

Some are noble. As the British prepared to hang Nathan Hale as a Revolutionary War spy, he uttered these famous words: *“I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country.”*

Some are tender. On his deathbed, President James Polk whispered to his wife, *“I love you, Sarah. For all eternity, I love you.”*

Some are despairing. As she lay dying, Queen Elizabeth the First wished for an impossible trade, *“All my possessions for a moment of time.”*

Some are downright cranky. The final recorded words of author H.G. Wells were spoken to a nurse: *“Go away! I’m all right.”*

Last words are rarely ignored. ... When a man is on his deathbed... those around him lean in to listen well. ... We instinctively sense that final words are somehow important.

As Timothy came to the end of Paul’s letter... (you can bet that he knows) he may be reading the apostle’s last words. ... Timothy was painfully aware that his missionary partner for 17 years... was imprisoned in Rome and on death row. He also knows that winter will soon shut down ocean travel... and that he may not make it to Rome before Paul is executed. Timothy knows the parchment he holds in his hands may be his mentor’s final letter.

I can see Timothy leaning in to listen to these last lines. He knows Paul will not waste his last breath... he will not spill his final ink carelessly. ... What charge does Paul *most want* to leave echoing in Timothy’s mind? ... We have now come to the climax of the Apostle Paul’s second letter to Timothy. This is the last letter Paul ever wrote. From the loneliness of his

prison cell in Rome... knowing that he is about to die... he wraps up his letter to his beloved son in the faith. ... And as we begin the 4th and final chapter... we are not disappointed. Paul is very fervent. He exhorts Timothy to carry on the work - with excellence.

Before we turn to this striking passage... let's get a little perspective about "EXCELLENCE." ... Did you know that there is a vast difference between "excellence" ... and "success" ...? ... Paul did not want Timothy to pursue success. Instead... it was excellence that was to be his aim.

In his book Christian Excellence author John Johnstone makes clear what the difference is... between excellence and success. (Please consider this carefully with me...)

God does not want us to be a successful church!

*Success is attaining cultural goals that elevate one's importance in the eyes of society... and is generally marked by power, prestige, wealth, and privilege.



*Excellence is the pursuit of the highest quality in one's work and effort, whether others recognize it or not.

*Success is measured in relation to others.



*Excellence is measured by one's own God-given potential and calling.

*Success seeks to please men



*Excellence seeks to please God.

*Success rewards only a few.



*Excellence is available to any believer who is willing to pay the price.

***Success** pertains to the possessions and reputation. ➡ ***Excellence** pertains to character.

***Success** can be cheap, attained by shortcuts, lying and stealing. ➡ ***Excellence** is never discounted, never available for anything less than full price.

***Success** focuses on the external. ➡ ***Excellence** focuses on internal.

***Success** concentrates on the temporal. ➡ ***Excellence** concentrates on the eternal.

***Desire for Success** comes from pride. ➡ ***Desire for Excellence** comes from humility.

I don't want us to be a successful church! Let's go for Excellence!

As we go now to our passage... please notice how it is excellence that Paul urges – *as strongly as he knows how* - for Timothy to manifest.

2nd Tim 4:1-4

Wow! Do you hear the urgency in Paul's tone as he calls for excellence in ministry...? Not only does he know this may be his last communication, but Paul also gives another reason for his determined resolve. *Because the day will when they will no longer listen but will turn aside and gather unto themselves those who will tickle their ears."*

Can you even **BEGIN** to imagine that future day... when people will have no stomach for solid spiritual food...? The Bible says there will be a day when churches are going to treat the Word of God as if it a smorgasbord.

“I’ll have a little of this. ... No thank you for that... I don’t accept that because I don’t like it. ... Maybe if it had more sugar. It needs to be sweeter. Just pile onto my plate pleasant things... I don’t need negativity... like teachings about Hell and damnation. Just tell me about how God loves everybody. Tell me how I can improve my life by simply trying harder and thinking only positive thoughts. Oh and how about a lot of that good stuff that tells me God only wants me to be healthy and wealthy...”

