

Itching Ears

October 16, 2022

2nd Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work...

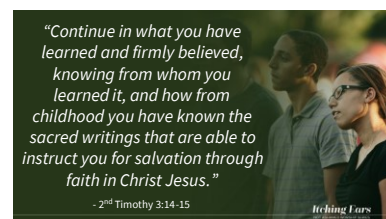
¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.



We began this “Not Ashamed” series with a call to rekindle the gift, to fan into flame the gift of faith that lives inside each of us. We gave thanks for those who poured into us, for

those who helped us on our walk of faith. Last week we heard the call to present ourselves to God and to one another as ones approved by God, as ones worthy of the call of Christ. This week we recognize that distractions abound. We are called to remain steadfast and to continue to walk daily in faith – to practice what we have learned, to share what we’ve learned with others. As we do so, let us pray...

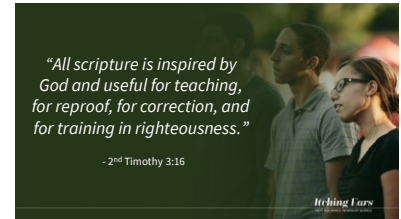
As Paul closes out the section of his second letter to Timothy with what we identify as chapter 3, verses 14-17, he offers an ode to the word of God and to all that Timothy has learned about the faith. Now, keep in mind that neither Paul nor Timothy nor any other ordinary person had what we'd call a 'Bible.' They would not get into the public's hands in any significant way until the 1500s. So when Timothy reads *"continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,"* he would know that Paul is referring to all of the oral, word of mouth teaching that Timothy has received.



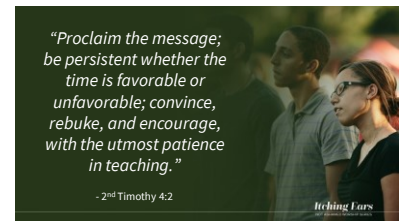
This learning about the Christian faith began with his mother and grandmother and was added to by Paul and probably others who shared the good news. If Paul were encouraging us, he would ask us to draw back to the stories of Noah's ark and of Daniel and the lion's den. He would ask us to recall all those Sundays when we were brought to church and taught about Jesus and about God's love. Paul would exhort us to think again about all of the wisdom gained in church and Sunday school, through reading the Bible and being in small groups. He would ask us to stand firmly upon the great foundation of faith that assures us of our salvation through faith in Christ.

Paul hopes that by connecting back into what was gained and learned from these habits and practices, that the love of Christ will be kindled anew in Timothy. Paul wants Timothy to fall in love with Jesus once again. He also wants young Timothy to understand that he is continuing on the work of passing on the faith. By modeling this for Timothy, Paul is guiding Timothy to claim his place in this kingdom building work.

Continuing on, Paul reminds his young protégé that *“All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”* In this kingdom building work, the word of God is the starting place, the foundation of the faith. Just as Timothy was formed and shaped by the word of God, Paul wants Timothy to see how he too can use the word of God to shape and form, to refine and correct, and to help others grow in their relationship with God.



Now, young Timothy, Paul says, it will not always be easy. Remember where I sit right now, bound in chains? Remember the beatings and stonings, the shipwreck and other trials? In the opening verses of chapter 4 Paul *“solemnly urges”* Timothy to *“Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”* Paul calls for both commitment and persistence. He begins with the essential act: proclaim the message of Christ. Acknowledging that the task will not always be easy, Paul encourages persistence whether the time is *“favorable or unfavorable.”* He wants Timothy to preach the gospel whether the crowd is for him or against him. This is another way of telling Timothy, and us, to not be ashamed of the gospel. The gospel is the power to save, to change lives. Paul is encouraging Timothy to always share the faith. As I wrote in Thursday’s blog, *“The gist here is to be ready to share the good news always - whether on Sunday morning or Tuesday afternoon, whether with a fellow believer or an atheist, whether at work or at the local grocery store... Always present yourself as one who is ready to live and love well.”*



And I love the action verbs: convince, rebuke, and encourage. Pour out your heart in your living, offering your life as a witness that convinces even non-believers of Jesus' love for them. Stand on the truth, offering words of correction or rebuke when needed in a situation or circumstance or in someone's life. And always lift others up, always offer words that encourage and edify. Perhaps most important, in and through and over all of this, do so with the utmost of patience and care. Be kind and gentle. Take your time and understand that some will arrive at the cross sooner than others. Understand that some have a different path to the foot of the cross.

