

Medicine for Itchy Ears

2 Timothy 4:1-5

This morning I want to consider a text that I *know* is familiar to all of you—one that has always defined the ministry of Grace Church, so much that you might be tempted to think it is something of a cliché: 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

"Preach the word . . . in season and out of season." That has always been the key verse for our Shepherds' Conferences, but I can't remember the last time anyone actually preached a message from that text. So that's where I want to start this year's conference. I hope to give this passage a fresh look, and I hope I can get you thinking a little more deeply about its implications than perhaps you have ever thought before. *Second Timothy 2:1-5*.

This, of course, is Paul's final charge to Timothy. Paul is about to be martyred in Rome. He clearly knows the end of his life is very near. He is coming to the conclusion of his own earthly ministry, but he is counting on Timothy to carry the baton into the next generation, and with that in mind he has written Timothy two brief epistles full of advice, encouragement, and instruction for how pastoral ministry in the church is to be done.

Paul has been explicit and direct, and his instructions to Timothy are deliberately simple and compact—just six chapters in 1 Timothy and four chapters in 2 Timothy. I put them together and formatted the text using exactly the same large font and wide margins I use for letters I write, and the two epistles combined made a nine-and-a-half-page business letter. That sounds like a long letter until you consider that this was Timothy's complete training manual on pastoral ministry. He had no shelf full of books on leadership and entrepreneurial theory; no insight from Peter Drucker's theories of management and corporate principles; not a subscription to the Willow Creek Association or Pastors.com. All Timothy had were the equivalent of nine and a half pages of instruction from Paul, and (of course) Paul's own personal example.

In other words, what Paul bequeathed to Timothy was a remarkably simple, straightforward ministry philosophy—in stark contrast to virtually every ministry philosophy that is in vogue today.

And Paul's advice to Timothy is likewise sharply at odds with most of the ideas often deemed essential for ministry today. *For example,*

consider the undue stress contemporary church-growth gurus invariably put on innovation. Today you have got to be novel; you must be "contemporary." The word *relevance* has practically become a synonym for novelty and innovation in evangelical circles. The evangelical movement is overrun with leaders who are so enthralled with worldly fashion that they can't distinguish true relevance from mere trendiness. And whenever a church nowadays advertises itself as "relevant," we know exactly what they mean—and it isn't about anything Paul told Timothy to do; it's about being "innovative."

Listen to this ad copy from the Catalyst West Coast Conference. This was a conference for church leaders held here in the Los Angeles area just last week. (Some of you may have attended; it was a huge event.) Here's how they advertised it:

"You won't want to miss the Catalyst West Conference, happening March 2-4 . . . in LA, where 3,500 young leaders will converge, including high-octane speakers, powerful worship, innovative programming, and an experience unlike any other. Hear from leadership authorities [from Andy Stanley to Matt Chandler; I won't read all the names, but it's a wide mix of Christian celebrities] along with *several innovative thinkers and practitioners* like CNN Anchor Soledad O'Brien, Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey . . . Braveheart Screenwriter Randall Wallace, and Eugene Peterson. Plus, Catalyst Labs will feature innovative thought leaders . . . And it goes on to give a long list of names from Scot McKnight to Gayle Haggard.

What stands out to me there is the obvious stress on being innovative. The word *innovative* is used at least once in every paragraph of the ad copy. If you did a word cloud on that web page, I'm certain that is the word that would dominate the page. That's what it's all about in contemporary ministry philosophy: you *must* be innovative—because the more innovative you are, the more you will capture the imaginations of young disciples who are still in the formative stages of developing their own ministry philosophy.

By the way, "innovation" in that formula almost never has anything to do with real originality. It's not really about fresh ideas or thinking outside the box. The best current expression of "innovative" ministry is sometimes labeled "hipster Christianity," because it's really about staying on top of the latest fads and being alert to the latest popular trends. That's why evangelical churches constantly run from fad to

fad—and at any given time evangelicals are all talking about the same thing. Six years ago it was *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Now you're not really cool unless you are flirting with some variety of Universalism. Contemporary evangelicalism is addicted to blending theological novelties with postmodern-and-politically-correct values. That's the current evangelical notion of "innovation."

