

MULTIPLYING LOCAL CHURCHES BY PREACHING THE WORD OF GOD

2 Timothy 4:1-4

INTRODUCTION

John Piper writes in his book, “The Supremacy of God in Preaching,” “People are starving for the grandeur of God and the vast majority do not know it... most do not know that they were made to thrill at the panorama of God’s power and glory.... This is the heart-pang of every human being. Only a few know it. Only a few diagnose the longing beneath every human desire as the longing to see God...” So where and how will people find out that God is the treasure for which we seek? Where and how will people be cured of their deafness to the voice of God and have their blindness to the beauty of God healed? Where and how will people of all varieties learn to love and rejoice in the God who made them and galaxies and trees and viruses?

God can only be found and known in and through those local churches where the word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are clearly and passionately proclaimed. This is the point that Paul makes in our text this morning. The commands of these four verses to preach the word of God are given to Timothy, Paul’s young apprentice, who is the teaching pastor in the local church in the city of Ephesus. I want you to look up a few verses in Paul’s 2nd letter to Timothy to 3:14-17. Paul tells Timothy that he is to continue in what he has learned and firmly believed. What is it that Timothy has learned and firmly believed? From childhood Timothy has known and believed the sacred writings, the Scriptures of the OT which God gave to make people wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Don’t miss what Paul just said, the entire OT is written for the purpose of showing that salvation comes through faith in Jesus. Timothy has discovered “the glory of God in the face of Christ” through his knowledge of the written word of God in the OT. It is this written word of God which is God’s revelation, his breathed out word, which describes who he is and how it is that sinful men and women can come to know and experience that for which they were created, to know and love and delight in their Creator, through faith in Christ.

However, it is not an accident that immediately after reminding Timothy of the power and purpose of the written word of God that he commands him to preach that word. He does not tell Timothy to make sure that everyone reads this written word or that he write plays and dramatic sketches to illustrate this word but that he, as the lead pastor of this local church proclaim the truth that is contained in these Scriptures. It is the proclamation of the written word of God by duly appointed and equipped leaders in the local church that is God’s chief means of opening the eyes of the blind so that they see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

This command to preach the word, addressed to this pastor of this local church tells us that the chief thing that must characterize every local church is the clear and passionate proclamation of God’s written word. It is by this word that the local church is sustained and it is by this word that local churches are multiplied so that all of Christ’s lost sheep are gathered into his flock. This morning we are going to see three reasons why it is that God has commanded that local churches be sustained and multiplied by the public proclamation of God’s word.

MAIN POINT

Local churches flourish and multiply by the proclamation of God’s word because...

I. Only God’s word prepares people for the coming judgment (v. 1)

In v. 1 Paul aims to convince Timothy of how serious he is about what he is commanding him to do. He summons Timothy, as it were, into God’s throne room and as God’s representative he issues God’s commands to Timothy. Timothy, you and I are standing here in the very presence of God the Father and of his Son Jesus Christ. The Triune God sent me to tell you this. They are listening to what I am telling you to do and I am

speaking with their authority. I am not making this up. This is the will of God for you as one of the pastors/elders of this local church. Not only is this God's command to you but also this is his commission. Just as the Lord Jesus personally commissioned me while I was on the road to Damascus, so now he is, through me, commissioning you to his service. Receive this commission as I did as a gift of God's grace given to you.

Then notice what he reminds Timothy of in regards to Jesus. Remember Timothy that this Lord Jesus is the one whom God has appointed as the judge of the living and the dead. He is the judge who will one day, unexpectedly, appear with all of God's angels. He will at that time bring the kingdoms of this world to an end and fully establish the kingdom of God upon this earth. All of humanity, including, you and I will be gathered before him and he will give to each person what he or she deserves. Every human being, including you and I will, on that day, hear this Lord Jesus Christ, who is right now standing here with us, say one of two things. Either we will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master." Or we will hear, "Away from me, you worker of lawlessness, I never knew you. Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Paul is here giving to Timothy the same two motivations that drove him throughout his long ministry of proclaiming God's word. In 1 Corinthians 9:16 he says, "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" The word "woe" is a word of judgment used often by the OT prophets in their announcements of doom upon the disobedient. Jesus used that word repeatedly in his declaration of God's judgment on the religious leaders of Israel. He said seven times to them as recorded in Matthew 23:13ff, "...woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" So when Paul uses that word in regards to himself, he is declaring that if he does not preach the gospel he will suffer God's condemnation, he will not be saved; he will go to hell. In Paul's case as now in Timothy's case, the evidence of their having been born again of God's Spirit, the fruit of their faith is that they will preach the gospel and so if they do not preach, it is evidence that they have not been born again, they do not really believe.

