

PREACH THE WORD

2 Timothy 3:12-4:4

¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

4 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: ² Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when people will not put up with sound 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. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

MESSAGE:

Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are often referred to as the pastoral letters because they contain Paul's instructions to pastors regarding their responsibilities to God and to their congregations. They usually don't make it into the pulpit unless a congregation is going through a change in pastors, but I've chosen to preach on one of them today for two reasons. First, a congregation will tend to be focused on whatever the pastor is focused on, and I want to be sure that we're focused on the right thing here at Hope Lutheran. Second, it never hurts to measure yourself against a Biblical standard. So I'm preaching this sermon today to myself as well as to you on the assumption that we both can benefit from hearing it! It will be an expository sermon, so I invite you to turn in your bulletins to the Epistle lesson for today, which begins at chapter three, verse twelve of Paul's *Second Letter to Timothy*.

First, Paul describes the challenge which every church—and every Christian—faces as we try to live out our faith in a fallen world: “...*everyone who wants to live a Godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*” (2 Tim. 3:12) What Paul is saying is that to the extent that we truly live for Christ—witnessing to Him and performing deeds of selfless love in His name—we will provoke retaliation. The reason for this is simple: active Christians are soldiers in God's kingdom which is invading the kingdom of this world, and any invasion force will be met with resistance. As Jesus said to His disciples on the night before He

was crucified: *“If the world hates you keep in mind that it hated me first.”* (John 15:18) Or as He said to Ananias regarding Paul: *“I will show him how much he must suffer for my Name.”* (Acts 9:16)

This is not an attractive prospect for Christians. Who wants to bring suffering on themselves? All of us would prefer a safe Christianity, one that nestles into our life in THIS world and doesn't make too many waves. One that confers prosperity upon us now, and glory later. In other words, we want Christianity without the cross. The problem is, a crossless Christianity isn't Christianity at all because as Jesus made clear, Christianity is taking up our crosses and following Jesus.

The only alternative to living under the cross, Paul says, is to live in a world of lies: *“...while evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”* (2 Tim. 3:13) To give oneself over to the kingdom of this world is to dwell in a world of smoke and mirrors where we go about deceiving others and being deceived. WE know—both from experience from an honest within ourselves—that this is true. We all hide behind images of ourselves that we have carefully constructed to present to the world—from the way we wear clothes that “enhance” our appearance to the way we hide the more unsavory aspects of our character. When we were teenagers, we worked at being “cool” in order to impress our fellow adolescents; when we became adults, we put a lot of money into cars and houses to project an image of success; and when we're lying in our coffin, someone will pay a lot of money to some mortician to make us look “as if we were alive.” The *lingua franca*, the coin of the realm in this world is deceit because the ruler of this world is the father of lies.

So we have to choose between living with persecution on the one hand or deceit on the other, depending upon whether we follow the Prince of Heaven or the prince of this world. What do we do with a choice like that? Paul answers this question in his next words to Timothy: *“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”* (2 Tim. 3:14-15) In other words, continue to search the Holy Scriptures, where you will find wisdom and strength. Whatever else changes, they will not change, for as Christ said, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* (Matt. 24:35) The Scriptures alone can make us “wise unto salvation.” Paul continues: *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* (2 Tim. 3:16) In these verses, Paul affirms three important things about the Holy Scriptures.

First of all, Paul says that the words of Scripture *“are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”* This means that the Scriptures teach us everything we need to know in order to be saved. Not necessarily everything we would like to know: we are insatiably curious and we long to know many things which God has chosen not to reveal to us. But they teach us everything we need to know. When we hear and read the Holy

Scriptures in faith, the Holy Spirit enlightens us, gives us understanding, and assures us of our salvation.

Second, they are “God-breathed.” This means that the Scriptures were written by human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who moved those authors to speak and write, each in his own unique style, yet always under God’s direction. This fact has certain implications. It means that the words of the Bible—like God, their author—are altogether true and without error. It also means that the Bible is complete: nothing must be added or subtracted from it, as the last verses of the Bible make clear in the form of God’s divine copyright: *“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”* (Rev. 22:18-19) The Bible is true, it is without error, and it is complete.

