

Do You Need to Be Encouraged or Warned?

Next Sunday morning, which kind of sermon do you need to hear: a comforting lesson that helps you deal with discouragement or one that gets in your face and warns you to take God more seriously? Depending on your circumstances, you will probably need one more than the other, but whatever your needs are, the Scriptures have what you need.

If, despite your best efforts, you've been struggling and doubting whether you're going to make it to heaven, you need to be encouraged. You need to trust a God who is greater than your hardships, and there are texts in the Scriptures that you need to pay particular attention to. You need, for example, to hear Jesus encourage His disciples: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (**Jn. 16:33**).

But if you've been lax and overconfident lately, your problem lies in the opposite direction. You need to be warned, and there are passages that will do just that. You need to hear, for example, the Lord blistering the Laodiceans: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth" (**Rev. 3:15,16**).

Passages that give us solace and security (such as **Heb. 4:16**: "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need") are not in conflict with those that stress reverence and responsibility (such as **Hb. 12:29**: "For our God is a consuming fire"); they just address two different needs, both of which we will have at one time or another. The Bible is a medicine cabinet that contains both sedatives and stimulants; which medicine we need at a particular time depends on what is happening at that moment.

Over time, of course, most of us will need a balance of both, and that is one good argument for learning all that is in the Bible. We need to be so familiar with all the book of God that in the exigencies of any moment we can turn to the passage we need to hear *at that moment*. And not only that, we need to be able open the Bible and read to someone else what they most need to hear *at that moment*.

Anytime a gospel preacher steps into the pulpit, he faces a tough challenge: he must judge the needs of a *group* of listeners wisely and present a lesson that meets the main need of the group as a whole, without doing damage to individuals in the audience whose needs lie in the opposite direction! A group that needs to be encouraged may contain an individual who is already overconfident concerning his salvation, and a lesson that comforts the group is likely to send that overconfident individual away confirmed in his overconfidence. On the other hand, a strong lesson that warns those who think they stand to take heed lest they fall is likely to have a discouraging effect on that downtrodden soul in the audience who was already doubtful of her salvation and now goes away thinking the task is even more impossible than she thought.

So what is the answer? It is that we all need *all of God's word*. And not only that, we need *all of those who preach and teach God's word*. Some individuals need encouraging while others need warning. Some congregations need to be comforted while others need to be confronted. Some preachers tend to be better encouragers while others do a better job of warning. It is the *net effect* of all of us doing what we personally think needs to be done that

— *over time* — will be the mix out of which God will bring forth the accomplishment of His purposes (**1 Cor. 12:14-22**). The work is much too important (and much too big for any individual) for us to waste time quibbling about whether someone else is putting the emphasis where we personally think it needs to be put.

And what is the application for me personally? It is that I probably need to hear that which I think I least need to hear! The preacher who emphasizes things that I think don't need to be emphasized is probably bringing a helpful counterbalance to my thinking. And the passages of Scripture that seem least congenial to my thinking on a given day are probably those that I most need to listen to.

Variety is more than just the spice of life: it's a requirement for spiritual survival. Do you want a deeper devotion to God? Do you want to be more devout? Then study Bible passages you think you don't need to study and listen to gospel sermons you think you don't need to listen to. Some- how, you'll be encouraged. Sooner or later, you'll be warned. And in the long run, you'll be more healthy spiritually.

Gary Henry