Picture in your mind, for a moment, a professional ball game. And now picture yourself as one of the players on this team (I know it’s a stretch). Your team is in the last game of the playoffs and the championship game is close at hand. Also imagine that the most famous player who has ever played the sport is also in the stands. And this famous player has also just bought the team you’re playing on. He is watching the game and will ultimately determine your future – whether or not you’ll play on the team next year.

So the stakes of this game are high. And to ratchet the drama up another notch the team you’re playing against tonight is more difficult than they have ever been. And you just lost your star player in the previous playoff game to a serious injury. So not only are the stakes high, the game is going to be very difficult.

How will you approach this game? What is your attitude? How will you play?

Will you be afraid of getting your jersey dirty? Will you be afraid of an injury? Will you just try to pace yourself? Will you tell the coach that you want to give others a chance to play in this one? Will you tell the coach you’re afraid of a particular defender and would prefer to not line up against him?

No honorable professional athlete would have attitudes or actions like these at any point in the season, but especially not at this point in the season. No, when the stakes are this high, an honorable athlete will give everything they’ve got, they won’t hold anything back; to quote a phrase, they’ll leave it all on the field.

And that’s exactly what Paul is calling Timothy to do in the last chapter of his last letter to Timothy. Paul wants Timothy to know, we’re in the last days; the end is near; and the opposition is harder than ever. And Paul wants Timothy to know that his departure is imminent; he’s going to be with the Lord, but Timothy is staying. Paul wants Timothy to know that Christ Jesus, the righteous judge – who himself ran the race with endurance and finished strong (cf. 2:8; Heb. 12:2) – is watching and will one day return to judge.

The stakes are high. And Paul is calling Timothy to leave it all on the field. The stakes are high for us as well. It’s the end of the season. What should we do? How should we engage in this game, in this battle? We too should leave it all on the field. That’s what Paul is calling Timothy to do and, I think we’ll see, that’s what God is calling us to do.

2 Timothy 4:1–8 (ESV)

1I 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: 2preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 3For 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, 4and will turn away from listening to the truth
and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Why is this text in our Bibles? What is the greatly desired effect God wants to accomplish in his church through the preaching of this text?

Sermon in a Sentence: The church must preach the gospel, because the stakes are so high.

There are three major references to time in this passage – two refer to the last Day and one to the last days we’re in. They give us three ways in which the church must preach the gospel and three reasons why the stakes are so high.

JUDGMENT DAY (vv. 1-2, 8)

The urgent setting

The first reference to time in this passage is judgment day. And this sets the tone for the rest of the passage. Actually, this passage is bookended with a reference to Jesus’ future return and judgment. In verse 1 we’re told that Jesus will judge the living and the dead when he appears, in other words when the King returns on the last Day. Then in verse 8 we’re told again that when the Lord appears on the last Day, as the righteous judge, he will reward those who loved his appearing.

In verse 1 the clause “I charge you” is probably a weak translation. It is probably more like, “I solemnly urge you in the presence of God…” Or as Eugene Peterson has paraphrased it in The Message, “I can’t impress this on you too strongly. God is watching.”

This is the setting of the command made to Timothy to preach the word. What he’s saying is, “The stakes are high, Timothy. What I’m getting ready to command you to do is so important. In fact, what I’m getting ready to command you to do is intimately linked to the righteous judgment of Christ on the last day.”

The main problem

The major problem that faces man is the wrath of God – the just judgment for our sin against a righteous God. When Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead we are told, in Revelation 19, he will “tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (v. 15). As our EFCA Statement of Faith says, the destiny of the unbeliever is condemnation and eternal conscious punishment. This judgment is in view when Paul gives his command to Timothy to preach the word. Without the word preached we are all hopeless and remain under judgment.

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1 George Knight, The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text.
2 Evangelical Convictions, pp. 248-252.
The gospel saves

What is the word that Paul is commanding Timothy to preach? He’s referring back to 3:15-17; the sacred writings, the Scriptures. So on the one hand, Paul is commanding Timothy to preach all of the Scriptures. But on the other hand, the word that Paul is speaking of in verse 2 is the gospel; the word that is able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (3:15); the word of truth, the gospel (2:15; cf. Eph. 1:13).

All the Scriptures point to Christ (Lk. 24:27; 44-47; Jn. 5:39). When Paul spells out the gospel for us in 1 Corinthians 15 as a message that saves, he reminds us two times that the work of Christ is the fulfillment of all of the Scriptures.

1 Corinthians 15:1–4 (ESV)

1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

2 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...

The word that must be preached is the gospel of Jesus Christ. All Scripture points to Christ. So we are called preach all of Scripture on the one hand and we are called to preach Christ on the other hand – and these two things are really one thing. That’s the word, the message to be preached. And why is this the message that must be preached?

