

Preaching

Introduction

This morning, I'm going to preach one of the most difficult messages I've ever preached. The honest truth is that I'd far rather be preaching a message from Ephesians 1. This is a message I didn't know if I'd ever preach, because it's a message *about* preaching. I've put it off for all sorts of reasons. First of all, I don't trust myself. I'm afraid of my own blindness and self-deception. I'm afraid of my heart and motives. I know what James said: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). I'm afraid that when I do have the right heart and motives, they might still be misunderstood by any one of you that I love. I'm afraid of driving people away, when my heart's desire in this message is actually to keep us all in fellowship together. I'm afraid of failing to accomplish what I know I'm accountable before God to strive for in every message – and that's HIS glory in the proclamation of HIS gospel for the building up of HIS people. These are my fears, and they can literally be paralyzing. I know I need the constant work of God in my heart.

Over the years, there have been *dear* brothers and sisters that I love, and will always love, who have expressed to me in gentleness and love that they don't get much out of my messages. On the other hand, there have been those who tell me how much they "appreciate" the messages. This morning, I would have an admonishment and an exhortation for both groups of people – for those who appreciate my messages, for those who don't get much out of them, *and* for everyone who might fall somewhere in the middle.

For a while now in the Christian church, there has been a strong emphasis on words like "practical" and "application." These are good words – they're *necessary* words for every true follower of Jesus. But what *is* "practical"? "Practical" is often times what we most associate with "spiritual growth." But what is "spiritual growth"? (In the things that I say, my promise to you by God's grace is that I'm making assumptions about no one.) For many today, "practical" is about specific things to be "doing" – practical steps, keys, or very specific "action items." Or by "practical," we're often times referring to that which we perceive and feel to be more relevant to me today. I used a Quiet Time Diary growing up that asked every single day after the reading of the Scripture passage: How can I apply this to my life? I believe the wording of the question (though well intended) betrays a wrong, and even a very dangerous approach to the Scriptures. I say this because this kind of question either won't work, or it becomes very redundant with huge, vast portions of God's holy Word – especially in light of how the word "application" is so often understood today.

I. "Doers of the Word"

James says that we are to be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves (James 1:22). Brothers and sisters, let us pay heed to what James says. But doers of *what* word? James writes:

"Of [the Father's] own will *he brought us forth by **the WORD of truth**, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures...* Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant

wickedness and receive with meekness *the implanted WORD*, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:18, 21).

The “word” is the Gospel. So what James is saying is that we must be “doers of the *Gospel*.” We must be doers of that word which has brought us to spiritual life as a kind of firstfruits of God’s creatures. We must be doers of that word which is able to save our souls. We must be doers of the Gospel. Now that might sound strange to many Christians today – or at least it’s probably not the way that we naturally talk. We might think more along these lines: I must be a doer of that *command*, or a doer of that *principle*, or a doer of that *law*. It’s this kind of thinking (which is instinctive to all of us) that often leads to the bondage of feeling that we always need to be working, and doing, and showing “measurable,” “quantifiable” signs of growth *in order to make God “happy”* – or even just so that we can feel better about our Christianity and our walk with God. And so in the context of preaching, this emphasis on the doing of principles and commands often leads to an emphasis on topical sermons (like the one I’m preaching right now) – an entire sermon focusing on a specific principle, or command, or “law.” Topical sermons are then perceived to be the most “practical” on a scale of 1-10. Often times, these are the sermons that *feel* the most relevant to us today. And so even our verse by verse, passage by passage sermons are then measured by where they fall on this “practical” scale of being doers of commands, and doers of principles, and doers of laws. The problem is that these kinds of “practical” sermons can’t *very often* be legitimately drawn from just one passage of Scripture (*usually* they’re drawn from a collection of Scriptures). And that’s because most of the Bible is not focused so much on commands, or topics, or principles as it is on the life changing power of the Gospel applied to our hearts.

