

Preach the Word

II Timothy 4:1-4

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to II Timothy, chapter four. Last week we were in II Timothy 3, and looking especially at those glorious verses in which the Apostle Paul describes the nature, the character of Scripture as divinely inspired, as God-breathed, as profitable for reproof and correction, and training in righteousness; as sufficient for equipping us for the living of the Christian life. And now, having moved from II Timothy 3, which was so focused on Paul's exhorting Timothy and the Ephesians and you and me to live by the Book, now we move to II Timothy 4, where Paul exhorts Timothy to preach the Book; and so, we move from "live the Book" to "preach the Book" as the exhortation that Paul is bringing to bear.

Now, don't think that that means that you're off the hook! I know what you're thinking! 'This is a passage written to pastors. This is a passage which contains an exhortation to preachers.' That's true. It does. It contains an explicit exhortation from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, and the applications to ministers and to all those who preach and teach the gospel are obvious. But I want to encourage you, my friends, that this passage is just as practical, just as applicable, just as important, just as relevant to you as it is to those who preach and teach the word of God.

Let's outline the passage before we read it together.

The Apostle Paul, in the four verses that we're going to study this morning, does three things:

1. In verse 1, first of all, he explains the seriousness (or the solemnity, or the gravity) of the charge that he is about to give. One of the things you will notice about this whole passage, II Timothy 4:1-4, is that it is a charge; it's an exhortation; it's a solemn adjuration of Timothy in a very important task, and he explains the gravity, the seriousness, the solemnity of it in verse 1.
2. Then, in verse 2, he does a second thing: he supplies the content of that charge. He tells you what that charge is, and he gives you the substance of it. He explains what it is that he's charging Timothy and faithful preachers to do.
3. And then thirdly, in verses 3 and 4, you're going to see him give a context to

this charge. He's going to explain the human, the earthly, the pastoral situation in which Timothy finds himself (in which all gospel ministers find themselves), which lends the urgency to Timothy's being faithful to respond to the charge that Paul is giving him.

And so, we have the gravity of the charge, the content of the charge, and the context of the charge described for us in this passage today. Let's now turn to God's word and hear it read—and before we do, let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His help and blessing. Let's pray.

Lord God, we acknowledge that Your word is given by inspiration; that the Scriptures—that all the Scriptures, that every Scripture—is God-breathed and is profitable for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, and it is sufficient to equip us for the living of the Christian life. So we pray, O God, this day, that You would make Your word to dwell in our hearts richly, and to transform our lives as the Spirit works in us to hear and understand the word; to apply the word to our hearts; and then, to mold our hearts and lives to the very will of God. We ask Your help and blessing today, O God, as we hear Your word and respond to it. We pray these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. 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, and will turn aside to myths.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Paul has moved from exhorting Timothy to live by the Book to charging Timothy to preach the Book. You notice the connection between what Paul says the Scriptures are and this particular exhortation as to what Timothy is to do with those Scriptures. Since those Scriptures are not the opinions of man, since they are not the pious reflections of sincere saints on who God is and what He might want us to do in this life, since they are in fact God's words to us, since they are the only authoritative and final rule of faith and practice, Timothy is supposed to not only live by those words, he is to preach those words. He's to preach the message which is found in the Book. And so, the logic of II Timothy 3 into II Timothy 4 is: live by the Book; preach the Book.

Now, again, these exhortations here in verses 1-4 are given to a preacher, and

by extension to all faithful preachers of the gospel; but even when exhortation are given to preachers in Scripture, there are numerous practical applications for every Christian, and I want you to see some of them today as we work through the three parts of this passage. I want to work through each portion. First, in Paul's words about the gravity of the charge he's going to give (vs. 1); and then, the content of that charge (vs. 2); then, the context of that charge in verses 3 and 4.

I. Paul's charge to Timothy.

Let's look first at verse 1. Paul is about to give a charge to Timothy. You know what a charge is. This time of year you probably hear a lot of them. It's graduation season, and during graduation season, usually someone who is a president or a chancellor, or a dean, or a special visiting speaker, will charge an audience of soon-to-be graduates as to what they are to do in life. He may call on those graduates with their own special abilities and their resources to not think about serving themselves, but to serve their nation and their community; to use the gifts that they have been given for the blessing of others. You've heard all kinds of charges. I have. They've been good this season, as many of you have attended those ceremonies.

