



## BECOMING ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS: PREACHING

Titus 1:1-4

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### Introduction – Preaching Turns A Whole Place Upside Down

Did you ever walk through a village notorious for its drunkenness and profanity? Did you ever see poor wretched beings that once were men, standing, or rather leaning, against the posts of the alehouse, or staggering along the street? Have you ever looked into the houses of the people, and beheld them as dens of iniquity, at which your soul stood aghast? Have you ever seen the poverty, and degradation, and misery of the inhabitants, and sighed over it? 'Yes,' you say, 'we have.' But was it ever your privilege to walk through that village again, in after years, when the gospel had been preached there? It has been mine.

So spoke Spurgeon of his experience in his first pastorate in the rural village of Waterbeach, outside Cambridge. He went on to say:

There went into that village a lad, who had no great scholarship, but who was earnest in seeking the souls of men. He began to preach there, and it pleased God to turn the whole place upside down.

Preaching! There has proven to be nothing like it to turn a place upside down; nothing like it to transform the hearts and minds; nothing like it to help people become zealous for good works.

"There is nothing like it," said one of the twentieth-century's greatest preachers, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, of Westminster Chapel, London. "It is the greatest work in the world, the most thrilling, the most exciting, the most rewarding, and the most wonderful."<sup>1</sup> Yet we live in a day and age where the widespread view is that lots of things are like it, even better than it, and nothing particularly special about it.

The great Christian statesman, John Stott, accurately summarizes the situation in these rather pointed words: "The contemporary world is decidedly unfriendly towards preaching."<sup>2</sup> It must be admitted that this attitude toward preaching is responsible for the decline in spiritual vitality and moral rigor of Christians. Part of the proof for that assertion is to look at the facts of history and note that every significant spiritual renewal and revival among the people of God has been driven by a renewal and revival of preaching.

At the end of the day, there is nothing like preaching to promote within the people of God zeal for good works. And in this message and from this opening passage from Titus, a book designed to help the church become zealous for good works, we are going to explore why it is that there's nothing like preaching to promote zeal for good works. So this message is part apology for preaching, part demonstration of the crucial role of preaching in promoting zeal for good works.

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *The Living Church*, p. 97.

As you may recall from last week's sermon, the book of Titus provides the church with practical instruction on how to organize and educate itself for effective gospel outreach; in a word, how to become zealous for good works. So the various passages in this letter will each, in their own way, contribute part of the answer to that question: how does the church become zealous for good works? How does the church become more effective at gospel outreach?

Last week's message was introductory. We sought to show that "Zealous for Good Works," the title for this sermon series, really does capture the heart of this book. We learned, you'll remember, first of all that good works are everywhere in Titus. We also learned that good works are essential to authentic faith in Titus. And, thirdly, we learned that good works are evangelistic in their trust according to Titus; good works are for outsiders.

This week's message turns, then, to the first specific, the first and indeed, as we shall see, primary way in which we as a church become zealous for good works. You will have no doubt noticed that these first four verses of Titus are filled with some wonderful biblical truths and rich theological themes; but you may also have noticed that it highlights only one churchly activity: *preaching*.

As we seek to fulfill our calling to be that city on a hill; as we desire to let our light shine before others that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven; as we long to become increasingly zealous for good works and thus adorn the doctrine of God with our lives; as we attempt to do all these things we must keep preaching at the center of it all. *For preaching is the primary way in which God creates a people who are zealous for good works.* Why is that the case? Because of what preaching is and what preaching does. First, preaching's origin: in the revelation and command of God: divinely revealing and divinely sanctioned. Second, preaching's content: the person and work of Christ, the hope of glory. And, third, preaching's purpose: to elicit faith and instill knowledge—which, as Paul says, "accords with" or "leads to godliness" (1:1).

