

Preaching the Gospel, Part 2

2 Timothy 4:3-8

18 November 2018 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Idea: God's people preach the truth, even to the end.

Big Question: Why is it important to preach the word?

Introduction

What causes a church to die?

How long have you got, right?

No doubt, there are a whole bunch of things that might cause churches to close their doors.

But there's one really simple and effective way of doing the job properly, though.

And it's this: stop preaching the word.

Starve the church of nutrition until it dies.

The Communist Party in China have worked this out.

According to a relatively recent article on news.com.au, of all places churches are having their access to the Bible restricted to a "version" the government approves of:

"In April, China's religious affairs department published an article saying that churches must endorse the party's leadership as part of "Sinicization."¹

"Only Sinicized churches can obtain God's love," the article stated."

Bibles have been seized and banned. Digital versions can no longer be found online. Only an officially approved version from the government-sanctioned open church is available.

Restricting access to Bibles is a sure-fire way of killing off the church.

Because there is power in the preaching of the word.

The Bible is God's words that illuminate our hearts and free us from our slavery to sin.

Without it, the church will soon die.

In the 1970s, whole denominations voluntarily decided to give up on the Bible.

They agreed that the Bible is just a guide to faith, rather than the Word of God.

Doctrine didn't matter all that much, they said.

They believed that the world would be won to Christ by working together and showing our unity.

Preaching the Word got sidelined.

History shows us the result: on the whole, those churches have been in terminal decline.

God's people need God's word.

Outline

We're at the climax of the letter we know as 2 Timothy.

Everything that's been said so far has been building up to what's said in chapter four.

Last week, we looked at the first two verses.

Under God, Paul gave Timothy a charge or commission.

That commission was this: Preach the word.

Whether it's convenient or not, proclaim the message of Christ as it was passed down from the apostles.

Correct, rebuke and encourage as you patiently teach people from the Bible.

We saw that one of the main motivators for Timothy to preach the word is that Jesus is coming back to establish his kingdom and judge everyone, verse one.

Before that happens, new times are on the horizon; a new era is coming.

The time is coming when there are going to be two departures.

This passage is full of comings and goings.

These two departures are two more reasons for Timothy to preach the word.

God's people preach the truth, even to the end, because

- People will depart from the truth (vv3-5)
- Preachers will depart from the world (vv6-8)

People will depart from the truth

The time's coming, Paul says, when people will depart from the truth.

They won't put up with sound doctrine anymore.

Verse 3:

2 Timothy 4:3a (NIV11) ³ For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine.

If you've read the whole letter up to this point, this's hardly a surprise.

In fact, you might well think that time had already come.

It's very clear that the seeds of discontent had already been sown in the church Timothy was working in.

If he hadn't already experienced what it was like to preach the word "out-of-season", he was certainly about to.

So, Tim, don't get caught off-guard.

Sooner or later, some people won't welcome him preaching the truth.

They'll close their ears, verse 4.

They'll start to filter the word of truth out.

Not interested in hearing the truth being proclaimed, they close themselves off.

They'll do a slightly more sophisticated version of putting their fingers in their ears and saying, "Nah, nah, nah, I can't hear you."

But only slightly more sophisticated.

These people don't start off looking dodgy.

They start by listening to the truth, but over time they turn their ears away.

They're often interested in the kinds of myths that Paul warned about in 1 Timothy 1 & 4.

The kind of person who likes playing on the fringes of theology – they camp out in areas of speculation.

They stop reading the Bible and start reading garbage like the Shack.

Paul describes them as having "itching ears".

This was a phrase that people were probably familiar with at the time.

In the ancient world, there were people called sophists who went around and people paid them to teach them how to argue.

The best ones could argue for one thing so well that you'd be convinced and then argue the exact opposite so you'd be convinced of that as well.

They were masters who'd tell people exactly what they wanted to hear in exchange for money.

Clement of Alexandria described one of these speakers like this. They were

"scratching and tickling, not in a manly way, in my opinion, the ears of those who wish to be tickled."

I don't know if you get itchy ears from time to time, like I do.

It's really annoying because there's not really anything that you can do about the itch on the inside of your ear.

These people are always looking for something new – it doesn't matter if it's true or historical or real.

As long as it relieves the itch.

They're bored with

*the old, old story,
Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
Of Jesus and His love;*

We all know that an itch is never really relieved by scratching it though, is it?

