

“Preach the Word”

2 Timothy 4:1-5

Baxter Exum (#960)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Four Lakes Church of Christ



Introduction:

Up at the front this morning, hopefully most of you have noticed that there are several boxes. If you have had a chance to come up here and look at these, then you know that these boxes contain every sermon that I have ever preached, starting with #1, a very short lesson delivered on Wednesday evening, June 20, 1984, when I was only 12 years old, and when I am done this morning, I will add today's lesson, #960. I put a little Post-It note at the point where we moved from Janesville to Madison, and so the lessons to the right of that note have all been preached here in Madison since April 2000.

As I was preparing for this morning's lesson, and as I briefly looked back over the past 23 years of preaching and teaching, at first I was a little concerned that my entire life can be boiled down to three file boxes. But then I wondered: Does preaching really matter? With all of the studying, and prayer, and reading, and researching, and late nights, and rehearsing, and even through the delivery of each of these lessons, does preaching really matter? Does preaching really do any good?

Several weeks ago, we started a series of lessons on the acts of worship—those things that we do in the Sunday morning assembly—on the first day of every week. We started by looking at the act of public prayer, and we looked together at Solomon's prayer—the prayer that was spoken by King Solomon at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. Solomon asked that God would listen to the prayers of His people. Solomon asked that God would forgive. And Solomon asked that God would hear the foreigners—at least a little bit of foreshadowing to the fact that God would someday welcome the Gentiles into the royal priesthood of Christianity.

Two weeks ago, we considered the act of singing. We noticed that our singing is to be done to one another. We noticed that our singing is to come from the heart—the heart is the only instrument that we as Christians have ever been told to use in our praise. And we also learned that our singing is to be addressed to God.

This morning, though, as we ask ourselves about the value of preaching, we come back to the question: Does preaching really matter? Over the past 20 years, we have all heard dozens of lessons on the proper use of money and the danger of debt, and yet: Has it really done any good? Over the past 20 years, we have all heard dozens of lessons about God's plan for the family—for raising children, for being a good spouse, for avoiding divorce: But has it really done any good? Sometimes I tell

people that the funerals I have preached have been a lot more permanent than some of the weddings. Over the past 20 years, we have all heard dozens of lessons about the importance of moral purity and Christian living: But has it really done any good?

These are all questions that we could discuss here this morning, but it seems that we are asking the wrong question, because when it comes to the question of whether preaching really matters, we need to be asking: Does God have something to say on the relevance of preaching? I would suggest that the answer is found in **2 Timothy 4**. We know that the book of **2 Timothy** contains the last words of the apostle Paul, and there is certainly something very special about a person's last words. The book of **2 Timothy** was written as the apostle Paul was awaiting his execution in the city of Rome. ****PPT****

Several weeks ago, we had the privilege of visiting the actual prison where the apostle Paul was held. It is referred to as the Mamertine Prison and is located right next to the ruins of ancient Rome. The picture on the right shows the entrance to the prison underneath, and the building on top was added sometime later. But the actual prison is basically a dungeon—basically a hole in the ground—not much bigger than one of our classrooms. The picture on the left was taken inside the prison cell, and it was so hard to get any perspective down there. It was so small, it was dark, and I could hardly back up far enough to get a picture of anything. A small stairway has now been added for the benefit of those who come to see it, but at the time of Paul, the only entrance was basically a hole in the ground—I would compare it to a man-hole. ****PPT**** History tells us that the prisoners were lowered into the prison through that hole by a rope, and then the hole was sealed off with bars. There were no windows, no doors, but only this hole in the ceiling of the room. What a blessing it was to be able to visit the room where the book of **2 Timothy** was most likely written. I have already told some of you, but there were two older ladies who were already down there when I got down the stairs. We had a very interesting conversation about the Lord's church, and I was able to give them a wooden nickel and invite them to visit our website and learn more about the plan of salvation! All of this was in the actual room where Paul most likely wrote the passage that we are about to consider this morning—not long before he was beheaded for preaching the gospel. ****PPT****

If you will, then, as we study the importance of preaching, please look with me at **2 Timothy 4:1-5**, the last words of the apostle Paul to the young preacher Timothy...

¹ 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: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, be sober in

all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

As we look back at these five verses, I would like for us to consider Paul's last words concerning the kind of preaching that is pleasing to God. I want us to look at three basic reminders that Paul gives to the young preacher Timothy.

