

Worship Series: *Uncovered*

Theme: What We Want to Hear? Or What Needs to Be Said?
(January 30, 2022)

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

The veteran church-planter's pen scratches across the paper. The culmination of wisdom from decades doing mission work spilled out in ink. But he's not writing his memoirs. Rather, it's an urgent letter to a young man he'd spent years training, encouraging, and mentoring in faith and ministry. Urgent because he knows his earthly life will be over soon, and this letter would be one last opportunity to encourage his young friend, one last piece of advice for his protégé; The old church-planter's last will and testament. What guidance would he offer for how to best grow God's church?

Knowing his letter would be shared with other pastors and churches, he wasn't just writing to his friend, but for the whole Christian church—including us!

His advice is important for us too, because we're always looking to grow the church, right? Many hours have been spent discussing and planning how to get more people in the seats, or worshipping from home.

Practically speaking, it's not complicated. Taking a cue from advertisers or cable news networks, to grow your following, you just have to say what people want to hear. To "scratch their itch," if you will. A pastor can fill a sports stadium on Sunday morning if he always says the things that people want to hear.

So we might expect that to be the veteran church planter's advice. Say what the people want to hear, and we'll fill the seats and need to build room for more. But his advice is the exact opposite. "Say what needs to be heard."

Maybe you've figured it out, but the veteran church-planter I'm describing was the Apostle Paul, writing his final letter to his young pastor friend and son in the faith, Timothy as he sat in a Roman dungeon, waiting to be

executed for proclaiming the good news of Jesus as Savior. From there, Paul lays out our ministry agenda. "***Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.***" "***Preach the Word.***"

That sounds backwards to our pragmatistic culture. God's truth had brought rejection, persecution, hardship, and now martyrdom into Paul's life. Wouldn't he encourage Timothy to preach a different message that would be accepted instead of rejected, so he didn't have to follow in those footsteps?

There are two possible paths to take at this fork in the road. As a church, will we proclaim **What We Want to Hear? Or What Needs to Be Said?** As individual Christians, do we gravitate toward voices that always say what we want to hear? Or do we listen to the voices that proclaim what needs to be said, even if we don't always like to hear it?

Our sinful nature leads us to the former more than the latter. Because every human heart is filled with sinful pride, we latch onto voices that agree with what we think, and say what we want to hear. That's why right-wing political minds watch Fox News, and left-wing political minds watch CNN. Because they say what their audience wants to hear!

That's also why so many people reject God's truth. God's Word confronts us with difficult truths about God, the world, and ourselves that often counter our personal opinions, feelings, and agendas. And our sinful human pride convinces us that our truth is truer than God's truth. Just as Paul warned Timothy, "***The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.***"

That's why it's not hard to build a big church following. Just tell people what they want to hear, toss in a couple out-of-context Bible passages, slap God's name on it, and voila, packed sanctuary. Satan knows that's a powerful temptation for a church. We want full seats, a church that's growing and ministry that's expanding. Pastors want to be popular and loved. We want our people to tell their friends, "The pastor at our church preaches the best sermons ever!" So instead of fighting against people's sinful desires, Satan

tempts God's churches to take the easy way out and say whatever will scratch people's itching ears!

Satan knows it's a powerful temptation to bring against individual Christians too. With the rise in virtual church options, you don't have to work very hard to find a church or pastor who will tell you that your personal opinions, agendas, and preferences are right and true, and never tell you that you're wrong, or need to change.

But while those pastors or churches might tell us what we want to hear, are they saying what needs to be said? Sometimes, what we need to hear isn't always what we want to hear. If your doctor diagnoses you with cancer, you could hop from doctor to doctor until one finally tells you that you don't really have cancer. That might put a smile back on your face, but if you actually have cancer, what good does it do to hear what you want to hear, instead of what needs to be said? It just means you won't see a need for the necessary treatment to stop the disease that's slowly killing you.

A pastor might promise that being a Christian will make you successful, healthy, and wealthy, and fix all your problems. But where will that lead when, as Jesus promises, people have to take up their crosses and suffer to follow Jesus? Some pastors channel the prevailing ideologies of secular society, and give their blessing to sinful actions or lifestyles. That might ease people's guilty conscience. But what good does that do if God himself says those actions and lifestyles separate us from him? Some spiritual leaders might argue that all paths lead to heaven, and that makes people feel warm and fuzzy inside. But what good does that do when Jesus says, **"No one comes to the Father except through me"**? While we might think it best to surround ourselves with "yes men" who scratch our itching ears, sometimes what we need to hear most, is what we want to hear least!