And I'm here to tell you *there's hardly any more wrong-headed approach* for anyone who aspires to leadership in the church. The quest for innovation is an emphasis that is entirely missing from Paul's instructions to Timothy.

No, the truth is even more alarming than that: The church's current infatuation with novelty and contemporary fashion is *antithetical* to Paul's message to Timothy. It is irreconcilable with a Pauline approach to ministry. It represents precisely the path Paul warned Timothy not to follow.

Paul's *actual* concerns about the direction of the church and Timothy's role as Paul's successor shine through clearly in the two epistles He wrote. These are issues that come up again and again.

Paul was deeply concerned, for example, about the danger of apostasy. First Timothy starts with a warning about people who "**devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.**" There were already false teachers in the church (1 Timothy 1:6), "**Certain persons, by swerving from [the truth, had] wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.**" At the end of that first chapter, Paul *named* "**Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.**"

The subject of apostasy then becomes a major theme in 1 Timothy 4, where Paul writes, "**Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons**"—and he goes on to devote that entire chapter to refuting heretical ideas. Again he condemns *mythology* in verse 7: "**Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.**"

He comes back and takes another swipe at heretics in chapter 6, starting in verse 3, pointing out the evil motives of those who teach novel doctrines: They have "**an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander,**

evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain." Then verse 10: "[Those who wander] away from the faith [pierce] themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things." Then verses 20-21, the whole epistle closes with these words: "Guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called 'knowledge,' for by professing it some have swerved from the faith."

So the threat of heresy was heavy on Paul's mind, and it is *still* a recurring theme in the second epistle. The very first imperative in chapter 1 comes in verse 13, and it is a reiteration of the main theme of that first epistle: "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me." And then there's that familiar command of 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"—followed by these words of caution: "But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene." This time Paul *names* "Hymenaeus and Philetus, who . . . swerved from the truth" by teaching the hyper-preterist heresy. And the rest of that chapter instructs Timothy how to deal with heresies like that.

Chapter 3 begins with a stern, prophetic warning: "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty." And then Paul gives a dead-on description of Charlie Sheen: "[Men] will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

But get this: Paul is not describing Charlie Sheen or any other secular celebrity. He is predicting a time when those traits will be characteristic of church leaders. Notice verse 5. The people he is describing "**hav[e] the appearance of godliness, but [deny] its power.**"

And—can I be perfectly honest with you? We are living and ministering in a time such as Paul described. Watch some of today's rock-star Pastors on their Youtube channels and you will see every characteristic Paul listed played out in vivid detail on the church stage.

So—should Timothy himself mentor these guys, or speak in their conferences, or publicly embrace and encourage them in the that hope he can harness their popularity and perhaps influence them for good? *Not at*

all. With regard to pastors and church leaders who promote and model innovative, worldly, self-loving ministry philosophies, "**reckless [church leaders], swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure**"—Paul wants Timothy to be a separatist: "**Avoid such people.**" In fact the Greek term is active, aggressive: "**from such turn away.**"

Anyway, the threat of heresy is a major concern of Paul's and he wants Timothy to stay on guard against the dangers it poses. That is a running theme throughout these two epistles. Furthermore, as a kind of sad punctuation to both letters, Paul ends both times by noting how many unfaithful former companions forsook him when the cost of standing firm became too high.

There are other common themes that tie these two epistles together. One is the warfare motif. Paul tells Timothy again and again that he is to be a warrior. There are enemies and ideas and influences that must be resisted—fought against, refuted, rebuked, and put to silence by the faithful minister. You cannot be faithful and free from conflict in ministry. It's *warfare*, and Paul stresses this again and again with Timothy.

