**BIBLE READING 101**

**THE ROLE OF PREACHING IN THE READING OF SCRIPTURE**

**2 Timothy 4:1-4**

**INTRODUCTION**

This is our last message in our five-part series on “Bible Reading 101”. My goal in taking our church through this series has been not only to encourage you to read your Bible more, but to read your Bible *better*.

And that’s because reading the Bible more isn’t necessarily a good thing. It can be a good thing, but it can also be a very bad thing. After all, the Pharisees read the Bible more than anyone, and yet no one received more rebukes and warnings from Jesus than they did. We all need to read the Bible more, but if we don’t learn *how* to read the Bible, our Bible reading not only becomes useless. It becomes dangerous to our souls.

That is why my goal in answering the question of how we are to read the Bible hasn’t focused on teaching you how to look at grammar, or syntax, or the meaning of specific words. Those are certainly helpful tools that we need to use as we do the hard work of digging into the Scriptures just as we would dig for hidden treasure. But if we use those tools without the right theological framework, we’re going to miss the whole point. We need to know *why* God gave us the Scriptures first in order to understand *how* we are to read them.

And why did God give us the Scriptures? He gave them to reveal himself to us. The Bible is the divine communication of a Holy God to a sinful people of who he is, who we are, and what he has done to save us. It is the revelation of the beauty and perfection of God’s character, which is displayed most fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, every time we open our Bibles, we read to see God’s glory shining forth in the face of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t matter if we are in the Old Testament or the New. We read to behold Christ. And as we do, the Holy Spirit supernaturally works in our hearts so that we become more like Jesus in loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves.

Up to this point in our series we’ve focused predominantly on our private Bible reading habits, what people typically call their “quiet times”, “devotions”, or what I like to call our “private worship”. Today I want to do something a little different. I want to focus on reading the Bible in our *corporate* worship. More specifically, I want to focus on what we’re going to do right now: read the Bible together in the context of preaching.

It’s easy to forget that this is what we’re doing. When we gather together on Sundays to get ready for the sermon, we’re getting ready to read the Bible together with the guidance of a pastor. That’s how it was done in the Old Testament. For example, in Nehemiah 8, at a time when all of Israel is gathered together to read the Scriptures together, it says:

“…the Levites helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, *and they gave the sense*, so that the people understood the reading.” (Nehemiah 8:7-8)

We see that in the New Testament as well. The book of Acts records Paul entering the synagogues where the Jews were gathered for corporate worship and not only reading the Scriptures, but reasoning *from* the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. And in 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul tells Timothy, who was a pastor, to:

“...devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, *to exhortation, to* *teaching*.”

This is why I ask you to open your Bibles with me. I don’t want you to listen to me as if you were attending a lecture to hear my thoughts about life. I want you to hear the Bible’s thoughts about life, and the only way to do that is for you to read with me: to follow the text with me, and to look at specific verses and words, and to see the connections within the passage for yourself.

So what I’m going to do today is preach about preaching. I want to show you that we don’t just do this because it’s tradition, or because we think it “works”. We do this because it’s fundamentally biblical.

The title of this message is **The Role of Preaching in the Reading of Scripture**. My aim today is to show you that **The Preaching of the Word Protects the Reading of the Word.**

We will have two points today:

1. Preaching’s Priority
2. Preaching’s Protection

(1) **PREACHING’S PRIORITY**

The Apostle Paul wrote 2 Timothy near the end of his earthly life. He had recently been imprisoned in Rome for about two years, which is how the book of Acts ends, but for whatever reason, he was released. The book of Acts doesn’t tell us why, but Paul alludes to it in 2 Timothy 4:16-17, where he says,

“At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth.”

God saved him from his Roman imprisonment. Church history tells us, however, that Paul would be imprisoned in Rome a second time just a couple years later, and this time there would be no escape. He would die as a martyr as he was executed by the Romans for his faith in Christ.

