

2 Timothy 4:1-8

It is a great honor and privilege to share a message from God's Word with you this morning. I was very thankful when Pastor Bill asked if I would be willing to fill in for him today. I trust Bill and Kathy are having a wonderful time celebrating Christmas with their daughter and family in El Paso. Next week we look forward to Edward bringing the message.

As you know, today is the last day of the year 2023. Looking back, I'm certain we are filled with lots of thoughts and emotions. For some, it was a year of grieving the loss of a loved one, for some, a struggle with health issues or disappointment over loss of opportunity and for some perhaps a year of happiness and health.

In our message this morning, we are going to take a look at 2 Timothy 4:1-8. This passage is a bit of reflection by Paul, not of the past year but of his life and it is also a look forward as he exhorts Timothy to preach the truth of the gospel. As we study these verses together, I am convinced these words are not for Timothy alone, but an exhortation to each one of us to seek the truth, to know the truth, to live the truth and to share the truth.

2 Timothy is the last of the so-called Pastoral Epistles (letters) and the last letter written by Paul prior to being martyred in AD67. Paul had received his call to be an apostle on the road to Damascus in 34 years earlier. In Acts 9:15&16 we read this command to Ananias,

"But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he (Paul) is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.""

We know this prophecy was fulfilled as Paul led three missionary journeys, wrote 13 of the New Testament books, suffered stoning, beatings and imprisonment. Timothy whose name means "one who honors God" was led to Christ by Paul during his first missionary journey. Timothy became Paul's lifelong disciple, friend and co-laborer. In fact, Timothy accompanied Paul on trips to Berea, Athens, Corinth and Jerusalem and was used by Paul to deliver messages to the different churches. This letter from Paul who was now in chains and facing execution with

no hope of deliverance, is a plea to Timothy to continue Paul's ministry, to be faithful to the gospel, to hold sound doctrine, avoid error, accept certain persecution, put his confidence in Scripture and preach it unceasingly.

Lest we grieve for Paul, remember his words in Philippians 1:21, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul sees impending death as a release from life's burdens and an opportunity to focus completely on glorifying God.

Back in November when we had our Praise and Pie service, and we were asked to share what we were thankful for, I was impressed with Nathan Bulger's response when he stated, "I am thankful to attend a church where the truth is still preached and taught." I thought it would be good for us to explore the meaning of truth as it is one of the central themes of our passage.

What is truth?

God is truth. John 14:6-7 "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."" John 15:26 "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me."

God's Word is truth. John 17:17 "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." Psalm 119:140 The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.

What we know about truth:

1. Not concealed. Isaiah 45:19 "I did not speak in secret... I did not say... seek me in vain"
2. Valid (proper). Galatians 2:14 "when I saw their conduct was not in step with the truth..." (when Paul corrected Peter over hypocrisy)

3. Reliable (trustworthy). 2 Cor 7:14 "... But just as everything I said to you is true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true."
4. Veracity (accuracy). Matthew 22:16 "...Teacher we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully..."
5. Valuable. 1 Timothy 2:4 "who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Application of the truth:

1. Right doctrine. 1 John 2:21-22a "I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?"
2. Right conduct. 3 John 3 "For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth."
3. Right Speech. Ephesians 4:15 "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ,"

The first sentence of this morning's passage, vs 1 & 2 reads: "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 ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

When Paul writes, "I charge you", he is giving a command, In a military sense he is ordering Timothy to perform what follows, it is a mandatory obligation Timothy must fulfill. When Paul adds the words, "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead", he is emphasizing the gravity, urgency and certainty of the command. It brought back memories to me of when I joined the Air Force and took the following oath of office:

"I Jim Van Dreser Do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice, so help me God."

Military members and many public servants take this oath or similar to publicly affirm their support and commitment to the duties, responsibilities and obligations of the office or service branch to which they are attaching themselves.

As an aside, in Basic Training, the drill instructors took great delight in reminding us that while our souls might belong to the Lord, our butts belonged to them!

As expressed later in our passage, Paul is stressing the importance of Timothy's commitment to teaching and preaching the truth. When he adds the words, "and by His appearing and by His kingdom", Paul is adding an eternal significance to the command. Christ's coming and return and reign in the millennial kingdom and eternity signals salvation for His people who are "in Christ" and judgement for those who resist and deny the truth.