Then, most important of all is the recurring theme in which Paul reminds Timothy of his singular duty to be a herald of the Word of God. First Timothy 4:6: "**put these things before the brothers.**" What things? "**the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.**" Verse 11: "**Command and teach these things.**" Verse 13: "**Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.**" Chapter 6, verses 2-4: "**Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.**" Second Timothy 1:13: "**[Hold fast] the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me.**" Chapter 2, verse 15: "**Present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.**" Then chapter 3 ends with that classic reminder of what has defined Timothy's own life; what has energized his spiritual growth; and what has framed his whole worldview—and it's nothing other than the authority and sufficiency of God's Word—"**All [of it,] breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.**"

Now Paul has arrived at the end of his final epistle to his most important successor. Second Timothy 4; the last passage of Scripture penned by Paul before his martyrdom. He knows death is coming. Verse 6: **"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come."** He is ready for it, and so he takes every thread of counsel; every theme of ministry philosophy he has ever written to Timothy, and he ties it all together in the paragraph we are concerned with this morning. This is Paul's final charge to Timothy, and in all the New Testament there are no more important, more solemn, more sacred instructions for ministry than these (2 Timothy 4:1-5): **I 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:**

- 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.**
- 3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,**
- 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.**
- 5 As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.**

Now, let's just walk systematically through the flow of this passage, and then if time permits, we'll come back at the very end and outline its implications. I want to start by challenging you to think a little more deeply than perhaps you have ever thought about what Paul is saying.

The heart and soul of this section, of course, are just three words: **"preach the Word."** That should be the nucleus, the core, and the primary focus of any proper philosophy of church ministry.

But I want you to see how far-reaching it is. This is not *merely* a prescription for expository preaching. It is not *only* about the content of Timothy's sermons. It *is* certainly about that, of course—but it's not *exclusively* about what comes from the pulpit. It covers all of ministry. No—more than that: It has implications for every aspect of the minister's life. In other words, Paul is not just telling Timothy how he should preach; not just instructing him on how to minister; he is telling him how to live.

There are nine imperatives in this passage, delivered in two waves of

rapid-fire directives, separated by the warning of verses 3 and 4. It's a *cycle* of imperatives—not a series of discrete commands but nine facets of every minister's one central responsibility. These commands are intended to impress upon Timothy what is entailed in faithfully proclaiming the whole counsel of God.

In other words, this is not a list of eight things to do alongside the preaching of the Word. This is a reminder of what a life devoted to the preaching of God's Word should look like. Here are the nine imperatives (and we'll come back to these in a minute to think them through, but here are all nine in order): 1. *preach the word*; 2. *be ready in every season*; 3. *reprove*; 4. *rebuke*; 5. *exhort*; 6. (verse 5) *be sober-minded*; 7. *endure suffering*; 8. *do the work of an evangelist*; 9. *fulfill your ministry*. Every one of those commands describes how Timothy is to preach God's Word.

Before we look at them individually, notice the solemnity with which Paul introduces this charge to Timothy. In effect, he puts Timothy under oath. Remember when Jesus was on trial before the High Priest? Matthew 26:63—the priest says, "**I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.**" That was a common, legal, and binding way of putting someone under oath. Paul does that with Timothy here. He literally binds him formally under the penalty of a curse.

By the way, this was also the kind of language that was frequently used in a last will and testament. Paul is formally bequeathing the pastoral duties of his ministry to Timothy, so he employs this legal formula to solemnize what he is about to say: "**I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus . . .**" It's not the first time Paul has called God as a witness when he gave a charge to Timothy. He did it in 1 Timothy 5, after telling Timothy how to deal with elders who sin, he wrote (v. 21), "**In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.**" Then a chapter later, 1 Timothy 6:12, he tells Timothy to "**fight the good fight of the faith**" (there's that warfare theme again), and starting in verse 13, he writes, "**I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.**"

Then in 2 Timothy 2:14, Paul encourages Timothy to use a similar legal formula in his preaching. "**Remind them of these things, [he says,] and charge them before God not to quarrel about words,**

which does no good."

