

DESPISING THE PREACHED WORD OF GOD

Despise not prophesyings (1 Thessalonians 5:20)

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By the time Paul reaches chapter 5:16 of 1 Thessalonians, his letter is nearly finished. He is on the home straight now. Before he concludes though, he issues, staccato-like, a series of seven crisp imperatives (verse 16-22),

Rejoice evermore.

Pray without ceasing.

In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Quench not the Spirit.

Despise not prophesyings.

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

Abstain from all appearance of evil.

It may have been urgency that prevented his enlarging upon these. He had been parted from these converts (2:18), so the letter must go to them as soon as possible. Therefore, like a preacher who has run out of time but has so much more to give, he has to content himself with just the heads, and a word or two more.

Arrangement

The arrangement of these marching orders is not haphazard. They follow a logical order like the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes or the Lord's Prayer. They relate to each other in this way: if we "rejoice evermore" in the Lord, we shall find strength (Nehemiah 8:10) to "pray without ceasing." Such prayer will receive answers that will mean "in everything (we) give thanks." Such gratitude will make us not want to "quench ... the Spirit." By that Spirit, we will reverence God's word and therefore "despise not prophesyings." Under that word, we shall have the means to "prove all things, etc." and "abstain from all appearance of evil." The divine order here is also the order of Christian experience.

Categories

These seven also fall into two categories. The first three (verses 16-18) are commands, and the last four (verses 19-22) are warnings. So, as with the Ten Commandments, we have positive and negative injunctions. Here we have what the Lord wants us to *do*, and what He wants us to *avoid*. We need both these. In our sinful perversity we tend to veer one way or the other. The Christian way is narrow - positive and negative teachings are like two guardrails that keep us safely on it.

Each of these seven is worthy of an article, but let us just consider the fifth – "Despise not prophesyings." We are not surprised it should follow the reference to quenching the Spirit. This is because there is a close relationship between the Holy Spirit and divine prophesy.

a] Prophecy is one of the Spirit's supernatural gifts.

"The manifestation of the Spirit is given is given to every man to profit withal ... to another prophecy" (1 Corinthians 12:7,10). In the early church, this class of men were called "prophets" like their Old Testament counterparts. So important were these men that they were second only to the apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28) and their utterances were superior to tongue-speaking (1 Corinthians 14:1-3). They "spoke from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

b] Prophets ministered in two ways.

Foretelling events. For example, Agabus prophesied a famine, enabling the disciples to muster relief for those in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). This same prophet foretold the sufferings

that awaited Paul at Jerusalem (Acts 21:10,11).

However, prophets also engaged in forth-telling (1 Corinthians 14:3). These men (and women sometimes, Acts 21:9) could become the organs of the Holy Ghost. They spoke by divine inspiration and they said was revelation truth from God. Before the days of a complete Bible, these prophecies were equivalent to the written scripture that came afterwards.

c] However, other men “prophesied” in a non-miraculous way.

These preachers “forth-told” truth using the Old Testament as fulfilled in Christ and the gospel. They “preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven” (1 Peter 1:12). At Thessalonica, their message came “not ... in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Here was Spirit-anointed preaching. These men were not called “prophets,” but they were still “prophesying,” albeit in a non-miraculous way.

d] *This* form of prophesying is permanent.

God did not intend extraordinary prophesying to be permanent. Prophets, together with the apostles, are what the church is built on, Christ being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Their ministry was *foundational*, to support and establish the early church at its beginning. Now we have the complete Bible, the equivalent is the more ordinary prophesying - preaching.

If men insist upon prophets today, then we must have apostles also, which is impossible (Acts 1:21,22). In addition, we must tear off the backs of our Bibles to accommodate the ongoing revelation. Paul Woolley says, “If such communications were actually being made, every Christian would be a potential author of Scripture. We would only need to write down accurately what God said to us, and we would legitimately be adding to the Bible, for such writings would be the Word of God” (*The Infallible Word*). Scripture would not then be the complete, sufficient and perfect book that it wonderfully is (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

We take, therefore, this verse, “despise not prophesyings,” to refer to preaching the word of God by His sent servants. This is hinted in verse 12 of this very chapter: “them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, *and admonish you.*” With this meaning in mind, William Perkins called his book on preaching, *The Art of Prophesying* (1592), and Jeremy Taylor, *A Discourse of the Liberty of Prophesying* (1646).

Also with this meaning in mind, let us see what this crisp, concise imperative is saying to us.

