

## Paul's Last Sermon

~ 2 Timothy 4

This chapter presents a very human Paul; one who begs his friends to come and see him. The words that are before us, are some of the very last words written by the Apostle. They are the last chapter of his last letter. At any rate, they are the last words of his which have survived. He wrote them within weeks, possibly within days of his martyrdom; which according to ancient tradition was by being beheaded on the Ostian Way.

For thirty years without intermission, the Apostle Paul had been laboring as an itinerant minister of Jesus Christ. Now, he is an old man. Truly, as he says in this chapter, he "has fought a good fight, he has finished his course, he has kept the faith." Now, he awaits the award of a crown of righteousness which, he says, is laid up for him. Therefore, these words that we are reading are Paul's legacy to the church. They breathe great solemnity. It is not possible to read them without being profoundly stirred --if you are stirable. Someone is going to die soon, and he has something very important to say. Therefore, from the very beginning we must say, "The greatness of Paul was not the greatness of Paul, it was rather, that Paul had a great cause. There is no greater cause than Jesus Christ."



The words take the form of a solemn charge, Verse 1. This charge was given first to Timothy, Paul's Apostolic delegate. However, these words are applicable to every Christian.

**To begin, let's look at 3 aspects of the charge.** *First*, the nature of the charge. *Second*, the basis of the charge (the arguments upon which it is grounded). *Third*, a personal illustration of the charge from the example of Paul himself in Rome.

**First, then, the nature of the charge.** It is given in three words at the beginning of verse 2, "preach the Word." Give it out. It would be very difficult to find a better motto for us. It is the equivalent of what is called "sound teaching" (verse 3), "the truth" (verse 4), and "the faith" (verse 7). The church is to stand for all of that, and all of that comes into fruition and marvelously clear focus in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone. When Paul wrote "God has spoken to us in these last days by his Son, Jesus Christ", he was in full agreement with John who wrote, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus is "God speaking;" he is the *Word* we are to preach.

In the Christian Church, when we talk about "preaching the Word," we're talking about "preaching Christ." Earlier, Paul declared, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, it is (*it alone is*) the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes." It is not an over-statement to say that everything that God ever had to say to man converges upon and consummates in His Word, Jesus Christ. It is not an over statement to say that all "truth" finds its reality in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way the *truth* and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). When God wanted to speak *words* that would heal the world he sent a counsellor to speak to us and be present with us in the world.

Glen Dewey used to tell the story of a young farm boy who saw letters in the clouds shaped in the form of PC that represented a call into the ministry. It took a long time for the boy to get the message; the letters didn't mean Plow Corn; they meant Preach Christ. I think it still takes folk a long time to get the message in the sky; it doesn't mean Personal Computer, it means Preach Christ. The Word is not our invention, it is God's Son. We have that Word as a sacred trust--more in our hearts than in our heads.

Our message is a Word. We understand that Word better because it took on flesh and bones, heart and personality, action and advocacy. It becomes "written on the fleshly tablets of our hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3). It is much more than a book; it is a person. The Word is Christ; it is God himself. It is our duty, therefore, not only to hear it, believe it, obey it, guard it, suffer for it, continue in it, and preach it; but it is also our duty to love it. Spread it actively because Jesus is God's good Word to the world.

***Next Paul tells us how to preach it; and our proclamation has four characteristics.***

*First, it is to be urgent!* "Preach the Word!" Be serious. It is no good to preach in a listless, lackadaisical manner. Richard Baxter comments, "Whatever you do, let men know that you are in earnest!" People will not cast away their dearest pleasures upon a drowsy request, given by one that seems not to mean what he or she speaks, or care much whether the request is granted. All true Christian preaching deserves to have a note of urgency and importance. The Christian herald must be serious.

Our preaching is to be urgent and it is to be "in season and out of season." The New English Bible has it "Press it home on all occasions --convenient or inconvenient." What does this mean? I want to suggest that it is not to be taken as an excuse for that insensitive rashness, that characterizes the approach of some, which they call boldness. It is a favorite saying of pilots that "There are old pilots, there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots." Neither are we to barge unceremoniously into other peoples' privacy treading upon their corns. We have no liberty to do so.

The occasion, "convenient or inconvenient" has to do with the speaker, not the hearer. Be on duty at all times, convenient or inconvenient. In other words, what we are given here is not a Biblical warrant for rudeness, but a Biblical appeal against laziness. Be on duty at all times, whether it is handy or not. Be serious and urgent in your commitment to making Christ known.