It reminds me of my vicar year, which is a pastoral internship. As a baby pastor, I had written and preached a few sermons, and all the nice little old ladies in the congregation told me I was such a good preacher, so I thought I had arrived. Until one day, I submitted a sermon to the pastor who was mentoring and training me, and he told me I had to start over, because my sermon was basically hot garbage. That was NOT what I wanted to hear. I fumed! How dare he tell me that?

But that was exactly what I needed to hear. As a young man who thought I'd already arrived, I needed to be humbled, to be reminded just how much room I had—still have—to grow and work when it comes to proclaiming God's Word.

And the hard, confrontational truths of God's Word aren't always what we want to hear. Even as Christians, there are Biblical doctrines that we bristle at, try to ignore, or push back on—because we think we know better.

Seriously? The God of the universe tells us, **"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,"** and **"His paths [are] beyond tracing out!"** Are we really naïve and prideful enough to assume that God's ways will always perfectly align with your sinful human preferences and opinions? As Pastor Tim Keller once wrote, **"If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealized version of yourself."**

So, yes. We could surround ourselves with teachers who will scratch our itching ears. We could fill our church by telling people whatever they want to hear, and never confronting them with truths they don't want to hear. But what good does that do for people's souls?

That's why Paul's agenda for Timothy's ministry was, **"Preach the word; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction."** Say what needs to be said—even if that requires you to correct or rebuke people's false or faulty opinions and preferences. Mind you, do that with love, patience, and care! But that's God's agenda for Christ's church, because that was God's agenda for Christ's ministry!

In today's Gospel, Jesus showed his divine power by driving a fever out of Peter's mother-in-law. He then spent the rest of the night healing the sick or demon-possessed people who lined up outside the door. Understandably, people didn't want Jesus to leave! He could have stayed, and clung to an agenda that highlighted his popularity. He could have stayed and played to sold-out crowds every night. But instead, Jesus told them, **"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also because that is why I was sent."** Christ's agenda was not to say whatever people wanted to hear, but to tell the people what they needed to hear. Not physical healing, but spiritual salvation.

God's agenda for Christians is the same! As Paul's last will and testament instructs Timothy, the Christian Church's agenda is to preach God's truth. Even when it's not what we, or others, want to hear. And here's why. ***"The Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."***

I could preach social justice or party platforms. I could focus on pop psychology, self-help messages, or environmental issues. Some pastors do, and some people love to hear that very thing from the pulpit. But while those might be fine, important things, none of them can make you wise for salvation, because none of them are the means of grace through which the Holy Spirit brings people to saving faith.

What we need to hear is the truth of the Bible. Paul explains why. ***"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."***

Scripture is God-breathed. That means that the Bible was written by God's inspired writers. "Inspired" meaning that God literally "breathed into" the writers the very words he wanted them to write. So, the Bible isn't a compilation of a bunch of dudes' opinions and preferences. It's the Word of God himself. And not some of it—ALL Scripture is God-breathed.

That means we can't be buffet line Christians. At Golden Corral, you can fill up your plate with all the things you like, and skip all the things you don't. But if all of Scripture is God-breathed, we can't do that with the Bible—we can't just skip over or ignore God's truth when it's hard, and we don't want to hear it. If God recorded them for us, then we need to hear those truths! Even when—especially when!—they rebuke or corrects our sinful lifestyles, mindsets, and actions!

The doctor shares the negative diagnosis so we can find a treatment plan. My supervising pastor trashed my sermon, because he wanted to help me better share God's Word with people. And even more, when God shares with us difficult truths that we don't like to hear, they're what we need to hear; because he loves us enough to tell us the truth!

Brothers and sisters, that's my agenda as your pastor. In worship, Bible study, and counseling, my agenda is to focus your hearts and minds not on personal opinions or human truth, but on God's truth in his Word. Sometimes, it might not be what you want to hear. But please know, since God gave those difficult truths out of love, when God's Word rebukes or corrects you, it's done out of love and care for your soul!

So don't just surround yourself with voices that will tell you what you want to hear. That won't do your soul any good. Instead, surround yourself with voices that will tell you what needs to be said. You're an undeserving sinner who can't save yourself. But you have a God who loves you perfectly. So much so, that he won eternal life for you through faith in Jesus. That's what you need to hear. That's what changes hearts. The good news of Jesus as Savior.

That means I received one of the best compliments of my ministry recently. On Wednesdays, I do chapel with our preschool students. One of the moms told me that she asked her son on a Wednesday if Pastor Troy had done chapel with them. And the boy said with an exasperated sigh, "Yes...but every time, it's always Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!"

That's my prayer as your pastor. That every day, my agenda will be to point myself, my family, my church, and our community to Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. That every day, your focus will be on Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Because the message of Jesus our Savior is always what we need to hear. Amen.