While fear of God's judgment was a motive in Paul's life and a motive he is seeking to give to Timothy, yet the motive of reward was far greater in Paul's life. You can see this by looking down just a few verses in this chapter. 2 Timothy 4:6-8, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." The chief driving force in Paul's life was his desire to be welcomed into heaven by his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He loved the thought of Christ appearing as the judge of all because he was certain of his reward. He gave his life away in the proclamation of the gospel because of his overwhelming desire to be warmly greeted by the one who died for him. He wants Timothy to obey these commands for the same reason.

But Paul is not only reminding Timothy of that final judgment in relation to himself but also in relation to the people to whom he will preach. When Jesus comes back, every human being, those who are alive when he returns and those who have died prior to this return will be gathered before him to be judged. Timothy, you have been given the assignment of announcing this impending judgment, of announcing God's just wrath against all human beings for our wickedness and of announcing how he has made provision for every rebel who will trust in Christ alone as the one who paid the penalty for his or her sins. The world does not believe that judgment is coming and so Timothy you must tell them. The world does not know that the only way to escape that judgment and gain entrance into God's kingdom is through reliance upon the righteousness of Jesus, so you must tell them, repeatedly and continually.

John Piper in his book on preaching says this about Jonathon Edwards, the famous American preacher of the 1700's, "Edwards had an overwhelming conviction of the reality of the glories of heaven and horrors of hell that made his preaching utterly earnest. He came under severe criticism for his participation in the revival fervor. Boston clergy, such as Charles Chauncey, accused him and others of stirring up far too much emotion with their dreadful seriousness about eternity. Edwards responded, 'If any of you that are heads of families saw

one of your children in a house that was all on fire over its head and in eminent danger of being soon consumed in the flames and the child appeared to be unaware of his danger...would you speak to him only in a cold and indifferent manner? Would you not cry aloud... and represent the danger he was in and the folly in delaying in the most lively manner? Would people not think you bereft of reason if you spoke only in a conversational tone of voice? If then we who have the care of souls knew what hell was ... and saw our hearers in eminent danger and that they were unaware of it... it would be morally impossible for us to avoid abundantly and most earnestly setting before them the dreadfulfulness of that misery and warning them to flee from it..."

God intends every pastor, elder, small group leader and parent in our church to fulfill our duty to preach the word to those assigned to our care in light of the fact that one day each and every person to whom we speak will stand before the great judge of the living and the dead, the Lord Jesus Christ and give an account. There is no place else on earth where the great Triune God is announcing this coming judgment and declaring his willingness to pardon all on the basis of the Son of God's perfect obedience and willing death than through the church of Jesus. We must proclaim this gospel because we are longing for his appearing and living our lives in light of it. We must warn all who will listen of this impending judgment and of God's offered salvation.

II. Only God's word reveals truth and error (v.2)

The Greek word translated "preach" is the word used to describe what a herald of the Roman government did. We've all seen these guys in movies. The king or emperor has a decree, a command for his entire nation and so he sends out his heralds, his preachers to every corner of his kingdom on horseback. As they arrive in a town or village they call out to the people to come assemble in the town square where they unroll a scroll and read from it the words of the king. Thus every local church is to be a place in and through which God's heralds proclaim his word. The king of the universe has decreed an end to the rebellion and is now announcing amnesty for all who will find Christ to be their treasure and we have been sent out to announce the decree.

Then Paul tells Timothy how he is to preach with a series of four commands followed by a modifying clause. The first command is that the pastor/elder, parent, small group leader is to proclaim this word always. We are to be a broken record, talking always about God's gospel. We are to do it when we feel like it and when we don't feel like it, when people want to listen and when they don't want to listen. When life is going well and when it is not going well. Everything is about God all the time and thus everything that is happening is always about the gospel. There is no circumstance, no experience, no condition among human beings about which the gospel does not speak and to which the gospel is not the answer. Several times a year the church office is contacted by couples who want to use the church to get married in. Two or three times in the last 13 years I've actually been able to get the couple to come see me. When they see me, after we've spent some time getting to know each other I will tell them that I am not in the wedding business, I am in the gospel business. Thus, I would be happy to marry them as long as they understand that we are going to talk about marriage in light of God's announcement that Jesus is the one who has come to save us from our sins. I've never had more than one appointment because most people are not interested in knowing the God who made them, they just want a spouse who makes them happy.