II. The Simplicity of “Doing the Gospel”

The pervasive language of the Bible (both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament) is that we be *doers* of the *Gospel*. And so it’s always the Gospel that takes front and center stage, while the specific ways that we *do* the Gospel are often summarized very “simply and shortly” as the natural, necessary outflow of that Gospel taking root in our lives. In the book of Romans, after eleven straight chapters of *Gospel*, Paul concludes by exhorting his readers to be *doers* of these eleven chapters of Gospel:

“I appeal to you *therefore*, brothers, *by the mercies of God*, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship... Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality...” (Rom. 12:1-2, 9-13)

Paul did not preach a sermon on showing hospitality to traveling brothers in Christ. He preached the Gospel for eleven chapters, and then exhorted his readers to do that Gospel in all the ways they *already knew* they should be. These are the simple things to understand. Brothers and sisters, I’m so happy to be able to say that the ways that we *do* and *live* the Gospel are not complicated. The whole law of God is summed up in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17;

Deut. 4:13), and all of the Ten Commandments are summed up in the two commands to **love** God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to **love** our neighbor as ourselves (Mat. 22:36-40). It's not complicated.

Micah 6:8 (Psalm 15:1-5; 24:3-5) — He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

What's so complicated is our *sin* – the sin that still remains within us – the sin that works fulltime every day of our lives to prevent us from loving God, and loving our neighbor. And the answer to our sin is not principles and commands and laws – all of which have been hardwired into our conscience from birth (Rom. 2:14-15) – the answer to our sin is not principles and commands and laws, but the *Gospel*. In fact, if the driving motivation of our life is not Gospel motivation, then even our best attempts at obedience and goodness are of *no value* whatsoever in the sight of God (i.e. filthy rags).

III. “Long for the pure spiritual milk of the Word that by it you may grow”

In a very similar way to James, Peter writes:

“So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk [of the word; NASB], that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Pet. 2:1-3).

What is this pure spiritual milk that brings the spiritual growth we all know we need? Notice that the tasting of this milk is the tasting of the Lord's goodness. And we know what this goodness is because of what Peter has just written at the end of chapter one:

“You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:23-25).

Peter is saying that spiritual growth is the natural and necessary result of feeding on the goodness of God in the Gospel. How can a baby not be nourished and grow if he is feeding on his mother's milk? How can a Christian not be nourished, and grow, and put into practice the simple, straightforward commands of God's law if he is feeding on the goodness of God in the Gospel?

But this isn't the way many Christians would think and speak today. We might have said instead: “Like newborn infants, long for the unpacking of God's commands and the explanation of practical biblical principles so that by these you may grow up into salvation. Now I'm not trying to be sarcastic, and I'm not trying to paint caricatures. I'm just trying to help us rethink and reevaluate in the light of Scripture – so that we might be *free* and *rejoice*! We must long for the pure spiritual milk of the Gospel, so that by that we may grow up into salvation—if indeed we have tasted that the Lord is good.

IV. The Deepness and the Complexity of the Gospel

What the doing of the Gospel looks like is not complicated. It's very simple and clear. We all know what is required of us. The Gospel itself, on the other hand is not only simple and clear, it's also deep, and rich, and even complex – at times even hard to understand. It's the deepness, and richness, and complexity of the Gospel that makes it so powerfully equipped to deal with that daily reality of sin in our lives.

The author of Hebrews wanted to feed his readers on the Gospel truth of the high priesthood of Christ as that which was after the order of Melchizedek. He writes:

“About this we have *much* to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness [which is the Gospel], since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (Heb. 5:11-6:2).

What are the elementary doctrines of Christ? They're the elementary doctrines of the Gospel (repentance, faith, instruction about the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment). The author of Hebrews isn't saying that we should lay these things aside, but that we should build upon them with the deeper and more *advanced* doctrines of Christ and of the Gospel (such as the beautiful, *life-changing* truth of Christ's high priesthood after the order of Melchizedek).

The writer of Hebrews said that his readers needed someone to teach them again the basic principles of the oracles of God. He said they needed milk, not solid food. But he says this more to shame and convict them than he does to cater to their immaturity. We know this because in chapters seven to ten he goes right on to instruct them very thoroughly in the high priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek. And then at the end of all this deep Gospel teaching, he very briefly and earnestly exhorts them to be doers of this Gospel teaching, and not hearers only (Heb. 10:19-39). What we see throughout the Bible is a whole lot of time spent on Gospel truth, and then constant, brief, simple exhortations to live as doers of that Gospel. I believe that much of our Bible reading and preaching today is not a faithful reflection of what the Bible actually *is*.

