

# What itching ears need to hear

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     The reading this morning is from 2 Timothy chapter 4 verses 1 to 8. With great patience and careful instruction.

For the time will come when people will not put up the sign doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you keep your head in all situations.

Endure hardship. Do the work of an evangelist. Discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering.

And the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness.

[ 1 : 3 3 ]     Which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day. And not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Thank you. Thank you. Okay.

We are almost done with Paul's second letter to Timothy. We'll look at the rest of chapter 4 in a fortnight's time. And that will be ours done with this book. We did do a couple of sections of it before we went into lockdown.

But the series is going to be done before we're back to meeting in person. So for me, this is going to be the series that I remember as the lockdown sermon series, if you like. And I hope it has been helpful and encouraging to you in these strange days that we are living in.

It certainly has been a help and an encouragement to me. So I hope for you as well. In many ways, today's passage from the start of chapter 4.

[ 2 : 3 8 ]     In many ways, it flows straight on from the closing verses of chapter 3. Indeed, if you've got an NIV Bible open in front of you, you'll see that there isn't even a new section heading at the chapter division, that this continues the thoughts of the end of chapter 3.

So this is what it's going to look like for Timothy to continue in what he learned as he was commanded back in verse 14 of chapter 3. Timothy here in chapter 4 is being contrasted once again with those evildoers and imposters going from bad to worse in verse 13.

However, there's still a break of sorts, if you like. There's a kind of definite re-emphasis here in verse 1 of chapter 4. There's an emphatic tone that comes in.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge. There's a kind of courtroom undertone to the verb charge here.

It's like kind of testifying under oath or commanding a witness to tell the truth as they testify. This is a solemn, emphatic utterance, even more so in view of whose presence this charge is made in.

[ 3 : 53 ] So Timothy is expected to take this very seriously. And whilst there may be nuances that apply particularly to him in his role as an apostolic delegate, then in the context of first century Ephesus, yes, there are specific nuances that only apply to him, but it definitely applies in a secondary sense to everybody who's called to a pastoral or teaching ministry.

And even I think we can say it applies to all people, that there are lessons for us all here in terms of how we speak and in terms of how we listen. So I want to divide our consideration of these verses into two sections.

We're going to think first about the nature of the charge, what is Timothy commanded to do? And then secondly, we'll consider the basis for the charge, why he does these things.

So what is Timothy being told to do? We're going to come back to verse one in a minute, but the content of the command comes here in verse two. Preach the word.

Be prepared in season and out of season. Correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. So firstly, Timothy is called to preach.

[ 5 : 07 ] We've said several times as we've thought about guarding the treasure, working our way through this letter. We've said that the way you guard the treasure of the gospel is not by burying it in a hole in the ground like a pirate, and it's not by hoarding it to yourself like a dragon on top of all his gold.

No, this treasure is guarded by sharing it far and wide. Timothy is commanded to preach. It's primarily by preaching that Christ builds his church, and that encompasses both the kind of initial bringing of sinful people to repentance and faith in him, and also encompasses increasing the faith of those who are already joined to him.

If you've been coming to our prayer meetings the last few weeks, maybe you can see the parallels here with what we've been thinking about praying for God to be glorified in salvation and judgment, and praying for God to be glorified in the fruitful and faithful lives of his people.

Timothy here is called to preach. So that's point one. Timothy is called to preach. Secondly, what Timothy is to preach is specified here. This isn't preach in the abstract.

This isn't preach a word. No, Timothy is commanded to preach the word. And Paul doesn't need to specify what that word is, because Timothy knows fine well that this refers to that which Paul himself has consistently taught.

[ 6 : 33 ] That when Paul talks about the word, he means the gospel, the mystery that has been revealed, the truth that has been committed to Timothy by Paul, and that Timothy is now to pass on to others as he was commanded back in verse 2 of chapter 2.

So Timothy, and preachers who follow in Timothy's footsteps today, Timothy is not at liberty to choose what to preach, but rather he is obliged to proclaim God's eternal authoritative word of truth.

And that's true of all of God's people, isn't it? Maybe it will feel more relevant to you if I point out that before preach became a kind of specialised piece of theological terminology, that behind that is the idea of something like herald.

Now maybe you don't want to say that you're called to preach with a capital P, but I hope that we are all interested in heralding the good news. And don't worry, the silly outfit is entirely optional.

So folks, if we're being heralds, and if God has revealed the word, well then that is what we have to hold to, isn't it? That is what each of us needs to speak about.

