

Preaching the Word

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[0 : 00] 2 Timothy chapter 2, look again at verse 15, just as a base for us this evening. 2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 15.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

It was before the Communion, but for once I managed to start a series after the Communion, rather than starting halfway through. We're starting a new series in our prayer meetings, and quite thankfully and quite happily it's a series.

The headings have been given to me already, which is a nice surprise. We'll be following, roughly following, and I'll be broken up, the seven characteristics the free church is looking at.

At what makes up a healthy gospel church. You remember we had Gordon, I speak a few weeks ago, and Gordon was there to give us a head start.

[1 : 03] And the free church's vision, it's a simple vision, but it's also a vision that is God glorifying. We trust is to have a healthy gospel church in every community in Scotland.

In God's great love, in God's great providence, we have been here, and our friends next door, but we're worried for ourselves.

We've been here as a gospel church, 75, 76 plus years, technically speaking. And the Lord's had his people in Tolstain, or Tolstain before that, of course.

So just to help us over the next few weeks, we'll look at these seven headings and just ask the question, quite simply, what does a healthy church look like? We want to be healthy.

I mean, every one of us, we want our best, to do our best, to be in the best health possible. Emma, as in the mainland, just now, and she's just here, she would say that's a lie, because the last thing I do for her is go to the doctors easily.

[2 : 05] I'm sure it tends to be a male thing, I'm not sure if that's true or not, but going to the doctors isn't the easiest thing to do. It's even harder sometimes to go when you worry there's something actually wrong with you.

You think, well, if I go, they actually might find something, and that's even worse somehow. Being healthy is what we want to be, but it's not always easy to actually work towards that.

We want to be a healthy church, and in these seven areas, I am sure there are areas we are healthy in, and areas we are perhaps slightly less than healthy in.

But every area is important. So we'll go through them one by one over the next few weeks, again taking breaks. First of all, this evening, quite simply, the first characteristic, the first heading of a healthy gospel church is healthy gospel preaching.

What is healthy gospel preaching? Using, as we said, 2 Timothy verse 15 as our base, just three or four things this evening.

[3 : 13] Four areas that I believe scripture teaches us that shapes healthy gospel teaching. And time permitting, we can see a few things that aren't healthy gospel preaching.

I remember, probably halfway into last year, we took time looking at what preaching was, what the church was. And I'll say the same caveat this evening.

As we ask the question, what is healthy gospel preaching? It's quite hard as a minister, in one sense, because you're so aware of your own downfalls while preparing a sermon like this.

But also, it's good for everyone, minister, a congregation alike, to be reminded how high scripture places preaching. How high the call of preaching actually is.

And that's why we have verse 15 here, where Paul writes to young Timothy, a young minister who is in a challenging situation. And Paul encourages Timothy, do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

[4 : 25] So the first characteristic of healthy gospel preaching is that it is based from the word. It is scripturally based.

Scripturally based. Now, it won't be anything, I'm sure, that is new to us this evening. Perhaps there might be, but I don't think there would be. But it's reminders for us. Scripturally based.

Everything we preach has to be from the word. It is never to be man's opinions. And for ourselves, it's never to be my opinions.

Brothers and sisters, I'm sure there's plenty of times you'll find that your opinions on certain topics come up against the word of God.

And you'll find that, you've found that. And where your opinion is one thing and God's opinion or God's word is never a way, our opinion always has to be wrong. God's word always has the final say.

[5 : 25] And much that is dangerous preaching, that is unhealthy preaching, it has man's opinion, the minister's opinion, and God's opinion, God's word.

And the minister takes his own opinion and pushes God's word out of the way and preaches his own opinion. Now, if nothing else, it's much easier to do that.

I think I have my sermons done in half a time each week. If I was to come up here every Sunday and every Thursday and preach my own opinions, preach my own ideas and thoughts, it would be much easier.

That would be an easy job, a quick job. But it's not the call. The call is to preach the word. All we have is scripturally based.