### **The Origin of Preaching: God's Revelation and God's Command (1:1-3)**

We begin with the origin of preaching. Preaching has, from the first, been central to the Christian faith. From the earliest days of the Apostles, they gave themselves to preaching. So, too, Christianity has always been defined by preaching. In fact, preaching distinguishes Christianity from the other religions of the world. John Broadus, regarded by many as the father of modern biblical preaching, had this to say about the place of preaching in Christianity:

Preaching is characteristic of Christianity. No other religion has made the regular and frequent assembling of groups of people, to hear religious instruction and exhortation, an integral part of divine worship.<sup>3</sup>

But why has preaching been the characteristic thing about Christianity? It has to do with the origin of preaching. As we learn from this passage, preaching is rooted in *God's revelation*. In fact, as Paul explains, preaching is the very means by which the timeless purposes and precious promises of God are made manifest or visible in the world. You see, God the Father had as his purpose from all eternity past to send God the Son into the world to redeem us from our sins and make for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (2:14). God's purposes and promises aren't made visible on the evening news; you won't read anything about them in the *Time* or *Newsweek*.

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<sup>3</sup> John Broadus, *Preaching*, p. 3 (cited in Mohler, p. 16).

Preaching is also rooted in *God's command*. The Apostle Paul did not make preaching his primary occupation because he liked preaching, or because he was good at preaching, or because he earned a good living from preaching. Nor did he give himself to preaching because he found it good for his ego to be in front of large crowds of people, not least because when he preached, he was often beat up for it! No, Paul preached because Paul was commanded to preach. As he says, preaching is that with which "I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior" (v. 3). This in turn is why Paul identifies himself in the opening verse as "a servant of God" (v. 1). He's a man under strict orders. That's also why he was called to be "an apostle of Jesus Christ" (v. 1). He's a herald, a steward of the mysteries of God. So Paul says to Timothy, "For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle" (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). Or to the church in Rome that it is "my ambition to preach the gospel" (15:26). Or to the saints of Corinth: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" Preaching, for Paul, then, was not an option; neither is it for us.

Preaching is, then, rooted in the revelation and command of God. Because of this, preaching is neither insignificant to the church nor optional for the church. Rather, preaching is critical and essential—to your life and mine, to the health and vitality of the church of Jesus Christ, even to the hope and future of the world. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, "Life, death, hell, and worlds unknown may hang on the preaching and hearing of a sermon."<sup>4</sup> We literally cannot live without preaching!

### **The Content of Preaching: God's Word and God's Son (1:3)**

So, there is nothing like preaching—the act and activity of preaching. But that's not the only partially addresses the issue. What ultimately sets Christian preaching apart from everything else is the *content* of Christian preaching.

What is the content of preaching that can truly be called Christian preaching? What is it that we preach? We preach, as Paul says, "his word" (v. 3)—that is to say, God's word, not our word.

Because preaching is preaching God's word, preaching must be both biblical and expository. Preaching must be biblical because the whole point of preaching is to speak God's word in human words; not human words in human words. But because preaching is to be biblical, it must be expository. That is to say, the preacher must seek to make the message of the text the message of the sermon. What the text says, he must say. And not the other way around: letting what he wants to say guide his selection of texts.

But in preaching God's word, we don't *merely* preach the Bible. We preach *the Christ* of the Bible. So the content of preaching is not only the Bible, but the One who is the sum and substance of the Bible. For what is the word of God all about, from Genesis to Revelation? It is all about Christ! You may recall in Luke 24 the two men who met the Risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus, where Luke tells us of Jesus, that "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27). Jesus Christ is in all the Scripture. He is both the goal and the key to the entire Bible. He is not only the hope of the Old Testament, he is the fulfillment of the New. "For," as Paul says, "all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20).

So in preaching God's word, we preach God's Son. In preaching the Bible, we preach the heart of the Bible—Jesus Christ. In expositing Scripture, we expose ourselves to the Lord of

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Albert R. Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, p. 47.

Scripture. “Him we proclaim,” Paul says to the Colossians (1:28). Or to the Corinthians, he writes: “what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

God’s word and God’s Son—this is the content of preaching. And this is why there’s nothing like it!

## **The Purpose of Preaching: Knowledge of the Truth**

What is the purpose of preaching? In the most basic sense, preaching is designed *to elicit or to bring forth faith*. Here’s how this works. As Paul says in Romans: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (10:17). Preaching, then, is God’s means of making known the word of Christ in order that faith might spring to life in the hearts of God’s elect, those whom God has chosen to become heirs of salvation.