This second Roman imprisonment appears to be the context for the writing of 2 Timothy. Paul knew that this imprisonment would be different from the first, because this time the Lord would choose not to rescue him from the lion’s mouth. As he says in 2 Timothy 4:6-7:

“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, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

This context is important because it gives us a better sense of how we are to read this letter. Say you’re writing a letter to a friend, or to one of your children. You’re writing the letter because they’re living far away, and you want to catch up with them and give them some counsel and advice. Perhaps you know that they’re struggling with some relational conflict and you want to encourage them to forgive, or you know that they’re in the course of making a hard decision and you want to help them make a wise one.

But then consider how this letter might be different if you were writing it on your deathbed. You know this is likely the last time you will write to this person whom you love dearly, and that soon this person will have to live without your counsel. How would that change your letter? It would change it so that you focus on the things that are most important to you, the things that you really want your friend or child to know before you die.

That’s what’s happening in this letter. Paul is writing to Timothy, his spiritual child in the faith, the young man whom Paul says was as a son to him, and that he had no one like him (Philippians 2:20-22). At the time, Timothy was pastoring in Ephesus, a church that Paul started and loved dearly, which gave him even more reason to leave Timothy with this last deposit of truth.

So as Paul writes this letter, he’s concerned about two things: Timothy’s spiritual health, and the church’s spiritual health. He wants Timothy to keep the faith, and he wants the church to keep the faith, just as he had kept the faith. Nothing would bring Paul more joy than to see his spiritual child and his spiritual family flourishing spiritually in his absence.

And so, Paul gives Timothy a mixture of personal counsel and ministry counsel. He tells him to guard the gospel in his own life, but he also tells him to entrust the gospel to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. He tells him to flee from sin, but he also tells him to call others to repent. And then in Chapter 3, Paul’s counsel to Timothy culminates in the exhortation to keep reading the Bible, just as he had read it with his mother and his grandmother when he was a child. Why? Because of what Paul says in verses 16-17:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

Paul says it all comes down to reading the Bible. If you’re going to guard the gospel, entrust the gospel, flee from sin, and call others to flee from sin, you need to read the Bible, because only the Bible can train you in righteousness. Only the Bible can equip you for every good work.

That leads us to Chapter 4 and our text today, and to what some scholars consider the culmination of the entire letter. Immediately after Paul exhorts Timothy to keep reading the Word privately, he now exhorts him to keep preaching the Word publicly.

“Preach the word!” Paul says in verse 2. “Be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” Each of these words tells us something about the character of preaching. The preached Word is meant to *reprove* us, which means correcting false understanding and sinful behaviour, the righting of wrong thinking and wrong living. It’s meant to *rebuke* us, which means calling people to turn from ungodliness. It’s meant to *exhort* us, which means calling people to believe and live out the truth of the gospel. And all of this is meant to be done with “complete patience and teaching”. As the Word is preached, it’s meant to be taught, with the “complete patience” of a godly, humble life.

This sounds a lot like what Paul said about reading the Word just a few verses earlier. Preaching the Word reproves, rebukes, and exhorts. Reading the Word reproves, corrects, and trains. The Word functions in the same way when it is read, and when it is preached. The only difference is that preaching the Word is meant to do for the church what reading the Word is meant to do for the individual Christian.

This shows us that Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, didn’t consider reading the Word to be sufficient for spiritual growth. Reading the Word was always meant to be accompanied by listening to the Word being preached. They’re both essential to a healthy spiritual diet. If we want to grow as Christians, we need to read the Word privately and read the Word corporately in the context of preaching.

John Calvin captures this well in his commentary on 2 Timothy when he writes:

“Let us remember, I say, that the reading of Scripture is recommended to us in such a manner as not to hinder, in the smallest degree, the ministry of pastors; and, therefore, let believers endeavor to profit both in reading and in hearing; for not in vain hath God ordained both of them.”