Be persistent and patient, be faithful and committed – these are good reminders for us too. The journey of faith is not a dash or a mad rush. It is a slow and steady walk. The path of discipleship is not one of achievements and victories, of checking off the boxes. The road to a deep and mature faith is a road walked with patience and commitment, with persistence. Life is a road with detours and potholes, with temptations and pleasures. Too often we try and walk the road of faith with worldly rules in mind – work hard, earn your place, do more. If you fail, just work harder. But this is not the road of faith. The road of faith is the road of surrender and humility.

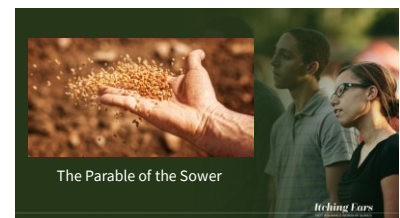
Paul began this second letter by telling Timothy to hold onto what he has been taught. He then encourages him to pick up the spirit of mentoring others, of teaching others, of walking alongside others on their journeys of faith. Paul implores Timothy to keep modeling and passing on the faith lessons, the wisdom, the call to holy living. There is also an implied message in here that we cannot miss. Paul wants Timothy to understand that he is still on the journey himself. So even as Timothy preaches and teaches, he is to remain a learner and a seeker.

As we touched on earlier, Paul wrote that “*all scripture*” is useful. Not just some parts. So keep learning, keep being challenged, keep questioning when you are troubled, keep growing when you are stretched by the word. Keep asking these questions: How does this teaching help me to know Jesus better? How is the word made flesh revealed in this passage?

Paul encourages Timothy to keep growing in the faith, to continue to seek to be more and more like Jesus because, well, the more you know Jesus, the more you live and therefore preach the gospel. Even though stepping into more of a leadership role, young Timothy, allow the scriptures to continue to “*train [you] in righteousness.*”

This charge that Paul gives Timothy – this call to faithful persistence, this call to share the good news, this challenge to keep growing in the faith – this charge is not just to Timothy. This charge is ours too. As followers of Jesus, make no mistake, we too are charged with sharing the most important relationship in our lives. All of us – every single one of us – are called to share that which defines us and to reveal the one who shapes us. All of us are called to share our faith and to witness to the one who offers grace and mercy and hope and redemption and restoration and salvation. We are all called to share our knowledge, our experiences, and our stories of faith as means to give invitation and to gather up those who are lost and hurting and broken. And as Paul told Timothy, so he tells us. This is not always going to be easy.

Jesus offered this same message. In Matthew 13 he gave the parable of the sower. If you recall, Jesus charged his disciples and those in the crowd to sow seeds of faith.



He encourages us to sow seeds everywhere. Jesus said to sow the seeds of faith in the hard soil, in the rocky soil, in the weedy soil, and in the good soil. Jesus was teaching about persistence and generosity, about offering everyone the good news that has the power to change lives. In this parable, Jesus also reminds us that it is not we who cause the seed to grow. We are simply called to sow abundantly and persistently, trusting the Spirit to do the work of faith.

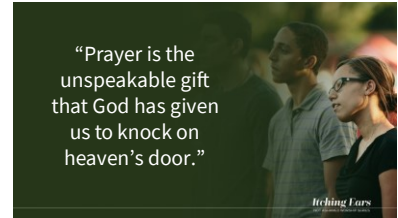
Turning to our gospel lesson for this week, we look at another story of persistence. There are also some itching ears in this story. Turn with me to Luke 18, starting in verse 1, where we find the parable of the persistent widow. This is, as Jesus says in verse 1, a story about the need to pray continuously without giving up.