Well, the Apostle Paul is giving a charge to Timothy, but before he gives that charge, before he calls Timothy to do this very important thing, he wants to impress upon Timothy how serious this is. You know that in these graduation ceremonies, there's a certain weightiness to them. There's a certain gravitas. You usually have a very impressive speaker that comes in to speak, and the ceremonies themselves lend themselves to a sense of sobriety and significance.

Well, the Apostle Paul is wanting to impress upon Timothy how serious a charge it is that he is going to give. And notice how he does it, in verse 1. He's administering here an oath. It's almost like Paul is taking Timothy into the divine courtroom and he's swearing him in as a minister; and, as he administers this oath to Timothy, he calls on God to be witness, and he adds to his charge in order to stress its solemnity. Look at each of these phrases. five qualifying phrases

First of all, notice that he says "I solemnly charge you...." Now, Timothy, when he hears Paul say, 'Now, Timothy, I'm about to give you a solemn charge,' Timothy is probably thinking, 'Paul! What have you been doing? I mean, if what you've been telling me in chapter 3 is not solemn, I don't know what solemn is!' It's not like Paul has been light and trivial in chapter 3, and now he's going to get serious in chapter 4. You can imagine the trembling that would have been in the heart of Timothy when Paul tells him, 'Now, Timothy, I'm really going to get solemn. Do you think I was solemn when I was telling you what the word of God was? You think I was solemn when I was telling you to follow me in suffering? You think I

was solemn when I was telling you about how false teachers were going to get into the church and harm sheep? Well, now I'm really going to get solemn with you!' And so, he impresses on Timothy the significance of what he's doing by saying, 'Timothy, now I'm going to give you a solemn charge.' But he doesn't stop there.

Secondly, notice that he says, "I solemnly charge you *in the presence of God*. Timothy, that the One who is up on the Judge's bench is not a city judge or a family judge, or a county judge, or a circuit judge, or a federal judge, or a chief justice on the Supreme Court. The One who is up there on the Judge's bench is God, the maker of heaven and earth. That's the One who's watching me charge you. That's the One who's watching you respond to my charge.' In other words, Paul is saying, 'The audience at this oath-taking ceremony, the audience at this adjuration, the audience at this charge, Timothy, is God Himself.' He wants Timothy, in everything that he does, to be aware that what he does he does in the arena of God's presence; that God is his audience; that God is watching what he is doing. So, he impresses him with the solemnity of this charge. But he doesn't stop there. He keeps on going.

Notice what else he says: "I solemnly charge you *in the presence of Christ Jesus...*" So Paul calls on Timothy to swear allegiance to this particular task, to this duty, under the watchful gaze of his Redeemer. Timothy's job is to preach the word of salvation which has been brought about by Jesus Christ, and so Paul says, 'Timothy, what I'm about to charge you with, I want you to understand: the Lord Jesus, our Redeemer—your Redeemer, my Redeemer—He's watching as I deliver this charge and as you respond to it.' But he doesn't stop there.

He says a fourth thing: "I solemnly charge you in the presence...of Christ Jesus, *who is to judge the living and the dead.*" In other words, he says, 'Timothy, I want you to remember something about the Redeemer. He's not only your Savior; He is coming to judge the living and the dead.' You know, we confess that every time we say *The Apostles' Creed*: "...from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." And Paul is saying, 'Timothy, I don't want you to ever forget that the Lord Jesus Christ...under His watchful gaze, you are going to respond to this charge. He is coming to judge the quick and the dead, and that means you.'

In other words, he's reminding Timothy that ministers are going to be judged in accordance to their faithfulness by the Lord Jesus Christ in the Last Day. What does James say? "Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that you will incur a stricter judgment." Paul is saying the same thing: 'Timothy, remember there is going to be a day when you stand before the Lord Jesus and you give account for how well you served the flock; for how faithfully you preached the word; for how faithfully you followed this charge that I'm giving you now.'" It's a very solemn occasion, you see. But Paul's still not finished. Look again at verse 1.

He goes on to say a fifth thing: "I solemnly charge you...by His appearing and His kingdom...." You know, you've heard some people—the Pharisees were famous for having people swear on things: swear on the temple; swear on the gold of the altar—you've heard some people swearing on their mothers' graves—it indicates the serious about which they are getting ready to make a commitment. Here Paul says, "I charge you...by the appearing and the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ."