Reading the Word is necessary but not sufficient. If it were sufficient, Paul would have either cut out verses 1-4 or replaced them with a charge to teach others to read, but he doesn’t do that. He charges Timothy to *preach*.

And look at the kind of charge Paul gives to Timothy. In verse 1, he writes, “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: preach the word”.

John piper calls this the “most amazing part of this passage”. He writes,

“I am not aware of any other biblical command that has such an extended, exalted, intensifying introduction.” (Expository Exultation, p. 66)

Paul is saying, “Listen, Timothy. God the Father is watching you! And God the Son is watching you! And as he watches you, he’s not preparing to save you. He’s preparing to *judge* you, and don’t think you can escape this judgment, because he’s the judge of the living and the dead, and one day, he’s coming back. He who dwells now in the heavens will appear in the fullness of his kingdom, and when he does, he will judge you on this: did you preach the Word faithfully, or did you not?”

This charge is absolutely stunning. It is weighty. It is solemn. Paul is making it clear to Timothy that these aren’t just the words of a grizzled old pastor on his deathbed. These are the words of God *himself*. This is the Father’s charge to the pastor. This is the Lord Jesus Christ’s charge to the pastor. *Preach* the Word. Preach it, knowing that the divine host of heaven is bearing witness.

The text couldn’t be clearer in communicating that there is nothing more important for the pastor to do in his ministry than to preach the Word.

We live in a time when many pastors speak not of preaching, but of “having a conversation”, or “sharing some thoughts”. That’s *not* what God has charged them to do. To preach is to make an authoritative declaration. It’s to announce what God has done and what he has accomplished through the person and work of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification so that we could be free from the penalty and power of sin. Sure, we can have a conversation afterwards, and you and I can share some thoughts with one another. But that’s not preaching. We’re not preaching to one another when we’re just having a conversation. Preaching is reserved for *this* context where God’s people open up God’s Word as it is taught and declared to them.

Other churches do the preaching part just fine. They excel at proclamation. That’s not where they fail. Where they fail is that they’re not preaching *the Word*. They may be preaching all kinds of helpful advice and principles for life, but if they’re not preaching *the Word*, they’re not preaching at all, at least not in the Biblical sense.

God has called pastors to *preach the Word*. If I fail to proclaim, then I have failed to preach. And if I fail to proclaim the Word, then I have failed to preach as well. This solemn charge requires nothing less than the authoritative preaching of the Word.

This is why our church is committed to what is known as *expository* preaching, a kind of preaching that is deeply committed to the text. Expository preaching isn’t content with referencing Scripture like it’s a footnote. Expository preaching strives to help people see for themselves that what I’m saying is what God is saying in his Word. If I’m not leading you in such a way that your eyes are constantly on the words of Scripture, then the chances are that I’m not preaching expositionally.

Last year, one of the families that spent the last twelve years of their lives in our church moved to Ottawa for family reasons. They spent several months looking for a new church to call home. I’ll never forget what they told me about what their little seven year old son, Zachariah, said about their search. He said, “The people are nice, but the pastors don’t seem to open the Bible very much.” That is both sad and encouraging. It’s sad that the pastors don’t open the Bible much, but it’s encouraging that little Zachariah had the discernment to notice. That’s the kind of legacy that your pastors want to leave in our church, to have a church filled with people who are just like Zachariah, who love it when pastors open up the Bible to them and feel uncomfortable when they don’t. My prayer is that, if I’m going to be accused of anything, let me be accused of spending too much in the Bible rather than too little. God demands nothing less.

(2) **PREACHING’S PROTECTION**

The preaching of the Word is meant to have priority in our corporate worship gatherings. But why? Aside from the fact that God commands it, what purpose does it serve? We’ve already seen some of those reasons, but it all boils down to one thing, leading to our second point: Preaching’s Protection.

