

Itchy Ears Preaching

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2 Timothy 4:1-8

Sermon Series:
Kingdom Legacy

*...itchy ear
preachers...tell
people what
they want to
hear.*

I learned recently about a cell phone ring tone that most adults can't hear. This ring tone, called Mosquito Tone or Teen Buzz, operates at such a high frequency that people over 30 ordinarily can't hear it. Most adults can't hear sounds above 16 kilohertz (the highest note on a piano is four kilohertz). The Mosquito Tone registers at 17 kilohertz. I listened to the Mosquito Tone on-line and couldn't hear a thing. This high-pitched ring tone enables students to send and receive text messages in class without teachers knowing about it.

Ironically, the Mosquito Tone was first developed in Great Britain to irritate and drive away teenagers loitering at convenience stores. Some enterprising student figured out how to install this sound into cell phones and, voila, kids are downloading it by the millions.

I find it curious that the gradual loss of hearing in adults, called *presbycusis*, sounds like our word Presbyterian. Lots of Presbyterians suffer from *presbycusis*. Some of us have lost the ability to hear God.

The ear is a vital receptacle for receiving the Word of God. The medieval church believed the primary organ for Mary's conception of Jesus was the human ear. It was Mary's obedience to God's reve-

lation, "Let it be with me according to your Word," that helped make Jesus' birth possible. Jesus said to would-be followers, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear."

Paul writes in our Scripture lesson, "The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itchy ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (2 Timothy 4:3). Eugene Peterson translates this verse in *The Message*, "You're going to find that there will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching, but will fill up on spiritual junk food—catchy opinions that tickle their fancy. They'll turn their backs on truth and chase mirages."

There were Christians in Paul's day afflicted with itchy ear syndrome. The phrase "itchy ears" is a pejorative term for a kind of teaching that tickles someone's fancy. Such people have accumulated for themselves leaders "to suit their own desires" (4:3). They pile up teachers to pander to their already existing appetites. They want God on their own terms. These itchy ear preachers were all too eager to tell people what they want to hear.

In theatrical circles, this is called "playing to the gallery." When actors and actresses used to modify their presentation to suit a particular

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audience in open-tiered galleries, it was called playing to the gallery. Today, this term has come to be associated with people who say or do things that will make them popular.

Charles Finney, a famous evangelist of the early 1800s, writes about the qualities needed most in a preacher: “Honesty is the best policy in a minister. He must be faithful to their souls. He is not courting them for any purpose of popularity.... People are not fools. They have no solid respect for a preacher that will go into the pulpit and preach smooth things.... As an ambassador of Jesus Christ one must deal faithfully with their souls.”

When the prophet Isaiah preached words people didn't like, they said, let's go and get us a preacher that will prophecy smooth things to us (Isaiah 30:9-10). Tell us what makes us feel better. Tell us what we want to hear.

My job as a preacher is to proclaim the message or, as some translations interpret it, “preach the Word” (2 Timothy 4:2). My mission is not to tell you what you want to hear but to teach the Word of God. When I took my ordination vows, I pledged faithfulness to the Biblical text. I am not permitted to make up whatever I want the Bible to say. The Bible is a comforting book, but I am not at liberty to expunge its discomforting admonitions. This church that ordained me has given me an assignment to accurately and faith-

fully apply this sacred text to real life.

If my job is to preach the Word, then your assignment is to determine whether I am being faithful to the text. Would that we would all become Berean Christians! When Paul preached in Berea, Luke tells us the people “searched the Scripture daily to see whether Paul was telling them the truth” (Acts 17:11).

The Bible, admittedly, is not an easy book to read. It doesn't read like a supermarket tabloid or murder mystery. But there is a certain thickness to the Biblical text. This book, as I can attest from personal experience, grows on you.

Revelation is what makes this book unique. Revelation means we are reading something we never would have guessed or figured out on our own, unless God had revealed it to us.

This book does not flatter us or curry our favor. It does not tell us what we want to hear. It tells us what we need to hear.

This book does not entertain us. There are hard things in this book. Some of the words in this book are difficult to digest. There are hard things to hear and hard things to obey.

This book reads us as much as we read it. It tells us who we are, where we came from and where we are going. It tells us what makes us tick.

This book will not coddle us. It challenges as well as comforts us. This book will not placate us, particularly if we insist on living outside of the will of God. Maybe

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that's why Soren Kierkegaard writes with whimsical, biting irony, "Take this book back again, we are no good at dealing with a thing like this, it only makes us unhappy...."

We ascribe to three Core Beliefs in this church: Jesus is Lord, Scripture is our authority and everyone is called to discipleship. I'm not so sure we really believe the Bible to be authoritative in our lives. When I listen to us debate the great social issues of the day, we rely on our personal experiences rather than what the Bible says about the issues.

I want to counter the widespread practice of making personal experience our authority for living rather than the Bible. Personal experience must be placed under the authority of the Bible and not over it. We interpret personal experience in light of Scripture, not Scripture in light of personal experience.

Let's be clear why we read the Bible. Reading the Bible is God's way of conforming us into the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to form Christ in us. Reading the Bible takes us out of our self-absorbed lives into the larger arena of God's kingdom.

Some of you have never actually read the Bible. You have assumed, since the Bible is so famous and highly revered, that it must be decoded by experts to interpret for us.

No way! Although this book is profound enough to confound scholars, it is simple enough to be grasped by children. You don't

have to be smart or well-educated to read this book. The first people who heard and read these words written in our Bible were ordinary, working-class people. One of the great early translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale, said that he was translating so that "the boy that driveth the plow" would be able to read it.

Some of you might have tried to read the Bible earlier in your life but shut down when your reading fell flat through familiarity or boredom. You found reading news-papers and magazines and pulp-fiction more to your liking. I'm asking you to give this book a second chance. I'm urging you to devote 10-30 minutes daily to allow the message of this book to sink into your heads and hearts. The message of this book is eminently liveable. It could very well change your life! Stan preached last Sunday from 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correction and training in righteousness so that the God's people may be equipped for every good work."

In the time remaining, let me offer a brief tutorial on reading the Bible. For starters, you'll need a Bible. I would suggest investing in a reputable study Bible. There are plenty on the market. The New International Version Study Bible is my personal favorite. A study Bible will provide historical context, explain important words and interpret difficult verses, as well as supply cross-references to parallel passages.

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I would also encourage you to buy *The Message*. Eugene Peterson, a pastor and first-rate Biblical scholar, invested ten years of his life into putting the Bible into contemporary language. Whenever I am stymied by the text, *The Message* helps navigate the way.

Okay, you invest in a study Bible and *The Message*, now what? Where to start in this maze of 66 books and 1100 pages? I suggest beginning with the life of Christ. These first four books that introduce the New Testament, called gospels or “good story,” are a great place to start. These books, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John will introduce you to Jesus Christ, the central figure of Holy Scripture.

Begin by reading a chapter each day. Read leisurely and thoughtfully. Keep a notebook nearby to write down passages that encourage or challenge you. Take this notebook with you throughout the day and refer to it whenever you are stuck in traffic or waiting in a checkout line.

What would happen if we treated our Bibles like our cell phones?

What if we carried it around in our purses or pockets?

What if we flipped through it several times each day?

What if we used it to receive messages from the text?

What if we gave it to kids as gifts?

What if we treated it as if we couldn't live without it?

What if we used it in case of an emergency?

What if we upgraded it to get the latest version?

Here's the best news of all. In the kingdom of God, there are no monthly service fees and no dropped calls!