It feels good while we're distracted for a while but doesn't give us what we're actually looking for and ultimately hurts us.

The same is true of dodgy doctrine.

The fact that they do this doesn't just say something about their doctrine, but it actually says something about them.

It shows what their character is like.

They don't really have a thirst for God's truth.

So, they'll go looking for voices that tell them what they want to hear.

They don't want to be corrected or rebuked – like Timothy's called to do in verse 2.

They don't even want to be encouraged – at least not Biblically.

They just want to be affirmed in what they already believe.

This's so easy to do in the internet age.

If you don't like what you're hearing at church, it's so easy to go and find a blog or sermon that agrees with you.

So many preachers are so easily available – the bad ones as well as the good ones – that it's really not that hard to find and surround yourself with people who agree with you.

It's true that there is wisdom in many counsellors, however, sometimes we just keep asking until we find someone who gives us the answer that we're looking for.

We can be like the kid who goes and asks their mother if they're allowed to do something.

When they don't get the answer they want, they ask their father.

If he doesn't say, "Yes," then they go and ask Grandma, because Grandma always says yes!

I remember hearing a pastor who preached at conferences tell of something that happened to him once.

At conferences, there is often a line of people who want to talk to the speaker afterwards.

Sometimes the questions are related to what's been said, but mostly they've got nothing to do with what's been said.

He recounted how one time, a woman came up and asked whether it was okay for her to be living with her unbelieving boyfriend.

This wasn't a grey area – she was clearly sinning.

Before he answered her though, the speaker was wise enough to ask what her pastor had said.

She replied that he said it wasn't okay.

What about her believing friends? They also agreed that she was being disobedient.

He was onto her.

This woman didn't really want an answer – she just wanted someone reputable to affirm that what she was doing is okay.

She was going around asking until she could find someone to affirm her.

Every other godly counsellor could tell her it wasn't okay, but if just one person said that it was then she'd be okay to keep doing it.

And so she was going around trying to find that one person.

You might think that sounds a little bit extreme... and it is!

However, I suspect that most of us have been guilty of the same thing at one time or another.

There's a doctrine or a teaching that we don't like or disagree with, so we go looking for an expert who agrees with us.

Because if someone else agrees with us – especially if they know Greek and Hebrew – then it's legit.

And we call it "research".

When really all we're doing is trying to legitimise what we already think by finding an expert who agrees with us.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't turn to godly teachers to help us work our beliefs and theology out – we should!

But careful and honest Bible study looks at the arguments put forward by various people and compares them to the Bible.

True Christian study and research is interested in how our position matches up to the Bible, not whether we can find someone to justify our position.

We shouldn't hold to a position just because someone else who's respected does.

The application at this point for all of us is clear.

Are you willing to listen to God or are you always going around looking for someone who'll affirm your behaviour?

Are you listening to people who care for your soul or just to the people who are telling you what you want to hear?

We all need to check our own hearts and consider if we're listening to the word of God or just looking for what we want to hear.

That takes humility.

We'd probably all say that we want to hear from the word of God, but it's not always that clear in the moment.

I'm sure you've all heard someone trapped in sin try to justify themselves.

They come up with some of the most imaginative and feeble reasons to justify what they're doing.

And you're standing there listening and you think to yourself, "Even blind Freddy can see right through it."

But they're so desperate to justify themselves that they'll grab hold to anything.

That's all of us from time to time.

It might even be you today.

My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will convict you and I and bring us to a knowledge of the truth in those moments.

That's why Timothy needs to keep preaching the word.

That might seem futile and disheartening, but he needs to keep doing preaching faithfully precisely because people won't want to hear it.

Paul begins verse 5 with those important words – but you.

It's a phrase that's scattered throughout the book to draw a comparison.

That's what those people do, but you – Timothy – need to do things differently.

Let me tell you about what I think is sadly not an uncommon scenario.

A church calls a new pastor to come and work at their church.

Especially if he starts to faithfully preach the Scriptures, there are almost always some people who get upset.

Because there are many people who don't want to hear the Bible taught.

When people who aren't interested in sitting under sound teaching are forced to do so, there are four things that might happen.

Some of them vote with their feet.

They'll get up and leave.

Some of them will try and sit it out.

This's probably changing but there are lots of people in churches who know that they only need to wait for a while.

Many pastors only last 3-5 years in any one church.