So this is a typical way for Paul to underline the immense gravity of what he is about to say—to emphasize and to strengthen the charge. In fact, he thus elevates these nine imperatives to the level of a sacred commission. How would you like to have clear, personal marching orders like this, in such solemn terms, directly from the pen of the apostle Paul, to delineate and prioritize the duties of your life and ministry?

Well, you do have that, because these words are part of the inspired text of Scripture, "**breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.**" And as such these words are as personal and as applicable to you and to me *and to every church leader* as they were to Timothy.

Before we get past this solemn oath, I want to mention that the construction here is an emphatic affirmation of the deity of Christ. Verse 1, the word *God* and the name *Christ Jesus* are linked in the Greek with a construction that makes it clear they refer to the same Person. The translation could read, "**I charge you in the presence of God, namely Christ Jesus . . .**"—and then Paul goes on to stress that Jesus is both Judge and King. Paul thus tacitly refutes both *the cult of Caesar* and *the Christological heresies* that were already experimenting with gnostic ideas to explain away the deity and the incarnation of Christ. Those were precisely the kind of mythology Paul wanted Timothy to be on guard against. So even as he makes this charge, Paul is modeling for Timothy the very thing he wants Timothy to do. Again, this is not merely advice on how and what to preach; it is a mandate for every minister on how to live.

Paul intensifies the profundity of this oath by the way he describes Christ. Not only does He appeal to Christ as God; he names three eschatological aspects of Christ's sovereign rule over the hearts of men: He says it this way: "**Christ Jesus, who is [about] to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom.**" Here are the three facets of Jesus' sovereignty Paul names: He appeals to Christ as "**judge**," to underscore the *gravity* of this oath and the charge that follows. He speaks of Christ's "**appearing**" to underscore the *urgency* of it. And he speaks of Christ's "**kingdom**" to underscore *the supremacy and authority* of what he is about to say.

Now look at the nine imperatives (and let's take them in order):

Verse 2: "**Preach the word.**" The Greek word is *kerusso*. Listen to what Kenneth Wuest says about this term. He writes:
 The English word "preach" brings to our mind at once the picture of the ordained clergyman standing in his pulpit on the Lord's Day ministering the Word. But the Greek word here (*kerusso*) left quite a different impression with Timothy. At once it called to his mind the Imperial Herald, spokesman of the Emperor, proclaiming in a formal, grave, and authoritative manner which must be listened to, the message which the Emperor gave him to announce. It brought before him the picture of the town official who would make a proclamation in a public gathering. The word is in a construction which makes it a summary command to be obeyed at once. It is a sharp command as in military language. This should be the pattern for the preacher today. His preaching should be characterized by that dignity which comes from the consciousness of the fact that he is an official herald of the King of kings. It should be accompanied by that note of authority which will command the respect, careful attention, and proper reaction of the listeners. There is no place for clowning in the pulpit of Jesus Christ. . . . [Furthermore, Wuest says,] The preacher as a herald cannot choose his message. He is given a message to proclaim by his Sovereign. If he will not proclaim that, let him step down from his exalted position.

Amen to that. Again, there is not an ounce of encouragement here for the person who thinks innovation is the key to an effective ministry philosophy. Much less is there any room for the pulpiteers of today who like to exegete the latest movies, or draw moral lessons from television sitcoms, or build their sermons on themes drawn from popular culture, or the kind of preachers who insist they are being missional when they are merely being worldly. Still less is there any warrant for the hipster or the wannabe celebrity rock-star pastor who continually makes himself the focus of his ministry. "**For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake**" (2 Corinthians 4:5). "**Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!**" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Paul's focus is extremely narrow—*stiflingly* narrow for the typical young-and-restless church planter for whom "style" is everything; and whose style (let's be honest) is conspicuously dictated by secular fashion rather than by the worldview Paul was exhorting Timothy to embrace.

