

Paul's Final Charge to Timothy to be Faithful

2 Timothy 4:1-4

2 Timothy 4:1-4: *"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: ² Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."*

Background Notes

One way to state the theme of 2 Timothy would be: "Faithfulness in the Midst of Fire and Failure." When Paul wrote this letter, the Roman persecution of Christians had already begun. Emperor Nero had blamed the Christians for the great fire in Rome in AD 64, and 2 Timothy was written in AD 66 or 67. Furthermore, false teaching had already begun to circulate wherever Christianity had spread, and it had penetrated into the churches. Some people who had once embraced the Christian faith were beginning to fall away. So Paul wrote to encourage Timothy to be faithful in the midst of fire and failure.

In this letter, Paul informed Timothy that conditions were not going to get better. In fact, conditions would get worse and worse, particularly in reference to false teaching. Look back at 2 Timothy 3:13: *"But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."* 2 Timothy was not just a 1st century letter from the apostle Paul to Timothy - it is Scripture, and thus it is the Word of God to us today. We, too, must be faithful in the midst of the fires of persecution and the failure to be faithful to sound doctrine.

One more sidelight to a historical note for any of you historians: Nero blamed the Christians for the fire in Rome, but it was indirect blame. He never said that the Christians had actually ignited the fire. Nero said the gods set the fire because they were angry with the Christians for failing to worship them.

Doctrinal Points

1. The faithful Christian preaches the word.

Verse 2 is a charge to *"preach the word!"* This was a command to Timothy, and it is a command to me and to you today. What does "preach the word" mean? Does this mean that you have to be in full-time ministry? No, this command is for **all Christians**, and the rest of the verse explains what it means to "preach the word."

We should be ready at all times to share the word with nonbelievers - "in season and out of season." We should be ready to evangelize and share the word with people on all occasions, not just when we feel like it, and not just when we think the opportunity is right. We don't keep office hours or punch the clock when it comes to sharing the word!

On a recent flight I was enjoying the opportunity to do some leisure reading for a change, but the guy next to me was just sitting there. Well, I knew that I should witness to him, but I didn't feel like it – I felt like reading! That was an "out of season" time from my perspective! What should we do on occasions like that? We should just do it - force yourself to witness - in season and out of season. I finally put away my book and began to talk to him. I looked for an opening to share the Word of God, and the Lord graciously provided an opportunity.

Besides sharing the word with unbelievers, we need to preach the Word of God to believers as well. Look again at verse 2: "...*convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.*" Teaching the word should be done with patience, and with a view to furthering the faith of the believer. Some believers need correcting, some believers need rebuking, and some believers need encouraging and exhorting. We should use God's Word as needed in each situation, and always with patience. This is not always easy, especially when your fellow believers don't want to listen.

Not long ago I had to rebuke one of my former students who was filing for an unbiblical divorce. He didn't want to hear what I had to say, and he didn't want to listen to the Word. Regardless of unpleasant or hostile reactions, we must preach the word. The faithful Christian preaches the word.

Verse 1 lists some motivating factors to encourage us to faithfully preach the word. Verse 1: "*I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom. Preach the word!*" Here are two factors that will motivate us to preach the word.

a. Our lives will be reviewed.

The Lord Jesus will judge the living and the dead. The "living" here are those who are saved; the "dead" here are the damned. Those who are unsaved will be judged at the Great White Throne Judgment and consigned to hell because they did not believe God (Revelation 20).

Those who are saved will not be judged as to their salvation; that was settled when they trusted in Jesus Christ for their salvation. So if you're a Christian, if you've trusted Christ, your salvation is secure. However, our *lives* will be reviewed at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Addressing Christians, Romans 14 says: "*For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. So then each of us shall give an account of himself to God.*"

Do you have your account ready for the time when your life as a Christian will be reviewed before the Judgment Seat of Christ? The Judgment Seat of Christ should motivate us to preach the word.

b. The Lord's return and His kingdom.