They'll know that they'll probably last longer than the pastor, so all they have to do is wait until they get "their" church back.

Some will be converted under the word ministry.

That's the best thing that can happen in that situation.

Through the preaching of the word, they'll be drawn back to the glory of Christ and what he's done on the cross as they hear the word preached.

But at least in my – somewhat limited experience – some will put up a fight.

They'll do anything they can to get rid of the faithful minister who's not tickling their ears anymore.

Sometimes even going to some quite extreme lengths to try and harm the minister's family.

I know a minister who moved to a new congregation.

At his previous church, he taught the Bible faithfully and it was typical of him to work through a book of Scripture.

When he came to this new church, he started to do the same thing.

People made their displeasure known very quickly.

He was clearly told that this was unacceptable and a great deal of pressure was put on him to change his ways.

Unfortunately, he backed down and caved into that pressure.

I can understand why – that’s not an easy situation to be in.

Timothy’s going to face a whole heap of pressure as he preaches the word.

He’s been given a task that will be really tough.

That’s why Paul says what he does in verse 5:

2 Timothy 4:5 (NIV11) ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

There are four commands in that verse.

Firstly, Tim needs to keep a clear head about what’s going on.

When everyone’s against you, it’s easy to think that it’s you who’s got the problem.

You start doubting yourself, asking whether you’ve actually got this right.

“Is this really how the gospel needs to be?”

“Am I being inflexible at points that I should be more flexible?”

“Maybe I’ve got this wrong?”

It’s so, so easy to think, “Perhaps if we just tweaked a few things here and there, that would keep everyone happy.

“Surely it’s no big deal?”

The temptation is real to give up the truth and start sliding down that slippery slope.

Secondly, he needs to stick to his guns and endure through the hardship.

This isn’t going to be easy.

Far from being his best life now, it’s going to be costly to preach the word, especially in the face of opposition from within the church.

In this, he needs to follow Paul’s example.

I like how Calvin puts it,

‘the more determined men become to despise the teaching of Christ, the more zealous should godly ministers be to assert it and the more strenuous their efforts to preserve it entire, and more than that, by their diligence to ward off Satan’s attacks’.

Thirdly, he needs to do the work of an evangelist.

What comes to mind when you think of “an evangelist”?

You might think of someone who spends their day meeting with people who don't know Jesus and reading the Bible.

Or someone who goes out on the street corner and proclaims the gospel to anyone and everyone who walks by.

It could be that Paul's concerned that Timothy's going to be so busy that he won't have time for evangelism.

After all, that's exactly what Paul and Timothy did together as they went around ministering – they took the gospel to new places.

Now he's in a more established church with internal problems, it'd be very easy for evangelism to slip of the radar.

I think that's a very real pressure, if not danger.

It's definitely a danger for us as a church.

We need to keep fighting to keep evangelism as part of what we do.

It's so easy to let that slip.

The term evangelist is used just three times in the New Testament and this is one of them.

There's Philip the evangelist mentioned in Acts 21:8.

The other place is Ephesians 4:11, where Paul writes:

Ephesians 4:11–12 (NIV11) ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

In that context, he isn't describing different offices in the church – pastors are different from apostles are different to evangelists.

Rather they're different roles that leaders of the church might have in equipping the saints.

When Timothy is to do the work of an evangelist, I don't think Paul means what probably comes to mind for us.

I think he means that Timothy's just meant to be a gospel man.

That the gospel has to be at the heart of everything he does.

He's in a more established church situation, but the work of gospeling continues.

If Timothy's preaching to a people who don't know the true evangel, he needs to tell them the gospel.

If he's preaching to people who already know the gospel, that's what they need to keep hearing.

Does being an evangelist mean preaching the gospel to those outside the church?
Absolutely.

It also means speaking the gospel to those in the church too.

That's one of the reasons for preaching the same gospel week in, week out.

It might seem repetitive and boring, but people can sit under the teaching of the word for years and still not quite grasp why the gospel gets us so excited.

It's interesting to them, but not compelling.

That might be you.

If it is, don't feel embarrassed.

We're glad you're here. Please keep coming back.

We're praying for you, that the Lord would open the eyes of your heart so that you might see just how amazing Jesus is and come to him in repentance and faith.

Paul summarises all this in his final command: fulfil your ministry.

The task he's been given is to preach the word.