I. And one of the first things we notice is that A GOSPEL PREACHER IS ULTIMATELY PREACHING FOR AN AUDIENCE OF ONE (verse 1).

****PPT****

The point Paul is making here is that God pays attention to what is said in the pulpit. As the preacher is preaching the word of God, he is preaching (first of all) for an audience of one. If the Lord is pleased, then it does not really matter what fellow human beings might say, and (in a similar way) if the Lord is not pleased, then the applause of thousands will make no difference.

Over the past eight years, I have preached more than 400 sermons here at the Four Lakes congregation. I could say that that is a lot of sermons to preach. You, of course, could quickly reply, "**That's a lot of sermons to listen to,**" and you would be right in saying that! But the day is coming when I will need to give an account to God for every word that has been spoken from this pulpit over the past eight years. When you multiply it out, there have been roughly 1.6 million words spoken from this pulpit. I have preached close to 4 million words in my lifetime. I will give an account for those words I have preached, and all of you will give an account for those words you have heard.

And so as the apostle Paul is coming close to the end of his life and as he is giving the young preacher Timothy some advice on preaching, the apostle Paul reminds Timothy that he is ultimately preaching for an audience of one. The emphasis in **verse 1** is on the Lord Jesus Christ. Apparently, Martin Luther once said, "**I preach as though Christ was crucified yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is coming back tomorrow.**" Those are some very wise words! Another famous preacher once said, "**One of the best proofs of the inspiration of the Bible is that it has withstood so much preaching!**" Maybe that is the case here in Madison, but whatever the case might be, Paul takes it back to Jesus.

First of all (in **verse 1**), we are to preach with the understanding that Jesus will judge the living and the dead. Whether we are alive or dead at the Second Coming, we will be judged by the words of Christ. We will be held accountable to the truth of God's word. As far as the preacher is concerned, I am reminded of Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 4:1-5**, where Paul said, "¹ **Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.** ² **In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.** ³ **But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself.** ⁴ **For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me**

is the Lord. ⁵ Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. We are to preach, then, in view of the Lord's coming judgment.

Secondly, we are also told to preach while being motivated by the appearing of Jesus Christ. In one sense, Jesus has already appeared. But in another sense, Jesus will be appearing again, and we are to preach with the idea of getting people prepared for that second appearing. In the ancient world, the word that Paul uses here was used to refer to the visit of the Roman emperor to a far-off city or village. The town would prepare for his "**appearing.**" They would clean up and put everything in order for the appearance of the emperor. Timothy was to preach in preparation for the "**appearing**" of Jesus Christ.

And finally, we are to preach with the understanding that Jesus has established His kingdom. The kingdom Paul is referring to is the Lord's church. Timothy, then, was to preach for the benefit of the kingdom of God.

And so we learn something about the importance of preaching as we find, first of all, that Timothy is basically told that he is preaching for an audience of ONE.

II. As we look back at 2 Timothy 4, not only do we see the motivation (or the basis) for the command, but in verse 2, we get to the command itself, as the young preacher Timothy is told to PREACH THE WORD.

****PPT****

The word "**preach**" goes back to the ancient practice of a king sending out messengers to proclaim some form of breaking news. Before the days of the internet, before the days of TV and radio, before the days of the printed page, if a king had a message he would call on certain men to go out and publicly proclaim that message. They would go out to the city gate. They would go out on the street corners. They would go out in the marketplace. They would scatter all through the kingdom "preaching" or "proclaiming" the message that the king had told them to proclaim. They were not ambassadors. In other words, they did not have the power to negotiate—they were not sent out to argue with people, but their sole responsibility was to faithfully communicate the message from the king.

We think about those men in the ancient world who were appointed by the king to announce the time at the top of the hour all night long, "**Three o'clock and all's well!**" Literally speaking, those men were preachers appointed by the king. This is the meaning of the word—they were proclaimers. They were commanded to go out and make the king's announcements in a loud, clear voice so that all of the people could hear the message.

As far as this verse is concerned, we clearly see the message in verse 2. Preachers are told to "**preach the word.**" The "**word**" has to go back to the last two verses

of the previous chapter. In **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, the apostle Paul had just said, **"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."** And so the preacher is to preach the word of God.

This is the main reason why I make every effort to preach what are known as "expository" sermons. An expository sermon is a message based primarily on one paragraph of Scripture. The structure of the lesson as well as almost all of the supporting material comes from within that one paragraph of God's word. And so in theory, it should be possible for those in the audience to open their Bibles to one passage of Scripture and to leave it there, and to come away with an answer to the question: What does God want me to understand from this passage of the Bible? This is the goal of expository preaching.