The church must preach the gospel urgently because judgment on the last day is in view.

When I say we must preach the gospel urgently it is because without this gospel you cannot be saved from judgment – there is urgency to our mission and we must urge people to respond in faith to this message. The gospel must be preached if the gospel is to be heard, as Romans 10 makes clear (v. 14c). And the gospel must be heard if people are to believe (v. 14b). And the gospel must be believed if people are to be saved from the righteous wrath of the righteous judge (v. 9).

The gospel sanctifies

But the Word of God is not only to be preached to the unbelieving world. The Word of God must be preached to believers as well. The gospel not only saves; the gospel sanctifies; it changes us; it is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” as 3:16 tells us. Therefore, preaching this Word must include reproof, rebuke, and exhortation (v. 2).

We believe that the Word of God does the work of God in the lives of God’s people. That’s why we should preach it patiently; we can simply let it speak for itself. When the Word of God is cut straight (2:15), God uses it to cut to the heart (Heb. 4:12). Therefore we need to let it speak for itself and call people to respond to it.

3 Cf. the May 20 sermon in this series, “The Straight and Narrow.”
This is my working definition of preaching: To faithfully and clearly communicate the content and the intent of a particular passage to a particular audience and to urge them to respond appropriately, all in the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe that when this happens, that God uses his Word through his Holy Spirit to save and sanctify people who believe. So, it is imperative that we urgently preach the Word of God.

**Does this apply to me?**

You may be thinking that’s great for you Josh, but I’m not a preacher so how does this passage apply to me? Well, I think there are a number of ways this passage applies to the whole church. I’d like to list three.

First of all, our church needs to insist on the Word of God being preached faithfully here. Ultimately pastors will have to give account to God for their preaching (Heb. 13:17), but I hope you will also hold those who preach the Word accountable to faithfully preaching the Word of God. Don’t hold me accountable to be like your favorite preacher. I’ll never be like John Piper or Matt Chandler; I can’t be somebody I’m not and I don’t want to be. But I can be faithful to God’s Word. Hold me accountable to that.

As the people of God, you should insist to hear from God – so that you can worship him rightly and be changed by him. The only way you will hear from God from this pulpit is if the Scriptures that are breathed out by God are preached faithfully. Expect faithful preaching and insist on it.

You should not only insist that Word be preached from the pulpit, but that the Bible is faithfully taught in everything we do from nursery to nursing home ministries. It is only as the Word of God is heard in the power of the Holy Spirit that people are saved and sanctified.

Secondly, our church needs to make sure we continue to send the Word of God to people who have not heard it through missions, evangelism, and church planting initiatives. Curt will say more on this in two weeks.

Thirdly, while Paul has a pastor in mind when he gives this command, the ministry of the Word is not limited to pastors and missionaries. All believers are called to make disciples. And making disciples happens through speaking the Word of God into people’s lives. This may be through a pastor preaching in a pulpit on Sunday morning. This may be in formal Bible studies. Or this may be in informal settings where we are simply encouraging another brother or sister with a word from God’s Word or when we are sitting down to give a loving rebuke to a friend who is drifting and to call them back to faith and obedience to God’s Word.

Regardless of who you are, all believers are called to Word ministry. Parents should speak and teach the Word of God to their children (Deut. 6:7). Spouses should speak the Word of God into the lives of their spouse (e.g. Eph. 5:25ff). We should all speak the Word of God to those in our schools and in our neighborhoods. People in business should speak the Word of God to their co-workers and clients whenever they have a chance. Health-care professionals should speak the

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4 Kent Hughes, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit.
5 Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, The Trellis and the Vine
Word of God into the lives of those they care for. Laborers should speak the Word of God into the lives of their co-workers. All believers are called to Word ministry.

We are called to adorn the gospel with our lives – to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel (as Lucas shared 3 weeks ago) – but we must remember that our deeds will never save anybody. It is only through the Word of God spoken in the power of the Spirit that men and women, boys and girls are saved and sanctified. This is an urgent task in view of the final judgment and this is the responsibility of all Christians.

When should we do this Word ministry? That brings us to our second time reference, the last days.

**LAST DAYS (vv. 6-8)**

Look again at verse 2. The preaching of the Word is to take place “in season and out of season” or more literally in good times and bad times, in opportune times and in inopportune times, when it’s convenient and when it’s inconvenient. Paul tells us in 3:1 that we are living in the last days. And in these last days, gospel ministry will be very difficult; these are the “bad times.” Therefore…

The church must preach the gospel resolutely because difficulty in the last days is sure.

There are two references to bad times in this passage. The second is found in verse 6; the time of Paul’s departure is close at hand. It won’t be long before Paul is gone. This will be a difficult time for Timothy. The first reference to bad times in verses 3-4 is more relevant for us.

