

Handling And Using The Word In Life

By Joel Wood

Bible Text: Titus 1:9

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Titus chapter 1. Our sermon text today is verse 9, but let me read verses 5 through 9. I'll be reading from the Modern English Version. Let me read those- read those verses to ramp up into the sermon text. Let us give careful attention to the reading of God's Word. "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city, as I commanded you: any man who is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children who are not accused of being wild or unruly. For an overseer must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not easily angered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, self-controlled, just, holy, temperate, holding firmly the trustworthy word that is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to convince those who oppose it." The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever.

We've spent a number of weeks now on looking at what an elder, what a pastor, should be. That he's not perfect but he strives for holiness. He puts off the deeds of the flesh and puts on the righteousness of Christ in his heart and life. And it comes down, now, to how he handles, how he views the Word, which is the central aspect in the life and ministry of an elder, either ruling as a lay elder or teaching as a pastor elder. And we see here that an elder must hold faithfully to the teaching, help those who need the truth, help with the truth, and hammer those who stand against the truth. I'll handle that a little more graciously than it might sound at first.

But firstly, an elder must hold faithfully to the teaching. And the Modern English Version handles the Greek a little bit better than even the King James does on this point. "Holding firmly the trustworthy word then it-- that is in accordance with the teaching..." And we see a few things from this, that, firstly, there- there must be teaching, there must be discipleship, there must be theological education. This involves pastors and sessions, it involves presbyteries, and it involves seminaries. This MUST be, we must have educated clergy in the pulpits of our churches. We must have men who have been set aside, not just by some internal sense of "I think God wants me to be a pastor." I've met a lot of men over the years who come to that conclusion after they fail at washing windows and selling cars and programming computers and, a number of things they fail at, and so they think "well I guess I'm just dumb enough I need to go into the ministry. I guess I'm just enough of a failure that I need to- I need to just step into the pulpit." No, that's not what we're going for! That's not- that's not the goal. The long practice in the reformed church is- is an educated clergy preaching to a literate laity. This is of utmost importance, that people know the Word. Why is it important for people to be able to read? Illiteracy is still a huge epidemic in our nation. Why should we, as the church, care about that? Remember a number of years ago the Miss America contestant who literacy was her thing that she was passionate about. And they asked her, "well what would you do if you met someone right now who is illiterate?"

What would you do?" She said, "well, I'd give them a copy of my book on literacy." No, we need to—we need to take time to educate, we need to invest in educational moments and institutions so that people can read. Why? So they can read the Word! So they can learn about Jesus, so they can study Christ and His ways. We must educate people to read.

But more importantly, we must have pastors who've been set aside and dedicated to the study of the Word. And the debate is swelling on the Internet, again: should pastors have to study the original languages? Why wouldn't you? What else are you going to do while you're there? I mean, it is amazing the dumbing down that has gone on in seminaries. I have a number of hobby horses that I'm trying to walk through the room and avoid, okay, I'm trying to do my best here. I praise God for our seminary that, when so many others were lessening the requirements, RPTS was raising its requirements for language study. I thank God for that, not because I came out some stellar linguistic scholar, by any stretch of the imagination. But it helps to go back to the original languages and be able to say, "what does God's Word say?" Are we being faithful to the teaching of the Word, are we being faithful to the teaching of the church? That education must be Word-centered. It's not enough to just say, "well, if someone's called to ministry, they need to go off and study somewhere." While that might sound like a good idea, understand that many are the obituaries that have been written for theological institutions that have turned away from the Word. Some of you may have seen this: the most recent is from one of the mainline denominations, this school's up in the Boston area. This is the quote from the chairman of the board: "A school that has taken on racism, sexism, heterosexism, and multiple interlocking oppressions is now called to rethink its delivery of theological education in a new and changing world," the very Reverend Gary Hall, Class of '76, Chairman of the Board said, "ending unsustainable spending is a matter of social justice." And the news agency that reported this was gracious enough to provide a translation of those sentences, which I thought was appropriate. "Having abandoned anything to do with Orthodox Christianity, we find that we have made ourselves completely irrelevant. If we spin our theological and financial bankruptcy as a sign of our virtue, maybe we won't look so bad."