The second command is the word for rebuke. If you look up to 3:16 it is one of the words describing the usefulness of the Bible. The word of God is given to tell us when we are wrong and every preacher of God's word is commanded to clearly announce to people the sins they are committing, the errors they are believing. This is the word Jesus uses to describe the first work of the HS. Jesus says that when the HS comes he will convict or rebuke the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. If you never leave a church service or a bible study or a time of family worship without being told about something wrong that you are doing or believing or thinking or feeling, then you are not being told God's word. Not every time, but regularly, we should leave church having been confronted with our sins. How can you identify those places where the preacher or the parent or the bible study leader is actually preaching the word; simply ask yourself, "am I being confronted and convicted about my particular sins on a regular basis?"

The third command appears to be a synonym of the one before it. It would be hard to distinguish between the English words reprove and rebuke. In the original language this second word is often used in contexts where it means to tell someone the wrong they have done. However, it is also often used of Jesus when he commands the wind and sea to be still and he commands the fever to leave Peter's mother-in-law and when he commands demons to come out and when he commands those he heals to not tell anyone who he is. Thus I think if there is any difference between these words it would be this one has more of the nuance of commanding people what they are to do or think or believe or repent or feel. Again, it is a highly confrontational word. When the word of God is being faithfully proclaimed you will find yourself being told what to do or what to believe or how to feel. If you never leave church having been told to do or believe things that go against your natural desires, then you are not in a place where the word of God is being preached.

The fourth command is one of the most common verbs used in the NT relating to speech. It is used 109 times. It can mean, depending on the context anything from "comfort" to "exhort, beg or urge." It is the root word for the title Jesus gives to the HS when he says that the HS is our comforter or our counselor. It is what the author to the Hebrews commands every Christian to do for every other Christian in 3:13, "But encourage (exhort in the ESV) one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." The best way to understand it here is as a command to strongly appeal to people. Paul wants Timothy to beg people to pay attention to the word of God. It is a word that captures the emotional intensity and earnestness that must characterize those who herald forth God's word. I think it is best captured in what Paul says about himself in 2 Corinthians 5:20, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore/beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

Finally, Paul qualifies these five commands, preach, be ready, rebuke, command, implore, with this clause, "with all patience and teaching." Everyone who announces the gospel wants to see people respond to it. We want people to trust Christ and obey him because they are so in love with him. It is very easy for preachers of the gospel, parents, pastors, small group leaders, to take it personal when people don't take him or her seriously, when children keep disobeying, when you have to talk to the same person about the same problem and give them the same solution in the gospel. Successful proclamation, rebuking, commanding, imploring requires that we give the word of God time to have its effect. We must, like the farmer who plants his field in the spring, wait for the harvest to grow while we cultivate the ground. While God can and does change lives in a moment, yet the more ordinary way that God's work in people's lives moves forward is at a far more plodding pace. We are engaged with people who "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18. Spiritual growth like physical growth is a process of transformation and thus patience is required. It will not do for the preacher to constantly be drawing lines in the sand and if people will not step across the line, then the herald will have nothing to do with them. Now Jesus did tell the apostles when he sent them out that sometimes, when the rejection becomes so entrenched we are to "shake the dust from our feet" and leave. However, that time only comes after a long period of patient proclamation.

But it is not only with patience that we preach and rebuke and command but also "with all teaching." That may sound like a redundant command but it is not. When anyone aims to announce God's good news and rebuke and command and implore people to listen and act it is required of that preacher that he or she show those to whom he speaks the ground for his authoritative announcement. It is the task of every preacher of the gospel whether pastor or parent or small group leader to be able to show from the text of the Bible where this command originates. Good preachers must know the doctrines of the Bible and be able to show how particular actions are required by these doctrines. It is a deadly and dangerous practice for anyone to say that God commands this, that or the other thing without being able to show the teaching, the doctrine in the Bible itself. Every pastor, elder, small group leader and parent when asked, ought to be able to go to chapter and verse to show from where their pronouncement has come. This is the reason I usually preach through books of the Bible and even when I do a more topical series such as the one we are in right now, I always seek to teach from a particular text of the Bible. There is no word of God apart from this written word of God and thus you should never listen to anyone who is not often making it clear where in the Bible they are getting this teaching. Let me say to you that this is the reason you should be listening to me or to any preacher with your Bible open. I am

not giving a speech of my own making, but attempting to explain what is taught on the pages of this book and so you should be looking to see if that is indeed what I am doing.