Can you believe it...? Just before Jesus comes back to earth – there will actually be BIG churches that will be like that. ... AND One day Satan is going to convince culture that the only UNforgivable sin... is to disagree that there is NO SUCH THING as absolute truth. He is going to convince the world that you can have your own personal truth... and anyone who says otherwise is using HATE speech. (“*You believe in absolute truth? You are a ‘Hate-monger!’*”) ... Wow! Can you imagine that ever happening...? ... Wait! IT ALREADY DOES! ... No other passage in Scripture describes more accurately the day in which we live.

In these verses today... the Apostle is obviously seeking to open Timothy’s eyes to (both) the URGENCY and the IMPORTANCE of what he is called to do. ... Paul charges Timothy with such urgency... because that day is coming. ... Well... now that it is here... how much MORE urgent could it be...? (LISTEN!) “If Satan cannot convince us that there is no heaven or hell... then he will convince us that there is no *hurry*.” ... “*You’ll have opportunities later,*” he whispers. “*There’s no rush.*”

... (Now) as to the importance... notice what Paul does. ... He flings back the boundaries of time and space... to reveal to Timothy the unseen realities before whom every Christian lives and labors.

(Please listen to me very-very carefully) ... There is nothing more helpful to a believer... than to realize... that what we are doing is supremely important. ... yet there is nothing harder for us to understand about our own Christian ministry... than what we are doing is supremely important... ..
Let me say that again... (**REPEAT**)

(You see)... like Timothy... we see ourselves as a tiny minority... amidst an overwhelming... mounting majority... that is committed to evil and unbelief. Our voice seems to be a mere whisper in the tumult of chaos... and the clamor of voices that speak and echo other things today. ... Most of us think of ourselves (and of our day-to-day commitment to walk with Christ)... as being almost **insignificant** - that we are contributing **nothing** to arrest the downhill slide of our day... and that we cannot speak with any impact at all - against the voices of unbelief... (which we hear on every side.)

I am sure Timothy felt that way too. We have been seeing all through this letter... that Timothy faced an **upsurge** of evil... and an increase in the voices that were denouncing faith and belief. ... Immorality was widespread in Ephesus. Sexual perversions were accepted as an **appropriate lifestyle** in that city-just (just as they are in our day.) Timothy must have felt that he could make no headway at all against the onrushing tide of evil.

So... what the Apostle does (here)... is roll back the separation between the **visible** and **invisible** worlds... and shows us - in **Whose presence we are laboring**. ... Paul reveals the powerful forces Who are observing us... and working with us - in everything we do and say as Christians. ... Paul reminds Timothy that he is laboring in the presence of God the Father... the Creator... the One who holds in His hands the life breath of every human being... the One who is Sovereign over all human events!

Timothy is also reminded that he carries on his ministry in the sight of Christ Jesus... the One who is to be the Judge of all men... before Whom every human heart is exposed... the One before Whom everyone (believer and unbeliever) must ultimately stand and give an account... although not at the same judgment. ... Jesus Himself said that the Father had committed all judgement into His hands.

Paul mentions "Christ's appearing" in verse 1... when He will "judge the living and the dead." ... The Bible teaches (in Matt 24 and 25) that a day is coming when the trumpet of the archangel will sound... the eastern sky will split... and Jesus will come riding back to earth on the clouds... followed by His angel armies. ... History will end... time will cease... and all humanity will be judged — some to enjoy God's presence forever... and everyone else to experience eternal torment.

... So... we are to carry on our ministry before the One who thoroughly understands all of human history. ... This is what Paul sought to capture for Timothy... and I hope that we will capture here in this passage — a consciousness of Who is watching... and before Whom we labor.

