

"The Treatment for Itchy Ears"
2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

October 20, 2019

19th Sunday After Pentecost

Have you ever had an itch – really bad itch? Maybe it's from a mosquito bite or contact with poison ivy. Maybe it's on your arms or legs or in the small of the back where you just can't reach. But it really gets your attention. You want relief from that itch so bad. Common sense says that, if you have an itch, the best way to deal with that is by scratching it. When you scratch the itch, it feels good – temporarily. However, scratching usually doesn't cure the problem which caused the itch and it might even make it worse. The best way to deal with an itch is to find the appropriate medicine which will bring the discomfort to an end as well as cure the problem that caused the itch.

In our text from Paul's second letter to young Pastor Timothy, Paul speaks of a different kind of itch – a spiritual itch. Like a physical itch, a spiritual itch gets your attention, is very uncomfortable, and demands action. However, the action which most people use in dealing with a spiritual itch not only doesn't solve the problem, but can make it worse.

Paul is encouraging Timothy in how to live as a Christian and as a pastor. In opposition to the never ending interest in and desire for new philosophical ideas and religious practices, Paul encourages Timothy, as a Christian, to continue in what he had already learned and in which he already firmly believed. Trust those who had shared with him the message of salvation from his childhood, namely, his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice. Trust also in the source of this message of salvation, the Holy Scriptures, which were able to make him wise for salvation since they were literally "God breathed". In addition that, the Holy Holy Scriptures were able to teach him the doctrines of the Christian faith, to point out any errors people had concerning the Christian faith, to show the corrections for erroneous positions, and to train him and all others in how to live a holy life.

As a young fledgling pastor, St. Paul encouraged Pastor Timothy to do one very important thing to accomplish these things: Preach the Word of God! He is not to alter the message. He is not to argue the message. He is not to apologize for the message. He is to preach it in season and out of season which means he is to preach the Word when it is received and welcomed and he is to preach the Word when it is rejected and condemned.

St. Paul gives a warning to young Pastor Timothy about the coming days and years ahead. There will be two problems. First, people will not accept or put up with sound doctrine. They will not believe the true teaching of the Word of God or they will think it is not important. Secondly, people will have itching ears, that is, a curiosity for something new and different. In other words, they will want something other than the pure Word of God.

That warning has been fulfilled in our present time. To be honest, it has been fulfilled throughout the ages from the time St. Paul said it. In fact, ever since Satan

tempted Eve with the words, “Did God really say....?”, people have been doubting the clear words of God and often concluding that God didn’t say what He said He said.

In our postmodern age, people deny the possibility of absolute truth. Therefore they cannot endure sound doctrine because they believe sound doctrine does not and cannot exist. There can be no absolute truth because absolute truth does not exist. Others, especially those within the church, do not believe that sound doctrine, if it does exist, is important. Usually that is said about a doctrine with which they already disagree. Instead, they will say, “it doesn’t really matter what you say as long as you love Jesus” or something to that effect.

In the past, having clear and pure doctrine was considered to be a good thing for which people were praised. Those who promoted false doctrine were criticized and condemned. Now, in a weird reversal of what should be, those who promote false doctrine are praised as being sensitive and open-minded while those who insist on pure doctrine are condemned as being unloving and uncaring.

We have an epidemic of “itchy ears” in our society today and in our churches. People have a curiosity for and a desire of any religion, philosophy, or way of thinking that is new and different from what they had before. It annoys them like a mosquito bite. People want to “scratch that itch” by demanding change to different doctrines, trying out different churches, and copying different religions.

Such people do not care about the truth, consistency, or connection to reality of their teachers and their teachings. They will say, “You have your truth and I have my truth,” instead of choosing one truth. People are looking for teachers who will make them feel right and good and affirm them in what they’ve already decided is true for them. They will utter phrases such as, “I am spiritual, but I’m not religious.” This allows them to claim some of the moral and spiritual high ground without being governed by any particular doctrines or any particular holy books.

Many people see no problem with this in our day and age of “cafeteria Christianity” in which you can choose what you like and leave what you don’t like. “Choice” is not only the theme for the abortion debate, but in almost every moral and spiritual way of thinking. Choice reigns supreme. You are free to choose a religion that you want or construct a religion on your own and I will choose the religion I want or construct my own religion and will both be happy.

There is a problem with “itchy ears” as there are with all itches. Scratching your spiritual itchy ears by trying a variety of teachers and religious resources may make you feel good for a time like scratching a mosquito bite or a poison ivy rash. However, scratching itchy ears cannot solve the problem or cure your spiritual desires. There will always be a new itch coming. People are always waiting and longing for the next great religious fad. They jump on it as soon as it’s here and, when it falters, they jump on the bandwagon for the next great religious fad. Nothing is ever settled and ears remain itchy.

In addition, scratching your itching ears may actually make things worse like scratching a mosquito bite until you bleed or are infected. Paul mentions two bad things that can happen when people “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passion.” First, they will turn away from listening to the truth. Since Jesus Christ is

the way, the truth, and the life, by turning away from the truth, you are turning away from Jesus. By turning away from Jesus, you are turning away from everlasting life.

