

Excerpts From A Sermon

The Church And The Preaching Of The Word

2 Timothy 3:10 – 4:5

by Sinclair Ferguson



We come today to the theme of the church and the preaching of the word. I am going to read Paul's letter found in 2 Timothy 3:10 and continuing to 4:5. As we read this passage, you will recognize this as one of the places in our English Bible that the chapter division should not really be there . . . Let us hear God's word:

"You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. I 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; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."

A number of years ago, I had a conversation with a long-standing friend, the wife of one of my close friends at home. She startled me with something she said in the course of the conversation. Indeed, it left a very deep and a lasting impression on me. I was asking her about her work and she said to me, "What I do isn't really important." Then she said to me, "What you do, now, that's really important." She wasn't the kind of Christian who would demean the Biblical teaching on calling. She wasn't actually a woman who was just doing a little work in order to occupy her mind; or for that matter, for a little more in the family budget. She was, in fact, the only international-level scientist that I think I knew in Scotland. Her work had prolonged the life of those who were destined to die within weeks. She was a woman of high intellectual power. Here is what I believe she meant by what she said: What she does prolongs people's lives in this world. Preaching, however, transforms people's lives for all eternity. It made a profound impression on me. It was a reminder of how important the preaching of the word of God is in the life of every Christian, every church, and the world.

Indeed, that is the Pauline sense of things. When he speaks to his young friend, Timothy, towards the end of his own life he says, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and I charge you by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word of God." Paul understood, as my friend understood, that the preaching of the word of God is His great instrument for the salvation of sinners and the transformation of saints. In response to Paul's statement, some may assert that Paul lived in an age when people really responded to preaching and we no longer live in that kind of age. But did you notice in our reading that the context in which Paul exhorts Timothy to preach the word is precisely the context in which people no longer want to listen to orthodox Christian preaching? Paul tells Timothy that he must not do as so many others have done and will continue to do . . . He reminds his young charge that he must preach the word of God to those whom God has entrusted to his care . . . The word of God, about which he was speaking, is the very word of God which he described in chapter 3, verses 16 and 17: the scripture that is "breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

Did you notice how Paul picks up the language that he's used in chapter 3 verses 16 and 17 and says in essence: Since this is what the word of God is for (teaching and for reproof), preach it that way! Be ready in season and out of season to reprove, rebuke, and exhort . . . Incidentally, that is a great guide for you and me in our private Bible study. As we open the scriptures . . . we are to use the scriptures in the way they were given to us to be used: for teaching, for reproof, for correcting, and for equipping. So Paul, in essence, is saying to Timothy: since God has placed His word into your hands and into your heart, use that word in your preaching that it may fulfill its glorious four-fold function in the lives of God's people . . . It is that four-fold function of preaching that I want us to think about for a few minutes together this morning.

The Apostle Paul says that the preaching of the word is important, first of all, that we may be taught . . . To be taught the truth about God, as we sometimes say, "to learn to think God's thoughts after Him," to view our lives in this world not from a merely human perspective but with the wisdom, truth, and insight of God's word. And this is so important throughout the whole of scripture . . . remember God's words in Hosea, "My people perish for lack of knowledge." The prophets and the priests are condemned by God. Having been given God's word, they withheld God's word from His people.

There are things in God's word that are hard for us to take. There are aspects of God's word that penetrate us as a sharp sword. There are portions of God's word that will offend us. And Paul is saying to Timothy: if you are going to preach God's word, be prepared for people to be offended. But do not hide God's word from them because it is God's means of communicating His truths and His teaching to them. And that is why the teaching and the preaching of God's word is what we call expository. The preacher is not there to communicate his own personal insights or his own world view. He is there for one single purpose: to teach God's people what God has said in His word. And he dare not deviate from that responsibility or he starves the people of God and he destroys them for lack of knowledge. Why is this so important for the Apostle Paul? Why is he so passionate about this? Why does he charge Timothy to preach the word? Because he understands that the transformation of our lives is utterly dependent upon the renewing of our minds.

We live in a . . . feel-good culture. But the Bible says . . . we must learn to think biblically in order that we may live transformed lives. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Our minds . . . are so confused by nature, so darkened by nature that the word comes as illuminating light into our lives to help us understand who God is, who Christ is, who we are, and how we may find and know God. As our Lord Jesus said in the great prayer of John 17, "This is eternal life: to know You, the eternal God, and to know Jesus Christ whom you have sent." So the first task in the church's preaching is to teach the word of God.

However, the word of God is given to us not only for teaching. The word of God is given, he says, also for reproof. We might translate it: convicting. The teaching of God's word that addresses my mind is not intended to stop at my mind. The teaching of God's word that addresses my mind is

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meant to pass through my mind into the conscience to reprove me. Of course, this where the word of God becomes very up-close and personal to us. This explains why, under the ministry of God's word as it is patiently unfolded, it doesn't matter what kind of personality the preacher has. One of the things that will happen is that God will find me out . . .

