

Foundations of Faithful Ministry

1 Timothy 4:13

*"Until I come **devote yourself** to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, teaching."*

Introduction: There are a number of sad realities that we have faced over the last months: loss of life, fellowship, jobs/finances, security, unmet expectations, normalcy, etc. These are real and hard. But there has also been unexpected blessings that God has given to His people and church. This has forced individuals and pastors to **evaluate** the effectiveness of our teaching, equipping, and structures. We've talked to pastors around the globe and each has stories that their ability to reach new people has grown as they are able to communicate the gospel online where it is watched by those who may never grace a church building or physical gathering. Our hope is that there will be a generation of followers of Jesus whose eyes were opened and hearts softened in the midst of a terrible pandemic, making the sourest of circumstances into gloriously sweet experiences.

One of the trends that has been observed is almost everyone I've read or talked to has said they are aiming at **shorter services and teaching times**. Now, you'll notice that we have adjusted that way as well. Our services in person were typically 90 minutes long, and now online they are more like 60 minutes or less (mostly). Now there is NOTHING spiritual about a long service or teaching time, nor is it more righteous to have a short one. The last thing that we should ever do to people is bore them with God's Word. But there is a **vibe** right now that shorter is better, people can't handle in-depth teaching, and won't sit still for longer than 20 minutes. The focus is on giving people less, hoping they will stay logged on, and won't flip through sermons like 2 minute Youtube clips of Jimmy Fallon or Dude perfect. If we compare preaching to this, there will be no competition.

In preparation for this passage I reread some of my favorite books on preaching. Martyn Lloyd Jones served as a preaching pastor in England for 44 years, and he said, *"The work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called. If you want something in addition to that I would say without any hesitation that 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 obviously the greatest need in the world also.**"*¹ He went on to say that there is a growing distaste for the church and preaching, the growing desire to be entertained, and more attention given to experience than God's Word. What is fascinating about this statement? He lectured on this 50 years ago! We have the internet as a potential distraction, they had *tape recordings!* There is nothing new under the sun in both the **need** and lack of **desire for** preaching.

Today we have information coming out of our ears (or rather into our ears). We have access to "traditional" news, but up to the second updates of things that are happening in real time around the world. We have all read, heard, and watched what is going on around us and each has formed opinions and forged preferences based on that information. How many conversations have we had lately that go something like, "I heard...", "I've read...", "they are saying..." The bombardment of information does what it intends to do: **sway our mind which moves our heart in a direction it desires us to go**. So if we have so much information at our fingertips, why would we show up (or log in) to a church service and a long, boring sermon?

¹ Martyn Lloyd Jones, "Preaching and Preachers", p. 9.

"People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of our troubled lives. **The majesty of God is an unknown cure.** There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow. Preaching that does not have the aroma of God's greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul: 'show me your glory!'²

Now that all sounds good, but are these just lofty, out of touch statements by pastors trying to keep their jobs? It is important that we have a basis for everything that we do. In fact, one of our goals is always to make sure **we know WHAT we believe and WHY we believe it**, and I'd extend that to not just belief but practice. Why do we believe that there are essentials in the church that cannot go away, must be cultivated, and rather than diminishing them for the sake of the itching ears of culture, we accentuate and deepen our commitment to what Scripture commands. So where does this commitment come from?

The reading of Scripture recognizes the **authority of Scripture**, brings the **centrality of God to bear**, proclaims **Jesus Christ** and is the fuel for the leading of the **Holy Spirit**.

Devotion to the Public Exercise of Reading Scripture

*"Until I come **devote yourself** to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, teaching."*

In this power packed sentence, this not only explained what Paul's ministry was based on but what he expected Timothy to **continually do in the church at Ephesus**. After Paul's conversion and training, he was brought into the church at Antioch to teach for a full year. You might remember this is the church where **disciples were first called Christians** (Acts 11:26). When Paul first came to the church at Ephesus, he taught in public and from house to house (Acts 20:20) for three years (Acts 20:31). Teaching from God's Word and the gospel were the **foundation and continuation of ministry for Paul**. There is no discipleship without it, no health when it is neglected, and no power to change beyond it.