"**Preach the word.**" That's the first imperative. It's followed

immediately by imperative number 2: "**Be ready in season and out of season.**" The verb is *ephiSTEMi*, meaning "stand by," and it does have the sense of readiness. In fact, in radio, that is exactly what the expression "stand by" means: "**Be ready.**" But this word is even stronger than that. It also carries the connotation of expressions like: "take a stand," "stand upon it," "stick to it," "stand up to it," or simply "carry on." Paul is urging Timothy to be absolutely devoted to the truth of the Word and to the task of proclaiming it. "*Stand firm, and stand ready.*" That's the idea. And the proof is in the rest of the phrase: "**be ready in season and out of season**"—literally, "when it's timely and when it's untimely"—when it's popular and when it's not. Or to contextualize the phrase for the current crop of evangelical *fashionistas*: Preach the Word whether it's in fashion or out of fashion. By the way, the expression is ambiguous as to whether Timothy or his audience is the barometer declaring what's "**in season [or] out of season.**" Doesn't matter. Regardless of how you or your hearers—or someone else—feel about it, you keep preaching the Word.

Preach the word whether the timing seems opportune or awkward. Preach it whether it's convenient or inconvenient. Preach it whether *you* feel like it or not. Preach it whether you think it seems like the door is open or closed. Preach it no matter how much resistance you encounter. Preach it whether or not people say they want it. Preach it—and make it the heart and soul of your ministry—no matter how many church-growth experts tell you otherwise. "**Be [at the task] in season and out of season.**"

Next imperative (this is the third of nine): "**reprove.**" In fact, numbers three through five come in very quick succession, each only one word: "**reprove, rebuke . . . exhort.**" That's three successive words in the Greek text also, each with a different nuance. The first, translated "**reprove,**" carries the connotation of telling people that they are wrong, or that they have done something wrong. It has the idea of "reproach," "a rebuke," or the refutation of falsehood. As such it's a negative idea, and one that is definitely out of step and out of fashion—"out of **season**"—in these postmodern times. But it's one of the key aspects of this duty. If you try never to tell people they are wrong, you are not fulfilling the responsibility Paul names here.

Then (4th imperative) there's the verb "**rebuke**" (*epitimAo* in the Greek). This is a stronger word yet. It denotes an expression of strong disapproval—a denunciation, or even a formal censure. Paul regards it as

Timothy's bounden duty not only to expose and refute error, and sin, and false teaching, but also to clearly denounce each appearance of those things as the evil it is.

I am frankly amazed and appalled at how many pastors today deliberately shirk this duty. You know: *"It's not for me to criticize what other people are teaching. I just want to be always positive, and we'll let truth and error sort themselves out."* But if you try to do that, you are not fulfilling the responsibility Paul posiTIVely assigns to every faithful minister, both here, and in Titus 1:9, where he emphatically makes this same duty the responsibility of every elder in the church: **"He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."**

Titus 1:13 says some people need to be rebuked "**sharply, [so] that they may be sound in the faith.**" In fact, when Paul gives this same charge to Titus, listen to how strongly he words it: **"Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you."** That jars our postmodern sensibilities, doesn't it? But it is a crucial aspect of the pastoral calling. You cannot be a faithful shepherd if you refuse to deal decisively with dangers that threaten the flock. You are not a true preacher of the Word at all if you shirk this responsibility.

But lest anyone think this is a prescription for angry-sounding hyper-fundamentalists, there's an important qualification in that fifth imperative and the words immediately following it: **"exhort, with complete patience and teaching."** The verb is *parakaleo*; the same word translated "preaching" in the King James Version of 1 Timothy 4:13. But it's a sweet word, closely related to *parakletos*, the name Jesus used to speak of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. It's used 29 times in the New Testament, and the first time it appears is in reference to Jesus, in Luke 2:25, where Christ is referred to as **"the consolation of Israel."** It's that same word, *parakaleo*, translated **"consolation."** And that's really the gist of it. It conveys the ideas of encouragement, comfort, refreshment, solace—all in the form of a gentle entreaty, a verbal summons, a tender exhortation. That's the heart of biblical preaching.

