

THE MAJESTY OF MINISTRY

by Ray C. Stedman

We are now approaching the climax of the Apostle Paul's second letter to Timothy. From the loneliness of his prison cell in Rome, and in view of his approaching martyrdom which he knows is coming, Paul addresses these solemn words to Timothy, who is far away in pagan Ephesus:

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, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For 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 likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." (2 Tim 4:1-4 {RSV})

No other passage in Scripture describes more accurately the day in which we live. This underscores again what we have seen many times already in Second Timothy, that, though this was written almost 2,000 years ago, it is highly relevant to our own day.

In these words, the apostle is obviously seeking to open Timothy's eyes to the importance of what he is called to do. Paul flings back the boundaries of time and space to reveal to Timothy the unseen realities before whom every Christian lives and labors, reminding him of the great personages who are involved in his witness in Ephesus: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead," Paul says.

There is nothing more helpful to us in the midst of pressure than to realize that what we are doing is a very important thing; yet there is nothing harder for us to understand about our own Christian ministry than that fact. Like Timothy, we see ourselves as a tiny minority amidst an overwhelming, mounting majority 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, that we cannot speak with any impact at all against the voices of unbelief we hear on every side.

I am sure Timothy felt that way too. As we have been seeing all through this letter, in his day there was an upsurge in 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 as they are in our day. Timothy must have felt that he could make no headway at all against the onrushing tide of evil.

What the apostle does here is roll back the separation between the visible and invisible worlds and show us in whose presence we are laboring, who are the powerful forces 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 judgment into his hands. So Timothy carries on his ministry before the One who thoroughly understands all of human history. This is what I hope we capture here in this passage -- a consciousness of who is watching, and before whom we labor.

Not only do we labor in the sight of the Father and the Son, but Paul, in other passages, has told us that

believers are called the "theater," the "spectacle" of the universe. In First Corinthians 4 he speaks of himself in that way: "We are made a spectacle before the world, before angels and before men," he says {cf, 1 Cor 4:9}. In Hebrews 12 the writer reminds us that we are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses," {Heb 12:1}. In our limited, finite observation of life we often feel like we have been abandoned to labor alone, but we are not.

Furthermore, not only are we being observed and helped by these powerful forces for righteousness in the universe, but we are involved, as Timothy was, with the greatest program the world has ever known. Paul charges Timothy not only in the presence of God and of Christ, but "by his appearing and his kingdom."

Most of the commentators take the phrase, "by his appearing," to refer to the second coming of our Lord. It is true that the word *epiphania*, which is used here (from which we get the English word *epiphany*), is indeed used of the second coming of Christ. There are passages in this letter which look toward that second coming. ("Judge of the living and the dead" is a reference to that event.) But here the word is a reference to the first coming of Jesus. In fact, it is used in that same way in Chapter 1, Verse 10, where the apostle says, "and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Paul is asking Timothy to look back to that first appearing of Jesus, who by his death and resurrection brought life and immortality through the gospel and thus began in that invisible, remarkable way to spread the kingdom of God on earth. By his witness, Timothy is involved in the advance of that greatest of all tasks which God is doing in the world.

That sets things in the right perspective. When we live and work and talk as Christians, we live righteously and justly, we live lovingly and compassionately before man. When we involve ourselves in the hurts of others to speak a word of comfort and relief, and especially when we point men to the Savior who can change their lives, we are involved in this greatest of all human endeavors, in a work that eclipses in significance and importance anything that has ever happened in human history.

I am trying to set forth for us what I have called, *The Majesty of Ministry*. We are doing an extremely significant thing. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:12, Luke 11:2 KJV}. When we are living, speaking and behaving as Christians should, that is what we are doing: We are answering that prayer, we are advancing the kingdom of God, we are causing the will of God to be done on earth as it is done in heaven. There is no higher calling.

In John Pollock's new biography of Billy Graham there is recorded an incident which occurred when Lyndon Johnson was elected President. The President asked Billy, with whom he had been friends for years, what particular position he would like to have in his administration. Without a moment's thought Billy said to him, "Sir, I believe that Jesus Christ has called me to preach his gospel. To me that is the highest calling any man could have on earth." That was an appropriate response. I have always been pleased that Billy Graham has turned aside from many such invitations so that he might maintain the calling to which God has called him. But we must not think of him as being unique in that regard -- every one of us is called to the task of proclaiming the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is brought out clearly in what Paul goes on to say to Timothy. He reminds him of the most essential element of a Christian witness in a dying world:

Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort. Be unfailing in patience and in teaching. {2 Tim 4:2 RSV}

That is the one great essential that must be carried on to fulfill the prayer of our Lord and to advance the kingdom of God, to bring to fulfillment that amazing work that began by his first appearing upon the earth.