[ 7 : 49 ] We aren't free to create our own kind of bespoke mash-up of ideas and follow along after that. And when we're talking to other people, well we're not free to act as if it doesn't matter what you believe.

Because there is such a thing as objective truth. There is the word which is to be proclaimed. Thirdly, Timothy must be prepared.

He needs to stand ready. And when you consider this command together with verse 1 in view of Christ's appearing, there's even a sense of urgency that comes through here, a desire to make the most of every possible opportunity, well, before Christ returns and it's too late.

Folks, it is a terrible thing to preach as if it doesn't really matter, to squander an opportunity. In Richard Baxter's advice to preachers, he said, Folks, I think sometimes we're so careful that not to want to be seen to be bullying people into believing, or we're so scared of being emotionally manipulative that we end up looking like we don't care that much.

But folks, we are dealing with matters beyond even life and death. We are dealing with all of eternity. So how dare we imply that it is a matter of indifference to us how we are heard?

[ 9 : 44 ] Do we love people or not? Friends, it matters to me a great deal whether you heed my words today and each week. It matters to me a great deal.

At not, I pray for the sake of my ego, but for the sake of your soul. Fourthly, this readiness is to be in season and out of season.

The sense here is of both convenient times and inconvenient times. The point isn't really that we preach in both summer and winter. The point is we preach whether it suits us or not.

And let me tell you, it is not particularly convenient to me to preach at this point where I cannot see any of you, where I have no idea whether you're listening attentively or being distracted by the dog that refuses to settle down and fretting about whether your lunch is going to burn.

And it's a pretty inconvenient time for many of you in terms of listening, isn't it? As you try desperately to persuade the children to sit quietly for five minutes. And at least if they're not going to listen, well, at least just do some colouring or something so that I can listen for three minutes.

[ 10 : 54 ] Lockdown feels pretty out of season for most of us, I suspect. But this is broader than that, isn't it? The point isn't that... Sorry, the point is that this word is of such colossal importance and the urgency is so great that we can't afford to put it off because the timing is inconvenient.

If I'm out at Tesco and somebody recognises me because, I don't know, they've seen a church post on Facebook or whatever, and they want to talk to me about whatever it might be, it may not feel very convenient to me.

But it would hardly be in keeping with this command to Timothy for my attitude to be, I came in here for a pint of milk, leave me alone! That's not in keeping with this command, is it?

And I wouldn't want you to be worrying whether it's a convenient time or not. And just as much for you at work. At the end of that long day, when you just want to get home to your slippers and a glass of wine, in that moment when your colleague tells you that her grandmother is seriously ill, and your colleague wants to talk to you about death and heaven and hell, well, it might feel pretty out of season.

It might feel quite inconvenient in that moment. But Paul says to you, preach the word she needs to hear right then. Tell her the good news of the gospel.

[ 12 : 18 ] And pray with her. At other times, I mean, it may not always be appropriate. When you're in the zone in the middle of the workday, it may not always be appropriate to pause for that conversation with your chatty colleague, even if it does seem to be something significant that they want to talk about.

Because we are called to work diligently as working for the Lord. It matters that we do what we're being paid to do. So there are legitimate reasons to not have a long, involved conversation at the moment.

But folks, let's resolve that it is not going to be our own comfort that makes us reticent to have those conversations. So when you are at the school gate, and you're trying to stop the children running off in six directions, and you want to get out of the cold and put the kettle on, in that moment, yes, it is out of season.

And yet it may be precisely then that somebody needs you to give them God's good news. So folks, opportunities might come in favourable circumstances and unfavourable circumstances.

They might come when you're looking for them, and they may come when you're not. And the question somebody asks might be one that you've considered at great length, or it might be a complete curveball that you are struggling to imagine any kind of an answer for.

[ 13 : 36 ] Opportunities differ. But our response is the same. Be ready. Preach the word. And correct. Rebuke. Encourage.

With great patience and careful instruction. Which brings us on to the fifth element of this charge, in which, for the sake of brevity, I'm going to group together correction, rebuke, and encouragement.

Or as the New English Bible puts it, use argument, reproof, and appeal. Now, broadly, we could note the variety here. Paul's already touched on the usefulness of God's word in a variety of different manners and tasks.

He touched on that just a few verses ago at the end of chapter three. You could almost think of these three elements as kind of appealing intellectually and morally and emotionally.

