



KNU International English Church

A LOVING COMMUNITY THAT CHANGES OUR WORLD.

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Scripture and Preaching: Speaking and Hearing the Word 2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

2 Questions for Discussion

- 1) When have you really felt God speaking to you through a sermon?
- 2) What were the main points of the last 5 sermons you heard?

Raise your hand if you could remember at least one of the last five sermon topics? Keep your hand up if you could remember two? Three? Four? Five?

But I expect that almost all of us could point to at least one sermon that was a powerful spiritual event for us. Somehow, sometimes, sermons become miracles. Reading the Bible and talking about it becomes a transcendent event when the words on the page become the Word of God for us in our hearts.

This is our topic today - the role of scripture and preaching in the worship service. You can read the Bible at home. You can listen to sermon podcasts or read them online, but something special happens when we gather to hear from God together. What is that? How does that work? How can we have more of those special, supernatural, God-filled moments when we gather on Sundays?

Our primary text for today is in 2 Timothy. Timothy is Paul's ministry student. Paul has been training Timothy for years. In our series on 1 Thessalonians, we saw part of this training period with Timothy serving as Paul's assistant. Timothy is out on his own now, on the island of Crete. Timothy is the Christian leader of the island, kind of like a bishop or lead pastor for a network of house churches. Paul is giving his final advice to Timothy, charging him with his most important tasks as a minister. Again and again, Paul comes back to one fundamental task: "Preach the Word of God." Let's read part of Paul's advice starting in 3:14.

Chapter 3: ¹⁴ *But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you.* ¹⁵ *You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁶ *All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.* ¹⁷ *God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*

Chapter 4: ¹ *I solemnly urge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who will someday judge the living and the dead when he appears to set up his Kingdom:* ² *Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching.* ³ *For a time is coming*

when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will reject the truth and chase after myths. ⁵ But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.

Let's focus in on verses 16-17 to help us understand the Bible and preaching. We'll just take these verses a few phrases at a time.

All Scripture is inspired by God.

All Scripture is God-breathed. The words in our Bible were written and recorded and edited and maintained by a wide variety of people over a long period of time. Their various personalities, cultures, and contexts are clearly present in the words of our Bible. However, we believe that God has guided and inspired the whole process related to the Bible. God inspired the writing. God inspires the reading. God inspires the hearing.

All Scripture is inspired by God. This is not a dead book. Hebrews 4:12 says: "For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires." Somehow this book is alive. God's Spirit lives and breathes - not so much in the ink and paper - but in the words and the message. Somehow, these words become scalpels and x-ray machines, stripping away our defenses, and revealing who we truly are. Somehow, this book, written thousands of years ago, never loses its power to change people and to carry the message of God for our world.

All Scripture is inspired by God. That's why we read the Bible when we gather for worship every Sunday. And that's why we read from several parts of the Bible. The whole Bible is the inspired Word of God - not just Paul's writings, not just Jesus' teachings, but the whole Old and New Testaments. That's why we use the Lectionary - a schedule of Scripture readings throughout the year. This forces us to read and to discuss the whole Bible, not just our favorite parts.

All Scripture is inspired by God. That's why the reader says "The Word of the Lord" and the people say, "Thanks be to God." We believe in the mystery that God still speaks through this text, and therefore this reading is always worthy of our thanks.

All Scripture ... is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. This is the New Living Translation, and it's easy to understand, but the translation in the NIV is easier to talk about: "All scripture is ... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." This describes the task of preaching: teaching, rebuking, correcting, training, and (if we pull a word from chapter 4 verse 2) encouraging.

These days, some people are saying that we no longer need preaching. Some say this one-way mode of communication lecture-style is outdated and obsolete. You can study the Bible at home or in small groups. That's true. I'm all for discussion and interaction and questions and feedback, but submitting ourselves to the Scripture when we gather to worship is an ancient spiritual practice for God's people.

The entire book of Deuteronomy is basically a sermon, reviewing the previous words and actions of God. When the Israelites rediscovered the Scriptures in Nehemiah and Ezra's time, "The Levites ... instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage" (Nehemiah 8:7-8). Jesus and the apostles often went to synagogues on the Sabbath, and when the people gathered, they preached by explaining the Bible. The Christian Church continued this tradition, with preaching being a key part of most worship gatherings.

