

## PREACH THE WORD!

### 2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

*What is preaching?* The word “preaching” is a religious term today, for better or for worse. But the Greek verb translated *preach* in **2 Timothy 4:2** was political, not religious. It referred to the function of a herald. When a king had a message to deliver to his people, he could not simply go into a pressroom and broadcast his message. The king would send his herald to proclaim his message. When the herald arrived in a city, he could cry out his message in a grave, formal, and authoritative voice. And the citizens had better listen and take heed. To ignore the herald’s message was to reject the king’s authority. But the herald was careful to proclaim his message faithfully and clearly. To misrepresent the king’s message was as dangerous as rejecting it. This is the picture that inevitably came to Timothy’s mind when Paul charged him to be God’s herald who faithfully proclaimed the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. The assignment has not changed.

**Romans 10:13** records a wonderful promise: *For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* Verses 14-15 then outline a series of dilemmas that prevent lost people from calling on the Lord for salvation: *“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard. And how are they to hear without someone preaching to them.”* Verse 17 concludes: *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”* So Paul’s charge to Timothy is God’s charge to the church then, now, and always: *“Preach the word.”* This passage is often lifted at pastoral ordinations, installations, and conferences. But the entire church needs to hear this challenge to develop a biblical philosophy of ministry, to encourage its spiritual leaders and hold them accountable, to deepen its worship life, to experience revival and reformation, and to be light and salt in the in this insipid and dark culture. Even unsaved and unchurched people need this text. D. MARTIN LLOYD-JONES wrote: “The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and most urgent need in the Church, it is the great need in the world also.”

Unfortunately, biblical preaching is not often a high priority for people looking for a church. Secondary things like music styles, ministry programs, and congregational prominence are deemed more important than biblical preaching. In some instances, church shoppers treat a congregation’s available parking spaces as a bigger issue than that congregation’s doctrinal position. Consequently, many pastors and churches, seeking either survival or success, have compromised the centrality of preaching. But preaching has always been the distinguishing mark of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful preaching is the essential mark of the true church, because everything will eventually fall into its proper place if the church faithfully preaches the word and allows its life to be shaped it. Conversely, a church’s apparent success is only incidental if it does not have a biblical standard to measure, sustain, or renew its ministry. So Paul calls Timothy to faithfulness, giving nine imperatives in these five verses. But the first command is the most important: *preach the word*. The other commands amplify the call to preach. Preaching is the central, primary, and decisive function of the church. The church is and does more

than preach. But biblical preaching is essential to all the church is and does. Paul's final words to Timothy lay out a vision for a faithful ministry of biblical preaching.

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## I. THE *SERIOUSNESS* OF THE CALL TO PREACH THE WORD

**2 Timothy 4:1** says: *"I 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."* The word *charge* means to solemnly testify. This is no personal exhortation based upon their close relationship. Paul speaks to Timothy with apostolic authority. Paul was Timothy's spiritual father and ministerial mentor. In a real sense, all Paul needed to say was, *"I charge you,"* to get Timothy's attention. But Paul pointed Timothy to transcendent realities: The true and living God. The Lord Jesus Christ. The final judgment. The Second Coming. The Kingdom of heaven.

**It was Sunday, June 11, 1989. I was resting after opening a six-day revival at the Chapel Hill Church in Detroit. The late Roy Allen was the pastor. My rest was pleasantly interrupted by the news that my father was on the phone. My dad was hospitalized the previous week. And I was concerned about him. I also had my own issues. I missed him. I was a 16-year-old boy preacher who had never been this far from home for this long. As we talked, I broke into tears and told him I wanted to come home now! He responded, "Son, I want to you be a man for daddy. And preach." Through tears, I answered, "Okay." But he pressed the point and made me promise. I did. Afterward, we exchanged "I love yous" and "goodbyes." Then I went back to bed. It would be the last conversation I had with my father. The following Saturday, he passed away as I was flying home. But that last conversation still comes to mind when I think of my father. "Be a man. And preach." I concede that those instructions may have only been intended to get me through that assignment. But they ultimately help get me through the coming years of dangers, toils, and snares.**

