

READY TO PREACH

2 Timothy 2:4

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Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Timothy 4. As you are turning, I want to add my word of greeting to you. Thank you for being here. This is a conference *for the Church*; we are a seminary that exists *for the Church*; I am a man that lives my life, to the best of my ability, for the Lord Jesus Christ and *for the Church*. It is a special thing to gather for the first *For the Church* Conference. I was asked to speak on “Ready to Preach.” For those in the room who are preachers, you know we typically pick texts, but on occasion, a text picks us. I feel that way tonight as we look to God’s Word.

I am going to be preaching especially from 2 Tim 4:2, but in many ways, we will look in and out of two full chapters - 3 and 4 - as we consider this topic. “Preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2).

Readiness is a concept to consider, an achievement to pursue, a state of being to seek to maintain. Who among us, after all, would be content in any arena of life to be counted unready? To not be ready, or even appear unready, can derail you in virtually any area of life. As I was thinking about this passage and topic in recent weeks, my mind went back to the 2008 presidential election when the whole idea of readiness became a focal point. You may recall, after eight years of the Bush administration, the nation seemed ready to transition leadership from Republican to Democratic. Political pundits predicted that Hillary Clinton, the former first lady and senator from New York, would stroll to the Democratic nomination and waltz into the White House. Early, the

Democrats were so certain of Hillary's rise to the nomination that observers anticipated the primary season being less a contest than a coronation. Nonetheless, a challenger emerged. He was a first-term, junior senator from Illinois; a political novice with an unusual name, Barack Hussein Obama.

Few took him seriously at first, but Obama proved to be a worthy opponent. The young senator from Chicago stormed through the primaries, built momentum, and seized the nation's imagination until, finally, Clinton went for the nuclear option, quite literally. She released a series of TV advertisements known as the "3 a.m. ads." You may recall them. The ads featured a ringing phone in the middle of the night; visuals of children sleeping in bed with the haunting voice wondering who would be equipped in the White House when the phone rang at 3 a.m. to answer that phone when there was a crisis. As parents, who do you want in the White House when that phone rings to deal with an international crisis, a nuclear incident, terrorist threat, or some other ominous development? While your child slept in the middle of the night, who would you like to deal with this? The message was clear—it was no time for amateur hour in the White House. The next commander in chief must be ready for the office. The ads, however, proved incapable of stopping the wave of support for Obama. Yet, our responsibility is far greater than those who would occupy the White House. Our pastoral office, we believe with full conviction, is more consequential than the Oval Office.

The call to lead the church is higher than the call to lead the nation, and to please the One we serve is more urgent than pleasing the electorate. We must be ready. In fact, readiness is a constant pursuit; you never quite attain it. You seek it throughout your life in ministry week-in and week-out, Lord's Day after Lord's Day.

This idea is front and center in 2 Tim 4:2, and it is front and center in Christian ministry. It is a particular, specific, inspired exhortation. It is a distinguishing mark of a qualified minister—one who is ready to preach. In thinking about the call to be ready—the theme of this conference, and this direct injunction from Paul to us—we confess it lacks a little zip, flare, and panache. It just is not sexy. Ministry in the 21st century so often tells us we should aspire for so much more than being ready. Frankly, it does not register with our priorities. The church's value system in the 21st century seems placed in other areas than readiness.

You would almost think the verse would say “be skilled” as opposed to “be ready.” Be skilled—refine your gifts of communication, strengthen your delivery, sharpen your wit, polish your presentation, spit-shine your sermon outline. Or perhaps it should say, “be networked.” After all, you would almost think Paul was unqualified to speak to us in that he has no Twitter followers nor a Facebook fan page. At this point, he certainly has a diminished rolodex. Or, perhaps the call in verse two should say “to be well-positioned.” We all know those whose gifts have taken them to places that their character has not kept them—the position to which so many aspire, but, tragically, for which so many are not ready. Perhaps we would think it should say to “be platformed,” to have a microphone on social media or a web presence that affords you an opportunity to be known. Perhaps Paul should be saying to “be credentialed.” Theological education has never been more accessible. Anyone anywhere can get a degree, and we are grateful for that. I, after all, lead an institution that is given to that. Yet, one can have degrees, credentials, appropriate résumés, and an impressive CV, but not be ready.

