

## **INTRODUCTION**

I went through my pastoral record book this past week and found that I've preached 881 sermons at Bethel Friends. That's a lot of sermons and I can tell you this. I may not be the best preacher in the world but through sheer experience, I'm a lot better now than I was when I preached the first of those. I'm embarrassed in fact by some of the sermons I preached years ago and I thank you for bearing with me.

But there's a flip side to the coin of good preaching. That flipside is good listening. People in the pew do judge how well the people in the pulpit preach. But people in the pulpit also judge how well the people in the pew listen. Ask John Ryser, our former areas superintendent, who has filled the pulpits of many Friends churches. He'll tell you. Some congregations listen better than others do. Preachers can tell that.

What I'm trying to say is that good listening is as critical as good preaching and I'm going to discuss both today. Turn to 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

## **GOOD PREACHING – DEFINES REALITY**

I begin with good preaching. Paul wrote this letter to a young pastor protégé of his named Timothy. Timothy had pastoral responsibilities in various churches in Asia Minor. Paul wrote him this letter to encourage and instruct him in those responsibilities.

Notice his charge to Timothy in the opening words of verse 2, *"preach the word."* The word *"word"* refers to a whole mass of 1<sup>st</sup> century apostolic teaching, much of which is found in the New Testament. It is thus the equivalent of what we call the Bible.

Remember what I told you about the Bible. It gives us the best information about the most important matters in human life. It is therefore, the primary source of reality.

That helps us understand what good preaching does. It defines reality. Some leadership experts say that the first responsibility of leaders is to define reality for those they lead. I concur, especially

when it comes to pastors. My foremost duty as your pastor is to define reality. That means to learn and communicate to you the best information about the most important matters in human life.

If I were on a pastoral search committee of a church, there are two things that I'd look for first in a candidate. The first would be character. Is he or she becoming like Jesus? The second would be competence and commitment with regard to defining reality.

Now, defining reality requires two things of pastors. They must study vigorously – the Bible first of all and other sources of reality second of all. They must then convey clearly what that study reveals.

I've studied, for instance, what the Bible reveals about the world, secular culture. I've also studied our own secular culture itself, what we call popular culture. I've concluded from doing so that the single biggest challenge facing our generation of Christians is this – how to respond to and interact with our popular culture.

Notice that I did two things. I studied and then conveyed clearly what that study revealed. Defining reality requires both of those.

That then is what good preaching does. It defines reality. Pastors learn and communicate the best information about the most important matters in human life to those whom they lead.

## **GOOD PREACHING – TELLS THE WHOLE TRUTH**

And they do that with a sense of urgency. Look at verse 1. It reveals the backdrop of every sermon that every pastor preaches. That backdrop is the Second Coming of Jesus and judgment. At the Second Coming, God will judge the behavior and thus character of each of us. Well, pastors must assist Christians in getting ready for that judgment and the most effective way that they do that is through preaching.

Every sermon has eternal implications in other words, which in turn creates a profound sense of urgency in any pastors worth their salt. Someone once asked the great Richard Baxter 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.*" I agree. That's how I preach to you this and every morning – as though I'd never preach again and as a dying man to dying men and women.

That kind of urgency is a goad in preaching. It's a stimulus to telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

The Bible has two sides. First, it comforts. We see that in the word "exhort" in verse 2. It has the same root, in the Greek, as the word translated "comforter" in John 14-16. The Bible comforts. But it also disturbs. We see that in the words "reprove" and "rebuke" in verse 2. Thus, the Bible not only encourages but convicts and condemns as well.

That shows us what it means to preach the whole truth. It means to preach both sides of the Bible – the one that comforts and that disturbs.

The problem is that pastors feel pressure not to do that. People want comforted but not disturbed. So, if pastors preach what comforts, everyone likes it. But if they preach what disturbs, many if not most dislike it. And because they dislike it, they either fire the preacher, leave the church, or don't follow him – one of the three.

Tony Campolo captures the dilemma of pastors in his book 20 Hot Potatoes. He writes: *"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 and it's a pressure that all pastors face.

But the solution, in verse 1, is clear. Preach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Then let the chips fall where they may. That's the only way that pastors can help people get ready for the Second Coming of Jesus and judgment. So that's what they have to do.

I've preached sermons, for instance, about which my wife warned me, *"Someone may leave the church if you say that."* But I didn't have a choice. My responsibility is to help you and me get ready for the Second Coming and judgment. And the only way that I can do that is to

preach the whole truth. I have to preach both what comforts and disturbs and that's what I'll do, until you fire me at least.