One of my primary roles... as a pastor... is to get members of this congregation involved in God's kingdom work (using the gifts that God has given to this church through them.) ... But everyone must realize that their ultimate accountability is not ME as pastor... or a leadership board of the church... no matter how doctrinally sound and godly they may be. They are ultimately accountable to the One Who has called and empowered them... and Who will one day judge them on how well they followed their calling.

At the Bema Seat Judgement in front of which all believers must appear- there will be no argument... no new evidence to be revealed... no cross-examination... no witnesses to call... no excuses... no jury of your peers... and no appeal. In the most absolute way...the Judge's decision will be final.

When we stand before our omniscient Lord... He already will know... (far better than we ourselves have any ability to know...) ... exactly how faithful and godly we have been. ... Not a year... or a month... not a day or an hour... not even a second escapes His notice... as to how we have fulfilled His individual call on each of our lives.

This judgement is not to decide whether or not we get into Heaven. That judgement is made solely upon the basis of what we do with the person of Jesus Christ. This judgement for believers will determine what kind of eternal rewards we will receive.

Paul charges Timothy in the presence of God and of Christ... "*by his appearing and his kingdom.*"

"*Appearing*" (or *επιφανεια* in the original language of the New Testament)... literally means a "*shining forth*"... and was used when the Roman Emperor would visit a province or town. ... The emperor's appearance in any place was his *επιφανεια*.. Obviously when the emperor was due to visit any place-everything was put in perfect order. Timothy would have understood Paul's use of this term as he spoke of Christ's *επιφανεια*... which calls for everything to be put in perfect order... because **Jesus is coming**.

In light of Christ's *επιφανεια* one of the things we need to put in order is the right perspective of the work that we are involved in. We are doing the most important work that can be done on planet earth.

We need to set things in the right perspective. When we are living, speaking and behaving as Christians should... we are advancing the kingdom of God. There is no higher calling.

2nd Timothy 4:2

That is the one great essential that must be carried out by you and me to fulfill the *επιφανεια* of our Lord.

When we read the phrase: “*preach the word*” (however)... most of us think that this is addressed to **preachers** (like myself)... and that this is something only done inside a church... on a platform... behind a pulpit.

No... this word is not addressed to *preachers* only. ... It includes all the people of God. (LISTEN!)... it does not merely mean to preach. The word is really: “*announce...*” “*proclaim...*” “*set it forth...*” “*deliver the truth...*” “*make it known.*” ... “*Herald the Word – Speak a message on behalf of the King... with all of the authority of Heaven!*”

This is done over a cup of coffee... in an office... or in a car while you are driving to work... It is done on AWANA night... or with a hurting kid sitting on the sidelines during youth group. ... It is something that can come up any place – anytime! ... Wherever human hearts are open... seeking... longing... and hurting - **that** is the place... **that** is the opportunity - to “*preach the word.*”

“*Proclaim the good news,*” Paul says —*of what God has already done for us. He sees us in our hurt... our agony... our failure and our weakness.*

The gospel is that He sees us in our weakness and in our strutting boldness and pridefulness - and yet even **still**... He loves us! ... And He has already done something about it—through the death and resurrection

of Jesus... He broke the stranglehold of evil upon human hearts. He found a way to set aside His Own just sentence... that you and I deserve death.

Jesus has not only died to take our punishment... but He also came to live in us... and start the process of renewing us... remaking us... and restoring us to our lost inheritance.

That is the word we are to proclaim! ... **That** is the answer we Christians have... to the increasingly obvious hurt and heartache of human need all around. ... It is the most **effective** thing we can do in our day.

THE DARKER THE HOUR-THE GREATER THE NEED FOR THE PREACHING OF THE WORD. ... And it is getting very dark!

I hope that comes through clearly because this is what the Apostle Paul is seeking to bring to Timothy's mind. Against this impressive background of the watching heavens... and in view of the paramount importance of continuing the redemptive work of Christ, Paul lays this solemn charge on Timothy's heart, as he does upon us: "*Proclaim the truth; preach the word.*" Then he tells Timothy, and us, how to do it.