Brothers and sisters, this has been written time and time and time again. Some of the oldest, most historic educational theological institutions in North America have gone the way of all flesh. Why? Because they abandoned the Word. They couldn't even hold on to the— the simple concept that there was some reason a picture of the Bible was etched in stone above the very doors that they would walk through to study. And they couldn't grasp it. I thought about reading some of the class descriptions from that seminary that I just noted but, seriously, I knew that some of you would be so offended that I wouldn't be able to get away with it. It is absolutely ludicrous what is touted as "theological education" in our nation today. We need to praise God for and support the seminaries that are holding true to the Word of— Word of God, our own and there are others, there are others. Let us pray for them. Let us pray for the professors, that it is so tempting to be original, to be neat, to be hip and cool. Let us not get wrapped up into that. Let us send our men to institutions where the simple word of God is taught simply. So that the people of God can be fed from the pulpits of our land. And elders and pastors must hold firmly to it, must hold firmly to the teaching. There must be a steadiness of faith rooted in the Word as it accords with the historic Christian faith. It isn't enough to have seminaries that are teaching the Word if we get in the pulpit and we get distracted. We must focus on the Word. And it doesn't do me any good to stand in the pulpit and stay focused on the Word when you all might get distracted with anything else. As a church, as a community, we must stay Word-centered. The Word of Christ must dwell richly among us as we minister to one another with the Word.

Secondly, an elder must help with the truth. "That he maybe able both to exhort with sound doctrine..."-- we'll allow that ellipsis to stand there, we'll handle the second part of that in a moment. This isn't just about getting people to do the right thing, AKA do what *I* want you to do. That's

manipulation. That's violence as we dealt with last week: forcing something from the outside that should be springing up from within. And- and that's what happens in these places that abandon the Word. The Spirit uses the Word, so even if the Spirit is still there and the Word isn't, the leadership is left to force from the outside what they want to be happening in the pew. We need the Word AND the Spirit. And we need to help people with the truth. Rob Bell, who is making a career out of walking away from the truth, this last week was quoted as saying that quoting Romans 8:28 to Christians who are suffering is oppressive. That that verse has not brought anyone any comfort. The theological word for that is idiocy. I was thankful for Owen Stron (?) who sent out at blurb over Facebook "if you've ever been comforted by this verse, please reach out to me because I'm writing a response to Rob Bell." It's ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous. That one of the most comforting texts of Scripture for the Christian is now being said "has brought no one any comfort." That's manipulation. That's violence. How do we help people with the truth? Well, publicly, we think of preaching. And preaching still remains to me one of the greatest mysteries on the planet. Because this sinful guy stands up here and talks to you sinful people out there about the Bible, about Christ. And the Spirit comes in and takes that word as it falls on the outer ear and He drives it down into your soul to your inner ear. And Lord willing, you're helped, you're changed. You might be frustrated, antagonized slightly along the way, but the Spirit works. It's so mysterious because we don't get a- we don't- we don't get a script sent to us every week from RP Central telling us "okay, here's the script for the sermon" or even "here's the lectionary, here are the verses that you should be covering this week." No, there are so many different men with so many different ways of doing it, and yet the Word of God is preached and the Spirit works in that.