Second, people who have itched their spiritual ears will wander off into myths. It's not just that you turn away from the truth and Jesus. It's that you wander off into error and Satan, the father of all lies. In your effort to be satisfied and saved, you end up being perpetually dissatisfied and damned.

The world has an answer to all of this: keep on scratching. Popular opinion today is that the answer to any conflict is to give the people what they want. You see that in many political debates. Candidates will try to give away the sun, moon, and stars if they think it will help them get elected. In the spiritual realm, people call for innovation, variety, and so on. Change the message to become more user-friendly. Proclaim a different message if it will get people into the pews. Furiously scratch to find the right message with the hope that new and different will be better and more successful in keeping the institution going.

Paul has a different answer. It seems rather simple and naïve. Paul doesn't call for innovations, improved messages, or giving the people what they want. His advice is short and succinct. He simply tells Pastor Timothy, "Preach the Word!"

There are two things going here: "preach" and "the Word." Let's start with the second one first. Preach THE WORD! The Word, or message, which God has given to us to believe, to preach, and by which we are saved does not change, nor does it need to change.

We continue to preach the Law of God which clearly proclaims His will. We are to tell people what God expects them to do and what He expects them not to do. The content of this message seems to be neither popular nor "positive" and may offend people by not making them feel good about themselves.

But the Word of the Law is useful and helpful. When the Law of God is proclaimed and people take it to heart, then the Holy Spirit is able to work admission of sin and repentance inside the hearer. As diagnosis of a serious disease cannot be ignored by a doctor in an effort to spare a patient's feelings but must be delivered that patient may be lead to the cure, so the Law's diagnosis of you and me as "poor, miserable sinners" is one that we need to hear so that it can lead us to see our need for a cure and guide us toward the cure.

We continue to preach the Gospel which clearly proclaims God's mercy and love. We are to tell people of what God has done for them. He has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, as a man in order to take mankind's place. Jesus took your place under the requirements of God's Law and obeyed them all perfectly. He did everything which God commanded to us. He did nothing which God has forbidden to us. His perfect obedience is then credited to your account for God.

In addition, Jesus also took your place under the judgment of God. He bore the weight of your sins on the cross. There, Jesus endured the punishment for all of your sins so that you might be relieved of their weight. Forgiveness for all of your sin is then credited to your account before God.

Finally, Jesus took your place in death in order that you might live forever. Jesus' death took away the threat of death. Jesus' resurrection from the dead has guaranteed the promise of life forever.

In addition to the content of the Word remaining the same, so is our action with the Word of God remains the same. We are to PREACH the Word. "Preach" often has a negative connotation as in, "Don't preach at me!" However, the word itself simply means to proclaim. We are to continually proclaim the Word of God without change in content or meaning. We are not to defend the Word, prove the Word, or argue the Word. We simply proclaim what that Word is and how it affects us.

We are to "be ready in season" to proclaim the word when it is willingly heard, respected, and accepted. We are to "be ready...out of season" to proclaim the Word when it is ignored, ridiculed, and rejected. Our proclaiming of the Word of God is not dependent upon the reaction to that proclamation. We simply proclaim. The pastor preaches the Word of God as Timothy is being instructed to do and which our sermon hymn, a hymn often used at ordinations, references. The congregation is to support the pure preaching of the Word of God and even to demand it from its preachers. You are to be like the people of Berea who came to hear Paul preach. In Acts 17, it says "they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." (Acts 17:11)

The best way not to have an itch is to do some preventative work beforehand, whether it is application of insect repellent or some cream or salve applied to appropriate areas. The same is true for itchy ears. Like with young Timothy, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed. Remember from whom you heard the Word – loving family members, eager teachers, and faithful pastors. Do not let Satan, the world around you, or your own sinful self deceive you and lead you to something else. Do not be swayed by the spirits of the age.

Know the source of your faith and knowledge well – Word of God – so that you are not curious or desiring a change. Develop an intensive and relentless pursuit of the Word of God, not merely in Sunday school and confirmation; not merely in Divine Service and Adult Bible Study; but in frequent reading, meditating upon, and memorizing the Word of God every day. Rely on the divine origin, the power, and the versatility of the Word of God so that you do not desire to seek comfort, peace, and encouragement, from anything else.

Nobody really wants itchy ears, either physically or spiritually. "Itchy" is annoying, bothersome, and can be a sign of something worse yet to come. Applying the right salve or lotion to take away the itching sensation on some part of your body and thus making you content is highly desired. In the same way, apply the salve of the Word of God to take away the feelings of spiritual itchiness in your soul so that you are content in your faith, confident in the content of that faith, and not the least bit curious in anything that departs from that faith. Curing the disease rather than dealing with the symptoms makes sense physically and spiritually. You will not only feel better but you'll be much healthier. That's what we desire for our bodies. That's what we desire for souls. Amen.