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Pentecost 18 – 2 Timothy 4:1-5 – What’s the Big Deal?

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I had about fifty pairs of eyes fixed on me during Bible class after church one Sunday morning in the very first few weeks of my ministry. They were watching, waiting, wondering how I was going to answer the question that had just been asked. “Is all this really that big of a deal? Do you think we’re making too much of this?” In other words, do we really need to be so meticulous, so firm, so insistent, some would even say so *divisive* about what we believe when there are plenty of other churches and plenty of other good people out there that believe... *mostly* the same but just a *little* different?

I mean, what’s the big deal in the grand scheme of things, right? After all, we don’t want to be stubborn sticks in the mud, we want to be loving and welcoming and open to new ways and ideas to help us reach people with the Gospel! Well there are worthwhile thoughts there, but shouldn’t we always ask first about anything we do or teach in the Church... what does *God* have to say about this? Not just the rest of the world, not just other churches around, not just my own preferences or opinions, but what does *God’s Word* say? It says that minimizing the Gospel is never the right thing to do, no matter how well-intentioned we think we are; no, we should always maximize and magnify the Gospel with every opportunity we get, because when we look at our Second Lesson from God’s Word for today, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy that preaching the whole truth of the Gospel is actually the biggest deal of all. God’s Church must preach the Word fully and faithfully, he says, because that’s what the members of God’s Church need, and because that’s the only thing that can soothe all our itches.

That was an all-important lesson that the old, experienced pastor Paul had to emphasize for his young apprentice Timothy here. See, Timothy apparently had a penchant for being a little too timid. He might have been tempted to believe all those people who would ask, *What’s the big deal?* What’s the big deal if I’m a Jew or a Christian? They seem so similar! What’s the big deal with keeping up on a few common Greek or Roman religious practices to help me fit in? What’s the big deal if I listen to other preachers who say different things about Jesus – they’re still talking about him and using the Bible, right? Paul says no, the job of a pastor is not to be timid or compromising when it comes to God’s Word. It’s to stand tall on the truth and preach the Word fully and faithfully.

And that is so important that he even gives Timothy a charge to do it before God himself: “*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word.*” Why is it so important to preach the Word? Because it comes from God, it’s about Jesus, and only the Word has power to bring us to faith and put us on God’s good side when Jesus appears again to judge the living and the dead and bring us into his heavenly kingdom. No, there is nothing less at stake here than our souls and our eternities, so the Word must be preached in all its fullness, truth, and purity! This is what our souls need, so there is no bigger deal than that!

But like I said before, there’s even something all-important in just that simple phrase, “*Preach the Word.*” Literally, that word *preach* means to *proclaim* or *herald* an important message. This is what a messenger would do when he was sent by a king. By order of the highest authority in the land, it was his job to make a bold, faithful, public declaration of the King’s will. There was no room for timidity or altering the message; his job was to share the message completely and exactly, with precision and passion.

And if that’s true for a messenger of an earthly king, how much more true is it for a preacher of our heavenly King! The full message of God’s Word is what sinful people need to hear and that’s what Christ has tasked his Church to share, so Paul goes on: “*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.*” In the everyday circumstances of real life, God’s people need to hear his Word whether it’s convenient or not, or welcome or not. Sometimes we need to be corrected, rebuked, and encouraged. Just like a doctor who sugarcoats his patient’s medical situation doesn’t do them any real good in the long run, it doesn’t do any good in the long run for a doctor of souls to sugarcoat our spiritual situation, either. If you have cancer, you need to know it so you can start treatment for it. That’s the only way to save your life! And when it comes to the cancer of sin we all have in our lives, it doesn’t do any good to say, just try to be a nice person. Or, here are some good self-help habits. Or, stay positive and try to ignore the negative. Or, just live and let live, and let everyone else make their own decisions about what they want to believe and do with their own lives.

No, we need to hear the Bible’s full message of Law and Gospel. We need to hear the Law so we can acknowledge our sin; we need to acknowledge our sin so we humble ourselves and repent before God; and we need to humbly repent before God so he’ll cut that sin out of our lives like the cancerous tumor it is. We need to hear the message of condemnation deserved, because only then can we behold the message of salvation undeserved. We deserve death because of sin, but we receive life because of Jesus! Jesus lived the perfect life for you, kept all of God’s Law in your place. Jesus died on the cross to pay for all your sins and take them away forever. He suffered hell so you’ll never have to, and he rose again to life so you can live with him in heaven. That spiritual teaching is the #1 foundation of everything we do as a church and we can’t compromise on it one bit, because you’re not going to find that Gospel encouragement anywhere else. Lots of other organizations might have better facilities, better speakers, better music, better programs. But nobody has a better message than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and so nobody has a more crucial charge than the Church of Jesus Christ. So we need to keep hearing it, keep learning it, keep instructing it patiently and carefully together here in church again and again Sunday after Sunday, because that’s the only message that can keep us focused on Jesus for now and the rest of our lives.

Friends, preaching the Word fully and faithfully *is* a big deal. That’s who we’ve been throughout our history as a church and a synod, and that’s who God wants us to be until Jesus comes again. Until then, Jesus gave us his Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations. How? By baptizing them, and by “*teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matthew 28:20). Church membership and growing the Church isn’t about shrinking back or watering down God’s Word, even

when it's hard or unpopular; it's about preaching it in all its fullness, truth, and purity and trusting the Holy Spirit to do his work through it. Let's not fall into the fine-sounding traps of the rest of the world or the rest of society, trying to take the easy way out. God knows best and he gave us the *whole* Bible for a reason, so let's listen to him and follow him! As a Church, let's continue to preach the Word, let's continue to *herald* the Gospel in its fullest sense; let's hunger for it, insist on it, and settle for nothing less than all of it, because that's what the members of God's Church truly need.