Every doctrine, every precept must be found in scripture. That's why I keep challenging you. I don't even mean it to be a literal challenge.

[6 : 24] But as a thought process, if I said something against scripture, would you challenge it? I'm not looking for confrontation, quite the opposite. I'm just making sure as a congregation we're reminded it is not my word you're following.

It is God's word. As we trust, as I work to preach it faithfully to you. It is his word we preach. And to be scripturally based, it involves not just hard work.

It involves at times gospel and word-based wrestling. And you hear ministers use that word. It would be wrestling with God's word.

And it sounds almost offensive, perhaps. It sounds like a bad term, but it's been used all the way through church history. And it's a good term for it. There will be days, and you'll be surprised which sermons they are.

It's the most simple, perhaps, of texts when you preach it. And it's a text where, you know, I start on a Monday morning. I think, right, well, this text should be okay.

[7 : 24] You know, and you think, well, we'll see how this flows and get us structured. By Wednesday, it's not working. By Friday, I think, yeah, it's not great.

You're wrestling with a word. You're wrestling to find out and to apply it in a way that is actually right. Again, the quick way out is to say, well, this says this, and I think it means this, and that's us.

That equals unhealthy preaching. That's opinion-based preaching. And it sounds good for a while. And you see many preachers who will preach amazing sermons. And we all wish to preach amazing sermons, every one of us, in terms of easy to understand and all that.

But good sermons that sound good are one thing. But bad sermons can also sound good. And for a while, bad sermons sound very good. And bad sermons will also attract a crowd for a while.

But bad sermons, which are not based in God's word, will not grow Christians. They will grow crowds. They will not grow the believer. They will not feed the believer. But to do a scripturally-based sermon, to preach, to be a scripturally-based preacher, it requires wrestling of the word.

[8 : 40] It also requires prayer. We'll do a study on Timothy one day. There's a constant theme in Timothy where Paul reminds Timothy to be in prayer. There is no great mystery to writing a sermon.

There is much study. Whatever study you do, there is much, much prayer. I was trying to think this morning, time-wise, what it is.

But I was trying to think, how many hours of prayer did you put into a sermon? We can't really quantify it. Because you'll be having breakfast, you'll be having your dinner, you'll be going to Tesco, see the shopping.

And you're praying through next week's sermon, this week's sermon, last week's sermon. You're praying through this, you're praying through that, as we all do, I'm sure, throughout our lives. It's a life, it's a sermon soaked in prayer.

So gospel, healthy gospel preaching, it is scripturally-based. It's also scripturally balanced. Scripturally balanced.

[9 : 43] Acts 20, where Paul says, Acts 20, verse 27, Paul says, I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God. The whole counsel of God is what a preacher is striving, a gospel-based preacher, a healthy preacher is striving to do.

Healthy preaching is scripturally balanced preaching. Every minister has their biases. We all prefer, I'm sure, some books in scripture compared to others.

We all have books in scripture we like to read more often than others. There's ideas, there's doctrines, there's theologies we like to discuss more than others.

Healthy gospel preaching requires a strict scriptural balance. There are doctrines and theologies I would like to preach most weeks.

There are parts in scripture, books in scripture I would like to preach most weeks. But quite simply, as Spurs would remind his students, Brothers, the pulpit is not your platform.

[10 : 51] The pulpit is not my platform. I'm not here to espouse my thoughts and opinions. I'm not here on a Sunday to give out my great wisdom. I'm sure you'd be starving quite quickly spiritually if that was the case.

No, in the pulpit, the preacher's job is to give a balanced sermon. And that's quite simple. You preach from the Old Testament. You preach from the New Testament.

You preach all the different genres of scripture. Poetry and prophecy. You preach all the historical books. You go into the gospels.

You preach around the history. You preach the epistles. You go through it and you try and balance it out as much as possible. And with that, you try and preach sermons that are mostly for Christians and sermons that are mostly for non-Christians.

You try and preach sermons that are a mixture of both. You try and make sure, but not week by week because that's impossible. But month by month or year by year, you're striving to be as balanced as possible.