Look again at verses 3-4. “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.”

The simplest way I know how to paraphrase these verses is to say that in the last days people will want to hear what they want to hear and not what they need to hear – the gospel. The criteria for an acceptable message and an acceptable messenger will be man-centered criteria instead of God-centered.

Man-centered man will want to hear self-help messages and health and wealth messages. He will want to hear the tolerance message and the social justice message. He will want to hear about how to have his best life now. What can be done to meet his felt needs and what can he do about it, that’s what man-centered man wants to hear.

Man-centered man doesn’t want to hear that God created him and therefore has authority over him. He doesn’t want to hear that he has rebelled against God’s righteous rule and is a guilty sinner in his sight. He doesn’t want to hear that the wrath of God is his biggest problem and he doesn’t want to hear that God’s Son is the only solution. He doesn’t want to hear that he must repent of his sin and turn to Christ in faith to be saved. But just because man-centered man doesn’t want to hear the gospel doesn’t mean that we should change the message or stop preaching the message.
It is easy to get side-tracked from the central message in a time when people don’t want to hear it. But we need to give people what they really need, not necessarily what they feel they need. That’s why Paul commands Timothy to be sober-minded in verse 5. What he means is that Timothy must stay focused on the mission of proclaiming God’s message. And he should endure suffering for the sake of this mission and this message because the stakes are so high. He’s to do the work of an evangelist. That is, he is to keep on preaching the gospel resolutely in the face of difficulty. That’s how he will fulfill his ministry.

If you want to hear of great modern day examples of people doing this very thing I encourage you to check out the DVDs being put out by Frontline Missions International called Dispatches from the Front. They contain real-life stories of the unstoppable power of the gospel going forward in very difficult places around the world.

God is the one who knows what we need and God has given us a message to proclaim. We too need to be resolute in our proclamation of the gospel even when people don’t like it. Just because we’re booed doesn’t mean that we should change the message. It is God’s message not ours; it’s not ours to change. And God is our primary audience not man (v. 1). So, just because people will not endure sound teaching, we must remember that God wants us to endure in proclaiming the Word of God. We must be resolute.

But not only do we need to speak God’s Word in the difficult times, we also need to hear God’s Word in these difficult times.

What do you want to hear? There are voices all around. There are plenty of voices to listen to. Do you want to hear the God-centered message; the word of God? Or do you want to hear a man-centered message; the word of man? The God-centered Word, the gospel, includes reproof, rebuke, and exhortation. When it is cut straight – it cuts to the heart. It includes talking about sin and the exclusive claims of Christ. But it also includes the promise of eternal life through faith in the sin-bearing Savior.

We all make time for what’s important to us. Are you making time for hearing the Word of God through listening to it preached, reading it regularly, studying it with others, memorizing it, meditating on it, and then obeying it? It may not always be what we want to hear in the moment, but God’s people will desire to hear from God and will therefore make space to listen up.

If you’d like some help with how to listen well to a sermon, I would suggest the small booklet by Christopher Ash titled Listen Up.

I am thankful for a church that insists its pastors preach the Word of God and insists on Word-based ministries throughout the church. I pray that we will stay this way for another 60 years and that through Word ministry God would be glorified and God’s people would be blessed.

At the end of this section of admonitions to Timothy Paul sums up all that he has exhorted him with so far by saying, “fulfill your ministry.” Paul then uses his own example in verses 6-8 to show that he fulfilled his ministry, persistently, all the way until the end. This is where we pick up our third reference to time, reward day. Look at verses 6-8.

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6 Joshua Harris, “A Solemn Charge.”
REWARD DAY (vv. 6-8)

In these verses there are two pictures, three phrases, and one promise.7

Two Pictures: In the first picture, Paul says that he is already being poured out as a drink offering. He’s referring to his imminent martyrdom. He has endured suffering for the gospel and he will endure until the end. And like a sacrifice that is acceptable to God, so is his ministry. The question that stands behind this picture is whether or not Timothy will fulfill his ministry in such a way that it will be acceptable to God by suffering for the gospel. In the second picture, Paul says the time of his departure has come. This conveys the notion of a soldier pulling up his tent pegs, or a ship letting loose of the ropes that held them to the dock as they head for home.8 The fight is over. He has fulfilled his ministry.

Three Phrases: The three phrases that follow in verse 7 are similar in meaning. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” This is very similar to the imagery in 2:3-6. In that passage there is a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer who are all examples of hard work, suffering, and endurance with an eye to the prize. David Helm has also observed that in all three examples these people do their work on a field – the soldier on a battle field, the athlete on a game field, and the farmer in a field full of crops. It’s as if Paul is saying to Timothy, “I’ve left it all on the field; will you?”9 I’ve held nothing back; will you? Paul has fulfilled his ministry. Will Timothy? Paul has kept the faith. Will Timothy?