In verse 2, Paul has already described preaching as reproving, rebuking, and exhorting. You could say that this is part of preaching’s purpose. Preaching requires reproving and rebuking because we’re sinners. We’re prone to wander from the Lord and to live for ourselves rather than God, and we need preaching to give us a wake up call and return to the Lord. Preaching requires exhortation because we’re lazy and we’re lost. We need the proclamation of God’s Word to call us to action, to get up and keep running the race of faith with perseverance and joy. These are significant reasons why the preaching of the Word is meant to have a priority in our life as a church and our lives as individual Christians. But here in our text, Paul has another reason in mind for why preaching is so urgent and important, and it’s found in verse 3.

Verse 3 begins with the word “*For*”. We should always pay attention when this word is used, because it tells us how what is to follow relates to what has just been said. “*For*” implies *purpose*, the reason *why* we should do the thing that has just been said. It has the same meaning as “*because*”. “I study hard, for (or because) I want to get a good grade.” “I ate a big dinner, for (or because) I was hungry.” In the same way, Paul is saying “Pastors, preach the Word, for (or because) 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.”

Paul is about to die. He knows he’s about to leave Timothy and the Ephesian church to fend for themselves against the fierce wolves are going to descend upon his flock and try to tear it apart. They need to fight, and in order to fight, they need to know who they’re going to be fighting against. And who is that? *False teachers*.

The greatest danger to the church isn’t terrorism or oppressive governments. It’s false teachers. Terrorists can only kill the body. False teachers can lead us to hell.

Part of the reason why false teachers are so dangerous is because of how subtle their influence is. Notice the subtle descent into apostasy that Paul describes in verses 3-4. It begins with a refusal to “endure sound teaching”. The word for “teaching” here is the Greek word for “doctrine”. People who once listened to “sound doctrine” – that is, professing Christians – will do so no longer. They won’t be able to endure it. They won’t be able to tolerate it.

And so, what they do next is they remove themselves from those who teach sound doctrine and surround themselves with those who only say what they want to hear. These teachers aren’t preachers. They’re people pleasers. Ego-lifters. Trumpeters of the worldly doctrine that people can do whatever they want as long as it makes them “happy”. Or as Paul puts it in verse 3, they’re the kinds of people that those who can no longer endure sound doctrine will accumulate around themselves to suit their own passions. These teachers don’t proclaim the Word of God. They proclaim the words of men. And as they do so, they lead these once professing Christians astray as they “turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths”.

This is why pastors must preach, Paul says. “Preach the Word…for the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching”. The best way to prepare for the day when people will not endure sound teaching is to preach sound teaching today.

Paul knows that this time is coming. He says the time *is* coming, not that it *may* come. But he isn’t a fatalist. He doesn’t resign himself to the future and say, “Timothy, there’s no point preaching the Word, because people just aren’t going to listen.” He says *preach*. Preach the Word! It doesn’t matter if it’s “in season” or “out of season” as he says in verse 2. Preach, whether people are receptive or have closed their ears, whether it’s popular or considered outdated, whether it’s accepted or mocked.

The pastor must preach the Word, because the preaching of the Word is the greatest defense to the false teaching that threatens to turn us away from listening to the truth and to wander off into myths instead. As John Calvin soberly remarked,

“[S]oon shall the gospel be extinguished, and perish from the remembrance of men, if godly teachers do not labor with all their might to defend it.” – John Calvin

God has been kind to us in giving us many godly teachers who have labored with all their might to defend the gospel through the preaching of God’s Word. As a preacher of the Word, I recognize that I follow in the footsteps of *mighty* men, men who devoted their lives to the preaching of the Word for the sake of Christ’s beloved church. And my prayer is that, on the Day of Judgment, on that wonderful and terrifying day of Christ’s appearing and his Kingdom, God might count me as the lowest member of that glorious company of faithful pastors who devoted their lives to preach his Word.