So, that's what Paul teaches us about good preaching here. It must define reality and tell the whole truth.

## **GOOD LISTENING – DESIRE THE TRUTH**

But it isn't just the people in the pulpit that he addresses. It's the people in the pews as well. An old French proverb says this, "*The spoken word belongs half to him who listens and half to him who speaks.*" Very few people grasp that but it's true. Good preaching is effective only when it's matched by good listening. The effectiveness of a sermon is just as much your responsibility as it is mine.

Six things characterize good listeners, two of which Paul reveals here. Let's examine both of those.

The first is that they desire the truth!

Look at verses 3 and 4. Paul foresees a day when people in the church will want to have their ears tickled. So they'll accumulate teachers according to their own desires and turn their ears away from the truth to myths. Bible commentator William Barclay explains what that means: "*They collect teachers . . . who will tell them precisely the easygoing, comfortable things which they want to hear.*"

Paul foresees that day and it's here. *Newsweek Magazine* had a cover article titled "A Time to Seek." That article discussed the kinds of sermons that people in America's pews want to hear. According to it, they want sermons that celebrate and affirm, not criticize. Sermons that make the gospel fit them, not them fit the gospel. Sermons that talk about support not salvation, help not holiness, and therapy not authority. Or as Paul would say it, they want their ears tickled.

Don't be that kind of listener. Be the kind who wants and even demands the whole truth, both what comforts and disturbs.

15 years ago, I heard a pastor preach against sports. He argued that sports is no longer just a threat to our religion. It is our religion,

he said, and gave some pretty convincing evidence to back up that claim. He then called on Christians to make the necessary changes in the time, money, and concern they devote to it. Being a sports fan, and at one time even a fanatic one, that sermon disturbed and even condemned me. But I thank God that I heard it. You know why? It's because I want to know the truth and needed to hear what that pastor said. I've even made practical changes in my life as a result of it.

So, desire the truth! There are times when you need comforted and times when you need disturbed. Want and demand that your pastor do both of those in his preaching. Want and demand the truth!

## **GOOD LISTENING – DESIRE CONTENT**

There's a second thing that characterizes good listeners. They desire content! Look at the terms "instruction" in verse 2 and "sound doctrine" in verse 3. Both terms allude to the content of the Bible and that's what good listeners want in the preaching they hear – content.

You might think that's a given but it isn't. Consider something that one of America's most prominent ministers said. If he changed the illustrations, he could preach the same series of sermons every year and no one would even notice it. He said that to emphasize the importance of stories to preaching. But he made a much larger point in the process that even he didn't seem to grasp. The cognitive content of his sermons isn't heard and doesn't matter to the people who listen to him. They don't care about being informed in other words.

What do they care about? If they're typical American Christians, it's being moved. That's why stories and images are so important to 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners. They're far more concerned about being moved than being informed and that includes Christians.

Consider these two speakers and people's response to them as a case in point. I heard a speaker at our Yearly Meeting. The content of what he said was outstanding, the best I've ever heard at Yearly Meeting, but his monotone style was mediocre. In contrast, I also heard a speaker

at a one-day conference. The content of what he said was mediocre at best, but his entertaining and hilarious style was outstanding. Here's what is so revealing. Almost every Christian whom I heard talk about that first speaker said how bad he was. One even admitted he was about ready to get up and leave. But almost every Christian whom I heard talk about that second speaker said how great he was. Let me ask you. Why is that? It's because the vast majority of Christians care far more about being moved than informed.

But what's wrong with that, you're probably thinking. Dallas Willard tells us in his book The Great Omission. Listen carefully as I explain it. It just a vital insight. In the nature of the human mind, emotion does not reliably generate belief or behavioral change, if it generates them at all. But understanding and insight do. Absent a cultic context, we cannot get people to change what they are and do by making them feel. But we can get them to change what they are and do by making them think. Don't get me wrong. It's good to be moved. But it's far better to be informed. Thinking not feeling is the Holy Spirit's primary ambience of ministry and change. That is a verifiable truth of our existence.

So, don't be a superficial listener like so many Christians are. Look for and concentrate on the cognitive content of what you hear. Look for and apply the realities that can change what you are and do. Want and demand that your pastors and other speakers do more than just move you. Want and demand that they inform you as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

I close this morning with a question. Has the sermon today been a good one? You know by now that the answer to that question depends as much on you the listeners as it does on me the preacher. So from here on in, let's together make the sermons at Bethel Friends good ones. Do your part, desire and demand truth and content, and I'll do mine, give it.