See, some people, some people have doubts and they need convincing arguments. And some people are mired deep in sin and they need to be rebuked.

[ 14 : 41 ] And some people are haunted by fears and they need to be encouraged. So it's the preacher's duty to apply God's word in such a way as to accomplish all of these things.

Now, let's note it is in preaching the word that these things take place. We've already said that, haven't we? It isn't. It isn't my job to condemn you for that which I personally dislike.

It's my job to help you see what God's word condemns. I'm not at liberty to construct a rational argument on whatever foundation I choose.

No, it is the Bible that must correct where you have gone astray. And I'm not free to use whatever means of comfort strike me as effective. That would be to follow those who preach what itching ears want to hear.

And we thought about that approach back in chapter three, verse six. No encouragement that we have to offer has to come on the basis that is outlined in scripture.

[ 15 : 48 ] And why is that? Well, because actually that's where true comfort is to be found. Comfort in the forgiveness of sins on the basis of Christ's sacrifice.

Not the false comfort of pretending there's no sin to be forgiven. That's true in public preaching. And it's true of how we speak to one another individually as well, isn't it?

It's true of the late night texts that you send to your friend when she's struggling to sleep and just wants some comfort. Well, let's let that comfort come from God's word.

Number six, with great patience. Now, you might think that this stands somewhat opposed to the urgency that we were discussing earlier.

But really, both can be held together. Urgency causes us to make the most of every opportunity. And patience, patience comes from a confidence that it's God who does the work.

[ 16 : 45 ] And therefore, we are urgent, but not frantic. We speak boldly. We apply rational arguments and timely rebukes and appropriate encouragements.

But we don't resort to pressure techniques or censoriousness or any kind of force. See, our readiness out of season.

That primarily refers to the convenience or otherwise for us who speak, doesn't it? It's not commanding us to speak when it is out of season for those who we hope might listen.

And that's freeing. That's freeing because it means we don't have to look over our shoulders at other churches and see how many converts are they claiming, or how many YouTube views for that matter. We don't need to turn to shortcut methods of trying to build a congregation numerically, because there are no shortcuts in building a church.

Now, that's true in our church life, and it's true for us all, as individuals who wish to be obedient to this as well. And therefore, seventh, we do these things with careful instruction.

[ 17 : 55 ] Timothy has to follow Paul in proclaiming the whole counsel of God, as must I and all who wish to follow in his footsteps. If we're going to correct and rebuke, well, actually, it does little good to just say that's wrong.

No, the charge to do this with careful instruction cautions us to say not only that's wrong, but here is why it's wrong. And for that matter, here is what's true and right.

So this is the comprehensive charge that Paul has given to Timothy. Why so wide-reaching, so broad, so urgent? Well, let's consider the basis of this charge, the reasons that Paul gives.

Stott says Paul offers three bases for this charge. In verse 1, look to the coming Christ. Verses 3 to 5, consider the contemporary scene.

And verses 6 to 8, notice the aged apostle. Now, we're not going to have time to look at verses 6 to 8 in detail this morning. Maybe we'll look at them a little bit next time.

[ 19 : 05 ] But in terms of motivating Timothy to answer this call, to do as he is charged to do, while verses 6 to 8 function primarily there as a motivation because Paul is not going to be around to do this himself anymore.

Paul's confident he is not going to survive this imprisonment, that he is being poured out, and he needs somebody to take up the baton, and Timothy is the man. The crown of righteousness is all that's left to await Paul, and it will await Timothy too, should he fight the good fight and finish the race and keep the faith.

I say, we may come back to those verses next time. But for now, verse 1. The first reason here to take this charge seriously is that Paul claims divine authority for it.

That is not what was supposed to appear on the screen at this point. Let's see, have we got verse 1? We do not. I don't know where verse 1's gone. I hope you've got your Bibles open and you can look at verse 1.

There's a reason here to take this charge seriously. Paul claims divine authority for this charge. It's made in the presence of God. Now that's a bold claim, isn't it?

[ 20 : 21 ] It's a big deal for Paul to claim to speak in God's name, to charge Timothy in the presence of God. But Paul's not done there. He brings in Christ Jesus alongside God and refers to him as the one who will judge the living and the dead and in view of his appearing and his kingdom.

Focus here seems to be on the future, as Jesus as the one who will return in judgment. And whilst this appearing, that phrase can be used to refer both to Jesus' first time on earth and to his later coming return, the latter is far more likely here in the context of this judgment reference in verse 1.

