

Introduction

I'd like to begin by making two statements and then asking you a question. First, the competitive spirit as it's taught in sports today is contrary to the Bible's ethic of love. Second, materialism is as detestable to God as homosexuality is. Question - what is your reaction to those statements? What are you thinking and feeling about them?

Those statements and your reaction to them flesh out what the text we read, Ezekiel 2:8-3:11, teaches. This text speaks to what I'm preaching about today, **"the pulpit and the pew."**

The Person in the Pulpit – Speak Competently

Chapters 1-3 record God's commissioning of Ezekiel. In 2:9-3:3, God gave him a scroll to eat. Verse 4 reveals what it represented – the words of God. Those words are the ones that Ezekiel eventually wrote down and that became the Book of Ezekiel. After he ate the scroll, God called him in 4 and 11 to **"speak"** its words to **"the house of Israel."** The house of Israel referred to God's chosen people, the people of Judah.

That's Ezekiel's commissioning and there are three aspects of it that have parallels in God's kingdom today. One aspect is the scroll. Its parallel is the Bible, which is God's written word. Another aspect is Ezekiel himself. His parallel is what I'm calling the person in the pulpit, that is, the one who preaches. And a final aspect is the people of Judah. Their parallel is what I'm calling the people in the pew, Christians like you to whom the preacher preaches. Those are the parallels and they teach much about the person in the pulpit and the people in the pew. Let's start with the person in the pulpit.

The prophetic action in 3:1-3 is instructive. Ezekiel ate the scroll, which symbolized receiving God's words and devoting himself to speak them. That reveals what the preacher's primary responsibilities are. They aren't counseling, administrating, or evangelizing, as vital as those things are. They're these two things instead. First, he should receive

the Bible. That means to study and to know it – thoroughly. It also means to live it out as Ezekiel did. He should practice what he preaches. The preacher has a second primary responsibility. He should speak or preach the Bible and preach it competently. There are three components of competent preaching.

One is urgency. The preacher needs to be passionate about what he's preaching. Richard Baxter was once asked what a pastor's ideal of preaching should be. He replied, **"To preach as though he'd never preach again, and as a dying man to dying men."** The Bible contains the best information about the most important matters in human life. That's something to be passionate about and the preacher should be.

A second component of competent preaching is clarity. Clarity is saying it so people can understand it. One pastor quotes 1 Corinthians 13:1 to explain how vital that is, changing the word **"charity"** to **"clarity"**: **"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not *clarity*, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."** How right he was. Preaching without clarity is useless.

There's a third component of competent preaching – brevity. A preacher who was popular with his congregation was asked to explain his success. He said the secret was a silent prayer he prayed each time he went into the pulpit: **"Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff, and nudge me when I've said enough."** In my view, 20 to 25 minutes is enough. If you can't say it in 25 minutes, make it a two Sunday sermon.

Those then are the person in the pulpit's primary responsibilities – know the Bible thoroughly and preach it competently.

The People in the Pews – Listen Competently

The parallels in our text also teach us something about the people in the pew. Verses 6, 7, and 11 reveal what their primary responsibility is. It's to **"listen"** in the same way the preacher preaches, competently.

That is a challenge I admit. Dr. Ralph Nichols, a foremost authority on the art of listening, contends that people think four to five times

faster than they talk. A typical speaker talks at the rate of 120 words a minute. A typical listener thinks at the rate of 400 to 500 words a minute. That means you're thinking a whole lot faster than I'm talking.

That's a problem and Dr. Nichols explains why. It tempts people to take what he calls mental excursions. So, I'm in the pulpit talking about lofty things like redemption, regeneration, sanctification, atonement, and eschatology. At the same time, you're in the pew thinking about lunch, the Browns, tomorrow's sales report, this morning's quarrel with your spouse, or why the bread always falls with the buttered side down.

That illustrates what the people in the pew must do to listen competently. They must concentrate. They must make a concerted effort to defeat the mental excursions their minds are tempted to take and to focus on what is being said. Hadden Robinson is a Ph.D. in the field of communications. He suggest four ways to redeem the advantage thought has over speech: (1) try to guess the speaker's next point; (2) challenge the supporting evidence of what he says; (3) mentally summarize what he says; and (4) apply the Scripture at each point. I'd add a fifth way. It's to assess the speaker's use of logic. Is he connecting up the facts rightly and drawing valid conclusions from them? However you do it, listen competently. Concentrate on what the preacher is saying.

The Person in the Pulpit – Preach Courageously

But it isn't enough to preach and to listen competently. God requires more of us. First, he requires more of the person in the pulpit.

We see that in 3:8-9. God promised to make Ezekiel's face and forehead like emery, which is harder than flint. It was a simile that conveyed this. He'd give Ezekiel the toughness he needed to speak His words to the people of Judah. God revealed why he would need that in verses 10-11. It's because they wouldn't like or live out what he spoke.