*Secondly, our preaching is to be relevant; "convince, rebuke, exhort."*

Three possible ways of preaching --all are needed. The speaker must remember this and apply it appropriately to the needs of the individual hearer or of the times. Use argument, reproof, and appeal. That is to say, some people are full of doubt and need to be convinced by argument. Others are full of sin and need to be rebuked or reproved. Still others, are full of fear and need --they must be exhorted and encouraged. Christ is able to do all of these.

*Thirdly, our preaching is to be patient.* Verse 2, "Be unfailing in patience, with all longsuffering." That is to say, "Though we are to be urgent --ready for peoples' early response to the message of Christ, we are to be patient in waiting for it. Wait, wait, wait, wait, that is what a great deal of life is composed of! I mean to say, "Some people don't know how to wait." The benches in WalMart are made for waiting --people who know that have a better chance at success in marriage. We are not to use human schemes, or human pressures, or human forces in order to contrive a decision. Our responsibility is to be faithful in proclaiming the Word of Christ; the results are the responsibility of God's Holy Spirit. "Unfailing in patience."

We are to be patient in our manner as well, for ch. 2 reminds us, "the servant of the Lord is to be gentle with all men." So, however urgent the message, there is no excuse for an impatient and rude manner.

*Fourth, our proclamation must be intelligent "And in teaching" (vs 2).* To teach is to cause people to understand. Such is our charge, "Preach the Word." And in our proclamation of the God-given message we are to be urgent, relevant, patient, and intelligent. In our whole ministry, urgent; in our application, relevant (we must make it apply to the situation); in our manner, patient; and in our presentation, intelligent. That is the first thing --the nature of the charge.

***Second, let's look at the basis of the charge.*** Now, Timothy was young in years, weak in physique, and timid in temperament. The times in which he lived were difficult and dangerous. They were Roman times, Nero times, Lion-fighting times for Christians. I think, as Timothy listened to this Apostolic charge, to preach the word with urgency and so forth, he must have cringed. I think he might have said, "Do I really want this job?" Perhaps, thinking that a better option might be to join other Christians who were hiding in the catacombs beneath Rome.

***Nor are we up to keeping a charge which is beyond our natural capacity. So, Paul does more than just issue a charge; he adds incentives --he adds some motivation; he bids Timothy to look in three directions. First, look at Jesus Christ the coming judge and king. Second, look at the contemporary scene. Third, look at Paul the aged prisoner approaching martyrdom.***

*First, look at the coming Christ.* Verse 1, notice that Paul still believes in the appearing of Jesus Christ. It will be too bad for this world if he doesn't come and take the government upon his own shoulders. Paul has written about his appearing in other letters, and even though he is going to die before it takes place, he still lives in the light of it. He describes Christians, verse 8, as "those who love his appearing. When we talk about "preaching the Word," we must remember that Jesus is the Word.

These things: "appearing," "judgment," and "kingdom" were clear and certain realities in the life of the Apostle Paul. They all have to do with Jesus Christ. You and I need to live our Christian lives and do our Christian work in the light of these realities. These realities drive ethics and morality; they give people cause to look deep within as they act in the world. Above all, let us never forget that both they who preach and they who listen are going to give an account to Christ when he appears. So, that is the first motivation --the coming Christ.

*The next motivation for preaching the Word is the Contemporary Scene (verses 3-5).* Verse 3, because the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but have itching ears. Now, the times described were already present, and Timothy was to frame his ministry in the light of the times in which he lived. It is not just that bad times were going to come and Timothy was to, therefore, preach the Word before they arrived. It was that he must go on preaching the Word even though bad times had already arrived.

So then, what are these bad times like? Paul singled out one characteristic. He stated it negatively and positively, and he stated it twice. In brief, it means that men cannot tolerate the truth. Verse 3, they accumulate teachers to suit their own likings. Verse 4, they turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. And it is all to do with their ears. These ears are itching for novelty; they are full of curiosity for some spicy new teaching. So, because their ears are itching for novelty, they stuff them against the old fashioned Truth of Christ; then, they open them to any teacher who will relieve their itch.

Notice what they reject is "that sound teaching" and "the truth," while what they prefer is "their own likings." In other words, they substitute their own hunches, for the sure bet of Christ. The standard by which they judge teachers is not "the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace," but their own subjective taste. That is the situation in our day; many folk are all ears to any new theological novelty.

*What should be our reaction --what was Timothy's to be?* In desperate situations, where people will not listen, but have itching ears, you may think the prudent thing to do would be to shut up shop and hold your peace. And Paul suggests just the opposite. Verse 5, "As for you" and for the third time he tells Timothy to be different. In other words, people around you are unstable, so Timothy, you are to be stable --don't give up. Again, the people around you will not endure sound doctrine, so you Timothy must be willing to endure the suffering that may come as a consequence of preaching "sound doctrine." The people around you are ignorant of the evangel, so Timothy, you must do the work of an evangelist. Again, the people around you are accumulating teachers to suit their own likings, so you, Timothy, must be all the more conscientious in carrying out the ministry God has given you. Bring Christ back into the church, Timothy! That must be the challenge of every good minister in every age. It has never, in my own lifetime, been more needed --bring Christ back into the church.

