are you sure? It could've been 6 minutes?" "No, no," he said, "I timed you. It was definitely 5 and we need more than that next time."

So it was an embarrassing thing and I remember at one point preaching in a church and my own home church, in fact, and somebody going out the door told me to look up a

particular verse in the Bible. I did. I went home and I looked in my Bible and the verse read like this, "Do not be hasty to open your mouth in the house of the Lord." I was devastated. I was crushed. I remember struggling and struggling and struggling and praying and I had a day of prayer to myself over this matter and over whether or not I had understood God's claim upon my life. And to cut a long story short, from 3 different sources on the same day, at college and then through someone's book they had given me and then in the evening through a sermon, the same text came up again and again, God's word to Jeremiah telling him that from the womb he had been ordained for this one thing and that day, I read these words,

"A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify,  
A never-dying soul to save,  
And fit it for the sky.

"To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfill:  
Oh, may it all my pow'rs engage  
To do my Master's will!"

*Lord, write your word on our heart to your glory. Amen.*