First, "*Be ready in season and out of season,*" he says. ... Many have been confused about what **that** means. Some have taken it to mean that you are to push the gospel on people... whether they want it or not. ... Some Christians take this passage to mean they have the right to impose a witness upon people... whether they are ready to hear it or not.

John Stott explains, "*This is not a biblical warrant for rudeness but a biblical appeal against laziness,*" Do it whether you feel like doing it or not. ... Believers must stand ready at all times... and in every circumstance.

(When it's convenient... when it's not convenient. ... When it's early... or when it's late. ... When the crowds are large... or when there are only a few. ... When you are affirmed and loved... or when you are being being criticized... or there is a good chance that you will. We are to always be on duty.. no matter what.

And “*Do it*”... Paul says, “with a variety of approaches.”... (“*Reprove, rebuke and exhort,*” he says. ... Those words reflect three different **approaches** that we can use in announcing the gospel. ... We must be careful not to use a one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism. We must tailor each conversation to match the person’s unique needs... with whom we are talking.

“**Reprove**” means to “prove,” “convince,” “refute,” or “persuade.” It carries the idea of replacing incorrect ideas with correct ideas.

To “**rebuke**” is to call attention to wrongdoing and assign responsibility. The term is a close cousin to “reprove,” except that the desired response is humility instead of conviction. ... Rebuking also implies the possibility of a consequence... so that (not only) is the truth is declared... but also its consequences - if it is ignored.

“**Exhort**” gives the picture of a coach encouraging the athlete-in-training. Believers need to be diligent, longsuffering teachers of grace. This provides necessary balance: A steady diet of reproof and rebuke alone will demoralize people, leading them to despair. A coach challenges and corrects... but a coach must also comfort and encourage. “That’s great... you are doing well now...” “That’s a step in the right direction...”

Finally, says the apostle, “*do all of this...with great patience and instruction*”. Patiently keep on teaching. ... Whenever we care very deeply about someone’s spiritual condition... we can get so frustrated at them... if they do not respond as quickly as we would like them to. But we are not to become discouraged when they don’t instantly run toward change.

I remember several years ago bringing this up as a frustration of mine to a seasoned (older Pastor) that I served with in my former church. Pastor Brad gave me an illustration that has helped me with my pastoral patience.

He told me to picture my ministry in this manner:

All week long you study the Word of God... filling up a bucket with it. Then on Sunday the people come to church... and they are like Coke bottles. You face a room full of Coke bottles who sit in the pews. (A few of them have their bottle caps on... and will never remove them.) Then you take your filled bucket and you throw it out (into the audience of Coke bottles.) All of the content you stored up all week goes flying out. Most of it lands on the ground. Some DOES get inside the bottles who have their caps off – but most of it splashes to the floor. Then all the bottles go home and return the next week. They come back with a little more than they came with the week before. ... Now you throw more at them... with the same result. They go home and come back next week with a little more. And so is the long process... by which you must be patient.

Unfortunately... much of what passes today (both in the pulpit and out on the street) as “proclaiming God’s Word”... are (really just) pressure tactics that seek to make people act... or say they believe ... when they are not yet really convinced. ... I hate to say it... but so many of our tactics are just psychological tricks and gimmicks... and pressure tactics... which get results - that do not last... and do not represent a real commitment of the heart. ... This is the result when we do not proclaim God’s Word with patience.

We are not to abandon those who are slow in responding... but... we are to keep on explaining... answering questions... clarifying... applying the gospel to specific situations.

“Proclaim the truth.” State it first, announce it, herald it, proclaim it; and then explain it, teach it, break it down, make it clear.” ... All this... says the Apostle... is required - especially as we approach end times. (And Boy! Are we ever there!)