So Paul calls Timothy to **continue what he started**, to give his attention to, to devote himself. The idea had to do with **preparation before the actual reading and speaking**. Far from "winging-it" or a service filler, the reading of Scripture had a central place of worship, both in Israel in the OT and the church of the NT.

The reading of Scripture recognizes the authority of Scripture, brings focus to the centrality of God, proclaims Jesus Christ and provides fuel for the leading of the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament we see Jesus in His home synagogue in Nazareth where He read the weekly reading from Isaiah 61:1-2, which would have been the next teaching in sequence. However, He added the mic drop where He said that today the Scripture was actually fulfilled in their midst (that's a tough one to replicate). In Acts 13 Paul and his companions were in synagogue in Antioch where there was reading from the **Law and prophets**, selections from the OT. The early church adopted this type of focus in their gatherings, even circulating and reading Paul's letters in the church (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27)

But perhaps no sequence of events shows the power of the reading of Scripture as the nation of Israel in the Promised Land. As they were on the cusp of their inheritance, God told Joshua, "**This Book of the**

² John Piper, "The Supremacy of God in Preaching." p. 15.

Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Joshua 1:8

Simple. Straight-forward. Attainable. But extremely difficult. After Joshua's death there arose a generation who did not know the Lord or the work that He had done (Judges 2:10). What??!!! How does this happen? We remember this: **we are always one generation away from losing what we have, one generation away from abandoning what is true, one generation away from an exchange of truth for a lie.**

Fast forward to the Divided Monarchy where the Northern Kingdoms had only wicked kings and were destroyed in 722 B.C, leaving the southern kingdom of Judah, all that was left of a once mighty and global power. A plethora of wicked kings were strewn with some moments of clarity from kings like **Hezekiah**, but culminated in the wickedness of Manassah, who introduced witchcraft, cultic practices, and sacrificing of his own children to false deities that spurred God's anger and promise of destruction (2 Kings 23:26). But after 55 years of wickedness, his grandson **Josiah took the throne at 8 years old**. At 16 years old he began to seek after God, and at 20 years old committed to restoring proper worship and purging idolatry.

At 26 years old, a strange thing happened. The Priest found the Book of the Law, the one given through Moses, the one that Joshua was committed to (2 Chron. 34:14) Think about that! The Temple was there, all the results of centuries of God's blessings, but the Scripture got buried as a mere ancient artifact. At 26 years old, Josiah read it, tore his clothes, and committed himself to it. He gathered **all the men of Judah, priests and Levites, both great and small, AND HE READ IN THEIR HEARING FROM THE BOOK HE FOUND** (2 Chron 34:30). As a result all who assembled humbled themselves and committed to do what was written in the Book, with all their heart and soul (34:31-32). This led to **revival in the land**, one that was short lived but real.

It's fascinating that you do not find a string of kings in succession who followed the Lord. Why? Because abandoning the Lord is always one generation away. All the talk about the survival of the church in the future being based on adapting to online formats is fine conversation and food for thought, but the survival and thriving of the church in the future is whether or not we will commit ourselves to the **authority of God's Word**. That will be the dividing line. Read it. Love it. Obey it. Refresh yourselves in it. Listen to it publically. Watch it read on screen. Listen to some British guy read it on the ESV app. But do not abandon it.

Devotion to the Public Explanation of Scripture

Notice that the next thing Timothy needed to devote himself to was attached to the first. Reading of Scripture should be followed by an explanation of that Scripture. We all understand that reading the Bible is one thing, but understanding it is another. There are hard concepts, words, sentence structures, cultural contexts, and historical events that are not typical to our Western eyes and ears. That is why we engage in **expository preaching**, meaning the goal of preaching is to explain the text in order to understand and apply it.