And when we do that, we'll be better equipped to stand up against anything that threatens God's Church as well. And that's what Paul warned Timothy about next: "*For 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.*" You've heard the phrase "sound mind, sound body"? Well here Paul tells us, "sound teaching, sound spirit." Paul says in another place that false doctrine is like gangrene, an infection that contaminates and poisons our souls and can eventually kill our faith. And here Paul compares it to an itch that needs to be scratched. Well coming into cold and dry and allergy season, we know that if you scratch an itch, it might go away for awhile, but chances are it keeps coming back and maybe even gets worse. Maybe if you scratch it enough you eventually rub the area raw. Or maybe if it's from something like poison ivy or chicken pox, scratching the itch only makes it spread. That's what false doctrine is like in the church. It might meet our shallow, selfish desires to feel smart or important at first, but it actually only hurts us in the end and gets worse as time goes on.

*They will do this, Paul says. Other people will act this way. They will heap up teachers who will tell them only what they want to hear, rather than what God says they need to hear. They will be controlled by their baser desires, and it will lead them from truth to myth, away from what is good and helpful and into what is bad and hurtful. And that's only happened more and more ever since. In Paul's day a teaching called Gnosticism was starting to spread, which taught that the physical world wasn't real and the only thing that mattered was one's own mind and choices. Don't we still hear that same thing from the sexual revolution, from the transgender movement, from abortion rights groups? Or in Paul's day, each culture had its own myths to share about where we came from and why life plays out the way it does. Isn't that still the way it is now with the push for evolution in our schools and the deification of science in our culture? Or back in Paul's day new Christians struggled to stay free from the restrictions that the Jews tried to impose on their spiritual lives. Isn't that work-righteousness the same thing our forefathers fought against in Reformation days, and isn't that still what we struggle against now as the American church puts such an emphasis on YOU making YOUR decision for Christ, or YOU getting baptized or taking the Lord's Supper as ordinances to prove YOUR commitment to Christ, or YOU needing to attend whatever church or worship experience that makes YOU feel the best (to say nothing of being solidified in God's truth)?*

*They will do this, Paul says, and those things will lead them away from God's Word and into man-made myths that cannot deliver any real peace, hope, or salvation. BUT YOU, Paul says emphatically, "But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an*

*evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*" This is not just true for pastors; God wants it to be true for his Church as a whole. Sinful people, even sinful people like us, get spiritual itches – we normally call them temptations. So what's the best way to answer those temptations? Not by scratching them, not by succumbing to the immediate gratification of giving in to them. It might feel good or be easier that way at first, but no – the only way to fix an itch for good is with the balm and healing that come from God's Word. So we don't get worked up into a frenzy with every new idea and fad that comes along. We stay grounded on the Word, level-headed and well-balanced on the fulcrum of Law and Gospel. We keep doing what we're doing – preaching, teaching, and learning the Gospel faithfully, fully, and steadily – because that's the only way to build up the Church with real strength and dedication that stand the test of time, rather than just puff it up with external numbers that scatter at the prick of a pin. See, when people ask us, what's the big deal, why can't you stop being so *standoffish* and *divisive* about what you believe? The big deal is that only the complete truth of God's Word can actually *unify* us *completely* as the Church God truly wants. Agreeing to disagree or "live and let live," as so much of the rest of the world and even the rest of Christianity does, only keeps up appearances; that's no real kind of unity, and nobody loves and exploits false confidence more than the devil. No, only by standing firm against false doctrine and by standing up for sound doctrine can our souls and our churches stay healthy for now and eternity like God wants for us.

So what would you say to someone you love if you knew it was the last thing you would ever get to? What is the most important thing that a father could say to his son in that instance? Well that was the situation for Paul and Timothy here. 2 Timothy 4 was the last chapter of the last letter that Paul ever got to write to Timothy, shortly before he was executed for his Christian faith. So in that all-important moment, what did Paul say? *Preach the Word.* There is nothing more vital, nothing more essential, no bigger deal for God's Church than that. And that's why even down to this very day, the same charge that Christ himself gave to his Apostle Paul, and Paul gave to his spiritual son Timothy, is the same charge that you have given to me as your pastor – it's point #1 right here on my call form: *In extending this call to you we solemnly charge you: To preach the gospel of our Lord among us in its truth and purity.* No, total faithfulness to God's Word in spiritual teaching is never too big of a deal, we can never make too much of it, and we can never afford to compromise on it even one little bit. This is building the foundation of our Church on the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone, just as God wants. This is the basis for why we have a *church* at all, and this is the central privilege, responsibility, and blessing of church membership. It's an expectation you must have and a demand you must make of every pastor that takes this pulpit, because it is your souls at stake and so nothing less than the fullness of God's Word will do. So encourage your pastors in their work more and more, friends, especially as the rest of the world tries to *discourage* them. Pray for them, support them, and rejoice with them as they fulfill their ministries for your eternal benefit. Together, with God's help and blessing, let's keep this charge faithfully and fully until the day we view Christ's appearing and kingdom with our own eyes. Amen.