He's really encouraging Timothy here. He's reminding Timothy of that thing that every good gospel preacher longs for: the Day of the coming of the Lord, when every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the heavenly Father; that Day when "...from earth's wide bounds and oceans' farthest posts, through gates of pearl will bring in the countless hosts, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost..."—that's what every gospel preacher lives for. And Paul is saying, 'Timothy, I charge you by that hope. I charge you by that thing that you long for from the very depths of your being: the glorious return of Christ, the eternal kingdom which He will fully establish, and in which we will everlastingly participate.'

You see, Paul is pressing home the solemnity of what he's about to charge Timothy with. He's reminding Timothy of the importance of this task that he is going to charge him to do, because preachers will give an account to the Lord. Derek and I had the great privilege in the last few days to interview John MacArthur on the radio for *First Things*. During that interview, we asked some things about how he came to faith in Christ, and how he felt a call to the ministry, and what he did in the early days of his preparation for the ministry, and he told us a very interesting story. Some of you may have heard it before.

When he was in seminary, he was mentored by, and he had a great admiration for, a professor names Charles Feinberg—a brilliant man who spoke 30 languages, was consecrated and devoted to the gospel ministry, and who taught seminary in the place where John MacArthur was studying. And John MacArthur wanted to emulate him. He admired him. He was greatly taught by him and encouraged by him, and he preached his first sermon in the seminary chapel with this dear man sitting right behind him. And he so wanted to please this man that he loved and admired so much...but after that sermon, John MacArthur said he turned from the pulpit and he went to sit back down and Dr. Feinberg was there; and he said his face was ashen, and he was almost in tears. And he said, "John, you completely missed the point of that text of Scripture!" And he was almost ready to cry, and John was, as you can imagine, heartbroken at this word of rebuke and this expression of disappointment from his mentor and professor. And so the man left the room and went running back across the campus to his own office, and John followed him right there, and he sat down in his office, and he said that by the time Dr. Feinberg got to his office he wasn't sad anymore, he was mad! And he said, "John, don't you ever do that to Scripture again! Don't you ever get up and preach something that Scripture is not saying! Don't you ever get up and completely miss the point of what God's word says. You preach what

God's word says!"

Well, John MacArthur has never forgotten it. Forty-something years later, that image is still emblazoned on his mind, and if you've ever heard him speak about preaching, he'll very frequently refer to that formative moment. It shook him with the realization of how significant a thing it was that he was called to do. He was called to preach God's word, and God's word is not something to be monkeyed with. He sensed its solemnity. It impressed him. He told us that every time he gets ready to preach, he pulls his Bible out, the last thing. He reads the passage to his wife, and he says, "Now, Honey, this is my main point. Do you think that's the main point of the passage?" And she says, "Yes." John says, "Good. Just wanted to check." And he goes off to church to preach. He still remembers it all those years later. The solemnity of what he was called to do was impressed upon him when he disappointed a dear and godly man who was his mentor.

You see, the Apostle Paul is saying, 'Timothy, the One who's watching you when you respond to this charge won't be me; will not be your congregation; it will be God, the maker of heaven and earth, and it will be Jesus Christ, your Redeemer, the coming Judge and King. Timothy, this is solemn, what I'm about to call you to do.'

II. Timothy, keep on proclaiming the message of truth.

And then he tells him the content of the charge, in verse 2, and that's the second thing I want you to see. He says, 'Timothy, keep on proclaiming God's message. Keep on proclaiming the message of truth. Preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction.' He is telling Timothy what his prime calling is. The minister's task is to be a herald of God's word, to publicly proclaim God's word, to herald the divinely authorized message of God. And Paul piles up five imperatives in this little verse. Notice them: preach, be ready, reprove, rebuke, and admonish. All of them are pointing to that one central charge: Proclaim the word. Timothy is, above all things else, to publicly proclaim the divinely authorized message—God's message to man—and he's to be ready to do that in season or out of season...whether it's convenient or not; whether it's popular or not; whether it's welcome or not, he is to proclaim that word in season and out of season.

And he's not only to proclaim what the word positively teaches, he is to reprove and rebuke. That is, he is to warn the people of God against their sins and against the errors of this world. He is to speak to our conscience and to aim for conviction with a view to repentance. He's to remind us of the consequences of sin, and not tone these things down. It's easy to teach what is right, sometimes, without ever saying what is wrong.