This must have been how Timothy felt as he read this letter. But Paul did not call Timothy to faithfulness on the basis of his personal influence. He writes: *"I 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."* It will not be long after writing these words that Paul would be martyred. And would face difficult times that would require more than his memories of the beloved apostle. So Paul charged Timothy *"in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus."* Feel the weight of this. Paul would soon be off the scene. But God is there. God is watching. God is monitoring his faithfulness. So is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate basis of personal accountability. God the Father and God the Son monitor our ministries and will hold us accountable. The holy Trinity is the final tribunal. The Lord sees when no one else is looking. **1 Samuel 16:7** says, *"For the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*

The reference to *Christ Jesus* here is significant. This solemn charge is given in the presence of Christ Jesus, who is equated with God the Father. This affirms the claim Jesus makes in **John 10:30**: *"I am the Father are one."* The fact that Christ is

coessential and coequal with God the Father is highlighted three ways in verse 1: *“who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom.”* Jesus is coming again. He will consummate the present-but-not-yet kingdom of God. All humanity – both the living and the dead – will stand in judgment before him. These eternal realities form the basis of Paul’s charge to Timothy.

What is the ministerial task that is so important that Paul presses the full weight of eternity on Timothy’s heart and mind? It is not a charge to visit the sick, lead meetings, oversee staff, establish programs, organize events, or build buildings. Indeed, these pastoral functions have their place. But they are not our primary function. Verse 2 says: *“preach the word, be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”*

A young preacher once complained to CHARLES SPURGEON that he did not have as big a church as he deserved. “How many do you preach to?” Spurgeon asked. “Oh, about 100,” the man replied. Solemnly, SPURGEON answered, “That will be enough to give account for on the Day of Judgment.” He was right. While so many are preoccupied with size and success and celebrity, we must remember the Lord will not ask us the size of anything when we stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ. But you will have to answer to the Lord for how you have fulfilled your call to preach the word. May the Lord help us be able to say with Paul in verses 6-8: *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”*

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## II. THE SUBSTANCE OF OUR CALL TO PREACH THE WORD

Verse 2 answers several key questions about the substance of our call to preach the word. WHAT SHOULD WE PREACH? Verse 2 exhorts: *“preach the word.”* This obvious answer is a necessary reminder that the importance of preaching rests in the content, not its function. Our preaching is not the reason the gospel works; the gospel is the reason our preaching works. So Paul does not just tell Timothy *that* he must preach; he tells him *what* he must preach: *preach the word.*

What does this mean to preach the word? It means our CONTENT must be biblical. The pulpit is not the place for personal testimonies, political speeches, therapy sessions, motivational talks, self-help advice, worldly philosophies, or scientific theories. The herald was on assignment to deliver the message of the king. It was not his message. He did not have editorial authority. He could not change the message to suit the crowd. Neither can we. MARTIN LUTHER rightly said the pulpit is the throne of the word of God. We must preach the word of God. Therefore, the text of scripture must be the priority of our preaching. WALTER KAISER says those who preach should always be pointing to a text. If he is gesturing with his right hand, he should keep his left hand’s finger on the text. If he reverses hands for gesturing, he

should also reverse hands for holding his spot in the text. We should always be pointing the Scriptures.

Likewise, our **MEANING** must be biblical. Your preaching is not biblical if it is void of biblical meaning. **2 Timothy 2:15** says, “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handing the word of truth.*” Biblical preaching involves more than reading, quoting, and mentioning Scripture in your sermon. Biblical preaching explains what the text means by what it says. Ultimately there are only two ways to preach: by exposition or by imposition. Either your preaching explains the God-intended meaning of the text or it sinfully imposes human speculation onto the text. Think about it. When you get an airplane ticket, you are clear about the destination, flight number, and time of departure. But you also make sure you get the right gate number. You don’t just go to any gate; because you know that going to the wrong gate, even if it’s just the next one over, can lead you far from your intended destination. Likewise, a lack of precision in handling the Scriptures can lead people far away from God, rather than closer to him.

Furthermore, our **FOCUS** must be biblical. When Paul charged Timothy to preach the word, it was primarily a reference to the Old Testament. The New Testament canon was not yet complete. But Timothy’s preaching of Old Testament texts was to be done as a minister of the New Covenant. He was to read Old Testament text with New Testament eyes. His preaching was to focus on the divine person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. **1 Corinthians 1:23** says, “*We preach Christ crucified.*” And **2 Corinthians 4:5** says, “*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.*” On one occasion, someone complained to CHARLES SPURGEON that all his sermons sounded alike. “And so they should,” he replied. “First I take a text, and then I make a beeline for the cross.” Likewise, our preaching should unapologetically focus on the virgin birth, virtuous life, vicarious death, victorious resurrection and visible return of Jesus Christ.