Third, the Scriptures give us strength and perseverance as we make our way through this deceitful world. They are, *“...useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped for every good work.”* Now it has been my experience that this aspect of the Scriptures can be misunderstood. Many people want to use the Scriptures as a kind of divine “Ann Landers” column to supply them with specific answers to the problems they face in their daily lives. And they become frustrated when they don’t find what they’re looking for. But the word of God is much more than a manual for daily living: ***it is a living force in our lives.*** In the words of the author of the *Book of Hebrews*, *“The word of God is living and active...judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* (Heb. 4:12). In the words of the Psalmist: *“Blessed is the man...[whose] delight is in the instruction of the Lord, and on his instruction he ruminates day and night.”* (Psalm 1:1-2) Or as Jesus said to his disciples, *“...the words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life!”* (John 6:63) The word of God is to our spirits what food is to our bodies. It’s closer to the truth to say that we eat and digest the words of Scripture, than merely read or hear them. Therefore, we are wise to return to them again and again, just as each day we return to our daily bread so that we can be nourished and grow in our faith. *“If you continue in My word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* (John 8:31-32)

Next, Paul’s solemn charge to Timothy as a pastor is summed up in three words: Preach the Word! He writes; *“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: Preach the Word.”* (2 Tim. 4:1-2) And that is what each and every one of you should demand from your pastor: an intellectually honest preaching of God’s Word. The Word of God is the pastor’s only authority and it his only source of power. His opinion about politics or economics or the current condition of the world must have nothing to do with his preaching. He is a conduit, not a fountainhead of the truth.

Finally Paul writes: *“...be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men*

will not put up with sound 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.” (2 Tim. 4:3) A major problem in modern Christendom is that pastors and their churches get caught up in an array of causes which have more to do with the kingdom of this world than they do with the Kingdom of God. We must never forget that the kingdom of this world is passing away, but the Kingdom of God is eternal.

Now if the ministry, according to St. Paul, can be boiled down to preaching the Word in season and out, then your Christian life and worship can be boiled down to receiving the Word and allowing it to work its power in your life. Jesus calls this “continuing in His Word” and promises all who do so the riches of true discipleship, which are the knowledge of the truth, and freedom from sin. What other blessings could rival these?

A brother pastor and good friend of mine serves as a chaplain for the safety forces of Cleveland. After the tragedy of 9/11 he was called to serve as an FBI chaplain, initially at the crash site in Pennsylvania, and after that, in New York City. He was assigned to a landfill on Staten Island where the remains of the World Trade Center were being transported truckload by truckload and carefully examined for evidence and for human remains. He spent two weeks there, working the midnight shift, providing whatever counsel and consolation he could to the policemen and FBI agents who were working the site. I received a letter from him shortly after he arrived. It began with these words: *“There I was at a garbage dump at midnight with only my clerical collar and my Bible. The smell was unbelievable. I felt like I was descending into hell, with literally nothing other than the Word of God to sustain me and offer to others. And the people who were working there—the policemen and FBI agents—were people who had seen a lot of what life can bring. I had no idea how they would receive me or the message I brought. But their response was astounding. I can’t tell you how eager they were to receive consolation and encouragement from the Word of God, to hear the message of life eternal in Jesus Christ. It was the most inspiring experience I have ever had in the ministry.”*

His letter concluded with the following words: *“One familiar with the Bible could not walk those grounds without thinking of our Lord’s own words regarding Jerusalem: ‘There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.’ (Luke 21:6) But a person familiar with that same Bible will also find hope! For it tells us that we are ‘strangers and pilgrims on earth’ and that here ‘we have no continuing city,’ but that by virtue of our connection to Christ we are headed for ‘a heavenly city, one whose builder and maker is God.’ That is a city with foundations which will never fail, not now and not ever.”*

There is power in the Word! And so my admonition to myself is this: *“Preach the Word!”* And my prayer for you is that you will receive it gladly and allow it to work its power in your life!

Amen.