I'll never forget—a friend of mine...we were talking about a very famous professor,

and we both had a great admiration for him. And he shared a story. He sat down with another minister who knew this professor. He's a very godly man, a very wise man, a very kind man, though he didn't like to critique wrong views. He was given simply to stating what was right, and then when people would ask him, "But, what about..." he'd say, "Well, I don't want to get into criticizing those other views." And so he was talking with this pastor, and this pastor said, "You know what his problem is? He'll draw a picture of a horse and say, 'That's a horse'; but he won't draw a picture of a cow and say, 'That's not a horse.' And that was his colorful way of saying this man will tell you what's right, but he won't tell you what's wrong. And Paul is saying to Timothy, 'It's not enough to tell the people of God what's right; you also need to tell them what's wrong. They need to know the difference, and they need to learn how to discern the difference, and that means being both positive and negative in your proclamation.'

And then, he goes on, saying, 'You're to admonish them. You're to have a tender, fatherly affection and exhortation to the people of God in the things which are right, because we don't simply do the right things because we're told them. We need to be warned off the wrong things. We need to be encouraged in the right things. If you could simply announce what the right thing to do, and close the book and go home, well, that would be fine. But that's not how it works. We're tugged by our hearts to do things which are wrong; we're conformed to the mindset of the world, and we need to be warned against those things.' So, the Apostle Paul is exhorting Timothy to preach the word.

Now, you may be saying, 'That's fine and good. This would be a great message to preach at some man's ordination service. There are a lot of preachers out there that need to hear this message, pastor.' And you may be thinking that this exhortation may not have anything to do with you, but it does. In fact, it has so many things to do with you, I don't have time to apply it all this morning. But let me think with you at least about three specific applications of this truth for you and me.

And the first application is this: If Paul is telling Timothy what he must do for the people of God, to be a faithful minister, then you, as the people of God, must need what Paul tells Timothy he must do. In other words, if Paul is saying to Timothy, 'Timothy, in order for you to be a faithful minister, you must preach the word,' then it must mean that the people of God need to hear the word preached.

When we come to a passage in Scripture in which God is telling a preacher what he must do for the people of God, because we know that God loves His people and doesn't tell His servants to do anything that is not for His glory and the good of His people, then whatever it is that He's telling His servants to do, you and I must need. And so when we come to a passage like this, where Paul tells Timothy and all faithful preachers, "Preach the word," then we ought to be praying something like this: 'Lord, if you are telling a preacher what You want him to tell me, then You are also telling me what I need to hear. So, Lord, grant that I

would listen to what I need to hear, and would not simply want ear-candy.'

Paul is telling Timothy what the people of God need. And if this is what the people of God need, then we need to be praying that God will cause our hearts to want to hear what we need. And of course, what Paul is telling Timothy here is to preach the word of God; to preach the message of God in the Holy Scriptures; to preach the scriptural message.

That's what we need in preaching: we need faithful, biblical teaching and preaching. We need what we call 'expository' preaching: that is, the preaching and the application are derived from the truth of the biblical passage that is being read and expounded. That's what we mean by 'expository preaching.'

And I want to say: Expository preaching is harder to listen to than a lot of varieties of communication out there. There are a lot of people who think that preaching is some sort of a moral deliverance on some relevant subject, with pious advice and counsel. But Paul says that preaching is heralding the divinely authorized message of God to a sinful and needy world, and that the way to do that is to preach His word, to explain His word, to apply His word. And that kind of preaching is harder to listen to, because it requires hard thinking. You have to follow God's chain of logic.

But it also is harder because it gets into areas that you might rather not get into, because it sneaks into places in your life that you have been trying to keep God out of, and it convicts of sin, and it raises your need before your eyes, and it points you to your Savior. And those things can be very painful processes, and yet, Paul says, 'Timothy, preach the word.' That's why we're committed to expository preaching. Now, our goal is not for preaching to be boring! That's not our goal at all! John Reed Miller, the pastor of this church for many years, used to take me out to lunch every couple of weeks, and he'd say, "Now, Ligon, it's not a sin to be interesting, is it?" And it's certainly not! That's not our goal (to be interesting), but it's also not our goal to give you simply what you think you need; it is our goal to give you what you need.

Very often when you're preaching the word, people will say things to you like this: "You know, your problem, pastor, is you're answering all sorts of questions that nobody is asking." And that may well be true. And some of that may be the pastor's fault. But you know what? If you're preaching this Book, whether people are asking the questions that this Book asks and answers or not, these are the questions and answers that need to be answered. These are the answers that need to be had. And when you're preaching God's word, you are giving people answers to the real questions, the right questions. And so we are committed to preaching the word.