When we read the phrase, "preach the word," however, most of us think that this is addressed to preachers like myself, that one has to do this in church, on a platform, or behind a pulpit. I do not like pulpits. I agree with Spurgeon's designation of them as "coward's castles." But I do believe in platforms. They are helpful to elevate one three or four feet above successful contradiction!

No, this word is not addressed to preachers only. It includes all the people of God, for it does not merely mean

to preach, the word is really, "announce, proclaim, set it forth, deliver the truth, make it known." It is not something you argue about; you declare it because God himself has said it. This can be done over a cup of coffee, in an office, or in a car while you are driving to work. It is something that can come up any place, anytime. Where human hearts are open, seeking, longing and hurting, there is the place, there is the opportunity to "preach the word."

"Proclaim the good news," Paul says -- and it is good news. It is not news of what we have to do for God. That distortion has been widely peddled across the world and in this country, and it has resulted in a phony Christianity. But that is not the gospel. The gospel is the story of what God has already done for us. That is what ministers to the aching heart. The gospel is the news that God loves us, he pities us, he sees us in our hurt, our agony, our failure and our weakness. The gospel is that he sees us in our strutting boldness and pridefulness and still he loves us. And he has already done something about it -- through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, in that amazing series of events that came through the appearing of Jesus on earth, he broke the stranglehold of evil upon human hearts -- he found a way to set aside his own just sentence of death. Through those who open their hearts to the Savior, he has found a way not only to die for us, but to come and 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. That is to be done by every Christian in every conceivable circumstance of life.

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:

1. First, "Be urgent in season and out of season," he says. Urgency means to do it with passion, with a deep belief in our own hearts that this is what is needed. Do not just come to somebody whose life is falling apart, and say, "By the way, I've got something that might help you. Let me see if I can remember it. It's to do with Jesus and the gospel." No, that leaves no impression at all. Rather come with a deep sense of commitment and belief yourself and say, "Let me share with you something that has meant everything to me." Then urgently, earnestly, lay it upon people's hearts, "in season and out of season."

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 -- like the Boy Scout who helped the woman across the street even though she did not want to go. 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. But, as John R. W. Stott has wisely said at this point, "This is not a biblical warrant for rudeness, but a biblical appeal against laziness." Do it whether you feel like doing it or not. Do it whether the opportunity seems good or barely feasible. In either case be ready to proclaim the Word. There is nothing else that can set human hearts free. That is why this is central and why, amidst all the other implications and exhortations of Scripture, the apostle singles this one thing out and says to Timothy, "In the light of the presence of God and the significance of the work you are doing, this is the one thing you must not neglect: Proclaim the word of God."

2. Then do it, Paul says, with a variety of approaches. Notice how helpful and practical this is. "Convince, rebuke and exhort," he says. It is rather interesting that those words reflect three different approaches that we can use in announcing the gospel.

"Convince" is a word addressed to the mind -- argue, reason, set it forth in a systematic, reasonable way, answering questions, removing obstacles. Adopt Josh McDowell's approach -- present it as evidence that cannot be confuted. That intellectual approach is perfectly suitable because many people have doubts that need to be answered. All of us should become experts at the reason and logic of the

gospel. It is a reasonable, logical explanation of what is going on in the world, for why men act the way they do.

But also there may be some who will need "rebuke." That contemplates someone who has fallen into sin, someone who needs a word that will appeal to the conscience because of sin which is destroying him or her and hurting others, sin which is demolishing, depersonalizing and dehumanizing those involved in it. Sometimes it is necessary to speak a word that points out the evil effects of wrongdoing, a word that seeks to address the conscience to turn away from this so that it no longer spreads evil among humanity. When you do that you are proclaiming the gospel.

Then there are some who need "exhortation," encouragement; they need their wills challenged and encouraged to act. Many people are fearful to try something new, fearful to believe something that they cannot prove. Here is where the approach of encouragement comes in, exhorting them and encouraging their wills to set aside their fears and believe the truth of the gospel. We are to involve ourselves in all of these helpful approaches.

3. Finally, says the apostle, "be unailing in patience and in teaching" -- patiently keep on teaching. I believe this indicates that Christians ought to beware of pressure tactics that seek to make people act or say they believe when they are not yet really convinced.

Many evangelists and others, unfortunately, have resorted to psychological tricks and gimmicks, pressure tactics to get people to come forward and commit themselves in an emotional movement or mood that does not represent a real commitment of the heart. That is not a part of the gospel approach. The Spirit does move in great convicting power at times, and people respond almost against any attempts to keep them quiet. But we are not to employ pressure tactics to get people to move. Nor are we to abandon those who are slow in responding, but, as the apostle says, we are to keep on explaining; answering questions, clarifying, applying the gospel to specific situations. All of that is the work of teaching.