On the one hand, there are those who show their dullness of hearing by being unable to listen to, and to grasp the deep truths of the Gospel – or sometimes by not being able to feel and perceive how powerfully relevant these Gospel truths are to us today. On the other hand, there are those who show their dullness of hearing by gladly listening to these deep truths of the Gospel, but then failing to really *do* the Gospel every moment of every day of their lives. The church today has become dull of hearing. But I believe with all of my heart that much of this dullness of hearing is the result not of ungodliness, but rather of a sincere, but misguided understanding of what is “practical,” and what it is that brings true “spiritual growth.” The church today has

become dull of hearing. It's a plague. And it's a plague of epidemic proportions. And in many cases, even the "conservative and evangelical" teachers and preachers of the word (people who are preaching the truth) have catered to this dullness of hearing in their teaching and preaching – which is exactly what the writer of Hebrews refused to do. Peter writes:

“There are some things in Paul's letters that are hard to understand...” (2 Pet. 3:16).

Lenski comments: “Peter has already noted the divinely bestowed wisdom with which [Paul] wrote. Such wisdom always penetrates to the bottom of its subjects and does not skim over the top as a shallow mind does. The effort to understand some parts of such writings naturally taxes the [mind] or thinking faculty. That is what the mind is for. We have but two brief letters of Peter, yet even in them everything is not written in ABC fashion.” The faculty of the mind is meant to be taxed, even taxed by the Gospel. But this is exactly what brings about the *renewing* of the mind, so that we are able to live out in our daily lives what all of us already know to be the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God. Paul knew that the mysteries of God's Word and of the Gospel were deep, and this is why he prayed that God would give to the Ephesians “a spirit of *wisdom* and of *revelation* in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of [their] hearts enlightened” (Eph. 1:17-18). This is why I need to be praying always more and more that God would give all of us a spirit of true wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him – through the preaching of the Gospel of His Son.

V. Our call to “endure sound teaching” and put off “itching ears”

Paul writes to Timothy:

“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 [instruction]. 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 passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Tim. 4:1-4)

Here's a warning about apostasy. I'm certainly not aware of any apostasy among the members of Living Word Bible Church. But I am worried that on a lesser level, and without ever realizing it, we can still have the itching ears that Paul talks about.

“The time is coming,” Paul says, “when people will not endure sound teaching.” What is this sound teaching? It's the deep truths of the Gospel, preached always with the goal of spiritual growth. But Paul said there would come a day when many in the church would not “*endure*” this sound teaching. As one commentator says, this is the language of “boredom” – it implies the “*emotional* prelude to rejection” (Towner). The point here is not necessarily that they were tired of being convicted, but that they had become bored with the sound doctrine of Gospel teaching. Today, it's easy for many to be bored with deep, meaty preaching about the high priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek – even when this preaching is passionate, and aimed at the heart with the goal of Gospel motivated obedience and faith. Why is this? Often, the reason is that this preaching is not perceived to be practical. It doesn't *feel* as relevant. To those who are

dull of hearing, such teaching is often boring. We don't get much out of it. And so it's tempting to want a teacher who will suit our own desires.

If a failure to “endure” sound teaching implies boredom, then Paul uses the metaphor of itching ears to describe an appetite for novelty – for something *new*, for something that could even feel more “entertaining” (Towner). While Paul was thinking of things more serious, this appetite for novelty can still be seen today in an appetite for teaching and preaching that focuses more on the doing of commands, and principles, and laws than on the doing of the Gospel – from the elementary truths of the Gospel all the way to the deepest and most complex. *Sometimes* our desire for more “practical” sermons can be the sign of a very subtle desire for that which is more “entertaining” – for that which *grabs* my attention and is *easier* to listen to. There is an interesting irony here in that sometimes the sermons that “step on my toes” are by far the most entertaining and “fun” to listen to.