And the mention of this coming judgment, well, that could be what we could call a negative motivation, a danger to be avoided. It could be a positive, a judgment that results in being rewarded, Paul's crown, verse 8.

Or it could be in the sense of judgment of everyone and therefore a motivation to preach the word clearly so that the judgment will be a positive day of vindication and hope for the many to whom Timothy will speak.

And I think elements of all three dimensions of judgment are probably in view here in Paul's motivation. Because that one appearing of Jesus will require that not only those who preach, but also those who listen, give an account to Christ on that day.

[ 22 : 00 ] And folks, one of the downsides of the fact that we do not live as clearly in light of Jesus' return as did the early church, one of the downsides is that we lose these kind of motivations.

But that return is certain. And it will be unexpected. And we don't dare lose sight of that reality. Well, having considered that future motivation, we can turn also to verse 3 and consider the present.

And here the slide is behaving itself. Paul introduces this section with 4. So this is explicitly a reason why Timothy should preach in this way.

Why? Well, because so many people are doing the opposite. Because the days are going to come when people don't want to listen to the preaching of the word. They won't put up with it.

Instead, people are going to gather those who say what they want to hear. Folks, we want to hear often. We want to hear something new and exciting, not the same old story.

[ 23 : 12 ] And we want to hear about the secret shortcut, not the gospel that expects us to actually listen and live out what we've believed. And so we suit our own desires instead of the truth.

Itching ears turn to myths and nonsense instead of to the truth. Why? Well, because it's exciting and dramatic.

And you get to feel superior to those ill-educated, clueless peasants centuries ago. You know, the ones who were so thick they thought they should take the Bible literally. Well, of course, we all know better, don't we?

We know it's meant to be an allegory, a story. One path to the truth. Paul says people are going to gather teachers who scratch where they're itching. But the problem is scratching rarely actually helps, does it?

In many cases, scratching doesn't deal with the issue. In fact, it can make it far worse. And the itching ears, this sensation of being overwhelmed by sins and passions.

[ 24 : 12 ] Well, the truth is that itch can be cured. It can be cured by the truth that brings health. But scratching these myths to which many quickly turn aside, that is only going to make the itching worse.

But we often don't want to hear the actual solution. We generally don't want to hear that we are sinners and fall short of the standards set by a holy God. We don't like to hear that God is a God of justice who punishes wrongdoers who break his commands.

We don't like to hear that apart from the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ that turns away the wrath of God, we face the pains of hell forever. We don't like to hear that we can in no way earn our own salvation, but receive it by faith alone, trusting in Christ and his work.

We don't like to hear that following Christ has certain ethical demands that call us to be holy as God is holy. The attraction always is to follow teachers who scratch those itching ears and teachers whose standards don't conflict with our own sinful desires.

Folks, we may not like to hear it, but the one truth is exactly what we need to hear. And these verses should serve as a warning to Timothy's church members listening in to this letter to Timothy and a warning to you and to me listening in 2,000 years later.

[ 25 : 43 ] A warning not to let our itching ears and let our own desires set the agenda for what we're going to listen to, but rather to listen to those who preach the word in season and out of season.

Now, perhaps even more than warning the hearers to listen up, Paul's writing this letter to Timothy to encourage him to persist despite dire circumstances.

And so Paul says, verse 5, because people are unstable in mind and conduct, Timothy must be sober and steady. He must keep his head in all situations.

Because Timothy has to persist in preaching what people don't want to hear, he must be prepared to suffer for doing so. Folks, please pray that the danger of unpopularity will not tempt me or other ministers of Christ's church to mute those elements of God's word that the world finds offensive.

And pray the same for yourself as you herald the truth in your daily context. Also, well, because people are ignorant of the true gospel, Timothy must do the work of an evangelist.

[ 27 : 04 ] Folks, we delude ourselves if we think that people are any less ignorant of the gospel today. We too must do this work. And therefore, whatever the reaction, Timothy and you and I, we must discharge all the duties of our ministry.

Folks, we share in this solemn charge because we live in days like those in which Timothy was called to minister. The problems are serious, but the solution is at hand.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, equip us, we ask. Equip us to preach your word in season and out of season, prepared to make the most of every opportunity, urgent in our purpose, able to correct and to rebuke and to encourage.

Give us patience. Equip us to teach in every necessary way. Make us willing to be poured out in your service, poured out even to death.

Guard us against fear of what others may say and keep us devoted to your truth and yours alone. Amen.