These verses teach that it isn't enough for the preacher to preach competently. He must preach courageously as well. Verses 10-11 define what courageously means. He preaches the Bible without being

influenced by the reaction of the people in the pew. There are two such reactions, more than any others, that preachers fear today.

One is people in the pew leaving the church. I once preached a series of sermons titled "Hearing God's Voice." I then received a letter from a young couple who left the church as a result. Part of it said: **"Recently there has been what seems to be a Pentecostal movement within the teachings of the church, which we are not comfortable with."** Some people leave the church when they dislike what the preacher preaches.

Another reaction is people in the pew resisting the preacher's leadership. Tony Campolo explains that concern in his book *20 Hot Potatoes Christians Are Afraid to Touch*: **"When I was a pastor, I was a bit cautious about what I preached. I tried to be prophetic and preach the hard things people need to hear, but I'm not sure I did it well. A pastor has to keep his people with him or her, and preaching too many controversial sermons makes that difficult, if not impossible."** He's right. Preaching things people dislike hearing can alienate them and make them resistant to the preacher's leadership.

As a result of reactions like those, many preachers **"tickle the ears"** of their congregations, to quote Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3. Afraid of people leaving, resisting their leadership, or even firing them, they tell them only what they want to hear. They take the radical claims of the Bible and reduce them to a set of socially acceptable rules and regulations – ones that people like and with which they're willing to live.

But that is the antithesis of God's call in 3:8-11. God called Ezekiel and calls preachers to be courageous. Preach the Bible without being influenced by the reaction of the people in the pew. They may not like or live out what the preacher will say. They may leave, resist, or even fire him if he says it. But he should say it anyway, because it's God's word and they desperately need to hear it. That's courage.

I read about a young man who was installed as the pastor of a church. At the reception following his installation, a woman approached

him and said, **“I admire you for attempting to please 700 people.”** To which this young pastor replied: **“I didn’t come here to please 700 people. I came here to please one person, Jesus.”** I don’t know how long he lasted there, but he was right.

It isn’t enough for person in the pulpit to preach competently. God requires more. He must preach courageously as well.

The People in the Pews – Listening Courageously

But God also requires more of the people in the pew. It isn’t enough to listen competently. They must listen courageously as well.

Notice a detail in 2:10 - how unusual the scroll was that God gave Ezekiel to eat. Only the front of scrolls in the ancient world was written on. But the back of this scroll was as well. That probably symbolized two things, one of which was this. Ezekiel should speak and the people of Judah should listen to all of God’s words not just some.

It’s the same in God’s kingdom today. His written word, the Bible, is a two-edged sword. One side of it comforts. It reveals principles and truths that uplift and inspire us. That’s the popular side of it. But notice how 2:10 describes the contents of the scroll that God gave Ezekiel, **“written on it were lamentations, mourning, and woe.”** There’s a second side to the Bible. That side doesn’t comfort but disturbs. It doesn’t uplift and inspire but reproves and rebukes. Be courageous. Listen to the second side as well as the first.

All of us have a worldview. Our worldview is the system of beliefs that runs our lives. We believe things, in other words, and then live and act accordingly. Now, Biblical principles and truths may challenge some of those beliefs and practices of ours. They may expose them for the foolishness or even sin they are. But many if not most people don’t want to hear it if they do. Newsweek Magazine had a cover article titled “A Time to Seek,” about the kind of sermons the people in America’s pews want to hear. According to the article, they want sermons that celebrate and affirm the self not criticize it. They want sermons that talk about

support not salvation, help not holiness, and therapy not authority. They want sermons, in other words, that **“make the gospel fit them not them fit the gospel”** and I’m quoting the article.

Don’t be like that. Be courageous instead. Look at 3:27, which is God’s message to the people in the pew, **“He who hears, let him hear; and he who refuses let him refuse.”** That is the prototype of Jesus celebrated declaration in Matthew 11:15 and elsewhere, **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”** Both statements mean the same thing. Be objective. If the preacher says something that challenges a cherished or long held belief and practice of yours, don’t get defensive or mad. Consider it with an open mind instead. Gather facts that are relevant to the issue at hand, apply good logic to those facts, and drawn valid conclusions from all of that. If doing so shows that the preacher is right and that your belief and practice need to change, then change them.

Take the two statements with which I began. The competitive spirit as it’s taught in sports today is contrary to the Bible’s ethic of love. And materialism is as detestable to God as homosexuality is. Those statements do challenge the beliefs and practices of many people in America’s pews. They may challenge yours. Don’t get defensive or mad if they do. Be objective and consider whether or not they’re true instead. Then change the way you believe and act if they are. You have ears that hear (you’re a courageous listener) if you do.

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with an old French proverb, **“The spoken word belongs half to him who listens and half to him who speaks.”** That is so true especially when it comes to the preaching of God’s word. Its effectiveness rests on the person in the pulpit, me. I must preach the Bible competently and courageously. But it equally rests on the people in the pew, you. You must listen to what I preach competently and courageously. May both of us do our parts. The sermons at Bethel will be good ones that glorify God if we do.