Verse two begins the details of Timothy's commissioning with four commands:

First, he is to "preach the word", the whole word and nothing but the word. Worship is truth understood. The truth of God's Word is understood by the expository preaching of God's Word. Earlier in the letter in 2:8 & 9 Paul says, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Paul may be bound with chains but the power of the word of God is not bound. Paul goes on to tell Timothy in 2:15,

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." Timothy is being commanded by Paul to preach the word, preach the truth!

Second, Timothy is to "be ready in season and out of season." Like the motto of the Boy Scouts, he is to be prepared. He is to be urgent. I have a friend who says, "We must be rested up, studied up, and prayed up." Timothy must be able to discern what to share, how to share and when best to share. Here in rural Wisconsin, you might say he is to make spiritual hay while the sun shines.

Third, Timothy is commanded to reprove, that is to reveal sin. To help unbelievers recognize and acknowledge sin in their lives which is the first step towards

repentance. For believers, reproof is carefully pointing out false doctrine or behavior. 1 Peter 3:15 instructs us to be prepared to make a defense of our hope in the gospel but to do it with “gentleness and respect.”

The fourth command is to rebuke, this command is more likely directed to believers who have either sinned or refuse to listen to the truth and need correction.

The fifth command is to exhort (encourage – NIV). 1 Timothy 4:13 says, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” Titus 1:9 says, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy Word as taught, so that he might be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it.

Timothy’s attitude as he carries out these commands is to be one of forbearance and careful instruction. Living out his faith as an example of godliness is not enough, he needs to teach the whole truth of God’s Word.

The second sentence in our passage begins with the connecting word “for” which signals what follows is the basis for the commands just given in the first sentence. Paul lists four specific dangers that will occur at an unspecified time to threaten the life and ministry of the church.

The first danger is that people “will not endure sound teaching.” Put plainly, people will not tolerate sound doctrine.

Sound teaching or doctrine is the expression of truth about a given topic, for example in our “Doctrine Sunday School class we have studied the doctrine of the Word of God, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ etc. That is, we are seeking to discern the truth of these subjects, using the Word of God as our guide. In 2 Timothy 3:16 & 17 we read, “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.”

The second danger is that people will have “itching ears” and will “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.” 1 Corinthians 3:19 & 20 says, “For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in

their craftiness,” and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.””

The third danger is that people will “turn away from listening to the truth.” 1 Timothy 4:1 tells us, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,”. People will want salvation apart from repentance. They will seek out churches and teachers who will make them feel good about themselves. We need to devote ourselves to the word of truth as found in the Bible even if, or especially if, it makes us uncomfortable. I’ve heard someone say God’s Word comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

The fourth danger is that people will “wander off into myths.” Myths are teachings contrary to the truth of God’s word. They are heretical, deceitful, false and dangerous and lead their followers to destruction. Have you ever heard someone say something along the line of, “It doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you really believe it.” If our belief is not anchored in God, the standard for truth and holiness, and His Word, that points to God, it is a lie and regardless of how much we would like it to be true, it is still a lie.

Verse five begins with the words, “As for you”, the NIV translates these words “But you.” Paul is making a deliberate 180 degree change in direction, contrasting the apostasy of vs 3 & 4 to his exhortation to Timothy to be a faithful minister of the truth.

He first begins with “be sober-minded.” While this could be a reference to not over indulging in wine, Paul is more likely intending for Timothy to “keep his head”, demonstrate self-control in his life, be spiritually alert, and practice humility. 1 Timothy 3:2 tells us,

“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,”.

Paul’s second exhortation is to “endure suffering.” Timothy needs to understand God will work out His eternal purpose through his suffering for the sake of the gospel. In the words of Job in 13:15, “though He slay me, I will hope in Him.”

Paul's third exhortation is to "do the work of an evangelist." At the time of this letter, Timothy was likely still serving the church at Ephesus. Paul was not asking Timothy to leave Ephesus to become an evangelist, but rather to do the work of an evangelist while still serving the church. That is, preach the truth of the gospel not just to those within the church but also to those outside of the church whom have not yet received the good news.

Paul's fourth and final exhortation to Timothy is to "fulfill your ministry." I believe Paul is reminding Timothy of his obligation to his calling to serve, preach and teach the truth of Jesus Christ. It is a lifelong commitment. We can think of it as being similar to the obligation of repaying a debt. With regard to the next couple of verses, Paul may even be reminding Timothy of Paul's admonition to the Corinthian's that they imitate him as he imitates Christ. Paul has set an example for Timothy, now Timothy will need to set an example for the Ephesian church.