And the purpose and the aim of *all* this—the rebukes as well as the encouragements—is for the good of the hearers—never their hurt. Preaching is a guide and a corrective and a feast and a salve—to edify or sometimes to heal the flock, Preaching is not a cudgel with which to beat the sheep. So it must always be done **"with complete patience and**

teaching." This echoes what Paul said two chapters earlier, 2 Timothy 2:25: **"the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth."**

Paul is calling for every possible demonstration of patience, kindness, magnanimity, and longsuffering. People will not be won to the truth by relentless scolding. If your rebukes and corrections are flavored with exasperation rather than true concern for the flock, if you deal out reproach after reproach and upbraiding after upbraiding without a true spirit of gentleness, you're not being a true shepherd.

Now in these postmodern times, it is commonly thought that "gentleness" excludes *every* kind of rebuke or correction—especially the sharp rebuke. But it's clear (isn't it?) that Paul saw no necessary contradiction between gentleness and firm rebuke. That has to be *our* perspective as well, or we will never be up to the simple yet far-reaching task Paul lays on our shoulders here.

Now face it: you and I minister in a climate of evangelical apostasy where clear teaching—especially if it includes rebuke for wrongdoing and the refutation of falsehood (*that* kind of teaching)—is simply not tolerated by people, and yet they fancy themselves *more* tolerant than anyone who dares to correct error.

That would come as no surprise to the apostle Paul, because he interrupts this cycle of imperatives with a prophecy telling Timothy that times such as these were already on their way. Verses 3-4: **"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."**

Notice once more the recurring theme of mythology. Paul would include in his definition of *mythology* every manmade narrative—both the speculative science that led modernists astray, and the postmodern urge to re-tell every narrative from my own personal perspective. That's precisely the kind of mythology Paul has in mind. Of course, the incessant exegesis of Hollywood's mythology among contemporary evangelicals also fits Paul's description perfectly.

People today *want* story-tellers, imagineers, comedians, and clowns. That is precisely what some church-growth experts today acknowledge—and encourage us to cater to. There is no end of young

pastors and church planters who seem to think Conan O'Brien and Chris Rock—or Steven Spielberg, or Bob Dylan—are more fitting role models than Charles Spurgeon or even the apostle Paul.

That whole attitude is hostile to the authority of revealed truth and ultimately fatal to authentic faith. It is itself a deadly evil, even when—perhaps I should say *especially* when—it is married to an orthodox but merely lip-service confession of faith.

Look at the text. Paul paints a vivid picture of what he merely alluded to in verse 2, an era when biblical preaching would be "**out of season.**" And this is what it looks like: "**people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.**"

Paul is describing a brand of obstinacy that we see reflected and magnified in our own culture. People talk incessantly of "tolerance," but one kind of intolerance is not only tolerated, but strongly encouraged: Our culture has no time for the unyielding truth-claims of God's Word. And the average evangelical church leader seems obsessed with *fitting into* the culture rather than pointing out the dangers of it. Rather than feeding the flock the nourishment they need, they tickle their ears and thereby actually turn them away from the truth and set them loose to wander off into mythology.

The people themselves are guilty, too, because they *demand* to have their ears tickled. That's what the expression "**itchy ears**" signifies. It was a common figure of speech in ancient Greek literature, and its meaning was clear. It describes the very same phenomenon Luke described in Athens in Acts 17:21: "**Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.**" The lust for novelty again. It's the same pathology that makes people today obsessively surf the Web in search of the latest trending topic.

By the way, speaking of surfing the web, here's a good argument for not trusting Wikipedia: I looked up this expression "itching ears" on Wikipedia. I don't usually do word studies that way, but I was pretending to be Athenian. And here's what Wikipedia says about "itching ears": Quote: "*Itching ears is a term used in the Bible to describe a person who will come across a large fortune. The term is used by the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy.*" I kid you not. So much for open-source definitions. Look it up, and one of you guys ought to change that entry on Wikipedia today.