Imagine for a moment, even as I am preaching the word of God to you, that I feel its weight upon my own life. I feel it exposing my own conscience . . . I sympathize with the position of the Psalmist in Psalm 130: "Lord if you display my iniquities who can stand in your presence?" If my iniquities were on display I would be out of the front door of the church, never to reappear, never again to occupy the pulpit.

And the wonderful thing about the preaching of the word of God . . . you and I find ourselves under the word of God to listen to the voice of God. It truly is sharper than any two-edged sword and it breaks through all of my defenses, penetrating my heart, exposing the dark shadows of my life and the secrets and subtle intentions of my heart. It exposes my deceitfulness and it exposes my hypocrisy. It lays me bare in the sight of God. Paul is saying to Timothy: Timothy, however painful it may be for you and however painful it may be for your people, it is what we need most of all! It is when our needs are exposed that we look for the grace to heal us.

You remember the remarkable passage of prophecy in Jeremiah 8, in which Jeremiah complains that Prophets are saying "peace, peace" when there is no peace. They are healing the wounds of the people lightly. They are saying to the people: "Don't worry about that. You aren't as bad as you think." And Jeremiah cries out in those wonderful words that even if you have never read you have heard sung, "Oh that there will be a balm in Gilead to heal souls that are conscience of their sins."

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful essay entitled, "Undeceptions." It applies to the preaching ministry of the word of God . . . I need to be "undeceived" about myself, my self-sufficiency, my pride, and my arrogance and all that goes on in the secret places of my heart . . . So long as somebody says to me "Sinclair, peace, peace" where there is really no God-given peace, I will be crying out "Oh is there not some balm in Gilead that someone might minister to me, to deal with my sin and my sick soul?"

It's like speaking of C.S. Lewis' novel, *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*, in which the useless Eustace is turned into a dragon. Aslan comes and he scrapes the dragon's scales off him with his paw, making that horrible kind of sound. Later on Eustace is asked about it and he says how horrible it was except for the joy of sensing that he was being made clean again. That is what we experience in the preaching of the word of God as it exposes our need and unmask our hypocrisy. As we place ourselves before God, we discover the joy and the thrill of being made clean by His word.

This brings us to the third thing that Paul talks about. After speaking of teaching and reproof he speaks about the correcting the word of God accomplishes as it's preached. When I was brought up, reprove and correct meant exactly the same thing: that a person was wrong . . . But that is not the tone of Paul's language here . . . the language he employs was used in the medical world of the first century to describe the healing and correcting of a broken limb. It was also used to speak of the reconstruction of something that had been destroyed. Paul is, in essence, telling Timothy that the glorious thing about the ministry of God's word is not only that it rebukes and undeceives us, exposing our sinfulness. When it has done that, it comes to us in all its gracious, saving, healing, and life-transforming power.

In a sense the pulpit is a place of deconstruction. But it is also a hospital for those who go to the Great Physician and beseech Him, "Oh, Great Physician Jesus Christ, heal me by Your word of grace!" Those of you who are physicians know that some men who are sick will do everything to resist going to the doctor to be told there is something wrong with them. Church can be exactly the same . . . Paul is saying that if you don't want to acknowledge something is wrong with you, you can never in this world, nor in all eternity, be healed by Jesus Christ. We find this as we place our lives . . . under the ministry of God's word. He pours the transforming grace of His truth into our lives. He

chisels away at our sin because He wants to reproduce in our lives the characteristics of our Lord Jesus Christ and make us more and more like our Savior.

So, the word of God is given to Timothy and to us for teaching, for reproofing, for correcting, and finally, for equipping. You see, this is why my friend said, "What you do is really important because it equips me for what I do." Oh, I pray that you may know this: what happens in these few minutes we have together on the Lord's Day equips you for every day of the week. And as the word of God penetrates your mind, cleanses your heart, and transforms your life, it equips you to serve Him for His glory. You will find yourself in the middle of the week living for His glory because the things preached from God's word have been impressed upon you by the Holy Spirit.

So as we sit together under the preaching of God's word each Lord's Day morning and Lord's Day evening, what is happening to us? Well, we are in a classroom in which we are learning to be disciples, we are in a hospital room in which the Great Physician is engaged in uncovering our secret spiritual sicknesses, and we are in surgery where what defiles our lives is cut out by the scalpel of the Holy Spirit. Then we begin to be healed and this place becomes a restorative place, an equipping place . . . a training ground. We who came in crippled, broken, and wounded by our sins and by the world are able to walk out the door into the world and live for the praise of the Glory of God . . .

My dear friends, we should never place our lives under any kind of preaching that will not do us good for all of eternity. But oh, to think, that through the preaching of the word something might be done among us, in us, which will last for all eternity. It is no wonder Paul says to Timothy, "I charge you in the presence of God, who would judge and quicken the dead, preach the word."

May He give us a longing for that word, and grant the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst, that may it be so.