In the context of this passage that rolls with anticipation and concern over faithful ministry and how to preach the Word, Paul stubbornly and directly challenges Timothy to “be ready.” This injunction comes with added momentum because of its context. These are the dying words of a dying man, given to a delinquent son in the faith in the context of a church that is straying. These are his final words. This is Paul’s final letter, and he knows death is near. In 2 Tim 4:6 he says, “I am being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.” Empire-wide persecution of Christians is underway, and this has accelerated mass defections from the church. Apostasy and disavowal of the faith are common. Timothy is vacillating; he is equivocating; he is in need of strength and personal fortification. But Paul writes to him, and he challenges him about ministry. He says, “You preach; you be ready.”

More personally, all of us in the room who preach, have preached, or aspire to preach identify with this book and passage. It captivates us. There is a certain romance to the call to preach that brings us back to these verses again, and again, and again, with a magnetic pull. It is as though we know Paul was speaking to Timothy and the church, but we can read it as though he was speaking directly to us. These are Paul’s

words to Timothy and to the church, and in a real way to us, he says, “be ready.”

The Three Marks of the Gospel Minister’s Irreducible Task

Indeed, there is much for which Paul could urge Timothy to be ready. After all, there is so much a minister is to do, so much he is to undertake, and so much he is to do well. But the irreducible task of the minister of the gospel is to preach the Word. Therefore, it is unsurprising that preaching the Word is coupled here with the call to readiness. Paul says, “You teach the Word, *be ready* in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort with great patience, and instruction.”

The phrase, “be ready” comes to us in a unique formation. It is a command that means “to be standing by or be equipped.” It is not only “to be prepared or equipped,” but also “to be poised, alert, and eager for the responsibility.” John Stott said it appears to take on the flavor not only of alertness and eagerness, but of insistence and urgency. Fundamentally, readiness is coupled with preaching the Word.

“Preach the Word.” This simple, direct admonition that is echoed throughout the history of the church no matter the season, era, continent, receptivity to or rejection of it stands as a timeless charge to preach the Word. This means to herald, to lift up one’s voice, to proclaim, to speak it loudly, boldly, without fear, and to make it known. I love how Paul says, “Preach the Word.” There is no need to clarify whose word, which word, or what word. He says simply, “Preach the Word.”

Much has been said of this passage, and much could be said, but I want to think together around three charges, or marks, of what it means to be ready to preach the Word. We will bob and weave within chapters 3 and 4 because so much is here, but all of this will be rooted and derived from 2 Tim 4:2. My argument is quite simply this—there are three non-negotiable marks of being ready to preach in this verse and throughout this passage: biblical conviction, personal courage, and pastoral care.

Mark One: Biblical Conviction

Mark one of being ready to preach is being a man of biblical conviction. This is set forth clearly when he says, "Preach the Word." It is as though it says, "What else could we preach?" or "How could we contemplate preaching anything else?"

The premise to preach the Word is built upon the entire canon of Scripture and is fleshed out throughout this book. Look, for instance, at chapter 1. Let your eyes follow throughout this book.

- 2 Timothy 1:13: "Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."
- 2 Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."
- 2 Timothy 2:25: "The Lord's bondservant is to gently correct those who oppose, hoping God to grant them repentance so they may come to the knowledge of the truth."
- 2 Timothy 3:10: "You followed my teaching."
- 2 Timothy 3:14: "Continue in the things you have learned from me and become convinced of."
- 2 Timothy 4:3: "They will not endure sound doctrine."
- 2 Timothy 4:4: "They will turn away their ears from the truth."
- 2 Timothy 4:7: "I have kept the faith."

The immediate context, prior to the call to preach the Word, contains one of the most majestic, informative, compelling statements in all the Bible about the Scriptures. Paul's command to preach the Word is built upon the logic of the authority and power of the Word as revealed in 1:15–17. He says,

From childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

These few verses form the foundation for Paul's statement in 4:2. It is a clear statement about Scripture that it is indeed inspired from God, from his innermost being.

We formulate from this the conviction of Scripture's verbal-plenary inspiration—that all of it is inspired, and not just all of it in thought, but all of it in word. The words themselves are inspired. Paul says, "Look, all Scripture is given of God. It is inspired by God, and it is profitable for something; for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be mature and maturing, equipped for every good work." The Bible is not a condiment that flavors our sermons. The Bible is the sole source, the foundation, and the content of our sermons. We are called to be ready to preach. If you are not convinced of Scripture—its truthfulness, authority, relevance, and power—you will be disinclined to preach the Word. You may look to it for sermon points because that is what evangelical preachers are to do, but you will never let the Word be your sermon's focus.