Long story short, the widow has been wronged but has no standing before the judge. As she is a widow, she has no one to plead her case. So she goes to the unjust judge – the one who does not fear God or respect men, the one whose ears itch for the clink of bribe money. She asks and asks and asks for justice to be done. Basically her persistence moves the unjust judge to give her justice.

Unpacking the parable, we find three main points. First, as its focus was about praying continually, Jesus tells us that the lack of persistence is often the root of unanswered prayer. Second, we learn that even fallible humans can sometimes get it right. And third, the woman is confident that justice will be done. Her belief is in the justice that she seeks. She knows God is just. She prays to God for justice.

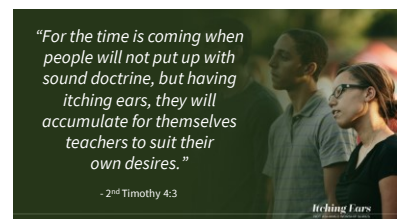
The parable of the persistent widow is ultimately a story about stewardship of prayer – of faithfully tending to our prayers. As one scholar wrote, “Prayer is the unspeakable gift that God has given us to knock on heaven’s door.” How would your prayer life change if you prayed always with this belief?



Just as Paul’s charge to Timothy and to us was to be persistent in the sharing of the good news, so too is Jesus’ call to be both persistent and courageous in our prayer. Paul believed with all his heart that the gospel holds the power to change lives. In the same way, Jesus teaches us here that courageous and persistent prayer has the power to change lives. Faithful prayer believes in the justice that we seek for a broken world and in the power of God to deliver such justice. There is a confident faith at work in both persistent witness and in persistent prayer. Both are needed in our lives and in our world today.

Sometimes, though, it feels like we are not making headway, like we are not making any progress. On bad days, it feels like the world and evil is winning. Patience and commitment, persistence and faithfulness – sometimes these are hard to hold fast to. Turn with me to 2nd Timothy 4 to see what Paul has to say about this struggle.

Speaking towards the future, but sounding like the present tense to me, Paul says in verse 3, *“For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.”* Now, this might sound like bad news.

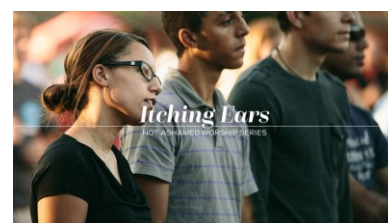


To a certain degree it is. For thousands of years false prophets and teachers have led many astray. Even in Jesus' day there were many who would not put up with his sound teaching. He was crucified, remember? And since the days of Jesus, many people have been led away to other religions, to other systems, to other ways of living. Many prophets and leaders have built followings, yet none pass the test of time. Today, this continues to happen. So why are people led astray? Why do people's itching ears lead them to buy into all sorts of wild stuff? The pull of the world is strong.

My friends, here is the good news: itching ears are a good thing. Itching ears means that people are searching.

It means that people still have a great desire for real truth

and for meaning and purpose in their lives. Itching ears means that there is still a desire for a better life, for a better story, for a transformative story. Itching ears will keep on itching until they find the story that scratches the itch, that soothes the pain, that heals the wound. Here is our opportunity.



Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus is the best story ever. So here is our challenge: tell a better story than the world offers. Tell the story of Jesus Christ and what he has done for you. Tell the story of faith, a story that brings hope and joy, that offers promise and peace. Tell the good news of Jesus Christ – a story that brings meaning and purpose to life. Tell of the love of Jesus Christ, a love that breaks all chains and heals all wounds. Ears are itching to hear and to believe this story. Do not be ashamed of the gospel – the story that has the power to save, the power to change lives. My friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, may we tell the world of our Jesus, sharing the power of Christ with all we meet. May it be so. Amen and amen.

GPS - Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Who do you know with itching ears? How might this be an opportunity to share the story of what Jesus has done in your life?
- 2) *Pray*. How has the word of God recently been trying to shape and form, to rebuke and correct, or to convince and encourage you? Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to work in your life and faith.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 18:1-8. What in your life (or in the life of someone you know) needs persistent prayer? How can you bring this to God more consistently?