In the remainder of **verse 2**, Paul basically goes on to tell Timothy to use a variety of approaches in preaching the word of God. And here we find a few more details about preaching. First of all, we find that Timothy is to, **"...be ready in season and out of season."** I had a list of things I wanted to do as soon as I got high speed internet in my office, and at the top of that list I wanted to listen to a sermon by Marshall Keeble. And so as soon as the cable was hooked up, I sat down and did a search for "Marshall Keeble audio." I would encourage you to do the same. He was a powerful preacher. I learned this morning that brother Keeble actually baptized brother Walt's father and grandfather. Marshall Keeble had a neat way of putting what we are looking at right here. Brother Keeble would say that we are to, **"Preach it when they like it, and preach it when they don't!"** Or, as Paul says, we are to preach God's word, **"in season and out of season."**

I have not been fishing for many years, but even I know that some seasons are better for fishing than others. Perhaps we think of fishing on a lazy summer afternoon. But as we know from living here in Madison, there are certain people out there who will go fishing at any time of day and night, and there are many who will even go fishing on a day like today. They will take along a giant auger, and they will drill through two feet of ice, and they will sit there on an upside-down bucket until they catch something—regardless of how cold it gets. Paul is saying that we are to have the same attitude about preaching. We are to preach the word of God, **"in season and out of season,"** when it is convenient and when it is not convenient.

Paul goes on and tells the young preacher Timothy that he is to **"reprove"** in his preaching. Literally, the word refers to bringing something to light, to expose something, to point out something to someone. As a preacher, Timothy was to convince his hearers of their true condition. Timothy was to very clearly convince people that they were not living the way that God would have them to live. Sometimes the process is painful—sometimes it gets very specific.

I once heard a story from many years ago about a preacher who moved into a logging community. Right away, the new preacher noticed that some of his members were dragging logs that had floated down the river from another village further

upstream. Each log was marked with the owner's stamp on the end of it—almost like a cattle brand, and the logs would all get sorted out at the end. But the preacher noticed that the men were sawing off the ends of the logs and marking them with their own stamp. He couldn't believe it, and so the next Sunday he preached a lesson on the sin of stealing. After the lesson, there were all kinds of compliments—people absolutely loved the lesson. But the next week they went right back to what they were doing. And so the preacher preached the same lesson all over again, but this time he closed a little bit differently. He closed with the words, **"Thou shalt not saw the ends off of thy neighbor's logs."** They got the point, and they ran the preacher out of town. I think we would agree that the preacher had finally fulfilled his God-given responsibility. He had **"reproved"** them—he had brought their sin to light.

In **verse 2**, Timothy is also told to **"rebuke."** The word means to speak seriously, to warn, to threaten, to punish. The preacher's responsibility is to warn about the consequences if someone continues going in the wrong direction. The word refers to expressing strong disapproval about something. One expert in the Greek language has said that this is a strong word—it is a **"sharp, severe rebuke with possibly a suggestion, in some cases, of impending penalty."** The idea here is that the preacher is to say, "Change, or else!" The people may or may not listen, but the preacher's responsibility is to sound the alarm.

We also find in **verse 2** that Timothy is told to **"exhort."** The word means that we are to appeal to people. We are to encourage, request, implore, entreat, comfort, and cheer up. The word here carries the idea of begging someone (or urging someone) to change their behavior. Perhaps all of this could be summarized by an old saying among preachers: **Our job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.** If there is rebuking with no exhorting, then the preacher only adds to people's burdens and weighs them down. But if there is exhorting without rebuking, then the preacher is guilty of allowing people to continue in sin. And so these ideas need to be combined together.

At the end of **verse 2**, Paul tells us to do these things, **"...with great patience and instruction."** The word **"patience,"** here, refers to the idea of never being annoyed—even without immediate results. The gospel preacher needs to realize that some people do not change overnight. Sometimes people change very gradually. Sometimes it may take years for someone to finally "get it," and so the apostle Paul tells the young preacher Timothy that he is to preach, **"...with great patience and instruction."**

As he writes from a Roman prison shortly before his death, Paul has now reminded Timothy that he is preaching for an audience of one. He has also reminded Timothy that he is to preach the word of God.

III. But before Paul closes his final letter, he adds several words of warning as he also reminds the young preacher Timothy that he will need to OVERCOME A WIDE VARIETY OF OBSTACLES AS HE PREACHES.