Brothers and sisters, I come to you as a man with a great burden because I watch preachers as you do, listen to preaching as you do, and read books on preaching as you do. What we are insisting upon at this seminary and from this text is a commitment to preaching the Bible that is unpopular in the broader Evangelical Movement. It may receive lip service, but actually doing it with discipline, intentionality, rigor, and faithfulness, is, unfortunately, uncommon. Paul says, "Preach the Word." You must be ready, and to be ready to preach, you must be a person of biblical conviction. That means your sermons come from the Scripture.

When I read things people write, I try to do so charitably, but recently a series of articles sent me to a book written by Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide*.¹ In that book and in other venues, Stanley argues that preachers should stop saying, "The Bible says." He argues that phrases like, "The Bible says," assume a person is a Christian because only a Christian takes the Old and New Testament as authoritative. So, if I am going to preach to people who are not Christians, I have to leverage a different point of authority if I am going to expect them to track along with me. That is 1,000 times wrong. The point is not that we are making assumptions about our hearers; the point is that we are standing upon

¹ Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

presuppositions about God's Word. We preach the Bible. It is authoritative. It is a hammer that breaks the rock. It is words of life that resurrect the dead. The Bible is more than a resource book. We are not doctors who learn medicine along the way and then can treat people without referring back directly to our books of study. We are ministers of the Word and to be ready to preach is to preach with biblical conviction.

I remember like yesterday the first sermon I ever preached, though I have been trying since the day after that to forget it. Some of you know what I am talking about. If you do not know what I am talking about, it is either because you have never preached, or you are too arrogant to think rightly and accurately about that first sermon. I was a college athlete, and as a college athlete who is a Christian, I found myself getting to share my testimony in places. Our church had some men who went to do a Sunday afternoon Bible study at a halfway house for ladies. There were 40–50 ladies there who had experienced some hardship, perhaps some abuse they were seeking to overcome. Some kind of difficulty in life had them there. I was asked on a Sunday to preach the next Sunday. I had never prepared a sermon in my life. No one had ever told me how to prepare a sermon. I had no idea how to prepare a sermon. It seemed like such a great invitation, so I accepted it with eagerness.

As the week began ticking through and Monday became Tuesday, and Tuesday became Wednesday, and I started barreling toward Sunday, I was fraught with panic over how to prepare a sermon. I still remember sitting down in my dorm room and taking out a legal pad to prepare a sermon. I didn't know what to do, so I just wrote down some of my favorite Bible verses. I then wrote down all of the preacher jargon that I could recall. Finally, I sprinkled in a few stories and a couple of illustrations, and I showed up to preach.

I preached this sermon and in my mind I had gamed it out to take 25 or 30 minutes, and I was done in about eight or nine minutes. I didn't know what to do, so I just re-preached it without sitting down. At the end of the sermon, I gave an invitation and six or seven ladies came to the front to receive Christ. I was smitten. I had never been so exhilarated in all my life. I was riding in the car back to the church with the guy who normally led the services. He said, "You did such a great job." I said, "Thank you. Honestly, I was blown away by their response." He said, "Didn't that make you feel great when those ladies came forward?" I said,

“You kidding? Absolutely.” He said, “Those same ladies come forward every Sunday for me.”

I say that not to just get a laugh, but once I learned, in the months that would follow, what a sermon is to be and how one is to make a sermon, it was the most liberating news of my life. I didn’t have to rack my brain for preacher jargon or rifle through illustration books. Instead, I could look to a passage and explain it. It was absolutely liberating to me that I could do that and please the One who evidently was calling me.

Biblical conviction is the first mark of being ready to preach—biblical conviction about what the Bible is, but also about what we are to do with it. Here is the point: there is a correlation between biblical conviction and biblical preaching. It is hard to have a high view of Scripture without a high view of biblical preaching. Biblical preaching does not grow on the vine of a low view of Scripture. Why preach the Word? I realize this isn’t a preaching workshop, but let me just present you quickly with a few reasons why I am convinced of biblical preaching.