In other words, these difficult seasons (and we have always them), in which it is hard to gain a hearing for the gospel, are not to discourage us. They are not to deter us from ministry. Still less, are they to induce us to trim our message to suit the fashions of the day. Even less, are they to shut us up --they are, rather, to spur us on to preach the more. The harder the times, the more urgent, persistent, and clear must be the message. You can talk about the Bible all you want, but if Christ doesn't shine through, you have a Bible that doesn't make it to Christmas. That is the second motivation --the contemporary scene.

*The third motivation to "preach the Word" is the aged apostle.* Look at the contrast (verses 5,6): "You, Timothy,

are to fulfill your ministry, because I, Timothy, am at the point of closing mine. "I am at the point of sacrifice" (verse 6) --my life is being poured out upon the altar. Continuing, "the time of my departure is come" --here we have a nautical term; he is a boat that is ready to set sail for another, and in this case, a heavenly shore. We have to guess that Alfred Tennyson took his inspiration for *Crossing the Bar* from this very passage. "And now Timothy, it is up to you" (verse 7). "If Nero condemns me, Christ will reverse the verdict and crown me" (verse 8). But as for me, Timothy, my life is done; now it is up to you. There is nothing left for me but my heavenly reward.

That was Timothy's third spur to faithfulness. And what is wrong with that? There are many dead Christians who spur me on in my own ministry. Certainly there are Orey Crippen and Glenn Dewey; but, in addition, there is my mother and Mr. Sanders, as well as former congregation members who have now received their heavenly reward -- whose toil and heart were invested in the gospel here and in me their minister.

Our God is a God of history; he buries his workers and their children take over. The next generation must bravely step forward. We cannot forever rest upon the workers of a succeeding generation. The day must come when we step into their shoes; the day had come for Timothy.

***We have then, the nature of the charge, the basis of the charge (the coming Christ, the contemporary scene, and the aged Paul); the rest of the chapter is an illustration of the charge from the life of Paul himself (verse 9-22).*** Paul actually practiced what he preached. Paul acted exactly as he asked Timothy to act, and did so while he was on trial for his life. Paul now returns to his present predicament in a Roman dungeon. We need to learn from this: In spite of all his courage, he was a man of flesh and blood, like we are, with ordinary human needs. He even hopes that God will "pay Alexander the coppersmith back for his evil deeds." He's not exactly an angel.

Some friends had deserted him (Verse 10); others were away on service (verse 12). Only Luke, his doctor and companion for many years remained (verse 11). So, he begs Timothy (verse 9), "Do your best to come while I'm still alive," and in any case "come before winter when navigation will make it impossible for you to cross the sea" (verse 21). Have you ever seen Paul like this? "Bring me my coat; I'm cold," "bring me my books; I'm bored" (verse 13). When the spirit is lonely we need friends (God's provision for loneliness is friends); when the body is cold, we need clothing; when the mind is bored, we need books.

These things are not unspiritual --books, friends, and clothes. In 1532, William Tyndale, who is responsible for our English Bible, wrote a letter from prison in Belgium not long before his martyrdom. "I entreat your lordship, and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I must remain here for the winter, you would beg the commissary to send me from the things of my possession a warmer cap. I feel the cold painfully in my head. Also a warmer cloak, for the one I have is very thin. He has a woolen shirt of mine, if he will send it (no heat there, you know). But most of all, my Hebrew Bible, grammar, and vocabulary that I may spend my time in that pursuit." We are not to despise means!

Paul, who longed for his books and his friend, was opposed by some (verses 14-15) and deserted by others. In his first trial he was unsupported; of all the Christians in Rome, there was no one to speak a word for him. Yet, "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength" (Verse 16). Inward strength for what? To preach the gospel, verse 17, before a large cosmopolitan crowd at the Emperor's tribunal. And if ever there was a Christian sermon preached "out of season," it must have been that one.

That was Timothy's model. I have saved verse 22 and verse 18 as a summary of the Christian life. Verse 22, "grace from God" for all my weakness. Verse 18, "Glory to God" for making use of someone like me. "Grace from Christ, glory to Christ." From him grace, to him glory. In all our Christian life and service, there is no higher philosophy than this. We get from him; we give to him. Grace to be gracious.

Prayer: "Give us, Lord, grace, that we may be gracious."