****PPT****

In **verse 3**, Paul warns Timothy that a time is coming when people will not endure sound doctrine. **"Sound doctrine"** is just another way of saying, **"healthy teaching."** A time was coming, then, when people would not put up with Timothy's message. They would dismiss it as Timothy's opinion, Timothy would be ignored, and the church in Ephesus would eventually bring in other men who would preach the message that they wanted to hear. By the time the book of **Revelation** was written, we know that Paul's prediction had come true. We find that the Christians in Ephesus had **"left their first love."**

Just this past week, I had the privilege of studying the Scriptures with a man from this community who was looking for a church that meshed with certain aspects of his Buddhism. He was asking some questions about reincarnation, and I did the best I could to explain that there is nothing in the Bible about reincarnation, so we do not believe in it. He went on to explain that he takes what he likes from the world's major religions and leaves the rest behind. I explained that we believe the word of God from cover to cover, every word of it. He was shocked, and it suddenly became clear to this man that he had apparently called the wrong church. And so he said that he would keep on looking for a church he could agree with. Truly, as Paul said (in **verses 3-4**), **"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."** Instead of changing his beliefs to fit the word of God, this man was looking for a word to fit the way he believed. He wanted a religion in his own image. He wanted to have his ears tickled. I invited him to come and see for himself—maybe we will see him here someday. But it was clear (to me at least) that we were not heading in the same direction.

The same kind of situation sometimes happens within the Lord's church. It can be so tempting, sometimes, to compromise here and there for the sake of numbers—perhaps to bend the rules for someone we love, perhaps to accommodate an influential or wealthy member. The apostle Paul, though, tells Timothy to always keep on preaching the word of God, regardless of the consequences. As William Penn once said, **"Right is right, even if everyone is against it, and wrong is wrong, even if everyone is for it."**

It almost seems at this point that Paul could almost anticipate Timothy asking a question, **"But Paul, what if no one seems to be listening? I am preaching, and rebuking, and exhorting, I am doing the very best I can, but no one seems to care. What do I do now?"** And in **verse 5**, Paul says, **"But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."** No matter what happens, Paul tells Timothy to keep a level head. He tells Timothy to **"endure hardship."** It will be difficult. Sometimes the hardship will even come from within the congregation. And so Paul reminds Timothy that he is to

"...do the work of an evangelist." I appreciate the word **"work"** there! Preaching is hard work. The word **"evangelist"** refers to **"someone who publicly proclaims the good news."** No matter what happens, Timothy is to keep on preaching the good news. And finally, Paul tells Timothy to **"fulfill his ministry."** The word **"ministry"** means **"service,"** and so Paul is telling Timothy that no matter what happens, he has a job to do, and his mission of service comes directly from Jesus Christ Himself.

Conclusion & Invitation:

As we close our lesson this morning, we get back to the question of whether preaching really matters. I have told you before about a provocative letter that was published several years ago in the British Weekly newspaper, **"It seems that ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending church quite regularly for 30 years and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I discovered that I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister's time might be more profitable spent on something else?"** People wrote in for weeks in response, but the firestorm did not end until another older man wrote in with this response, **"I have been married for 30 years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals—mostly my wife's cooking. Suddenly I have discovered that I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death a long time ago."**

We may not remember every sermon we have ever heard, and yet God certainly does have something to say about the relevance of preaching! The apostle Paul reminded the young preacher Timothy that he was preaching for an audience of One. He reminded him to preach the word of God. And he reminded him to keep on preaching the truth regardless of the consequences.

A lot of times, people will reject the message. At those times, perhaps we should remember God's encouragement as He sent out the prophet Ezekiel in **Ezekiel 2:4-5**, **"I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' As for them, whether they listen or not—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them."**

In the same way today, a preacher will ultimately be judged by whether he has faithfully proclaimed the word of God. Not long after I first started preach, my dad gave me something to hang on the wall in the office, a quote from John T. Lewis, **"I would rather have thousands say to me at the judgment, 'We heard you preach, and you hurt our feelings,' than to have just one lost soul to say, 'I heard you preach, but you did not tell me the truth.'"** All of us here this morning will be judged by whether we have obeyed the gospel message. The good news is that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised up on the third day. We respond to that message by turning away from sin, by allowing ourselves to be immersed in

water, and by coming up out of the water as newborns in the family of God. If you are ready to obey the good news, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org