The most obvious reason, first of all, is that it most fulfills the biblical commands regarding biblical preaching. Think of 2 Timothy 4:2 and 1 Timothy 4:13–16. Prescriptively and descriptively throughout the Bible, especially the book of Acts, we see repeatedly a model set forth for preaching—that is to preach the Word. Second, biblical preaching—expositional preaching—most honors the authority and the status of preaching. It gives people a certain word. When someone asks you, “What’s your sermon on?” Your first reflexive answer should be a text, not a title. Third, it gives an authority to the sermon. It gives the sermon a “Thus sayeth the Lord” ring. If you’re not bringing the text to bear, you are doing little more than pulling rank. Fourth, it gives weight and gravity to ministry. It brings seriousness to the pulpit while making the sermon’s content objective.

Fifth, biblical preaching most matures your congregation. There will be a trickle-down effect from the pulpit to the pew that causes your church to mature. Moreover, your pulpit will become a beacon in the city, drawing mature believers who move to town and want to be fed and be a part of a mature congregation. Sixth, it demonstrates how to study the Bible. It is no compliment when your church members often ask, “Wow, where did you get that from?” They should be able to see the root of your application. A part of preaching the Scriptures is we demystify the

preaching act and the sermon preparation act, thus educating our people on how to study the Bible.

Seventh, it assures relevance. Though counterintuitive, there is an inverse correlation between biblical relevance and attempted cultural relevance. Nothing dates a sermon like being chock full of pop-cultural references. Eighth, biblical preaching most consistently reveals Christ and a robust gospel message. As you preach the text, you're pointing people to Christ. You're not merely bringing trite or overly simplified gospel presentations; rather, you're preaching a full gospel message and thus producing sound, true conversions. Ninth, it most matures me as a man of God. Discipline in the Word forces me to address difficult passages. Pastoral tenure happens most often in the setting of biblical exposition because you do not have time to update your résumé. You're too busy trying to figure out what Paul meant in the next verses.

Tenth, biblical preaching gives me confidence in my sermon because I have authority that is not my own, but that is derived from Scripture. Eleventh, it most optimally stewards my time. I don't have to spend all my days trying to figure out what to preach on because I just go to the next passage. Twelfth, it ensures balance in the pulpit and prevents hobby-horse preaching.

Are you ready to preach? The person who is ready to preach is the person whose veins pulsate with biblical conviction about what the Bible is and conviction about what to do with it. Mark number one of the man who is ready to preach, for the woman who is ready to teach, is biblical conviction.

Mark Two: Personal Courage

I love the way verse 2 encapsulates personal courage, but the concept flows throughout this book and especially chapters 3 and 4. Recall the backdrop of the book that I referenced previously. Timothy, a young man who is probably in his early 30s, is clearly discouraged and second-guessing himself, so Paul is writing in a prophetic, apostolic way and in essence saying, "Buck up." He is challenging him. He is exhorting him to do this. He is reminding him of his rootedness in Scripture, his call to stand on Scripture, and to preach the Scripture. Then, he moves into how to preach the Scripture and bring it to bear.

First, it is imbedded in the word “preach.” As I have already referenced, to preach means “to herald or to proclaim, to speak intensely.” It comes with a force that presupposes courage. It is not so much the modulation of one’s voice, but the force of the words because of a conviction about that which you speak. Listen closely, preaching is more than a data dump. The central liability of many expositional sermons is just that. It is a rambling commentary that drops data on people, and preachers cannot figure out why people are getting bored. We are to present the text with force, probing, pushing, and prodding our listeners. To preach the Bible is more than a data dump. It is more than transmitting what you read in the commentaries to your people that week. It is to take it and apply it with a “Thus sayeth the Lord” charge.

A number of years ago I took my wife to Chicago for our anniversary. We spent the weekend there. We love Chicago, and when we have the chance to go for a couple days we do. While there, we signed up to take an architectural boat tour. Some of you have done that before. It is an incredible thing to do. It is like a double decker bus tour, except it is a little more romantic because you are on the water and a little less cheesy because people are not gawking at you as you sit at red lights. You are there in the boat, going through a city on the water. It is fascinating. The guide on the microphone will tell you that you are going by the Merchandise Mart building, and how it was built in the 20s. Before the Pentagon, it was the largest building in the U.S. The Kennedy family owned it for years, and they sold it along with some other properties and made \$625 million. You will go by the Sears Tower, and he will tell you about that. You are going through the city by water, and the guide is telling you about every river, every building, the architectural rendering and style, the skyline, and you end it with all of this data about the city.