**CONCLUSION**

And so, as we end this short series on Bible Reading 101, let us consider the role of preaching in our reading of Scripture. If you’re a Christian, you already know that Bible reading is essential to the welfare of your soul, but now after our time in this text, I hope you believe that Bible preaching is just as important.

The reading of the Word and the preaching of the Word play complementary roles in our lives. The human heart is like a compass. It’s meant to point us to God, just as a compass is meant to point us north. But over time, the compass becomes less precise. It’s off by a few degrees and needs to be recalibrated. Our hearts are like that. The cares of the world, the passions of the flesh, and the schemes of the devil all conspire together to turn our hearts away from God and to other things instead. Our hearts need to be recalibrated daily through the reading of God’s Word.

Now if reading the Word recalibrates our hearts, then the preaching of the Word is meant to ensure that the tools we’re using to recalibrate our hearts are working properly. If the tools are faulty, it doesn’t matter if you recalibrate a faulty compass every day. You’re never going to get it right. The tools need to work right first. That’s what preaching does. It guards the way that we read the Bible by teaching us what the Bible means and warning us against the false teaching that would lead us astray.

As we close, let me leave you with three points of application.

First, I encourage all of you to follow along in your own Bibles as I preach. It’s nice when I look out at you and see many of you with your eyes on me, paying attention to what I’m saying. But when we start reading the Word, I don’t want your eyes on me. I want your eyes on the Word. I want you to see for yourself that what I’m saying is what God is saying. I didn’t always do that myself. In fact, when I would listen to pastors go through the text and try to explain his conclusion, I would be thinking, “Oh just get to the point. Just tell me what you want me to know! Just tell me what I should do!”

That’s not what preaching is about. You’re not here to hear from me. You’re here to hear from God. And the only way you’re going to be absolutely convinced that what I’m saying is what God is saying is by looking at the text yourself. So when the sermon begins, and we begin looking at the Scriptures, I want you to open your Bibles. And when I reference different verses and try to explain the logic or meaning of those verses and how they fit together, I want you to put your eyes on the page and follow along as you *think* about it for yourself, so that you’re not just listening to me preach. You’re reading along with me.

Second, I want to remind you that everything that we’ve studied about reading the Bible privately is true about reading the Bible corporately in the context of preaching. If reading the Bible privately is about beholding God’s glory in the face of Christ, then preaching God’s Word publicly is about the same thing. Preaching isn’t just about the proclamation of truths. It’s about the proclamation of Christ, that he has come into the world to suffer as the slaughtered Lamb of God for the forgiveness of sins to the glory of God. That’s the main difference between teaching the Word and preaching the Word. Teaching the Word helps people see how the text reveals Christ. Preaching the Word helps people say, “Isn’t Christ great?” That’s how you can tell if a sermon was good or not. Did it magnify the person and work of Christ, and did it help his people love him more?

Third and finally, if what is true about reading the Word is true about listening to the preaching of the Word, then we need to realize that we need the help of the Holy Spirit. An encounter with God in God’s Word is meant to be a profoundly supernatural act, because these are spiritual truths that are spiritually discerned by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. We can’t approach the Word casually. We need to approach the Word with humble, desperate dependence on God. That is true about our private worship, and that is true about our corporate worship as well.

That is why I prioritize our pre-service prayer meetings. I need to cry out to God to take his Word and change my heart, so that I don’t just respond to his Word intellectually, but with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. When I pray with my kids on Saturday night before they go to bed, I pray that the Lord would prepare all of us to receive his Word the next day with faith and joy. I pray the same thing with them on Sunday mornings. I pray the same thing with all of you before I preach. We pray as we approach the Word, not because it’s tradition, or because it’s written in our order of service, but because we need the Holy Spirit if we are going to profit from our time in the Word.

And so, as we close our series on Bible Reading 101, may we all commit ourselves not only to reading our Bibles more, but to reading our Bibles better in both our private worship and our corporate worship. Let us read to find Christ. Let us read to love him more. And let us read to become more like him.