John Stott said, "***It was taken for granted from the beginning that Christian preaching would be expository preaching. That is, that all Christian instruction and exhortation would be drawn out of the passage read.***" In other words, the source of preaching was not commentary on the therapeutic, political, or a social lens, but coming OUT OF Scripture and THEN speaking to all the issues of life. This was the apostolic norm. The word for **exhortation** here in the text is a beautiful word which means

coming alongside, encouraging, and exhorting. Preaching is proclamation (2 Tim. 4:2) and persuasion, speaking to the mind and heart to not only **see God, but to savor Him!** The Scottish preacher James Stewart put the aim of preaching to "*quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.*"³

The passage Austin read today reminds us of the combination of reading and teaching of God's Word and its effect on God's people. After rebuilding the Temple and Wall in Jerusalem, Ezra gathered all the people: men, women, and children and read it from **early morning til midday!** (Neh. 8:3). But this was not a bored bunch, but they had told Ezra to "Bring it! Bring the Book of the Law" (8:1). They stood the whole time, hearing the words and responding by lifting voices (Amen, Amen), hands, and bowing heads in worship (8:6). We see some principles of preaching and what it should be and produce:

- **Clarity** -The best preaching is the clearest teaching. Sometimes I hear people say that such and such a preacher was "deep", only to realize that he simply was unclear. Encouragement from Scripture comes when we understand what the author meant in its original context in order to apply it to modern life. Four times in Nehemiah 8 the word "understand" or understood is used (v 2, 3, 8, 12). The job of the preacher/teacher is not simply to be interesting, to try to be relevant, or to keep people awake. It is to take the ancient text that is living and active and make it understandable to the modern listener. One of the greatest compliments you can give a teacher is, "I now understand that passage clearly". One of the greatest joys to his heart will be when you follow that up with, "and now I'm going to apply it to my life in Christ."
- **Conviction** – We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Preaching connects to our mind in understanding to bring conviction to bear in our heart. In Nehemiah 8, the people wept when they heard and understood what had been read to them. (8:9) This was a weeping over the fact that they had largely neglected the Law and been living in disobedience or indifference to God Himself. Preaching that is God entranced deals with how we fall short of His glory, how Christ shines in our hearts and minds to bring us back to Him, and how we need to repent of our sin. If preaching never deals with God's glory or our sin is not real preaching and can't bring true conviction in the heart and mind.
- **Confession** – After hearing the reaching and understanding the teaching, conviction led to **confession**. In 9:2, the people *separated themselves from the foreigners among them, confessed their own sin and the sins of their fathers*. Confession of sin is the regular rhythm in the life of a believer when we understand the battle in our own flesh and the freedom Christ has given us by the forgiveness of sin (1 John 2:1-2). Because we have an advocate with the Father who is a propitiation for our sin, when we are brought into the realization of the Greatness of God, confession of sin is a natural response.
- **Commission** - The reading and teaching of God's Word did not simply stay with the priest or leader, it trickled down to leaders of homes. "On the second day the heads of fathers houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law." (Neh. 8:13). This is the same as 2 Tim. 2:2 where teaching from a study of God's Word was handed down to faithful men who would perpetuate faithful teaching. In

³ Piper, p. 25.

other words, though there will be some who are gifted to preach and teach publicly, the goal is not just to keep it to one or a few but to equip and train many to teach, especially those who lead their families.

- **Celebration** - In Philippians 3:8 Paul said he counted everything as loss in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ His Lord. Knowing God the Father through Jesus His Son through the guidance of the Holy Spirit is a goal of life and teaching. After weeping and conviction from what they heard, the people in Nehemiah were told to stop weeping for the **joy of the Lord was their strength** (Neh. 8:10). "And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, **because they had understood the words that were declared to them.**" (8:12) Far from a simple intellectual exercise, reading and explaining God's Word brings us to a place where we see God's greatness, glory, and excellencies and rather than moving away in fear brings us to Him through the reality of the work of Jesus Christ. That is reason to rejoice no matter the circumstance we are facing.