Here's what it *ought* to say: "The expression 'itching ears' speaks of a lust for novelty that overrides and eliminates healthy hunger for the unchanging truth of Scripture. It describes someone whose desire to hear new stories results in blithe intolerance of biblical doctrine."

In the Greek there's a definite article attached to the expression "**sound teaching**" in verse 3. Literally "*the* sound doctrine"—the system of healthy teaching Paul himself proclaimed and defended.

I think there's a conspicuous parallel to this down in verse 10. Just as Demas deserted Paul because he loved the present world, verse 3 describes how "**people**," meaning people in the church—the general movement of people in the church—would desert healthy doctrine because they would grow to love worldly values and develop a lust for self-gratification. That is *apostasy*, and yet it is a dead-on accurate description of the evangelical movement of our day. This is to our profound shame as pastors and church leaders.

We don't have to follow the flow of the world's fashions. In fact, Paul orders Timothy *not* to follow the flow. Verse 5 (and here he returns to the cycle of imperatives): "**As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.**" There you have the final four imperatives in quick succession. Let's look at each one.

Imperative number six is this: "**Be sober-minded.**" "**As for you,** [in contrast to every popular trend] always be sober-minded." The Greek word is *nepho*, and it has all the same connotations as the English word *sobriety*. Its primary meaning has to do with abstinence from wine.

I'm not going to suggest that Paul was mainly concerned with what liquids you imbibe, but I do want to point out that this does have real implications for the trend in certain church-leadership networks to make consumption of alcoholic beverages a conspicuous badge of liberty. A few years ago a church near where I live started up with a lot of fanfare about "relevance" and "contextualization" and "cultural engagement," and I was curious about what they were doing, so I went to their website. And the most prominent graphic on this church website was a pint of Guinness—with the head running over the side of the glass and everything.

And about that same time I began to notice a trend among young pastors who were having men's Bible studies and theological discussions in pubs and talking a lot about beer and whatnot. To this day there seems

to be a cult of style-conscious, mostly young, church leaders who make their love of beer more or less an identity statement.

Let me be clear: I'm not trying to make a case for teetotalism. I've ministered for years in Italy, and frankly it is not going to cause me to stumble if you have wine with your pasta. I'm not the weaker brother. I'm not going to scold you if I see you having a beer. But I *am* going to tell you that it's stupid and immature and carnally-minded to treat beer-drinking as a kind of badge of liberty as if it were one of the main things that distinguishes your ministry from all others.

One of the qualifications for any kind of church office is that men in public positions of leadership in ministry can't be given to much wine. *Sobriety* is what we ought to be holding in highest esteem and picturing not only at our web sites but in the way we live—because that is the standard Scripture sets.

But in this context this word is not exclusively—and probably not even primarily—about the consumption of wine. Like our word *sober*, the Greek term here also speaks of alertness, serious thoughtfulness, dignity. The King James Version translates it as a reference to watchfulness: "**But watch thou in all things.**" And that's certainly an important aspect of the idea.

Remember, all these imperatives expand and elaborate on the central idea, which is at the head of the list: "**Preach the word.**" Paul is saying, handle it *soberly*. Treat it with the gravity and sobriety and circumspection your calling warrants. Don't be a clown or a trifler in the pulpit. *Especially* when people are demanding to have their ears tickled, you need to impress on them the full weight of the profound importance of God's unadulterated Word.

Imperative number seven: "**endure suffering.**" This is an inevitable and inescapable aspect of every minister's duty. Chapter 3, verse 12: "**Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**" Paul's own sufferings bleed into the text of both his epistles to Timothy, and this is another thread that runs through them: Paul keeps telling Timothy he needs to be bold, to embrace suffering, to stand up against opposition and take the blows he would inevitably be dealt—to die for the truth if necessary. Timothy obviously had a much more timid constitution than the apostle Paul. That seems to have been his besetting sin, so Paul has told him repeatedly that he needs to "**Share**

in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2:3). If you aren't willing to do that, you need to get out of ministry.