Even in the face of opposition, Timothy needs to keep on doing that same work of preaching the word.

Until the mission is accomplished and everyone is mature in Christ, we need to keep proclaiming the gospel.

Obviously, this applies first and foremost to pastors.

I need you to watch me and make sure that I don't divert from preaching the word.

You need to be on your guard because it's often not a massive change overnight.

A minister who stops preaching the word is more likely to do it little by little over time.

You also need to be careful of the next pastor that you choose – whether that's the next person that we put on a staff team or the person who replaces me.

He needs to be someone who'll lovingly pastor the flock by encouraging and challenging when it's appropriate.

Don't settle for anything less than a man who'll preach the word.

But it's not just pastors.

Timothy's been called to a task that takes hard work.

And that means giving stuff up, perhaps even danger.

That sounds pretty much like teaching Sunday school to me!

This applies to anyone who's teaching, whether it's adults or children.

We need to preach the word because there will always be pressure not to.

Timothy needs to preach the word because there will be people who depart from listening to it.

They'll want to hear things that please them.

We need to build a culture of being willing to humbly listen to uncomfortable truths.

The gospel is familiar, but it should also be gripping.

We want the "same old, same old" because it's the message that gives us life and hope and peace.

Hearing the Word is what will keep us following Jesus.

Preachers will depart from the world

The third reason – and the second one we're looking at this morning – that Timothy is to preach the word – is because preachers go to glory.

A faithful preacher will keep on in the truth, faithful even to the end.

But sooner or later either Jesus will come back or the Lord will call them home.

What happens then?

The time has come for Paul to depart and the next act of the gospel mission to begin.

Paul describes himself as being poured out like a drink offering, verse 6.

This refers to one of the Old Testament sacrifices.²

As part of a number of the sacrifices required under the Law, grain would be offered to the Lord, but then wine would be poured on top.

What's different about the drink offering is that it's poured out.

Paul has given his life to the gospel.

He's poured his life into proclaiming the gospel as an offering to God.

It's quite unusual to hear him talk about himself as much as he does in verse 7 and 8.

So unusual, in fact, that some scholars say that it mustn't have been Paul who wrote this.

He wouldn't boast about himself like that, they say.

Given that the start of the letter clearly says that it was from Paul, that seems a little bit far-fetched.

He summarises his ministry like this: I have fought. I have finished. I have kept.

He's fought the good fight.

Ministry hasn't been easy for Paul.

In fact, it's been quite a struggle.

But he's come to the point where he's finished the race, having remained faithful.

Elsewhere, he talks about the fact that the race is still to be won.

Here, he makes it clear that he's come to the end.

What does it mean that he's kept the faith?

It could mean that unlike the a false teacher, he's maintained good doctrine.

Or it could be that he continues to trust Jesus to the end.

It's the second way that the original phrase is used outside the Bible.

Although there probably isn't really much of a difference between them.

Keeping your faith in Jesus means having good doctrine.

There's a feeling of certainty about the way he says that there's a crown of righteousness waiting for him in verse 8.

He will get the award of being declared righteous on that day when Jesus judges the living and the dead.

Do you yearn for Christ to return or call you home, like Paul so clearly did?

Are you looking forward to the day when he says "Well done, good and faithful servant?"

Or are you actually concerned about that happening?

It's an important question.

When Paul says these things, many of us think, "Well, bully for you."

Paul was a super-Christian.

It's all very good and well for an apostle like Paul, but what about the rest of us?

Don't be so arrogant, rubbing it in our faces.

How can we possibly have the same certainty as him?

After all, how could he know the things that I've done?

My past is just too bad.

You couldn't even begin to imagine the things that I've done.

How could God possibly forgive me for those things?

It's all very well for Paul, but what about me?

Think about Paul's life for a minute though.

He had a few skeletons in his own closet, didn't he?

Actually, they aren't at all hidden.

In his early life, he persecuted Christians for no other reason than they followed Jesus.

He stood there – with a satisfied smile on his face – as Stephen was pelted with rocks until he died.³

And this same man says

2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV11) ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Paul doesn't make this claim because of what he's done.

Don't think that he earned his way back to God.

He can't speak with such certainty because he's done more good deeds that outweigh the bad.

Why does Paul get into heaven?

It's not actually because he finished the race.

He can't depend on the fact that he's kept the faith.

It's all dependent on what Jesus has done.