What does it mean to keep the faith? Does it mean Paul has persevered in believing the gospel? Or does it mean that Paul has preserved the faith (the gospel)? In the book of 2 Timothy it seems as though the two ideas are inseparable. We’ve titled this sermon series “Entrusted with the Gospel” to draw out the importance of preserving the gospel. The one who keeps the gospel “in trust” preaches it faithfully, protects it from false teaching, and passes it on to future generations. But the one who preserves the gospel is also the one that perseveres in believing the gospel to the end. Paul has certainly done both – he has kept the faith – and now he is calling Timothy to do the same.

The stakes are so high; he wants Timothy to leave it all on the field. We too must leave it all on the field because the stakes are so high. We need to urgently see that the gospel is preached. We need to resolutely preach the Word in the face of difficult opposition. We need to persist in this ministry to the end of our days.

We live in the last days, in the age between the two appearings of Christ. From Christ’s first appearing (the inaugurated/present kingdom) until his final appearing (the consummated/perfected kingdom) we need to proclaim the gospel (of the kingdom).10 We need to stay at this gospel ministry. We need to leave it all on the field. But what is our motivation for such urgent, resolute, and persistent gospel ministry (it sounds so tiring)?

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7 David Helm, “2 Timothy 2:1-8.”
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Cf. Vaughn Roberts, God’s Big Picture.
One Promise: Look now at the promise in verse 8. *Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*

The church must preach the gospel **persistently** because the reward on the last day is worth it.

We may be *rejected* by man for proclaiming the gospel, but we will be *received* by God because of our faith in the gospel. Therefore we can persist in gospel proclamation till the end. The one who has faith in Christ that perseveres also has the righteousness of Christ imputed (transferred) to them. Therefore, we don’t need to fear judgment – we can finish our difficult race humbly, but confidently, knowing that the crown of righteousness awaits us. Instead of facing the eternal death that is due to us because of our sin, we can look forward to eternal life because of the righteousness of Christ.

It is likely that Paul was beheaded at the hand of Nero on the Ostian Road outside of Rome because of his persistent preaching of the gospel. But it has been said that at his martyrdom he could have said, “As my head rolls, I will receive a crown; I’m guilty in the eyes of men, but righteous in the eyes of God.”

Do you look to his appearing with humble confidence? Or do you dread his appearing because you’ll face his just judgment? If you believe that Christ died *for your sins* and was raised from the dead you don’t have to fear; the gospel is able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (3:15). If you have not yet put your faith in Christ, I urge you to do so today!

We started out by saying the stakes are so high. Judgment Day is on the horizon. But for those who belong to Christ the prize that awaits us is even greater. The real prize is actually Christ himself. One day our faith will become sight when we make it home. We will behold his glory. We will be with him. We will worship the Lamb who was slain eternally together with every tribe and tongue and nation. He will be our God and we will be his people eternally. Those who had once been banished from his presence and sentenced to death will be in his presence eternally in the light of life.

And those who have faith in the gospel and are faithful to gospel ministry will long for that day; they will long to see him. We must keep that day in view. We must keep our eyes on the prize if we are to persist in gospel ministry now.

Are you having a hard time urgently, resolutely, and persistently proclaiming the gospel. Remember how high the stakes are *and* remember the crown of righteousness that awaits you.

Do you ever feel like those who persist in faith and faithfulness to gospel ministry get nothing while the faithless are winning? Are you discouraged? Take your eyes off of your circumstances and fix your eyes on Jesus the author and the perfecter of your faith (Heb. 12:2). Keep your eye on the prize – we have everything to look forward to.

The missionary H.C. Morrison spent his life working in China in the late 1800s and early 1900s. After retiring, he returned to America on board the same ship carrying former President

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11 David Helm, “2 Timothy 2:1-8.”
Theodore Roosevelt home after a hunting safari in Africa. As the ship steamed into New York harbor, large throngs of people gathered to cheer Roosevelt. But no one was there to greet Reverend Morrison. And so as he watched bands play and fire boats spray water into the air for Roosevelt, Morrison quietly fumed. “What a lot of fuss for a man who recently did nothing more than shoot tigers in Africa! What kind of homecoming do I get after decades of work for God in China?!” His lifetime of work began to look insignificant, garnering no reward or renown. There was no justice in this homecoming, he thought. Until suddenly a still small voice inside his heart whispered, "Yes, but you are not home yet."12

We are not home yet. We’re homeward bound, but we’re not home yet. But when we make it home Christ will be there to greet us and what a day of rejoicing it will be when we all see Jesus, we’ll sing and shout the victory. It will all be worth it. So we can leave it all on the field now. We’re not home yet.

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12 David Helm, “2 Timothy 2:1-8.”
References