Often I hear preaching like that. It is merely cruising through the passage, giving a little historical background, a contextual statement here, a little word study there, and an “exegetical fallacy” there, to quote D.A. Carson, and mixing it all in. You leave there saying, “Hmm, that was enlightening.” Preaching should never be less than a Bible study, but it should always be more than a Bible study. It is more than a boat tour or an architectural assessment of the passage. We are doing more than revealing artifacts; we are bringing it to bear.

Notice again how this comes to us. Chapter 3 and 4 necessitate this. Look 2 Tim. 3:1-7,

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

You say, "Oh my, wasn't the world a mess then." Yes, but this, I believe, is first and foremost a reference to the church, or at least those who were meeting under the auspices of the church. It is a commentary on the state of the religious.

Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected in regard to the faith. But they will not make further progress; for their folly will be obvious to all, just as Jannes's and Jambres's folly was also. Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me! (2 Tim. 3:8–11)

What is going on here? Paul is reminding Timothy of how devastatingly ruinous the culture and the church was and is. Verse-after-verse in chapter 3, we see the cascading effects of the fall. All of this is going wrong. He punctuates it with verse 12: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Then, notice 2 Tim. 4:3–4,

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will

turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

What is going on here? Sandwiched within the documentary of all the decay, compromise, and junk that was taking place in the first century church and culture is a silver bullet to combat it with a preached Word—a preaching that is rich in biblical content and that comes with full-throttled force. Now, to make that point even clearer, and to add emphasis, 4:1 sets the context. Paul says, “I solemnly 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.” Paul is saying, “In spite of all of the decay and ruin, you must do something, and I remind you—before I give you the charge to do it in verse 2—in whose presence I charge you, and it is King Jesus.” He frames this by a reminder of Jesus as the soon-coming Judge who is coming to establish his kingdom. Preach the Word with courage. Do something with it. Notice, you reprove, rebuke, and exhort. When do you do that? In season and out of season.

Typically when you hear verse 2 preached, you hear people say that it refers to whether or not the crowd, church, or culture is receptive. Sometimes it will be more in season and sometimes it will be less in season. The point is that it is always either in season or out of season, so always preach the Word. That is not a poor rendering, but I think it is an incomplete one. I think what Paul is getting at in verse 2 is not so much whether it is in season or out of season with his hearers, but whether or not it is in season or out of season with his own soul, with his own heart. He is to preach the Word whether or not he is bouncing into the pulpit and ready to preach with zeal or if he is shirking, tired, complacent, discouraged, weak, down, fatigued, compromised, and befuddled. He is saying, “Have courage, Timothy.” He is saying to us, “Have courage in season and out of season, whether they receive it or not, and whether you are ready to give it or not.” There are certain times the athlete just has to play through his slump, and there are certain times the preacher just has to preach his way out of a funk.

Notice what Paul says. It is here we get our marks of courage: “You reprove, you rebuke, you exhort.” I love those words. To reprove is a negative. It is a corrective word. In 2 Tim. 3:16, Paul mentioned that reproof is what the Scripture does. It carries the idea of challenging

errant thinking and false doctrine. Reprove in your preaching. We are not to be jerks. We do not go around trashing people every Sunday, but if people will speak to your church as they do to the television screen and the publications and all the rest that are clamoring for the attention of your congregates, have the courage to reprove that garbage when it seeps into your congregation. Rebuke is a reference to the heart. It is to bring a person under the conviction of sin. John MacArthur wrote, “[to reprove] discloses the sinfulness of sin. Whereas, [rebuking] discloses the sinfulness of the sinner.”² Paul also says, “Exhort”—come alongside of and encourage. You see, there is an industry, creativity, power, and effort to preaching to where we are bringing the text to bear over and over, so that folks know when they leave someone has spoken to them.

Someone has described contemporary preaching as, “Mild-mannered men standing before mild-mannered people, imploring them to be more mild-mannered.” That is not Paul’s way and that best not be ours.