Something profound happens when we stop moving, stop talking, take a position of humility, and submit ourselves to God's Word. Sometimes we learn something important about God or life. Sometimes we are corrected or rebuked. Sometimes we are trained in how to live well. Sometimes we are encouraged. Something mysterious happens when a preacher adds her breath to these God-breathed words. If the Holy Spirit is working in the preacher and the listener, then a Spirit-filled event can take place. God's Spirit can breathe in us and inspire us toward God and godliness.

God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. The point of preaching is to help people live well. The point of preaching is to help people respond faithfully to God. James said, "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves" (1:22). The point of preaching is to move us from *hearers* of God's Word to *doers* of God's word. The highest goal of preaching is to help God work in our hearts and minds to transform our lives, to transform the way we actually live day to day.

Preaching is not just to make converts. Preaching is not just to keep the church in line. Preaching is not just to make us feel good or encouraged. Preaching is not just to give us a little spiritual boost to help us get through the week. We read the Bible and preach so that God can work through his Word to transform our daily lives by his grace. In our church, our vision breaks this up into three points. The point of our whole church - but especially our preaching - is that we will be made new by God's love, gathered in multicultural community, and sent to cause global change through local action.

But preaching is complex. Let's spend a few minutes talking about some of the complicated issues involved with preaching.

- First, preaching is **both words and the Word**. When I get up here to preach, I'll say a lot of words - maybe too many. Not every word that I say is the Word of God. I am not an infallible messenger. My words will never become Scripture. You can't equate my sermons with the Word of God. However, somehow, mysteriously, sometimes God does speak to people through preaching. In, around, beyond, behind the preacher's words, the Word of God often breaks through to our hearts.
- Second, preaching involves **both certainty and uncertainty**. One of the Nazarene articles of faith is that the Old and New Testament Scriptures are inspired by God and

reveal all things necessary for our salvation.¹ On one hand, that's great. The Bible tells us everything we really *need* to know for life in Christ. On the other hand, that's kind of a bummer. The Bible doesn't tell us everything we *want* to know. Some things in the Bible just aren't clear. So as a preacher, part of my job is to be clear about what is clear and to be honest about what is not clear. What is clear is more than enough to guide us faithfully into God's grace and peace through Jesus.

- Third, preaching is **interpreting the Bible and the people**. Part of my job is to understand the Bible, and part of my job is to understand you. Good preaching not only reveals God more clearly. Good preaching also reveals you to yourself. Good preaching helps us understand ourselves more clearly in the light of the God's Word.
- Fourth, that means preaching is both **timeless and timely**. Good preaching embeds the timeless message of God's love within the time and culture and language of the people in the congregation. There is no culture-less preaching. All preaching always exists within a cultural context. Good preaching breathes God's message in the indigenous context of the people listening.
- Fifth, that means preaching is **more complex in a multicultural setting**. If good preaching is culturally embedded, what do we do when we have a lot of cultures all together? I don't have a perfect answer, but I think about it like this. Jesus said he would make us "fishers of men." Preaching is kind of like fishing - trying to help God's message catch peoples' hearts. A good fisherman uses different techniques for different fish. Sometimes he uses a net; sometimes a trap; sometimes live bait; sometimes a smaller fish or a frog or a cricket or a piece of meat. You can't catch all fish with the same method. (We were talking about this in Greenhouse Worship, and Tim said, "Yes you can! Use dynamite!") Preaching is kind of like that. Unless, I'm going to use dynamite, I'll have to use different sermon styles and topics to reach different people. It's almost impossible to connect with everyone at the same time. A few months ago, I preached a narrative sermon using a Flannery O'Connor story. I knew would be difficult, maybe even offensive for some, but afterwards, a young man told me that was the best sermon he had ever heard me preach. That's how it goes in our church. So, if a particular week's sermon doesn't catch you, maybe it wasn't intended for you. Maybe it was for someone else. Come back next week, and see if God catches your heart with that one.
- Last, effective preaching **depends on the preacher, on God, and on the listener**. Once, a pastor had a crazy week - three funerals, seven people in the hospital, a million emails, an exploding toilet in the church bathroom, and a complaining deacon. When Sunday he came, it was almost time for him to preach, he prayed and said, "God, this week has been so busy, I haven't had time to even think of a sermon. You've got to help me. What should I say?" Then, the voice of God came clearly into his heart, *Tell them you are not prepared*. I'm guessing that sermon didn't go so well. As a preacher, I have to do my homework. I have to study and pray and think and practice. There's no way around that, but the simple truth is that even if I do all of that, when I get up here to talk it might just be me talking - blah, blah, blah, blah. If God

¹ Article 4: "We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith."

doesn't show up in me and in you, this is all just words. One of my greatest prayers is that God's Spirit will work a miracle and that somehow through what I say, we will all be drawn closer to God. But there's another part of this whole preaching thing. Part of this depends on you. I can pretty much guarantee you that God is not going to speak to you through the sermon if you are asleep. You have to engage the process. You have to be open. You have to be ready.

