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WHY PREACHING IS ESSENTIAL

2 Timothy 4:1-5

By

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Special Message

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When people file out after church, they sometimes say things to their pastors that they probably didn't intend to come out that way. Here are a few that pastors have heard:

"Pastor, you always manage to find something to fill up the time."

"I don't care what they say, I like your sermons."

"If I'd known you were going to be good today, I'd have brought a neighbor."

"We shouldn't make you preach so often."

"Pastor, every week you're better than next week."

Preaching has fallen on hard times. Even many pastors do not believe in the relevancy of preaching in our TV age, where people have developed shorter attention spans. They contend that we ought to abandon doctrinal sermons in favor of more emotional forms of communication, such as drama and storytelling.

I'll be the first to admit that a lot of preachers are boring and irrelevant. Listening to their sermons is a lot like P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster described listening to a violin solo: "It was loud in spots and less loud in other spots, and it had that quality which I have noticed in all violin solos, of seeming to last much longer than it actually did."

Coupled with boring, irrelevant preaching is the fact that there has been, even in evangelical circles, an erosion of the sufficiency of Scripture as it applies to all of life. Several years ago, the editors of *Christianity Today* (2/10/92, p. 28) pontificated:

Myth: A pastor is competent to counsel his parishioners.

Fact: Most pastors are armed with only a meager knowledge of behavioral therapies. A pastor's calling is, primarily, a spiritual one, helping people to find strength in God's presence and a sense of divine direction in the midst of difficulty. Psychological adjustment is a different matter, and when it re-

quires serious attention, pastors should find ways of partnering with professional counselors or psychiatrists.

The implication of those words is that the Bible is a nice book that gives some uplifting thoughts about life. But when it comes to grappling with the tough problems of daily living, you'd better find a professional therapist. I agree that people often need individual counseling in order to apply the lessons of Scripture to their personal lives. But the idea that psychology offers solutions which the Bible lacks, undermines the sufficiency of Scripture and relegates preaching the Word to irrelevance regarding life's real problems.

A third factor that undermines biblical preaching is that most pastors are being asked to become the chief executive officers of the church business. They must know how to plan and implement church growth principles. They must understand management and financial concepts. Somewhere in their busy week, they're supposed to throw together some sort of uplifting talk from the Bible. But they aren't given the time to prepare solid biblical messages that feed the flock.

I concur with J. I. Packer who wrote (*A Quest for Godliness* [Crossway Books], p. 282), "We shall never perform a more important task than preaching. If we are not willing to give time to sermon preparation, we are not fit to preach, and have no business in the ministry at all." He argues (p. 281) that "the well-being of the church today depends in large measure on a revival of preaching in the Puritan vein. He says (p. 283), "... to the Puritan, faithful preaching was the basic ingredient in faithful pastoring." I agree. I see biblical preaching as my primary task.

You may be thinking, "Well you're saying that because you're a preacher. Of course preaching is important to you." But I am not saying that preaching is important simply because I am a preacher. I am saying that preaching is important because *God* says that it is important—in His God-breathed Word through the Apostle Paul to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:1-5). He's saying that

Preaching the Word and hearing the Word
are essential for God's people.

These words are important enough as they stand, but they take on more weight when you realize that they are Paul's final

charge to his beloved son in the faith, Timothy. Paul could not have emphasized the essential nature of preaching any more strongly: "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" (2 Tim. 4:1-2a). It follows, of course, that if preaching the Word is so important, then hearing the Word preached is also top priority, because a man does not preach to himself.

In 4:1-2, Paul talks about the priority of preaching that must be established; in 4:3-4, he mentions the problem with hearing the Word preached that must be avoided; and, in 4:5 he emphasizes the perseverance in preaching to be pursued, even when people don't want to listen.

1. The priority of preaching the Word must be established (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 should be preached because of the serious issues at stake.

The word translated "solemnly charge" (1 Tim. 5:21; 2 Tim. 2:14) has a legal nuance: Paul is calling Timothy in front of God's judicial bench and charging him under oath with the awesome 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 imparts 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 life is a serious matter. Every human being must someday stand before the living God to give an account of his or her 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. 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!

In the original text, there is no chapter break between 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 4:1-5. All Scripture is profitable for preaching. "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. The word "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 was limited by what the king had to say. 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 harmed 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 use tact and gentleness; but he must preach and apply the text of Scripture.

Thus Paul tells us that we need preaching because of the serious issues at stake; 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. Someone once enjoyed a sermon by a great preacher and asked him how long it took him to prepare it. "Twenty years," he replied. "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!

D. *How* to preach it? The Word should be preached with application to life.

"Reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (4:2). A preacher once asked an audience 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." The word 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 not simply give an emotional harangue. He must present his case in a logically convincing manner from the Word so that his hearers are persuaded that what it is saying is right even when 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 wrong; 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 has the nuance of 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 wraps his preaching 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 weak-

nesses. 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 the priority of preaching the Word must be established. But even great preaching that falls on closed ears and hardened hearts is not effective. Thus,

2. The problems of hearing the Word must be avoided (4:3-4).

Paul warns Timothy that the time will come when people (in the church is the implication) will not endure sound doctrine, but rather, wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate (lit., "heap up") 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 teaching 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. There is a tremendous temptation to the preacher, especially if he has a high need 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 ministry by whether you like him or not ("desires," 4:3), but rather by answering the question, "Does what he preach line up with what God's Word says?"

As a pastor, I try to serve the spinach of the Word along with the ice cream (the Word contains both). I try gently but firmly to confront sin with God's truth as well as tell you the solutions God prescribes. 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 grow to spiritual health if you do.

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

3. The perseverance of preaching the Word must be pursued (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 occasionally received letters from people in his congregation (invariably people he didn't know personally) who would say, "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 they always 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."

Third, "*Do the work of an evangelist*." Don't get sidetracked by those in the church who criticize you, but keep going after lost people. Evangelism is the cutting edge of the church's ministry.

Finally, "*Fulfill your ministry*." Paul is saying, "Don't leave the ministry and go into an easier line of work just because you run into opposition. Fulfill your mission as a preacher of God's truth! Follow me in fighting the good fight so that you will finish the course" (4:7). John Calvin explains, "The more extraordinary the eagerness of wicked men to despise the doctrine of Christ, the more zealous should godly ministers be to defend it, and the more strenuous should be their efforts to preserve it entire; and not only

so, but also by their diligence to ward off the attacks of Satan" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 255).

Conclusion

Stephen Olford, a godly preacher whose father was a missionary, was once about to speak when he was called off the platform by an emergency phone call. His mother was on the line and she told him that his father was dying. Stephen told her that he would go back to the meeting and explain the situation. They could make do with someone else, and he would come immediately. But his mother said, "No, your father doesn't want you to do that. He said, 'Tell the boy to preach the Word.'"

Preaching the Word and hearing the Word are essential for God's people. Preaching God's Word is my primary task. Your responsibility is to hear the preaching of God's Word with a view to obedience. After I'm done preaching, I hope you can look at your Bible and understand what it is saying and how it applies to your life.

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. In this day when preaching has fallen on hard times, I pray that I will faithfully preach the Word and that you will obediently hear the Word. Then on that great day when we stand before Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, we all will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servants!"

Discussion Questions

1. Why is biblical preaching not being emphasized today?
2. Even Jesus warned His audience about listening well (Luke 8:18). How can a person improve his listening ability?
3. Why does Paul say that sound doctrine must be "endured"? Does this imply that it confronts us with our sin?

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