III. Only God's word can restrain our addiction to self-gratification (vv.3-4)

Verse 3 begins with the word "for". Thus vv. 3-4 are the reason that Paul has commanded Timothy to preach the word, be prepared in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all patience and teaching." The reason is that at least some of the people to whom you preach, some of your children, at some time in the future are going to stop listening to you. They are not going to put up with the sound doctrine that you are teaching. It is worth noting that the word "sound" means health giving doctrine. The gospel of Jesus is the only cure for what ails your soul and every true preacher of that gospel is bringing God's healing to you. Paul says that some of the people who are listening to you right now will one day reject what you are telling them.

However, they won't leave the church. They won't go out and declare that they are non-Christians. Rather, these rejecters of God's word will find teachers who will scratch them where they itch. They will find "Christian" teachers who won't tell them what God says in his word, who won't rebuke them and command them and appeal to them. Rather they will find teachers who will tell them things that line up with their own desires. These teachers will still refer to the Bible and use the name of Jesus but their teaching will simply affirm your way of life, place God's stamp of approval on what you are doing. Paul says there is no shortage of such teachers in the world. There are people all over the place who are happy to tell you a gospel that never challenges what you by nature love. There are teachers all over the dial of your TV and available on the internet and standing in the pulpits of beautiful buildings all over the world who will be happy to indulge your desire for fanciful and mythic stories of human goodness and achievement and of God's love for all people everywhere without distinction, just the way they are. There are lots of teachers who will tell you that God doesn't want you to be lonely or to be sick or to be poor or to have bad kids or a bad spouse. The airwaves and the churches are full of teachers who will tell you that Jesus died so that you can have a Christian marriage, happy children, a fulfilling career, financial security, a healthy way of life. These are all myths. Christ died to bring you to God. He died so that the just and holy God can justly love you and be your God and so you can be his child and a part of his family and arrive safely in heaven. He died so that you might show off his sufficiency by your suffering love for others, by your enduring cancer with joy, by your persistent love for a rebellious child, by your firm and loving faithfulness to a mean spouse, by your giving away your money to advance the kingdom of God in the earth.

Verses 3-4 are a description of the state of the church in the USA. We are not in this condition because of all the bad people outside the church but because the people have rejected sound doctrine and gathered to themselves teachers who will teach according to their own desires. Let me repeat that: the greatest danger to the church of Jesus, the biggest threat is not all those bad atheists or gay right activists or liberal politicians. The greatest threat to the church is you and me. Will I and the other teachers in our church be faithful to proclaim the word of God and will you put up with it? By nature, we both want to do something else.

Every one of us should feel the warning that is in this text. When you don't like what someone who is claiming to speak for God is saying you must ask yourself why you do not like it. If your disapproval of the message is because you can clearly demonstrate that what is being said is not in accord with the written word of God, then you should refuse to listen. If the messenger is a pastor of a local church, you should leave it. If it is a parent, you should respectfully not listen when they claim to speak for God. If it is a small group leader you should leave the group. However, if you don't like it because your sins are being exposed or your prejudices are being challenged or your wrong theology is being corrected or your desire to find a happy life on planet earth is not being affirmed, you should think twice about leaving. Churches and leaders of those churches that are faithfully proclaiming the word of God should regularly make us feel uncomfortable, should regularly challenge our thinking and acting and feeling. We who have been liberated from the kingdom of darkness and who have by grace been made citizens of God's kingdom should of all people recognize that we need God's correcting word in our lives to preserve us in our faith so that we can make it safely to heaven. A month or so ago we

distributed a little booklet entitled, “How to listen to sermons”. If you did not get one then, please be sure to pick one up after the service and read it. It will help you to pay more careful attention to the proclamation of God’s word not just here on Sunday mornings but in your small groups and in family worship as well.

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