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WHEN SHOULD WE PREACH? Verse 2 answers: “*be ready in season and out of season.*” The verb “*ready*” denotes immediacy, urgency, and earnestness. In other words, we must be ready to preach the word whenever a word from the Lord is needed. In a sense, this is a call to **PREPARATION**. To be ready you must first get ready. The late DONALD GREY BARNHOUSE once said that if he knew the Lord was coming in three years, he would spend two studying and one preaching. Moreover, this is a call to **PERSEVERANCE**. *In season* refers to an opportune time. It is the same term used in **Mark 14:11** to describe how Judas sought a convenient moment to betray Jesus. *Out of season* means an inopportune time. We are to preach the word when it does not a good time to preach the word. This play on words exhorts us to be faithful to the task of biblical preaching no matter what it costs. If our preaching brings in a great harvest of souls, we must not become preoccupied with building bigger barns like **THE RICH FOOL**. Keep preaching. If our preaching brings in no harvest, we must not try to develop artificial fruit. Keep preaching. **Ezekiel 2:7** says: “*And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.*”

WILLIAM MACDONALD is right: “The message is in seasons at all times, even when some might think it to be out of season.”

Of course, we should strive to be faithful and fruitful. But we must be faithful even when it seems we are not being fruitful. We must refuse to measure our ministries by how people respond. Visible results are not automatic, necessary, or essential signs of God’s favor on your church. It’s your job to fill the pulpit; it’s God’s job fill the building. So do not be discouraged if your church is not becoming a so-called “mega-church.” Listen to Noah’s testimony: “I had a word from the Lord: it’s going to rain. In fact, I was so convinced of it that I started building an ark to get ready for that day. But nobody else listened to me. I preached for over a hundred years and didn’t get any converts outside of my own family. But while they were drowning in the flood, I was floating in the ark.” The real harvest is at the end of end of the age, not at the end of the service, the end of the year, or even the end of our tenure. Be ready in season and out of season.

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**HOW SHOULD WE PREACH? Verse 2 exhorts: “reprove, rebuke, and exhort.”** There are three imperatives here. The first is *reprove*. It is to convince a person of his error with the goal of leading him to confess his wrong and repent. It is the same word used in **1 Timothy 5:20**, where Paul instructs Timothy to publicly “rebuke” sinning elders. The second imperative, *rebuke*, compliments the first. It’s the act of showing a person his error, regardless of how the person responds. Together, these two imperatives remind us that a faithful ministry must confront sin and expose error, whether people receive it or not. The third imperative, *exhort*, reminds us that a commitment to truth does not mean we are to be negative, fault-finding, hyper-critical, judgmental, or pharisaical. Faithful preaching warns that the way that seems right to man leads to death. But it also leads the sinner to the cross where Jesus paid it all.

How are we to convince the mind, rebuke the emotions, and exhort the will? **4:2** answers, “with complete patience and teaching.” The first word of this verse is “preach” and the last word of the verse is “teaching.” This reminds us there is no hard distinction between preaching and teaching in the New Testament. Faithful preaching necessitates doctrinal teaching. In **Matthew 28:19-20**, THE GREAT COMMISSION says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Yet teaching is not enough. **2 Timothy 4:2** says we need “complete patient and teaching.” We must care for truth and care for people. This requires longsuffering. Preaching may not work in people’s lives according our vision, schedule, and expectation. Yet the word of God is sufficient. In **2 Timothy 3:1**, Paul warns, “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.” But Paul doesn’t give Timothy a new strategy for the changing times. He commanded Timothy to stick with the Scriptures! **2 Timothy 3:16-17** tells us why you can trust the Bible when times get bad: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

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### III. THE STRUGGLE OF OUR CALL TO PREACH THE WORD

Verse 2 tells us what and when and how to preach. But there is another question. Why is preaching the word so important? Verses 3-4 answer: *“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”* Paul foresaw and predicted an emerging and inevitable period when biblical preaching would be out of season. But to fully understand what Paul was talking about, we must identify who Paul was talking about. What *people* does these verses describe? Paul speaks of unbelievers in Ephesus. But they were not unbelievers outside of the church. Professing believers in the church were actually unbelievers. And their hypocrisy would be exposed by their intentional, rebellious, and definite rejection of sound doctrine. In the place of life-giving truth, their sinful desires would lead them to promote false teachers to satisfy their curiosity for something novel, pragmatic, or sensational.