On the other hand, there are those who think they love the deep truths of the Gospel, but by their lack of true spiritual growth—by their lack of doing the Gospel every moment of every day of their lives no matter what the cost—they prove that they have no such love. I see people that I love and care for sitting under the preaching of the Gospel week after week after week, and yet when it comes down to the doing of that Gospel within the context of family, and relationships, and personal holiness, I see very little change or growth. The fault here does not lie with the Gospel, but rather with a hardness of heart that results in being self-deceived. And then there are those who by God's mercy and grace alone are eating and drinking deeply of the truths of the Gospel and then living that Gospel out with true freedom and joy.

Conclusion

I know there are better and more faithful communicators of the milk and solid food of God's Word than me. I understand that some people will just “connect” better with other preachers of God's Word. But I would urge you to see that the preaching at Living Word is, all of it, practical. If it is the milk and the solid food of the Gospel preached from the heart, and always concluded with some—with any—form of exhortation, then it is pre-eminently practical by biblical standards – though *not* in the way that most Christians would think of today. I say this *not* in self-defense. In fact, this only makes me feel overwhelmed with my accountability to God. I say this for your sake – for the sake of your joy and spiritual growth.

May God help us to feel in our hearts the difference between being doers of principles and commands, and laws, and being doers of the Gospel every moment of every day of our lives in all the ways that we all *already know* are required of us (2 Pet. 1:12). May God help us to feel in our hearts that all of the messages we've heard from Matthew and from Genesis have been intensely and powerfully practical. May it truly be God's Word that informs our ideas and our feelings about what is, in fact, “relevant” to us today.

Even in many conservative, evangelical churches today, much of the preaching and teaching no longer taxes the mind. In much of the preaching and teaching of today, there is no longer anything “hard to understand.” But this is the teaching that today is considered to be “practical” and “relevant.” Today, even preaching that should not be hard to understand is still considered to

be taxing on the mind and not very practical because of the prior expectations that many Christians have come to have – perhaps without even knowing it. May God always be taking away our dullness of hearing, and our itching ears so that we may embrace with all of our heart the deep, and meaty, and life-changing truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And may God always be merciful to us by not allowing us to be hearers of the word, and not doers also, *deceiving* our own selves.

So what is my job?

1. My job is to make sure that the truth I preach is shaping my daily living so that my words on Sunday are not the words of a hypocrite.
2. My responsibility is to preach with a genuine passion for God's glory and a genuine love for His Word. I must never be guilty of preaching dry, academic facts as though I were in a lecture hall. My job is to shed literal tears and literally laugh out loud for joy as I prepare the sermons in the office.
3. I'm accountable to preach with a genuine love for God's flock and a genuine concern for their well-being.
4. My job is to preach with clarity – to be understood. If you can't understand a word I used or something I said, please tell me.
5. My responsibility is never to compromise or water down the beautiful complexities of God's Word.
6. My job is to unpack the truth and beauty of God's word as it stands, and as it comes to me each week. My job is to stay in a book as long as that book requires (though Genesis is significantly longer than Matthew, Genesis required less than half the time of Matthew).
7. And when I see a need in the corporate body for a specific sermon on a specific topic, my job is to preach that sermon – building it on the foundation of the Gospel (which means that even these topical sermons can be very meaty and somewhat taxing on the mind).

What is your job?

1. Your job is to come every Sunday *longing* for the pure spiritual milk and the solid food of the Gospel so that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.
2. Your job is to so apply your mind and all your powers of concentration every Sunday morning that you are able yourself to be teachers of the deep truths of the Gospel – and not just *teachers*, but doers of this Gospel every moment of every day of your lives.
3. Our job is to model for our children a love and a passion for the preached Word on Sunday morning.

The point of the preaching on Sunday morning is not a command or a principle or a law to go home and do, but a Gospel to go home and live out in thought, in word, and in deed. My heart's longing this morning is that we might be *doers* of the Gospel, and not hearers only, *deceiving* our own selves. My heart, too, is that we might be released *from* the bondage of today's definition of what is practical *into* the joyful freedom of simple, faithful, *Gospel living*. May God bless the preaching of His Word *here*, and *wherever* it is preached, to the building up of His Church and the glory of *His* wonderful Name.