In December 2012, I preached commencement in the old chapel at Midwestern Seminary, and I made an old throw-away line about preaching and going with courage. I challenged our graduates not to pursue a safe ministry. I said, “Toss your résumé to the wind, grab a six-pack of Red Bull, and preach with courage and zeal.” I received a letter in the mail a few weeks later from a little old lady rebuking me for encouraging our graduates to drink alcohol. I wrote her back and kindly instructed her that Red Bull is non-alcoholic; it is caffeinated. The point that I made with levity is this, just do something. Churches are dying on the vine not from preachers being too energetic, zealous, or forceful. They are dying on the vine from people stumbling into pulpits and giving a 30-minute apology. Think about the greats of church history. They did something with the text. Luther, Calvin, Bunyan, Whitefield, Edwards, and Spurgeon—they brought it to bear. They did not apologize for it or stumble through it. They showed up like a prophet of old and brought it near.

For those in the seminary community, I mentioned the other day a road trip that I took our family on this summer. We left Kansas City and were gone for over a month for seminary travel and some personal

² John MacArthur, *1 and 2 Timothy* (MacArthur New Testament Commentaries; Chicago: Moody, 1995), 177.

vacation. We traveled for 6,300 miles—seven people, two adults, five kids, one suburban for over five weeks. People asked me if I preached on the trip and I say, “I didn’t, but I yelled a lot with five kids in the car. That is sort of like preaching.” I took them to show them a lot of different places in church history.

My favorite stop was at the grave of Whitefield in Newburyport, Mass., where he is buried beneath the pulpit in the Old South Church. It is so gripping to be there and to see this man who shook two continents preaching the gospel with courage; who would preach in fields while people hurled rocks, tomatoes, and dead animals at him; who would preach to crowds outside of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia that would outnumber the total populations of those respective cities. He would preach with such force and courage that people would often cry out—literally moaning—gripped with conviction by the force of his sermons. Now, he is buried under a pulpit, some 250 years later after shaking two continents for the gospel and the cause of Christ by preaching with such boldness.

I finagled my family in to see this church, which is a massive structure. Whitefield helped found the church that is larger than this chapel. It has a massive balcony and as so often is the case, only about 30 people now gather in it. The church is unfortunately marked by liberalism now. His grave was left open until the 1920s, about 170 years after he died because people so wanted to see him that they begged them not to cover the tomb so they could go look at him when nothing was there but a skeleton. Finally, in the 1920s the health department insisted they close it. In the 1770s, in the context of the American Revolution, Benedict Arnold came with his officers to worship at the Old South Church, and they knew that Whitefield was buried underneath. They went down into the crypt, which had some kind of closure on it then, and they forced it open and ripped off pieces of his clothing so they could pin them as talismans to their jackets, seeking good will and divine blessing on their military endeavors. His thumb was stolen and taken back to Europe, as was his forearm.

Nothing has happened in this church for over 200 years, but I will tell you what does happen. I asked the minister and people there, “Do many people do what I am doing?” He replied, “We get tour busses coming through. Daily people come and beat on the doors of this old church and say, ‘Show us where that man Whitefield is buried.’” I will tell

you why. It is because that man preached with courage. No one is driving across the country today to look at the grave of some mild-mannered man who did nothing but bumble through life and ministry. Mark your life and set yourself to preach with courage, to be ready to preach with courage.

Mark Three: Pastoral Care

The third mark of being ready to preach is pastoral care—biblical conviction, personal courage, and pastoral care. I love the end of verse 2, “You do this with great patience and instruction.” You say, “Are you invalidating what you have been saying for the last 20 minutes?” No, I am not, because you can preach a sermon that is full of conviction, but drips with love for a congregation. I know you can do it because I heard one yesterday. You do not have to be abrasive; you do not have to be a jerk. But, with humbleness and forcefulness, you can bring the text to bear into the lives of your people and do so—I love these two words—with patience and instruction. Why patience? Because you are preaching to people, after all. People are not an irritant to your ministry; they are your ministry. People are not a disruption to your ministry; they are your ministry. You do so with patience because you know your own fallenness. You know from whence you have come. You have read the book; you know your soul; and you know that you, like them, stand in the need of grace—do so with patience and instruction. The point here is that you keep teaching, keep preaching, and keep bringing the text to bear. That is what we do and who we are. The man who is ready to preach is not ready to preach one sermon. He is ready to do it again, and again, and again, and again. It is what we do. I am reminded of Paul’s words in 1 Thess. 2:1–6, where he speaks of these things and his love for the believers at Thessalonica.