Verses six thru eight are sometimes referred to as the last will and testament of Paul. He knows his death is imminent, the work he was commissioned to perform has been completed and now he is looking forward with expectation of life eternal with Christ.

When Paul says that his life is being poured out like a drink offering, he is expressing his confidence that God is still in control. Paul's martyrdom is to be seen as a type of sacrifice for the gospel. To Paul, death is not defeat but merely a passing from this life to the next, to live with Christ in heaven.

In Philippians 3:20 & 21 Paul says, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to Himself."

When Paul says he fought the good fight, he is not bragging on his own merit, but rather communicating to Timothy that the fight of Christian ministry is inherently good and worthy of the battle as is suffering for the sake of the gospel. I think there could be a bit of a reminder that Timothy is not alone. God will provide the "armor" (Ephesians 6:13) and weapon ("sword of the Spirit which is the Word of

God” - Ephesians 6:17) and the confidence found in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things thru him (Christ) who strengthens me.”

This may surprise you, but back in the late 90’s, I was a runner. There were runs all over the area, most served as fund raisers for different charitable causes. I ran in Sharon, Delavan Lake, Whitewater, Darien, Lake Geneva, etc. I’m sure there were some who ran to win, but most, like me, ran to complete the course in a competitive time for the individual. The completion of the race was a mini celebration with free food and drink. At the completion of the 25k option of the Lake Geneva Marathon, we even got a complementary ride back to Lake Geneva from Fontana on the Lady of the Lake. There is a condition called “runner’s euphoria” whereby the body releases some kind of chemical after hard exertion that some find very calming or euphoric. I don’t think this is what Paul is referring to. I think he is letting Timothy know that he has completed the course in life, his ministry, the direct command of Jesus Christ to be a servant and witness, especially to the Gentiles.

Paul finishes verse seven with the statement, “I have kept the faith.” He never faltered in loving, trusting, being faithful and executing his commitment to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1 Timothy 2:7 Paul writes, “for this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.” Paul has fully discharged his calling to preach the truth.

Verse eight begins with the words, “henceforth, (which is translated “in the future” in the New American Standard Bible) there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,”. Note the certainty Paul expresses in this statement of the hope he has for the victor’s crown of righteousness.

Paul’s hope is not based on his merit or works, but on the saving grace of Jesus Christ. In Titus 3:5-7 Paul says, “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs

according to the hope of eternal life.” We share the imputed righteousness of Christ with Paul. I think what Paul is teaching here is that “on that day” refers to the time Christ returns to judge the world and usher in His kingdom. Galatians 5:5&6 teach, “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”

Just as Paul commanded Timothy to endure suffering while fulfilling his ministry, He is now sharing the promise of the crown of righteousness with those who persevere in the faith.

I think it is easy to forget letters such as 2 Timothy were written by a specific person to a specific person (or church) for a specific purpose. This passage always made me a little sad as I considered the impending death of God’s servant at the hand of a tyrant. This is not a letter of defeat or sorrow. It is a proclamation of victory and hope. While there is concern for the Ephesian Church as they appear to be yielding to false teaching, Paul is exhorting Timothy to stand for the truth and to fight the good fight. The course will be difficult, but if Timothy stands firm on the Word of Truth, there is the hope of a future crown of righteousness.

Today is the last day of 2023. I think it is an appropriate time to reflect on the past year, but also, it is a good time to look forward to, and consider our priorities for 2024.

Are we committed to the truth? What is our moral compass? Is it based on the truth of God and His Word? John MacArthur says the worst threat to the church today is the perversion of sound doctrine.

We are very fortunate to have a Pastor and Elders who are committed to the truth. In fact, we currently have an adult Sunday School class dedicated to the teaching of sound doctrine.

We, you and I, are to fight the good fight, to run the course and keep the faith. We are to cling to the truth, promote sound doctrine and help prevent people from being seduced by the world. Our weapon is the Sword of the Spirit, God's Holy Word.

As a church, I pray we will continue to have a heart and hunger for the truth of God's Word. That we will continue to seek to be Great Commandment and Great Commission people.

Amen.

References:

John MacArthur's Study Bible

The Letters to Timothy & Titus Philip H. Towner (Commentary)

Word Biblical Commentary Pastoral Epistles William D. Mounce