Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Why I Am Committed to Teaching the Bible
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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by John MacArthur

I have never aspired to be known as a theologian, a polemicist, or an academician. My passion is teaching and preaching the Word of God.

Even though I've dealt with theological questions and doctrinal controversies in some of my books, I have never done so from the perspective of a systematic theologian. It is of little concern to me whether some point of doctrine fits with this tradition or that. I want to know what is biblical. All my concerns are biblical, and my desire is to be biblical in all my teaching.

Preach the Word
That is how I have approached ministry from the beginning. My father was a pastor, and when I first told him years ago that I felt God had called me to a life of ministry, he gave me a Bible in which he had inscribed these words of encouragement: "Preach the Word!" That simple statement became the compelling stimulus in my heart. It is all I have endeavored to do in my ministry--preach the Word.

Pastors today face a tremendous amount of pressure to do everything but preach the Word. Church growth experts tell them they must address people's "felt needs." They are encouraged to be storytellers, comedians, psychologists, and motivational speakers. They are warned to steer clear of topics that people find unpleasant. Many have given up biblical preaching in favor of devotional homilies designed to make people feel good. Some have even replaced preaching with drama and other forms of staged entertainment.

But the pastor whose passion is biblical has only one option: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2).

When Paul wrote those words to Timothy, he added this prophetic warning: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth" (vv. 3-4).

Clearly there was no room in Paul's philosophy of ministry for the give-people-what-they-want theory that is so prevalent today. He did not urge Timothy to conduct a survey to find out what his people wanted. He commanded him to preach the Word--faithfully, reprovingly, and patiently.

In fact, far from urging Timothy to devise a ministry that would garner accolades from the world, Paul warned the young pastor about suffering and hardship! Paul was not telling Timothy how to be "successful," he was encouraging him to follow the divine standard. He was not advising him to pursue prosperity, power, prominence, popularity, or any of the otherworldly notions of success. He was urging the young pastor to be biblical--regardless of the consequences.

Preaching the Word is not always easy. The message we are required to proclaim is often offensive. Christ Himself is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8). The message of the cross is a stumbling block to some (1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11), mere foolishness to others (1 Corinthians 1:23).

But we are never permitted to trim the message or tailor it to people's preferences. Paul made this clear to Timothy at the end of 2 Timothy 3: "*All* Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (v. 16, emphasis added). This is the Word to be preached: the whole counsel of God (cf. Acts 20:27).

In chapter 1 Paul had told Timothy, "Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me" (v. 13). He was speaking of the revealed words of Scripture--all of it. He urged Timothy to "Guard . . . the treasure which has been entrusted to you" (v. 14). Then in chapter 2 he told him to study the Word and handle it accurately (2:15). Now he is telling him to proclaim it. So the entire task of the faithful minister revolves around the Word of God--guarding it, studying it, and proclaiming it.

In Colossians 1 the apostle Paul, describing his own ministry philosophy, writes, "Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God" (v. 25). In 1 Corinthians he goes a step further: "When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (2:2). In other words, his goal as a preacher was not to entertain people with his rhetorical style, or to amuse them with cleverness, humor, novel insights, or sophisticated methodology--he simply preached Christ crucified.

Faithfully preaching and teaching the Word must be the very heart of our ministry philosophy. Any other approach replaces the voice of God with human wisdom. Philosophy, politics, humor, psychology, homespun advice, and human opinion can never accomplish what the Word of God does. Those things may be interesting, informative, and entertaining, but they are not the business of the church. The preacher's task is not to be a conduit for human wisdom; he is God's voice to speak to the congregation. No human message comes with the stamp of divine authority--only the Word of God. How dare any preacher substitute another message?

I frankly do not understand preachers who are willing to abdicate this solemn privilege. Why should we proclaim the wisdom of men when we have the privilege of preaching the Word of God?

Be Faithful In and Out of Season

Ours is a never-ending task. Not only are we to preach the Word, we must do it regardless of the climate of opinion around us. We are commanded to be faithful when such preaching is tolerated--but also when it is not.

Let's face it--right now preaching the Word is out of season. The market-driven philosophy currently in vogue says that plainly declaring biblical truth is outmoded. Biblical exposition and theology are seen as antiquated and irrelevant. "Churchgoers don't want to be preached to anymore," this philosophy says. "The baby-boomer generation won't just sit in the pew while someone up front preaches. They are products of a media-driven generation, and they need a church experience that will satisfy them on their own terms."

