

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

The Positive Results of Negative Preaching

By Bobby Witherington

“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season: reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables; But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

The preceding instructions, penned by an aged apostle from a prison cell in Rome, constitute a portion of Paul’s farewell address to Timothy, his *“beloved son”* in *“the faith”* (2 Tim. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2). Paul was awaiting martyrdom and was aware that the time of his *“departure”* was *“at hand”* (2 Tim. 4:6). Contrary to what would be the normal attitude of most people under such dire this-world circumstances, Paul was not morose. Far from it! He knew that for him there was *“laid up...a crown of righteousness”* and that the Lord would preserve him *“unto his heavenly kingdom”* (2 Tim. 4:8, 18). It was with this hope and goal in mind that Paul fought *“a good fight,” “finished”* his *“course,”* and *“kept the faith”* (2 Tim. 4:7). Yes, martyrdom awaited him, but Paul knew that the cause of the Lord must continue. Others would have to pick up the flaming torch of truth and run with it. So, Paul wrote Timothy a letter of encouragement and instruction. And in this letter, he, among other things, told Timothy what to preach and how to preach. Let us observe these instructions more closely.

To Timothy, Paul issued a *“charge”* — a *“charge...before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Tim. 4:1). Too many preachers view themselves as standing before the brethren and people in general, but forget that they, first and foremost, stand *“before God and the Lord Jesus Christ!”* The solemnity of standing *“before ... the Lord Jesus Christ”* is underscored by the fact that Jesus *“shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom.”* Incidentally, this leaves no room for a millennial reign on earth. When Jesus returns, He will judge! Nothing is said about a seven-year rapture, then an earthly reign to be followed by the judgment!

The *“charge”* given Timothy was *“preach the word.”* He did not say *“preach your opinions,”* nor even the prevailing philosophies of men. *“The word”* by which we shall be judged *“in the last day”* (cf. John 12:48) must be preached now. Moreover, he said *“be instant in season, out of season....”* The point is this: there is no *“season”* when the word is not to be preached. *“The word”* is to be preached when people like it, and when they despise it. *“The word”* is to be preached when the preacher feels good, and when he feels miserable. *“The word”* is to be preached when it makes the preacher popular, and when it causes him to be hated. *“The word”* is to be preached when many are being baptized, and when no one is obeying; it is to be preached when the church is encouraged, and when it is discouraged. The farmer whose crop was destroyed by a famine last year has to sow even more seed this year. So it is in preaching; when the message seems to be falling on deaf ears the preacher must extend himself all the further and sow even more gospel *“seed”* (1 Pet. 1:23; Luke 8:11). He who has learned to *“endure hardness,”* as *“a good soldier of Jesus Christ”* (2 Tim. 2:3) is not a quitter!

But please note the further instructions. Paul said *“reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”* You mean the preacher must *“reprove”* and *“rebuke!”* Isn’t that negative? Yes. Doesn’t it make the preacher unpopular? Yes. It caused John to lose his head. Literally. It caused Jesus to be crucified. Of course, preaching is not all negative. Paul also told Timothy to *“exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”* To *“exhort”* is to call to action, to admonish, to urge one to pursue some course of conduct. He said *“reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering....”* *“Longsuffering”* means patience. *“Longsuffering”* demands stick-to-it-tiveness. The preacher is not running a 100-yard dash; he’s running a marathon! And Paul also said *“reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering, and doctrine.”* Doctrine? Yes, doctrine! Doctrine is often decried now-

days. Preachers are often criticized for being “too doctrinal.” That makes as much sense as criticizing an athlete for being too healthy!

The reason why the preacher must “*reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine*” is because many “*will not endure sound doctrine...*” (v. 3). Yes “*sound doctrine*” must be endured. It is not always easy to preach, nor easy to hear. Pious platitudes, comical “one-liners,” and soothing sweet nothings often sound better—at least, to those who “*received not the love of the truth...*” (2 Thess. 2:10). Of course, those who “*will not endure sound doctrine*” do not necessarily shun all preaching. In fact, Paul said that “*after their own lusts*” they would “*heap to themselves teachers*” – the kind of teachers who will scratch their “*itching ears,*” and even assist them in turning away their ears “*from the truth, and ...unto fables.*” (2 Tim. 4:3,4). In view of what Paul, by inspiration, knew was coming, is it any wonder that he cautioned Timothy to “*watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry*” (2 Tim. 4:5)? To “*make full proof of thy ministry*” is to fill every part, to be lacking in none of these items. I say this honestly; on numerous occasions when I have reflected on what is involved in reproving, rebuking, exhorting, and making “*full proof of thy ministry,*” I have wondered if I have enough courage to be a gospel preacher! Perhaps this is why Paul besought the brethren at Ephesus to pray for him so that he might open his “*mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,*” that he might speak “*boldly,*” as he “*ought to speak*” (Eph. 6:19-20). Without study, a preacher won’t know what to speak. Without prayer, he will not have the courage to say what he “*ought*” to say.

Yes, two-thirds of the order cited in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 involves negative preaching. However, let us not be too negative about negative preaching. It does produce positive results! It caused many of the Jews on the day of Pentecost to be “*pricked in their heart*” and to cry out, “*men and brethren, what shall we do?*” When told what to do, 3,000 souls “*gladly received the word, and were baptized.*” These constituted the “*saved*” whom “*the Lord added to the church*” (Acts 2:41, 47). Man, that’s positive! Please observe how negative Peter sounded on another occasion, when he said: “*Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity*” (Acts 8:21-23). Now that’s negative! It seems that the only thing Peter and Norman Vincent Peale (who wrote, *The Power of Positive Thinking*) have in common is that both their names start with the letter “*P.*” But look at the positive response to Peter’s preaching. “*Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me*” (Acts 8:24). But what could be more negative than the fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians? Herein Paul minced no words nor wasted any time in telling the “*puffed up*” Corinthians what to do about the man who was committing “*fornication*” with “*his father’s wife.*” But what could be more positive than the response of this man, concerning whom Paul later wrote: “*Sufficient to such a man is this punishment which was inflicted by many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him*” (2 Cor. 2:6-8). Isn’t that beautiful? **And positive?** Thank God for Paul’s negative preaching! And what about the Corinthians whom Paul rebuked for harboring a fornicator in their midst? Their response to this rebuke was such that Paul later wrote, saying: “*For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge? In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter*” (2 Cor. 7:11). That’s beautiful, too! **And positive!**

In a sense, negative **scriptural** preaching may be likened to the crucifixion of Christ. What scene could be more negative than that of Jesus dying on the cross? Yet, it was the “*joy that was set before him*” that caused Jesus to “*endure the cross*” (Heb. 12:2). That “*joy*” was the prospect of you and me, and all other sinners who obey the gospel, and henceforth live and serve acceptably, being saved eternally in heaven. Now that’s **positive!** But Jesus had to die to make it possible. And it is the “*joy...set before*” gospel preachers today that prompts them to stand up and tell it like it is (however negative it sounds); it is the “*joy*” that wells up in their hearts as they contemplate the desired results of their preaching. Yes, as I discover “*the positive results of negative preaching,*” I am forced to concur with these words from the pen of a preacher friend who said, “*I find Peale appalling and Paul appealing!*” ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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