Notice that the passage begins and ends with an admonition to "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 the end, because of the conditions that will obtain at that time. The opening words of Chapter 3 of this letter describe a terrible condition that will come in the church. Then, Paul says, "Men will be lovers of self, lovers of money ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power thereof," {cf, 2 Tim 3:2-5}. Clearly, that is in the church. But here there is described a corresponding condition that will be evident in the world at large. At its base is a dislike of the truth:

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 likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. {2 Tim 4:3-4 RSV}

Surely that is descriptive of our own day. It indicates a time when the general population will forsake what is commonly called 'a Christian consensus,' an undergirding of the institutions of social life by Christian principles, and substitute others. This is the time in which we live: "They will not endure sound teaching." Sound teaching is that which leads to health and wholeness of spirit, soul and body, teaching that permits human beings to live at peace, to develop themselves and enjoy their lives. But, Paul says, men and women will turn away from that and refuse to hear it.

They will do this because truth requires the admission of human weakness, which people do not like to admit; the restraint of passions, which they do not like to do; and submission to the authority of God and other authorities under him, which they dislike and reject. They turn away from the truth, as this indicates; 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.

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. There is a disease, widespread in our day, called "itching ear disease," which Paul mentions here. This is an ear that wants to hear a particular line of things, an ear that wants to be entertained, that is always looking for something new, an ear that wants constant affirmation and does not want to hear anything negative or contradictory. 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."

What do these teachers, which such people accumulate in great numbers, teach? They cannot teach the truth because the truth is unacceptable, so they teach attractive lies, fantasies for the most part, speculative philosophies that emerge from the minds of men which have no basis in fact or history. There are many of these myths abroad today. I do not know all the myths that were taught in Timothy's day, but these errors appear again and again in the course of human history.

Take the myth of reincarnation. Many people, even Christians, believe that lie, that myth which has no basis whatsoever in fact. There is no empirical evidence that can support or substantiate the idea that people die, then come back to earth to live another life, and then die and come back to earth again. That is the myth that says, "If at first you don't succeed, die, die again!" Reincarnation directly contradicts the evidence of revelation. It is diametrically opposite to the biblical teaching of the resurrection of the body, that the body survives life, is changed, and people go on in the same body. Reincarnation says they leave that body, never to enter it again, and come back and take another body. The two are diametrically opposed. You cannot believe in the biblical doctrine of resurrection and also believe in the widespread myth of reincarnation. That is one myth that is taught today to please the itching ears of men who will not believe what the Word of God says about the survival of the body.

Take another myth widespread in our day, the myth of evolution. In the last century, by and large, this myth began to take over the scientific world, again 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. Yet I find that many Christians believe the myth of evolution. They do not seem to understand the theological implications which evolution teaches, without any support from science, that our race is descended from apes and other animals so that there never was or could be a fall. By denying the Fall, evolution teaches that there is no need for any redemptive act on the part of God. Why should we need to be redeemed if we have never fallen? That is the theology of the lie of evolution.

Take the lie of human autonomy, 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.

Take the myth of the omnicompetence of science, 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 on the basis of human existence. There, we are told, they are solving problems in the realm of the molecules that make us up, 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 the record -- it speaks for itself -- yet it is all set aside in the face of this attractive lie.

Take the matter of homosexuality as an accepted lifestyle. This is being taught and spread everywhere in our society by every means, at every level. 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 said, "These shall be one flesh," {cf, Gen 2:24}.

We have been saturated by a world that is committed to falsehood. That is why, as Paul sets forth here, we must increasingly proclaim the truth as it is in Jesus. As we see these things abounding around us, the temptation in our day is to start a protest movement, to organize a demonstration, to mindlessly chant slogans, or stage sit-ins. I understand the feelings of frustration that come when we see all that is dear and precious in humanity being destroyed by these lies. We 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 carrying that through until the world at last arrives at the day that God himself has designated, that final end when all creation shall bow together 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, far and away above any international program, act of Congress or decision of president, king or ruler. Glory in what God has called you to do, and be faithful to his command:

- Preach the word;
- Be urgent in season and out of season;
- Convince, rebuke, and exhort;
- Be unflinching in patience and in teaching.

Prayer

Lord, what a calling, you have given to us, and what a world in which to proclaim it! Grant to us that we may not be content with the pabulum that many are issuing today in your name, or fooling around with side issues that do not confront the lies of the enemy at their very source. Grant to us that we will commit ourselves afresh to be purveyors of the truth, preachers of the Word, heralds of the good news that is in Jesus Christ. We ask in his name, Amen.

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