Our directory for public worship talks about preaching a little bit. Hopefully after I read this you don't fire me and think "you're not doing your job" but here's what- here's what it has to say: [Ch 2] "[21] The preaching of the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation, is central to the work of the ministry. It should be done in such a way that the workman need not be ashamed, but may save both himself and those who hear him (First Timothy 4:16). The one who ministers the Word is to prepare for the preaching by careful study of the Scriptures and prayer. He should seek the aid of the Holy Spirit that he may declare the whole counsel of God. He should read widely and keep abreast of the scholarship and the social and doctrinal issues of the times. His messages should be adapted to the congregation, both in content and delivery. [22] The sermon is an exposition and application of Scripture. The continuous exposition of a book or a section of a book is an excellent method of preaching. However, topical messages are also appropriate to address the needs of the congregation and issues of the culture. The preacher should interpret Scripture in the context of redemptive history and the unfolding of God's plan of salvation. Faithful preaching must proclaim the- the explicit teaching of the Bible, the Word of God written, and proclaim Christ, the Word of God incarnate. [23] The servant of Christ is to preach in this manner: [a] Diligently, not doing the work of the Lord negligently. [b] Plainly, so that all ages and abilities may understand; delivering the truth not in the enticing words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect (First Corinthians 2[:4] and 1[:17]); also abstaining from an unprofitable use of unknown languages,"-- no problem here-- "strange phrases, and cadences of sound or words; and sparingly citing quotations from ecclesiastical or other human writers, ancient or modern, however elegant. [c] Faithfully, for the honoring of Christ and for the conversion, edification, and salvation of the people, and not for his own gain or glory; keeping nothing back that he may promote these goals, giving to each what is needed, and having impartial respect to everyone, without neglecting the most lowly, or sparing the most influential, in their sins. [d] Wisely, framing all his teaching, exhortations, and especially his reproofs, in such a manner as may be most likely to be effective; showing all due respect to each one's person and place, and not giving way to his personal animosities or prejudices. [e] Solemnly, as appropriate to the Word of God; avoiding any gestures, tone of voice, and expressions that would give opportunity for people to despise him and his ministry. [f] Lovingly, that the saints may see

his ministry springing from a genuine zeal for the Lord and a deep desire to do them good. [g] As taught by God, and convinced in his own heart, that all he teaches is the truth of Christ; living before the congregation as an example to them; earnestly, both in private and public, recommending his labors to the blessing of God, and watchfully looking to himself, and to the flock of which the Lord has made him an overseer. In this way, the truth will be faithfully preserved, many people will be converted to Christ and built up in the Christian faith in life, and he himself will receive many encouragements in his ministry in this life, and afterward a crown of glory in the world to come. [24] The worshipers participate in the preaching of the Word as they listen with 'diligence, preparation, and prayer, receive it with faith and love, lay it up in their hearts, and practiced it in their lives' (Shorter Catechism Question 90)."

That is what is to be going on in the preaching of the Word. That is what is to be happening week by week as we publicly help those in need with the truth. The truth has fallen on hard times in recent years and what- before we say, "well not in the church," yes, even in the church. Because when it comes to helping people suffering with the sin in, at, and around them, it seems that even the church is willing to turn ANYWHERE else than the truth of God's Word to help, to encourage, to build up. The Word should be central in the public preaching, as well as privately in the counseling, of the church. We note in the bulletin that I'm available, and some are being trained so that we have MORE available, to help people in need. What is biblical counseling? It's upholding the truth in theology of scripture and verbal interaction with another to confront the sin in, at, and around them, for their good and their change. But even in that, brothers and sisters, the church is willing to turn anywhere else than the truth of God's Word. They'll turn to any system that- that views man as simply an evolved animal, as simply a beast that needs retrained, as just some purely sexually motivated animal, rather than to turning to God's Word that knows what people are, what our problem is, and how to fix it. Brothers and sisters, we as the church are called to help. The elders, the pastors are called to help and we're called to help with the truth. We are to exhort with sound doctrine. And if we do anything less than that we are failing at our task.

Well, an elder is to hold faithfully to the teaching, he's to help with the truth, and he's to hammer those who stand against the truth. And I hear you. "Hammer? Really, Joel? That's word we're going to use?" Well, have you ever seen someone not good at nailing nail? Trust me, they don't "nail it" in any way. When we hammer something it takes exerting a particularly focused energy in a precise location to drive a point where it needs to go. Publicly this also involves preaching, as we saw in the definitions above. But nowadays it also involves writing and debates and even that dastardly dragon social media. There are a bijillion-- and I think that is technically a number. Remember I'm not good at math-- fronts on which truth is being accosted today. There are many who stand against the truth. And driven by love, driven by love we need to confront them. Your pastor and your elders need to be ready to convince those who oppose the teaching of the church. It's done publicly and it's done privately and this should be the more typical way in which we do it. But remember there are two types of people who oppose the truth. There are those who oppose it outwardly, in an antagonizing way, who are very vocal and very blunt about where they stand. And there are those who oppose it inwardly, in a silent rebellion against God and His Word. And brothers and sisters, the challenging thing about the church is sometimes we're not sure what to do with those who openly are antagonistic against the truth. And we choose to ignore and hope that they somehow get things worked out themselves, those who inwardly, silently oppose the truth.