But Paul says the excellent minister must be faithful to preach the Word even when it is not in fashion. The expression he uses is "be ready." The Greek term (*ephistemi*) literally means "to stand beside." It has the idea of eagerness. It was often used to describe a military guard, always at his post, prepared for duty. Paul was speaking of an explosive eagerness to preach, like that of Jeremiah, who said that the Word of God was a fire in his bones (Jeremiah 20:9. That's what he was demanding of Timothy. Not reluctance but readiness. Not hesitation but fearlessness. Not motivational talks but the Word of God.

Reprove, Rebuke, and Exhort

Paul also gives Timothy instructions about the tone of his preaching. He uses two words that carry negative connotations and one that is positive: reprove, rebuke, and exhort. All valid ministry must have a balance of positive and negative. The preacher who fails to reprove and rebuke is not fulfilling his commission.

Years ago I listened to a radio interview with a preacher known for his emphasis on positive thinking. This man had stated in print that he assiduously avoids any mention of sin in his preaching because he feels people are burdened with too much guilt anyway. The interviewer asked how he could justify such a policy. The pastor replied that he had made the decision early in his ministry to focus on meeting people's needs, not attacking their sin.

But people's deepest need is to confess and overcome their sin. So preaching that fails to confront and correct sin through the Word of God does not meet people's need. It may make them feel good. And they may respond enthusiastically to the preacher, but that is not the same as having real needs met.

Reproving, rebuking, and exhorting are the same as preaching the Word, for those are the very same ministries Scripture accomplishes: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Notice the same balance of positive and negative tone. Reproof and correction are negative; teaching and training are positive.

The positive tone is crucial, too. The word "exhort" is *parakaleo*, a word that means "encourage." The excellent preacher confronts sin and then encourages repentant sinners to behave righteously. He is to do this "with great patience and instruction" (4:2). In 1 Thessalonians 2:11, Paul talks about "exhorting and encouraging and imploring . . . as a father would his own children." This often requires great patience and much instruction. But the excellent minister cannot neglect these aspects of his calling.

Don't Compromise in Difficult Times

There is an urgency in Paul's charge to young Timothy: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2 Tim. 4:3). That is a prophecy reminiscent of those found in 2 Timothy 3:1 ("Realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come"), and 1 Timothy 4:1 ("The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith"). This, then, is Paul's third prophetic warning to Timothy about the difficult times that were to come.

Note the progression: The first warning said that the time would come when people will depart from the faith. The second one warned Timothy that dangerous times were coming for the church. Now the third one suggests that the time would come when those in the church would not endure sound doctrine, but desire instead to have their ears tickled.

That is happening in the church today. Evangelicalism has lost its tolerance for confrontive preaching. Churches ignore the biblical teaching on women's roles, homosexuality, and other politically charged issues. The human medium has overtaken the divine message. That's evidence of serious doctrinal compromise. If the church does not repent, those errors and others like them will become epidemic.

Note that Paul does not suggest that the way to reach such a society is to soften the message so that its people will be comfortable with it. Just the opposite is true. Such ear-tickling is abominable. Paul urges Timothy to be willing to suffer for the truth's sake, and keep preaching the Word faithfully.

An appetite for ear-tickling preaching has a terrible end. Second Timothy 4:4 says these people will ultimately "turn away their ears from the truth and will be turned aside to myths." They become the victims of their own refusal to hear the truth. "They will turn away" is in the active voice. The people willfully choose this action. "Will be turned aside to myths" is in the passive voice. It describes what happens to them. Having turned from the truth, they become victims of deception. As soon as they

turn away from the truth, they become pawns of Satan.

The truth of God does not tickle our ears, it boxes them. It burns them. It reproves, rebukes, convicts--*then* it exhorts and encourages. Preachers of the Word must be careful to maintain that balance.

There have always been men in the pulpit who gathered crowds because they were gifted orators, interesting storytellers, entertaining speakers, dynamic personalities, shrewd crowd-manipulators, rousing speech-makers, popular politicians, or erudite scholars. Such preaching may be popular, but it is not necessarily powerful. No one can preach with power who does not preach the Word. And no faithful preacher will water down or neglect the whole counsel of God. Proclaiming the Word--*all of it*--is the pastor's calling.

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