But what this means more precisely is that preaching is designed *to instill in God’s people a knowledge of the truth*. You see, when Paul pairs “the faith of God’s elect” with “their knowledge of the truth” in 1:1, he is with the latter phrase further defining the former phrase.<sup>5</sup>

Because preaching instills in us a knowledge of the truth, it cures us of the ultimate and most fatal of diseases: *ignorance*.<sup>6</sup> Think about it: much of the spiritual malaise and immaturity we see in our own lives is the direct result of not knowing the truth of God’s word. This should be no great surprise to us. For we cannot be profoundly impacted by that which we do not know! And the sad reality is that many of us know far more about our favorite sports team, or our favorite hobby, or our own line of work, than we do about the word of God and the gospel. In fact, there is a startling degree of biblical illiteracy among Bible-believing Christians these days. And while biblical literacy or the knowledge of the truth leads to godliness, biblical illiteracy or biblical ignorance leads to spiritual impotence and ineffectiveness.

Yet Paul can describe salvation itself as “coming to a knowledge of the truth,” Now when faith is birthed in one’s heart and the knowledge of the truth of God’s word has renewed one’s mind, the result is this: *a transformed life*. Indeed, the result is a life that is increasingly zealous for good works. For the knowledge of the truth, as Paul says, “accords with” or “leads to godliness” (1:1), to a life of good works.

Just after Christmas, *The Times* printed a most remarkable confession from a self-proclaimed atheist, entitled: “As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God.”<sup>7</sup> He describes visiting the African country of Malawi and several charity works there. Listen to his most remarkable response to what he saw. He says of his visit:

It inspired me, renewing my flagging faith in development charities. But traveling in Malawi refreshed another belief, too: one I’ve been trying to banish all my life, but an observation I’ve been unable to avoid since my African childhood. It confounds my ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses to fit my world view, and has embarrassed my growing belief that there is no God.

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<sup>5</sup> The “and” (*kai*) is epexegetic, further explaining what is entailed in faith. So, Marshall.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this way of putting it to Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Parris, “As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God.” December 27, 2008.

Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.

That's right! The primacy of preaching is changing people's hearts, promoting spiritual transformation, affecting new birth, initiating change—the primacy of preaching is making people zealous for good works!

Whether in Africa or America, Malawi or Oak Park, whether among the poor or the rich, the uneducated or the educated, whether in the first-century or the twenty-first century, there is simply nothing like it!

### **Conclusion—Preach the Word!**

Preaching is the primary way in which God creates a people who are zealous for good works. Preaching is of course not the *only* way he does so, as we shall see as we work our way through the book of Titus in the weeks ahead. But let's be clear at the outset that preaching is indeed the *primary* way he does so. Of all the things talked about in this important little book, preaching is the main thing. That's why Paul begins the letter the way he does.

But if preaching is the main thing, then our challenge is to so order our lives as individuals and our life as a church that we let this main thing *be* the main thing. For if we are going to fulfill our calling as a church to be that City on a Hill of which Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount, we are going to have to insist on the primacy of preaching and allow no substitutes.

This is why Paul was so insistent with his other junior colleague in the ministry, Timothy, when he said to him: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort” (2 Tim. 4:2). And he says virtually the same thing to Titus: “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.” As if to say to these understudies of his: “Men, brothers, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing!” in other words, let the main thing be the main thing—*preach the word!*

This is why we as a church need to be insistent that we prioritizing the preaching of the word among all the believers. Preaching must be central and shape the tenor of everything else we do. And, let me just say for the record, that we must insist on preaching as central not because the preacher is central, but because God's word, God's voice, is central.

This is also why you must help us, as your pastors, to prioritize the preaching of the word amidst all our other responsibilities. Just as we as a church are pushed and pulled in all sorts of directions, so too I as your pastor am pushed and pulled in all sorts of directions. Not all of them pointless or fruitless, but often they are not helping me minister the word of God to you from week to week.

Finally, each one of us—each one of you—needs to prioritize the preaching of the word in your own life. Let me ask you a rather blunt but I suspect revealing question: What is the highpoint of your week? Is it sitting under the ministry of the word of God? If not, let me ask you quite candidly: why not? For what could be more thrilling than the prospect of hearing the voice of God speaking to you in words you can understand?

Amen.