The Lord Jesus is returning to this earth to set up His kingdom - and Christians are going to reign with Him. 2 Timothy 2:12 says, *"If we endure, we shall also reign with Him."* This verse indicates that our place and reward in the future kingdom of Christ on earth will be determined by how faithful we are now. This fact should motivate us to be faithful and preach the word. The faithful Christian preaches the word.

2. The faithful Christian endures sound doctrine.

Verse 3: *"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."* Sound doctrine is not always pleasant. Some sound doctrine is not easy to understand or believe - it must be endured.

For example, the doctrine of hell is not a pleasant doctrine. It's unpleasant to think about the truth that unbelievers will be lost forever. It's hard to think that your friends and your relatives are going to eternal punishment if they haven't trusted Christ as their Savior. The doctrine of hell is not pleasant - but it must be endured.

Verse 3 says that some believers will not endure sound doctrine. They have "itching ears" – they only want to hear what *they* want to hear! These people will turn away from the truth, and go to churches (or TV preachers) that preach what they want to hear.

Like the people of Isaiah's day, they say, *"Do not prophesy to us right things. Speak to us smooth things. We want to hear pleasant things, even if it means illusion."* Like the people of Isaiah's day, there are people today who call themselves Christians, but have turned away from the truth. They will not endure sound doctrine.

They even turn aside to myths or fables (v3). They prefer to believe, for example, that there is no hell. They like the idea that unbelievers simply cease to exist. That's false teaching. You can't find that teaching in the Bible – in fact, the Lord Himself taught about hell. Whether it's pleasant or not, we must believe in hell because that's what the Bible teaches. The faithful Christian endures sound doctrine.

Practical Applications

1. Beware of the "itching ear" syndrome!

"To suit their own desires, they will gather around... teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (v3-4).

When you read the title - "Beware of the itching ear syndrome" - you may have thought, "I'm sound in doctrine. Nothing can shake me. Nothing can "tickle my ears"! I'll endure sound doctrine."

Well, no matter how strong you think you are, beware of the “itching ear” syndrome!

Within human nature, there is always a tendency to move in the direction of what’s new and popular, or what’s easiest to believe, or the latest idea, or the most exciting or interesting theological theory, or the most politically correct position. Beware! It’s easy to be caught by the “itching ear” syndrome.

The idea that man is basically good, and not a sinner, appeals to the itching ear. The idea that there is no hell appeals to the itching ear. The idea that there is no role distinction between man and women appeals to the itching ear. These popular ear-tickling ideas are not in the Bible - but they are attractive because they appeal to the itching ear of our fallen human nature.

No Christian is invulnerable. Beware of the itching ear syndrome.

2. Don’t wait for the “perfect” opportunity to witness!

Verse 2: “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season.”

Why shouldn’t we wait for the perfect opportunity to witness? Because the perfect opportunity will never come! There will always be something that’s not quite right. I don’t quite have the time right now. My neighbor doesn’t seem quite ready yet. There’s too much noise and too many interruptions at work to speak about faith with my boss.

Opportunities abound, but none will ever be the 100% “perfect” opportunity. Even the “in-season” times could always be a little bit better, from our perspective. But the command is that we should always be ready to preach the word, even in the out-of-season times. Don’t wait for the “perfect opportunity” to witness - it just never arrives.

Some years ago I witnessed to a business contact whom I had just met. It was really an “out-of-season” time. I didn’t know where the man was coming from, faith-wise. It certainly wasn’t a perfect opportunity. However, the weather happened to be perfect that day, and so I said, “On a beautiful day like this, how could anyone not believe in God?” Well, that comment led to a long discussion about the Lord and Scriptures!

From my perspective, it was not the perfect opportunity – but from God’s perspective, it was perfect timing, because unbelievers are always “in season.” So we are to be ready “in season and out of season.” Don’t wait for the perfect opportunity to witness.