[11 : 53] You want to challenge believers to grow and challenge non-believers to come to Christ. That's why we are and why we strive to be so exegetical in our preaching.

As it were, verse by verse and section by section. That's why the Reformers were not great fans as to the one-verse preaching method.

Perhaps it's part of our culture at times, but the Reformers didn't like it. Why? Because it came really from a Catholic background where you take one verse out of context and preach out of context and forget all around it.

God speaks not in one verse. The verses are man-made. God speaks in paragraphs. Speaks in books. And there's no harm that we're taking one verse this evening. There's no sin in that.

But our preaching must be, at most, the majority of it has to be line by line, verse by verse. Now, there's time for topical sermons. This seven weeks will be topical sermons.

[12 : 53] I'll be taking random verses, but for good reason. All the way throughout Scripture, that back up what we're saying. But the majority of our preaching, I hope you're noticing, the majority of our preaching, my own personal goal is three quarters as much as I can.

Three quarters of the preaching is verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book. And again, there's nothing innovative there. The early church did it.

The very start of the Christian church taught that was the best way to do it. It was lost over a thousand or so years, two thousand or so years, a thousand or so years after that.

And then with the Reformers, that exegetical preaching was brought back in verse by verse, book by book, chapter by chapter, and so on. That makes sure you preach the whole Scripture faithfully.

Not just my top ten favourite sections. My top ten through the verses. It means that in a year, if we're preaching through a chapter in Scripture, a book of Scripture, it will be verses which if I could choose, I perhaps would not choose them for ten years, twenty years' time, thirty years' time.

[14 : 01] But we're preaching book by book. There's bits in Scripture we have to look at together, discuss together. All that to say it's a balanced approach. Healthy gospel preaching is a balanced approach.

Healthy gospel preaching must also be scripturally encouraging. It's to help believers to grow. Every time you're preaching a sermon, and every time I hope you're listening to a sermon, you're there to listen to God's Word.

And God's Word is always doing, well, we're doing many things, but for our interest tonight, God's Word is always doing at least two things. Every time a believer hears God's Word, God's Word is challenging us, it's encouraging us.

Whatever word you use, it is having some impact on the believer. That is a guarantee. But also, every time God's Word goes out, as we know us, we remind ourselves so often to a non-believer, their hearts are ever being hardened or softened by the Word of God.

There is never nothing happening. It's like an encouragement for preachers that you can go somewhere, and this is not true for yourselves. I have not found it. Even on supply, I didn't find it.

[15 : 21] But you will go places at times. I've done plenty of supply over in Scotland the last ten or so years. And you see a congregation, and you'd almost think they were just mannequins.

Now, I'm not wanting claps of a place. I'm not wanting smiles. I'm not wanting, I don't want anything. But you see, sometimes you see congregations, and they look like there's nothing going on. And you think, oh, man.

And I was living out and studying in Edinburgh. You travel hours, hours and hours. Stay overnight sometimes. Man, there's nothing happening here. And the reminder comes in.

God is doing his work. The believers here are being encouraged or being challenged or whatever else the Lord is doing with them. And the non-believers are being softened or being hardened. And that is the simple reminder that keeps preachers going.

Every sermon has to be in some way scripturally encouraging. Now, by encouraging, I include challenging. Encouraging isn't always a positive aspect. We're encouraged as we're challenged.

[16 : 32] As believers, as the word speaks to our life and shows sin perhaps in our lives, it shows disobedience in our lives, we are being encouraged to grow. Also, we're to be scripturally evangelical.

I know we know of us. Here's a balance. Every sermon can't always be both. And you strive to be balanced as much as you can.

It's not always good. It's not always achievable. It doesn't always work. Some sermons you are focusing majorly on the Christians. Some sermons you're trying to focus majorly on those who are not yet Christians.

Some sermons you try and do both at the same time. We'll try that, Lord willing, this Lord's Day morning. But you're striving all the time to encourage the Lord's people to also preach the simple gospel to those who haven't yet come to the Lord.