So, as congregants, as people who sit under the ministry of the word, one response to this exhortation to Timothy is to know what you need. And what you

need is the word of God. You know, there are all sorts of churches in this city where, once upon a time, you could have heard the word of God preached, and you can't hear it preached there any more. You can hear a fine, moral sermonette, or you can find some happy deliverance about this or that or the other, but there's a famine of the word of God there. We need the word. That's the first application for us out of this passage.

But there's a second one, as well, and that has to do with wanting what we need in preaching. We live in a society that doesn't like hard thinking, and it certainly doesn't like self-examination in the sphere of sin. But when we come to a passage and see God saying to a preacher, "Preach the word," then we need to pray, "Lord, if that's what I need (and You say it is, in the word), then make me want it. Cultivate in me a desire for what I need, not for what I think I need. Cultivate in me a desire for what I really need, not for what I superficially want. Lord, make me long to sit under the ministry of Your word."

I've thought for many years of writing a book called "How to Listen to a Bad Sermon", mainly because I preach so many of them. And this would be one of the points: that we come to worship the living God so longing for His word, that His word sets the agenda for what we need, rather than whims of this world for the unsanctified desires of our hearts; that we'd come wanting what He says we need, rather than what we think we need. So, one response to this truth is to pray, "Lord, if this is what I need (and You say it is, in Your word), make me want it. Make me want faithful preaching of the word."

Doesn't this passage say to us that we need to be praying for our preachers? That we need to be praying for their faithfulness? —because there are plenty of congregations out there with faithful preachers, who don't appreciate those faithful preachers. I am very glad to say that this is not one of them. You're more appreciative than I deserve. But there are many faithful brothers, even in our own city, who are laboring faithfully and powerfully, and yet, their word is falling on many deaf ears. And the people of God aren't responding to it. You need to pray for those brothers to keep on being faithful. You need to be praying for those men to understand the truth of God before they stand up to explain it. It's hard work. Sometimes it's easy to mistake the point of a passage and to make the kind of error that John MacArthur admitted. You need to be praying for those ministers to explain with clarity the truth of God's word, and to bring it home to our hearts with faithful, searching application. Sometimes that's the hardest part of preparing a message: applying it faithfully and biblically to believers. Pray. Pray for your ministers here at First Presbyterian Church, but pray for other gospel ministers, that they will be faithful; that they won't simply give the people what they want, but they will give them what they need. We need to be praying for faithful preachers. There's no greater curse than a famine of the word, and if you look around the evangelical world today, you can find plenty of sermons filled with jokes and stories, or practical lessons that are dis-attached from the truth of God; but you're hearing less and less of the meat of the word of God, and there's

no greater curse than a famine of the word. We need to be praying for faithful gospel ministers who will preach the word.

III. Keep on preaching the word of truth because a time is coming when the people will prefer myths to truth.

And then, the Apostle Paul in verses 3 and 4 says one last thing. He gives the context of his charge to Timothy. He gives a pastoral context for it that explains its urgency. He says, 'Timothy, you need to keep on preaching God's message. You need to keep on preaching the truth, because a time is coming when people will prefer myths to truth.' Paul is giving the reason why it's so urgent for Timothy to be diligent in his work: "Because there's going to come a time, Timothy, when they won't listen. There's going to come a time, Timothy, when they're going to prefer messengers of their own liking, as opposed to God's men. They're going to prefer messages to their own liking, as opposed to God's word. And so, Timothy, it's urgent that you preach now, and that you preach the word.'

You see, the task of preaching God's message from God's word is so urgent because of the imminent spiritual dangers to the flock of God. And again, my friends, we look around us today and we see those dangers everywhere: Worship services where the word of God is never, ever, read; worship services where the word of God may be read, and then the message has absolutely nothing to do with it; worship services which lead the people astray with false teaching; congregations where once the gospel was clearly proclaimed, where it's completely lost. The imminent spiritual dangers of which Paul warns Timothy are around us today everywhere to see, and therefore, my friends, this passage is not just a passage that's relevant to preachers. It's relevant to members, to those who sit under the ministry of the word regularly. And we need to pray, and we need to want that word, and we need to long for that word, and we need to long that God would work that word in our hearts and transform us by it.

Let's look to Him in prayer.

Lord God, bless Your word, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus, the Messiah. Amen.

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