The Bible consistently condemns false teachers. But this text is the other side of the coin. It tells us false teachers would not have a platform if not for itching ears in the church. The fact that a preacher has a large congregation does not necessarily mean he is preaching the truth. He may be an ear-tickler that tells people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. MARVIN VINCENT said it well: “If people desire a calf to worship, a ministerial calf-maker is readily found.” Consequently, we live in a time that is much like the times described in **Jeremiah 5:30-31** where God says, *“An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?”* In **2 Timothy 4:5** Paul gives four more imperatives that call us to faithfulness: *“As for you, be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”*

First, Paul exhorts: *“As for you, always be sober-minded.”* The verb simply means to be sober. When it is used metaphorically, as it is here, the emphasis is on alertness, not abstinence. It is to be watchful. It describes one who is stable, steadfast, and serious. KENNETH WUEST put it this way: “There is no place for clowning in the pulpit of Jesus Christ.” But this command goes even further that. Indeed, you may know some preachers who, when see the way they act in the pulpit, you think they ought to never get out of it. But then you see how they act outside of the pulpit and you think that they ought to never get in it. But we are to always be sober-minded, not just on Sunday mornings.

Secondly, Paul exhorts: *“endure suffering.”* There is an implicit command embedded in this explicit command. To endure suffering you must expect suffering. There are many who preach because they expect it to bring ecclesiastical prominence, material prosperity, and worldly success. Consequently, many pastors and churches increasingly view ministry in terms of celebrity, privilege, and affluence. But in **2 Timothy 2:3**, Paul says, *“Share in the suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”* Christian ministry is spiritual warfare. So we must endure affliction.

Thirdly, Paul exhorts: *“do the work of an evangelist.”* What does it mean to do the work of an evangelist? Commentators debate whether Timothy possessed the gift of evangelism. But regardless of Timothy’s giftedness, he is commanded to do the work of an evangelist. So is every pastor-teacher. This is not about a travel schedule, a ministry program, or a special technique. It is about the very nature of Christian ministry. We must preach the gospel to the lost and teach the gospel to the church. **Colossians 1:28** says, *“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”*

Fourthly, Paul exhorts: *“fulfill your ministry.”* This is the final imperative of the text. It summarizes the previous eight commands. And it reinforces all that Timothy has been charged to do in this letter. In season and out of season, Timothy was to faithfully accomplish his ministerial assignment. So must we. We must not allow fear, pride, laziness, neglect, or suffering to cause us to be unfaithful in the word to which the Lord Jesus has called us. We must fulfill our ministries.

**Jim Ryun was a favorite in the Olympic 1,500 meters the day he fell. As a massive crowd in the stadium and on television watched, Ryun made his way around the track in a pack of finely conditioned runners. And then he crashed to the ground. And, of course, in a race of this sort, a fall virtually guarantees that it will be impossible to win. So, at this point, Ryun had several options. He could have got up and headed to the locker room and a hot shower. He could have become angry at having trained for so long for this even and now missing his chance for the gold medal. He could have sunk into self-pity over the seeming bad deal he’d gotten by being jostled in the pack. But apparently, none of these came to his mind. Rather, he seemed to have had only one thought that eclipsed all other options: Finishing, even through he couldn’t win. And that is exactly what he did. He got up and ran again. Others won medals, but Ryun a large measure of respect when he determined to finish the race.**

**A CHARGE TO KEEP I HAVE, A GOD TO GLORIFY,  
A NEVER-DYING SOUL TO SAVE, AND FIT IT FOR THE SKY.**

**TO SERVE THE PRESENT AGE, MY CALLING TO FULFILL:  
OH, MAY IT ALL MY POWERS ENGAGE TO DO MY MASTER’S WILL!**

**ARM ME WITH JEALOUS CARE, AS IN THY SIGHT TO LIVE;  
AND O THY SERVANT, LORD, PREPARE A STRICT ACCOUNT TO GIVE!**