And that's the elements. If Christ isn't being glorified or being magnified in some way in your sermon, then you're a waste of time. A Christless sermon is not a sermon.

[17 : 45] To talk at best, a lecture perhaps. But it's not a sermon. Christ must be magnified and glorified. And it's not twisting God's word to find him.

We saw that in the judges. How many weeks we spent in the judges. And there's some pastors in the judges. And there's nothing but misery. There's nothing but killing and awful abuse going on.

And Christ is there in the absence of any goodness. And we saw that. We preached that. But Christ is here in that you're left saying, without God, without a saviour, we are done.

We're evil. We're disgusting people who are just raping and killing and destroying, as we saw at the end of Judges. There's no Christ in the text here, but he is there in the fact that he is so absent it screams out.

In other words, every sermon has an element. We must bring ourselves back to Jesus and glorify him and remind ourselves of him. So scripturally encouraging to the believers and scripturally evangelical to the non-believers.

[18 : 51] And finally, every sermon, to have good, healthy gospel preaching, every sermon has to be scripturally empowered.

Scripturally empowered. In other words, all his strength and none of my strength. Two brief texts for us here. Exodus chapter 4, where poor Moses is speaking.

And Moses here says words that I think every preacher, every minister has echoed since. Exodus 4, verses 10 to verse 12. Moses said to the Lord, Pardon your servant.

Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue. The Lord said to him, Who gave human beings their mouths?

Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go. I will help you speak. I will teach you what to say.

[19 : 54] Brothers and sisters, there's never a better summary of what it feels like at times to preach. I'm sure every preacher will say this and will mean this. Every one of our colleagues, I would say, in Presbytery I've spoken to, will share a similar sentiment.

At times you are thinking, I haven't got the words to say. I certainly haven't got the ability to do this well, humanly speaking. And you've studied hard, you've worked hard, but at the same time you think, you've got two pages if you're lucky.

I'm thinking, man, this doesn't even come close to doing God's word, any sort of justice whatsoever. And you're reminded we're to be spiritually empowered.

Moses wasn't wrong. You know what God doesn't say to Moses, oh Moses, you're fine. You're quite clear, Moses. You're quite smart, Moses. No. God doesn't say anything back to Moses at all.

Moses says, I can't do this because of this reason, that reason and that reason. And these reasons are right and valid. Moses on his own because of this reason and that reason and that reason was an awful choice to have to go and set his people free.

[21 : 01] Moses was the worst choice in many ways. But God reminds Moses, I am sending you, therefore go. Weak ability also, Hebrews 4 verse 12, a verse we know so well, that a mind of a word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, both joints and marrow and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The words of one of the Puritans, I am altogether unable. His word is sharp and able. That is, again, the preacher's motto. Brothers and sisters, don't think for a second, at least I hope this to be the case, there's not one preacher who has ever stood before you or a hearer or else you've heard servants.

Not one gospel glorifying, God glorifying preacher who is thinking that they have any sort of ability. Because the second you think you have some sort of preaching ability, some sort of preaching, amazing skill in preaching, the sermon crumbles to bits pretty quickly and that happens to ministers.

The truth is the gospel preacher like poor Timothy is obviously finding out. It's interesting, we don't see, of course, the letters that Paul receives, but we can see in how he counsels Timothy the things Timothy's been saying or writing to Paul and Timothy's scared.

He's scared he's not able to cope with the demands of ministry. He's scared he's not able to preach well, to do the job well and Paul again and again says to Timothy, you've been called and God will give you the strength.

[22 : 51] But just because God gives us the strength to be gospel preachers, it doesn't take away from us our responsibility. You see that verse 15 of the verse we have. Do your best.

Do your best, he says. Yes, God gives you the words, God gives you the strength, but not for a second does that mean you sit back and do nothing and say, well, the sermon will come together on Sunday morning.

It's okay. Well, that's mockery. That's testing God. Like every other Christian, like every other Christian, the minister's job is simple and clear.