With that in mind, let's talk about your participation in reading of the Bible and the preaching in the worship service. There are some very specific things you can do before, during, and after the worship service to make you a better sermon-listener. If you do these things, you are more likely to have more of those powerful moments of hearing from God during the worship services. So here they are - **10 ways to be a better sermon-listener.**

BEFORE

- **Go to sleep earlier** on Saturday. I know Saturday is a fun day for many of you, but don't stay up until 2 or 3 working or playing or watching a movie. If you stumble in here with your eyes half open, the chances are really small that God will do something significant in your heart that day.
- **Wake up earlier** on Sunday morning. You don't want to be rushing around to get breakfast and get the kids out the door. If you arrive all stressed out, that doesn't put you in a good mode to give God access to your heart. If you arrive late, you miss the beginning of the story. Every service is like a story. The songs, the call to worship, the greeting time, all of that is preparing us to submit ourselves to God during the reading and preaching of the Word. If you miss that part, it's like walking into the middle of a movie or running a race without warming up.
- **Study the Bible.** At home and with a small group, honestly engage the text of the Bible. A sermon usually works from one key text, but it is flavored with the whole of Scripture. To really get a sermon, you have to spend time getting to know the rest of the Bible.
- **Pray for your pastors and for the worship service.** Pray that we as a church will really meet with God when we gather. Pray that the pastors will be full of God's Spirit. Pray that the people will be open and ready. Pray that God will change lives. Somehow, in the mystery of God's grace, prayer makes more of those deep spiritual moments happen.

DURING

- **Expect discomfort.** Sometimes we expect our pastors to keep saying the same things in the same ways, just with a new illustration or a catchy alliteration to help us remember his five points until we forget them again. Sometimes we have built up these internal defenses to God's message so that we think we're really listening, but actually we are just keeping it at the surface, not letting it get to those deep places in our hearts. Sometimes, an unusual style of sermon will allow God's message to enter through a side door in our hearts, surprising us and allowing God to touch a place in our hearts we had been hiding. Other times the problem is that we want sermons that

are full of rebuke - full of rebuke *for other people*. Good preaching will eventually involve correction and rebuke for everyone - even the preacher. Be ready for that.

- **Listen for the quiet voice of God.** God may speak to you through what I say, or God may speak through something else - a song, a phrase in the Bible, an image on the screen. You may be hearing my words with your ears, but in your heart there is that little nudge or voice that says, "That is for you" or "What about this in your life?" Pay attention to those whispers. That could be God calling.
- **Take notes** - not just about what the preacher says, but about what God is saying to you. Bring your journal to church, and if you feel that little nudge of God's Spirit or the quiet voice of God, start writing about it. Bring your calendar, and add something to your To Do list. Highlight a meaningful verse in your Bible. If God starts talking, do something to help you remember.

AFTER

- **Talk about it.** In the snack time or wherever you have lunch, spend a few minutes talking about the worship service. This gives you a chance to remember and a chance to hear from others about what they heard. They might have heard something different, or they might have understood it in a different way. "As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend" (Proverbs 27:17).
- **Pray and study.** Some of our people take the sermon copies home and study them during their QT (or quiet time) during the week. Maybe reviewing the difficult English words will increase your understanding. But for all of us, spending more time with the text or with connected texts will open us to more of what God wants to say to us.
- **Do it.** Remember the words of James again: "Don't just listen to God's word... Do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." Don't fool yourself by coming to a worship service and going home without taking action. When was the last time you *DID* something because of what you heard on Sunday morning? If you aren't making any changes in your life because of the sermons you hear, then there is a good chance that you are a *hearer* not a *doer*. There is a good chance that you've grown cold, stopped changing, stopped growing, stopped living in connection with the Spirit. Each week, try to do at least one specific thing in response to the sermon.

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

May God breath his Spirit into his Word as we read and preach and hear so that we will all be corrected and guided and encouraged to live his goodness in our broken world. May God inspire our preaching and hearing so that we truly become a loving community that changes our world in his grace.