Devotion to the Pervasive Equipping from Scripture

The final word is a little broader, and it the word *teaching*, which is used 15 times in the pastoral epistles, signaling its importance in the life of the church. It is the systematic teaching of God's Word, not merely what we are doing right now. It extends to the whole of what we do as a church, from children on up, from families on out, from Simi Valley to the ends of the earth. **Discipleship** is a commitment to **read, understand, explain, and apply** God's Word to our life, and to help others do this as well. Next week we will look at how this plays out practically through the gifting of the Holy Spirit, but we cannot jump to that until we understand this.

This is what we've *been* committed to, what we *are* committed to, and what we *will be* committed to moving forward. Yes, we want to be creative in how care for one another, especially right now. We will be open to innovation and using new technology to help communicate with people throughout the week. If we can create resources for you to use to reach your neighbors and unsaved friends, we want to do everything we can to make that happen. But we will not change our commitment to **reading, preaching, and teaching God's Word** as a primary expression of worship corporately and as a primary focus in every ministry in our church. This is how we ensure that we are functioning under **God's authority, to His pleasure, for His glory.**

Conclusion: So what is your appetite for God's Word? Are you motivated to read, study, and apply it? What holds you back from this? Is it too hard to understand? Has no one ever showed you how to do it? This is exactly why we have structured our church to teach God's Word and help others learn how to do this. We have shepherding groups to study through God's Word together. We have essential classes that are now moving online to systematically go through God's Word. And we have **discipleship**, which is life on life relationship centered around God's Word. My encouragement is that you commit to not only listening to God's Word read, preached, and taught, but also find someone else who can help you understand.

*"There are always two parts of true worship. There is **seeing God** and there is **savoring God**. You can't separate these. You must see Him to savor Him. And if you don't savor him then you don't see him, you insult him. In true worship, there is always **understanding** with the mind and there is always **feeling** in the heart. Understanding must always be the foundation of feeling, or all we have is baseless*

emotionalism. But understanding of God that doesn't give rise to feelings for God becomes mere intellectualism and deadness. That is why the Bible continually calls us to think and consider and meditate on one hand, and to rejoice and fear and mourn and delight and hope and be glad on the other. Both are essential for worship.'

John Piper, "The Supremacy of God in Preaching"

Questions to Answer:

- Read through Nehemiah 8:1-13. What do you note about the public reading and explanation of Scripture? What are some observations that you make about them that could be true of us?
- Take a few minutes to observe 2 Chronicles 34 and Josiah's life. He was 8 when he started. What did it take for Josiah to bring reform in his own life and the life of those he lead?
- What is your current appetite and intake of God's Word? How do you grow that appetite and intake?
- What are the dangers for us as a church and your family moving forward in regards to our commitment to God's Word? What are the temptations we face to abandon? How do we make sure we stay true to God and His Word?

Ways to Pray:

- Spend some time reflecting on the greatness of God. Use Psalm 111, 112, 113, 114, 115 as prompts (not all of them unless you'd like to). Praise and adore Him for the majesty of His glory
- Read 1 Timothy 2:1-4 and pray for our government officials, praying for their salvation, thanking God for them, and that we'd be able to lead peaceful and quiet lives in godly and dignified ways.
- Pray for our missionaries: 1) **Stephen and Lisa Wreesman** in Togo, Africa; 2) **Philippe & Sophia Viguier and Florent & Lori Varak** in Lyon, France; 3) **Vance and Jen Vance and Jen Yzbick** in Lodz, Poland, 4) **Matt and Mai Higby** in Osaka, Japan, 5) **Mike, Michelle, and Evan Beard** in Hanoi, Vietnam. As much as we have felt the tension of the shutdown in our lives, our missionaries are feeling that plus being away from family in new cultures. Pray that they would be comforted, would redeem the time, and grasp hold of new opportunities.