2 Tim 4:3-4

This is the time in which we live: *“They will not endure sound teaching,”* Paul says, men and women will turn away from it and **refuse** to hear it. They will not even give it a hearing. ... It is not that they will listen to the truth... and then decide whether it is right or wrong. No... they do not even want to hear it. ... They do not want you to say anything in this direction... and they resist... sometimes openly... sometimes with subtle influences... every attempt to introduce the truth into any kind of social or governmental situation.

They will demand that the Ten Commandments be removed from every courtroom. They will demand that Creationism must not even be taught along side of Evolution and let the students decide. ... No! Evolution is to be taught as fact - and none of the strong evidence that disproves it... is to be mentioned. ... Manger scenes and Christian symbols will need to be removed from all public property. ... Prayer will be outlawed at football games and graduation ceremonies. ... Christianity will be society's #1 evil - because it regards homosexuality as a sin and claims itself to be the only way to heaven.

Then... since they will not listen to teachers of truth (as the apostle says)... they will look for others who will teach them what they want to hear. An epidemic will spread that is worse than Covid 19. This one is the disease known as "*itching ear disease*." ... People who have this disease look for teachers who will scratch that itch; and the result, the apostle says, is that they "*wander into myths*."

They teach attractive lies... (fantasies for the most part - speculative philosophies that emerge from the minds of men.)

I have already mentioned *the myth of evolution*. Even though it is without a shred of empirical evidence to support it... any attempt to try to set forth anything to the contrary is met with ridicule and mockery... put down as though those who hold any other view are village idiots... incapable of reasoning with intelligent men.

The myth of human autonomy... is another (which we hear on every side today.) ... We hear that man is the measure of all things. Man is the ultimate intelligence in the universe. Our destiny is in our own hands. We can (and must) work out all our own problems. There is nothing more out there.

Reflected almost every time you turn on the television... pick up a newspaper or read a magazine is this underlying assumption that man is the measure of all things.

Then... there is *the myth of the omnipotence of science*. It says that science can solve all our problems. We see pictured in the media unthreatening... very mild-looking doctors and others... dressed in white coats... working away in laboratories... finding new bases of life and

secrets of matter... discovering that science can put everything together... and bring about a brave new world... in which we can live free from fear... and free from conflict with one another.

Yet (if you look at the record of scientific achievement)... all the technological advances of which we are so proud today... have resulted instead in the dehumanization and depersonalization of people... the pollution of our atmosphere... the corruption of our ways of life... and the increase in threat to the welfare of the world. ...That is Science's record! — It speaks for itself.

There are so many other myths... such as today's myth that believes homosexuality is a wonderful lifestyle. ... We are told that homosexuality can be as satisfying... as enjoyable... as contributive to the life and happiness of a human being as heterosexuality. That is an outright denial of all that God had in mind when he made them in the beginning male and female, and He said, "These shall be one flesh," {cf, Gen 2:24}.

We have been SO saturated by a world that is **committed to falsehood**... that no one dares define "woman." (You can get into deep trouble if you state the obvious.) ... That is why (as Paul sets forth here)... we must increasingly proclaim the truth as it is in Jesus.

(I know...) - we just want to seize hold of these things and smash them. But that is not what the Word of God says will work.

The apostle reminds us that the most effective thing is... preach the word... announce the truth... tell of reality... make it clear... spread the word. ... All of heaven is watching... and all of the program of God is committed to blessing... fulfilling... and being carried through. The day is almost here...

when all creation shall bow before the Lord Jesus... and declare that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

You and I are called to advance that work. Do not let anybody tell you that your life as a Christian does not count. ... It counts tremendously... it is the most significant thing taking place on this earth today. Our work is far more important than any international program... act of Congress... or decision of president... supreme court... king... or ruler.

Excellence in ministry is what God calls from us. ... God is calling every believer in this room to be faithful to His command:

Preach the word.

Be ready in season and out of season.

Reprove, rebuke, and exhort.

With great patience and instruction.