So there's a point of application here for those who would say, "That's right, the church needs to stand against those on Facebook and Twitter and whatever the newest rage is in the last 15 minutes. We need to stand against those who would- who are even members of the church who are antagonistic against

what the church teaches. That's right, we need to do that." But brothers and sisters, how are YOU at being convinced? How are you in those dark corners of your heart where you oppose the truth of God's Word? Where you know what you should be believing and, consequently, should be doing and yet you simply refuse. And I'm sure you have a million excuses why that truth doesn't apply to YOU. And I'm sure they're absolutely valid and-- no they're not, they're not- they're not valid. God's truth applies to all of us, whether we oppose it or not, it is truth. Christ is shining in the dark recesses of your heart. Are you surrendering that ground to Him? Remember, evangelism is God taking ground outside of us. Sanctification is God taking ground inside of us. That war rages. Are you surrendering to Him? Second Timothy 2, we have this presented a slightly different way. [vs 24-25a] "The servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but must be gentle toward all people, able to teach, patient, in gentleness instructing those in opposition." That's why I felt free to use the word hammer, because we're going to hammer gently. We're going to focus that teaching where it needs to go, in such a way that it drives home the point that people need to hear. "In gentleness instructing those in opposition." And- and this speaks then- Paul then speaks to the motive. [25b-26] "Perhaps God will grant them repentance to know the truth, that they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." Brothers and sisters, so often we hear those that are resistant to all truth, or even some specific truth, and we're so quickly willing to just write them off. "Ah well, they're- they're beyond hope. Forget it, I'm not even going to waste my time." If you ever- you ever-- don't raise your hand-- have you ever-- well, unless you want to, you can surrender now-- have you ever thought that? "It's not even worth my time. I've told my son, I've told my daughter a million times. I've talked to my neighbor a million times. I've talk to my coworker a million times. It's just not worth it. I will never see fruit." But Paul comes in behind us and he whispers in our ear: perhaps. "Perhaps God will grant them repentance to know the truth and they may escape from the snare of the devil..." Brothers and sisters, let us instruct in gentleness those in opposition. Your pastor and your elders are called to this in a public, open forum. You are called to it in your home, your places of work, to, in gentleness, confront that opposition.

Jack van Impe used to send these little lapel pins around the United States, you'd see people wearing that. It had a trumpet and it would say, "perhaps today." I'd like to get a lot of those pins and pass them out, not because I believe in the dispensational rapture as Jack van Impe does, but we should be heralding Christ's blessings because perhaps today, perhaps today God will grant repentance to those to whom we preach the truth. First Thessalonians 5, Paul says, --and this is in case you question, "well, but that's the pastor's job, that's the elders job!" And I tell ya, I'm thankful for ruling elders who aren't afraid to know the truth and speak the truth and confront with the truth. They- they do their job. But listen, brothers and sisters-- [vs 14] "Now we exhort you, brothers, warn those who are unruly, comfort the faint-hearted, support the weak, and be patient toward everyone." There is an aspect of this job that belongs to all of us. Let us do it with diligence because perhaps today God will grant repentance that they might know the truth. And perhaps that today is here for you. Perhaps as I've been speaking, the Spirit has been confronting you in your heart about that aspect of truth, that part of the teaching of Scripture, that you have been standing, even if it's just on the inside, you've been standing in opposition to. And I would say perhaps today the Lord will grant you repentance that you might know and love the truth. An elder must hold faithfully to the teaching of Scripture, he must help those who need it with the truth, and hammer those who stand against the truth. The priority here is the truth, is God's Word among us, as the Spirit applies it to us, changing us, conforming us to the image of Christ.

Stand with me as we pray.