I once heard a young seminary student insist that if we're kind enough, and positive enough in what we preach about, and as tender-hearted and compassionate and winsome as we can be—then it ought to be possible to pastor a church in America without causing anyone offense and without being persecuted for our faith. I pointed out 2 Timothy 3:12, and his response was that that verse applied to first-century Roman culture; in a culture like ours where the gospel has fairly well penetrated, we ought to be able to live and minister faithfully without conflict of any kind. I urged him to do something besides ministry.

Now, it's unusual to hear anyone as candid as that student was, but I know from experience that the typical evangelical today thinks just like that: *if people get mad at the preacher, then the preacher needs to tone it down.* That isn't what Paul said to Timothy. In fact, it's the polar opposite of what Paul said to Timothy. "**Endure suffering.**" But keep preaching the Word in season and out of season.

Imperative number eight: "**Do the work of an evangelist.**" This is an easy one. It translates to this: *preach the gospel.* See: all of this is about preaching. "**Preach the Word.**" Preach the whole counsel of God. And keep the gospel at the center of the message, which is to say keep *Christ* at the center of the message; and in other words, keep the story of redemption at the center of the message—because that is after all the only true and sound way to interpret Scripture. "**Do the work of an evangelist.**" *Proclaim the gospel, and never lose sight of it.*

The final imperative wraps it all together: "**Fulfill your ministry.**" How do you fulfill your ministry? By preaching the Word in the way described by all those imperatives combined. Paul has come full circle. Conspicuously absent are all of the fad-words that fill the vocabularies of church planters and missional strategists today. Nothing about *innovation*; nothing about "cultural engagement"—except for engagement in warfare *against* the fads and innovations of a generation whose main features are itching ears and a lust for novelty. That is the chief kind of cultural engagement we're called to: to engage our culture in the sense David engaged Goliath.

And you know what? That is the proper medicine for itching ears. Whenever you proclaim God's Word boldly into a society where people are demanding ear-tickling messages instead, the power of God's Word

is unleashed. You see it in the wake of Paul's ministry. Despite all the opposition he faced, he won a remarkable number of people to Christ and planted churches from one end of the Roman empire to the other.

We see it here every week, too, as people in this entertainment-saturated, porn-infested, secular southern-California culture respond to God's Word, faithfully proclaimed.

The remedy for itching ears is not ear-tickling and story-telling. The true remedy is the faithful and forceful preaching of God's Word, which is **"Living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."**

Now, again, this charge to Timothy is not merely about his public preaching ministry during an hour or two every week when the church came together to worship and be taught. These imperatives cover all of daily life and ministry for every person in any kind of vocation. They govern our personal walk, our spiritual warfare, and our devotion to the Word.

Paul wasn't commanding Timothy to do anything unique or extraordinary. Paul himself had done all those things, faithfully and consistently for years, despite every conceivable type of trial and opposition. The perspective he urged on Timothy here was the very same ministry philosophy Paul himself had followed faithfully. It supported him in the inevitable warfare; it directed him in his daily walk; and it kept him properly focused on and devoted to the Word of God. That is precisely what Paul says in verses 6-7: **"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight [he was victorious in the warfare], I have finished the race [he was victorious in his personal walk], I have kept the faith [he was victorious as a minister of God's Word.]"**

That's how I want to finish. That's how *you* want to finish. In order to do that, most of us need to seek God's grace to do much better than we are currently doing in obedience to these nine imperatives. We need to stop following worldly fashions. We need to stop following *evangelical* fads. We need to renounce the postmodern quest for innovation. And we need to get back to the simplicity and honesty of Paul's philosophy of ministry: **"Preach the Word."**