Paul taught the gospel of grace.

That's why he has such great certainty.

It's because of what Jesus has done.

In verse 6, we see the reality that Paul faces.

Through the letter so far, we've seen quite clearly that Paul is not in a great place – clapped up in a dungeon.

Chained and shamed.

But it's worse than that.

He says, "The time for my departure is near."

Paul's either about to face court or he already has.

He's knows that he's going to be found guilty.

But the amazing thing is that he is innocent before God.

And he's certain of that because Jesus had already made him righteous.

At the cross, God has shown his great justice.

He's poured out his wrath at sin.

But for anyone who trusts in Jesus, that wrath landed on Jesus instead of us.

At the cross, God showed his justice.

Sin must be punished.

But he also showed his great mercy.

He's that just that he's willing to take the punishment as well.

We can be forgiven, because he was forsaken.

These words must've been a great encouragement to Timothy.

Paul's a comparison to the other teachers and an example to Timothy.

This also shows Timothy that he too can preach the gospel... by God's grace!

The reality is that Paul's not going to be around forever.

He's about to leave this earth and his ministry behind.

And then it's going to be down to Timothy.

He's facing a task unfinished.

The gospel had gone out, but there was still work to do.

Not just Timothy, but others as well.

Being entrusted with the gospel is pass the gospel onto others.

In chapter two, Paul explained that the gospel is to be passed on.

2 Timothy 2:2 (NIV11) ² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

That's why Timothy needs to preach the word.

The pattern we see throughout the Bible is that leadership gets passed on.

Moses was succeeded by Joshua.

Solomon was succeeded by David.

Elisha followed on from Elijah.

Now the gospel is being passed on from Paul to Timothy.

That's the second reason that Tim needs to preach the word.

If the gospel is going to be passed on, we need to preach the word.

That's part of what it means to be entrusted with the gospel.

We need to keep passing it onto the next person.

I suspect we think about this more and more, the older we get.

I know I certainly do.

The natural application is to pass the gospel onto our kids while we have the opportunity.

Not just biological kids, but our spiritual kids too.

Just like Timothy wasn't Paul's biological son, but his son in the faith.

This's the great motivation for teaching Sunday School, even when it's not your own offspring.

It's the reason for leading at youth group.

These ministries are an investment in passing the faith on.

There's a lesson about this in this building.

Corinda Christian Assembly was once a thriving church.

As I go around the place, I keep bumping into people who used to come here back in the day.

It feels like everyone has a connection with the place.

Many of them have told me that while they faithfully preached the gospel, they failed to pass the gospel on.

That's been the assessment of many of the people who were here: there wasn't a pattern of equipping the next generation.

If Grace Bible Church is going to be here in 5, 10, 20, 50 years, we need to learn that lesson.

Timothy needs to keep preaching the word because preachers will depart from this world.

Conclusion

Bob Dylan was right – the times, they are a-changin’.

Actually, the times have always been changing.

They’re just changing more rapidly now than they have before.

It might surprise you to realise that things in church can change quite quickly too.

In fact, in some ways they need to as we keep trying to show how the gospel connects with the needs of the culture around us.

But in an ever-changing culture, we need a never-changing gospel.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 40:8 (NIV11) ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”

Our commission now is the same one given to Timothy long ago.

It’s the same job God’s people have until Jesus returns.

Preach the word.

¹ ‘China’s Crackdown on Christians, Moslems, Academics’, accessed 16 November 2018, <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/chinas-war-on-religion-academia-president-xi-jinping-moves-to-reassert-communist-party-dominance/news-story/5b6a71c240c3d6c094dbe8dbbfeb2521>.

² Exodus 29:40–41; Leviticus 23:13; Numbers 15:4–10; 28:7; Philippians 2:17

³ Acts 7:58

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2 Timothy 4:3-8

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Big Idea: God's people preach the truth, even to the end.

Big Question: Why is it important to preach the word?

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to “preach the word”?
2. How do you know if you're someone who has “itching ears”?
3. What role should tradition and authorities have in shaping our doctrine?
4. How would you describe the way Timothy is to respond to people who won't endure sound teaching?
5. What does it mean for Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist”?
6. Do you think Paul is arrogantly boasting in verse 7? Why/why not?
7. How can Paul be so sure that he will receive the “crown of righteousness”?
8. What should we expect to happen if we don't preach the word?