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been

approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

Now listen closely.

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess. 2:7–12)

A funny thing happens when a person leads and pastors a church. It is a sweet thing to see how their passions become yours. I remember the first church I went to pastor over a decade ago. My wife and I were so eager to serve. It was a small church outside of Louisville, Ky. I remember the first Easter there. It was a small church, but had a big Easter week. Every night, seemingly, there was something else to do. There was a big Wednesday night service, a Maundy Thursday service, a Good Friday service, an Easter cantata on Saturday, a sunrise service on Sunday, a regular Sunday morning service, and a Sunday night service. I looked at that and thought, “Good grief, not trying to sound sacrilegious, but are we overdoing Easter?”

The sunrise service was a particular irritant to me—I will confess—because I had never been to a sunrise service, and most of the

people resolved to attend a sunrise service were rather up in years and would be at all of the other services anyway. So, we did it. I remember the first year we did the sunrise service by the lake. We were there and my wife had a baby or two on her hip, and we were hanging on to the kids and doing the service. A funny thing happened. Over the next several years, I began to like those sunrise services, not because I really felt like we needed them, but I began to love those people who loved the sunrise services. By the time the Lord called us from there back to Southern Seminary to serve, I have to tell you, I not only miss those people to this day, but I still sort of miss that sunrise service. Why is that? In my own way, there was a heart of a pastor for the people and a love for the church that was there. I believe that is instructive for what it means to preach faithfully and how we are to preach. The person that is ready to preach is a person who knows biblical conviction, personal courage, and pastoral care.

Conclusion

Readiness to preach is a lifelong pursuit. There is a sense in which I never have to prepare a sermon again, and I can stumble into a pulpit and have something to say because I have prepared so many. But there is a sense in which I'd never stumble into a pulpit without having prepared to preach because who am I not to be ready? This seminary is seeking to ready ministers for the church, and the penultimate mark of that is to ready ministers to preach.

I close with some anonymous words you may have heard before. They certainly contain a measure of hyperbole, but they are pertinent to the subject of keeping us ready, of our being ready and devoted to discipline and doctrine. Referring to the pastor, this author wrote,

Fling him into his office. Tear the office sign from the door and nail on the sign, "Study." Take him off the mailing list, lock him up with his books, computer, and Bible. Slam him down on his knees before texts, broken hearts, and the lives of a superficial flock and a Holy God. Force him to be the one man in our shallow communities who knows about God. Engage him to wrestle with God all the night through, and let him come out

only when he is bruised and beaten into a blessing. Shut his mouth forever from spouting remarks, and stop his tongue from forever tripping lightly over every nonessential. Require him to have something to say before he breaks the silence. Bend his knees in the lonesome valley. Burn his eyes with weary study; wreck his emotional poise with worry for the things of God and make him exchange his pious stance for a humble walk with God and man. Make him spend and be spent for the glory of God. Rip out his telephone; burn up his ecclesiastical success sheets; delete his social media accounts. Put water in his gas tank. Give him a Bible, tie him to the pulpit, and make him preach the Word of the living God. Test him, quiz him, examine him, shame him, and humiliate him for his ignorance of things divine. Shame him for his good comprehension of finance, batting averages, and political infighting. Laugh at his frustrated efforts to play psychiatrist. Form a choir, raise a chant, and haunt him day and night, "Sir, we would see Jesus." When at last he dares to stay the pulpit, ask him if he has a word from God. If he does not, dismiss him. Tell him you can read the morning paper and digest the television commentaries and think through the day's superficial problems and manage the community's weary drives, and bless the assorted baked potatoes and green beans, *ad infinitum*, better than he. Command him not to come back until he has read and reread, written and rewritten, until he can stand up worn and forlorn and say, "Thus sayeth the Lord." Give him no escape until he is backed against the wall of the Word, and sit down before him and listen to the only word he has left: God's Word. Let him sup with it, until all he says about it rings with the truth of eternity. When he is burned out finally by the flaming Word, when he is consumed at last by the fiery grace blazing through him, finally transferred from earth to heaven, then bear him away gently, blow a muted trumpet, and lay him down softly. Place a Bible in his coffin, and raise the tomb triumphant, for he was a faithful soldier of the Word; and ere he died, he had become a man of God. He died having proved himself ready. He died as one who was ready to preach.