We strive to serve the Lord. Brothers and sisters, we all strive to serve the Lord. And we strive to serve the Lord to the best of our given ability. And we trust the Lord with the rest.

Because the reality is the rest is also the whole. The Lord takes the minister's study, the minister's prayer, small perhaps as it may be, and he uses it to glorify himself.

[24 : 00] A ministry, a gospel ministry is one that is spiritually and scripturally empowered. A minister of a weak mind and a weak mouth and a weak ability the Lord uses.

So a few things that healthy gospel preaching is. Just as we come to a quick conclusion, just a few thoughts what healthy gospel preaching is not.

Healthy gospel preaching is not all information and no application. Healthy gospel preaching is not just transferring knowledge.

Again, that's much easier to do. It'd be much easier every Sunday, every Thursday just to read you out everything I can find in the commentary is about one verse. It would save me hours of work.

I could do that in 10 minutes maybe, 15 minutes if I'm taking a slow day. It's my job done then. I could have a rest of the week off. Preaching is not information sharing.

[25 : 08] Healthy gospel preaching, yes, we are there to hopefully give new information, hopefully to encourage brothers and sisters to grow in our knowledge of the Lord but also it's about application.

It's our job to apply like our Saviour has done before us. We follow Him. He is the best preacher. He is the best teacher and by following His example He taught theology.

Our Saviour taught great theology in terms of He taught high theology but then He applies it in applicable ways, in understandable ways. He brings what is high and great down to the level of farmers and fishermen.

You think back to the early preachers in their own area in the Western Isles. Christians, when these ministers landed with the gospel, they struggled and they struggled to try and make sense of these great doctrines and preach it in a way the congregations could understand.

I'm sure you've all heard, or many have heard the story, but the minister who was trying to explain to folks, it was Uyghur or Harris or Lox or somewhere anyway, tried to explain to these probably Christians, but very small enough Christians, they had never heard the gospel heard before, tried to explain to them about Jonah.

[26 : 36] And they couldn't understand a word past it, they didn't understand any of it, so the minister just used examples. And these examples, imagine you're sailing out this loch, as you point to the loch, and he told us about Jonah as if it happened in the loch in their village.

And that feels silly to us, but he took what was great and glorious and applied it to the people. In other words, a good sermon is not about sharing information. There's a book that says, brothers, we're not professionals, it's a book for ministers, to remind us we're not businessmen.

Part of the book says, brothers, we are not lecturers. We're not lecturers. Our job is not just to share information each Sunday, that's not the calling, it's to share God's word and seek to apply it in a way that actually applies to the lives of believers.

So healthy gospel preaching, it is not all information and no application. It's also, quite simply, not an effort to sound intelligent, not an effort to sound smart.

You think, well, that's one thing you're not managing to do. It's not something we try and do. Sounding smart is actually a lot easier than being understood.

[27 : 51] you'll find that, if you've ever had to write an essay, you'll find that doing an essay. It's very easy to sound smart in an essay, but much harder to write an essay that is easy to understand.

That requires a lot more hard work. And as my markers have pointed out again and again, again and again, sounding smart is one thing.

This is a Bob Ackroyd special. Sounding smart, gentlemen, is one thing. Being smart is quite something else. Being smart is able to explain the hard thing in an easy way.

In other words, preaching is not about turns of phrase or about the tone you use, about how you move your voice around. We could wax lyrical and I could sway and shake the pulpit every Sunday.

It might impress some people. It won't save a single soul. Good, healthy gospel preaching is about trying to make God's word clear, not trying to make God's word sound better because I can't improve on God's word.

[28 : 59] And finally, as we said, healthy gospel preaching is not an effort to save by our power. It would be a very discouraging job as a minister if I believe for a second the salvation of North Tulsa depended on any way on my ability.

At times as ministers we are going to be discouraged anyway. As every Christian are, we are discouraged at times. Whether we should or shouldn't be, that's a whole different conversation, but at times we're definitely discouraged. How much more discouraged would a minister be if we believe for a second that it's by our power, by our ability, by our preaching prowess that those who are being saved are being saved.

Healthy gospel preaching, as Paul reminds to Timothy, is to strive, yes, to do your best to present yourself to God as one approved.

A worker has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth, but we do that only by relying on God. Brothers and sisters, as we go forward as a congregation we want to be hearing healthy gospel preaching and the good thing is, the reality is throughout the week, if you have access to radio, access to online, to telly, there are some good, healthy gospel sermons, but also to be aware, brothers and sisters, there are many, I have no problems if you listen to other preachers, none whatsoever, but be aware there are many preachers today and their sermons are not healthy, their gospel is not good and requires good, solid, intelligent thought, listening to what's being said, and deciding for yourself is this healthy gospel preaching, but for ourselves and Tolstah going forward, we strive for healthy gospel preaching.

Lord willing, next week, I'll have more information on the Lord's day properly about this, but there'll be any intimations to clearly explained, but next week we'll have a shorter prayer meeting and I hope to present what the elders seen a few months ago, a month ago now, which is the plan we have going forward and the plan that started already a few weeks ago, but the plan we have going forward for our development and discipleship, and in that you will see, I hope, that there is a plan for healthy gospel preaching, you'll see a glimpse as to where the preaching is going, God willing, this year, and I would ask personally as part of good healthy preaching is that you'd remember me in your prayers as I both prepare and share the word, I know your congregation prays for me and I feel it and I value it, I ask that to be carrying on as we go forward.

[31 : 48] Without good healthy gospel preaching, the word does not spread. Without good healthy gospel preaching, the word does not go out faithfully, as we heard last Sunday, if the word is not preached, then how can they hear?

If they don't hear, they can't come. If they don't come, they won't be saved. So please pray on going for myself and for everyone who comes to share the word with us. We strive to have good, healthy gospel preaching.

Let's ask our word of prayer, please, forever. Thank you. O Lord, O God, we pray, O Lord, that we hear and read thy word, that we would be able to apply it to our own lives.

We are conscious, O Lord, that we are weak in many different ways, sinful, sinful, yet we are conscious, O Lord, of thy grace, and we pray for it in our lives.

We pray that we might be put into thy care and keep it each and every day, that we would be enabled to learn more and more of the true and the living God of salvation in Jesus Christ, of our Saviour.

[33 : 20] and of a heaven that our very being longs for. And we thank thee, O Lord, for the light that shone into the darkness and that had such an impact upon us that it turned our hearts around.

and we are thankful, O Lord, that we now desire and seek to be facing towards the true and the living God. There are, O Lord, many distractions and pitfalls that are on the way, yet we are thankful that we can come to the throne of grace, knowing that thou carest for us.

We pray, O Lord, that as we move forward as a church, that thou would help us, O Lord, as a group, as a congregation of thy believing people, that our hearts would be made ready and willing to move the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ forward into the future.

Conscious, O Lord, of our own weaknesses, yet also aware of what is needed, we pray, O Lord, that thou would equip us and help us to have the vision and the heart, in which to be the servants that you command in your word for us to be, faithful servants of the true and the living God.

We ask, O Lord, that thou would bless us individually here at this time and collectively. Remember, O Lord, our families and our family members, those who are yet outside of Christ.

[35 : 19] We ask thy blessing upon them, that they might be able to see and take hold of the salvation that there is in Jesus Christ. We pray, Lord, for our village.

We ask that we would be able to have some sort of impact upon the people within it and that we would be bold and that we would be fearless in proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Continue with us now. Forgive us our sins. In Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Let's close by singing again God's word. That psalm reminds us of all we heard this evening.

Psalm 127. Psalm 127. The whole psalm to God's praise.

Psalm 127. Psalm 127. Psalm 127. Psalm 127. Psalm 127. Psalm 127.

[36 : 58] Psalm 127.

Psalm 127.

Psalm 127.

Psalm 127. Psalm 127. Psalm bleach. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, both you now and forevermore. Amen.