1. How we can despise preaching

“Despise” in the Greek is a strong word and means, “to count as nothing, have contempt for.” We might be amazed that any professing Christian could do this - yet it is what happens when we do not regard preaching as we should. In what ways could we be guilty?

a] By not having the highest respect for preaching.

Preaching is ordained by God as the chief means of bestowing the blessings of salvation to us. “Faith,” writes Paul, “cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17 cf 1 Corinthians 1:21). Calvin wrote that the preacher is the external minister, but the Holy Spirit is the Internal Minister who applies the message effectually to our souls. This, then, is a higher means of grace than privately reading scripture. Thomas Cartwright put it like this: “When the fire is stirred up and discovered it giveth more heat than when it is not, so the Word of God by preaching and interpreting maketh a greater flame in the hearts of the hearers than when it is read.” We should therefore have the highest regard for the ordinance of preaching.

b] By failing to realise what happens in preaching.

In true preaching *God* is speaking to us: “Then spake Haggai the LORD=S messenger in the LORD=S message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the LORD” (Haggai

1:13). John Preston described it as “A public interpretation or dividing the Word, performed by an ambassador or minister who speaks to the people instead of God, in the name of Christ.” If we don’t listen to preaching as we would listen to God, we despise this means of grace.

Yet it seems so incongruous that a mere mortal sinner should be the mouthpiece of God. It belongs more to angels, and yet when an angel released the apostles to continue their work, he said, “Go, stand and speak ... to the people all the words of this life” (Acts 5:20; although angels are present when the word is preached, 1 Peter 1:12). This is the danger: that familiarity breeds contempt. We slip into low views of preaching because we see only the man in the pulpit – “as the word of men” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). We must, however, see past him and hear more than his words. Calvin said, “Wherever the gospel is preached, it is as if God Himself came into the midst of us.” “Take heed therefore how ye hear” (Luke 8:18).

c] By not coming prayerfully to it.

Blessing through the preached word is not automatic. Just as the preacher needs to pray earnestly in his sermon preparation before delivery, during delivery and after delivery - so do hearers, because it is a two-way phenomenon. The preacher is the messenger and the hearer is the recipient, and both need divine enabling in almost equal amounts. Yet, how often we come to sermons almost expecting it all to be done for us. Such carelessness amounts to a despising of preaching. Contrast the earnest attitude of Cornelius, “Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God” (Acts 10:33).

d] By not obeying what we hear.

Much of God’s word is perceptive, and therefore faithful preaching will show us clearly what God requires of us – and what by His inworking grace He will enable us to perform (1 Thessalonians 5:24). We must be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). If we refuse to submit to God’s word, we despise the authority of that word.

We have, of course, a duty to “prove all things” (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and ensure that the sermon is truly reflecting the will of God in the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). No preacher has authority to bind the conscience – he may be wise above what is written or be “righteous over much” (Ecclesiastes 7:16), i.e. requiring more than what the Lord requires. However, if the obedience required is clearly the teaching of God’s word, then to the Lord we submit – otherwise, “He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit” 1 Thessalonians 4:8).

e] By wearying of preaching.

We can be guilty of this in different ways. By lacking the spiritual appetite or felt need that would bring us to this means of grace. Or by imagining other means would prove more effectual for today’s hearers. Even in reformed circles, innovations are employed nowadays as a supplement to the (shortened) sermon: discussion, interviews, testimonies, music bands, jazz evening, (even) drama, ventriloquists and the like. These carnal expedients are surely to be guilty of the very thing we are warned against here!

2. Why we must not despise preaching

There are some important reasons why we must be careful here.

1] Because it is one way to quench the Spirit.

He *accompanies* the word preached, “with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven” (1 Peter 1:12). His anointing is only promised to the word He has inspired and would go with as its Internal Minister. If He is grieved and withdraws, we have lost everything. Is this not why, in these unspiritual days, we sense a withholding? Why conversions are not numerous, nor Christians’ lives transformed, nor society at large affected as much as we long for?

We would not agree with J.I. Packer in certain matters, but he puts his finger on our predicament these days,

“Certainty about the great issues of the Christian faith and conduct is lacking all along the line. The outside observer sees us staggering on from gimmick to gimmick and stunt to stunt like so many drunks in a fog, not knowing at all where we are or which way we should be going. Preaching is hazy; heads are muddled; hearts fret; doubts drain strength; uncertainty paralyzes action. Unlike the first Christians who in three centuries won the Roman world, and those later Christians who pioneered the Reformation, and the Puritan awakening and the Evangelical revival, and the great missionary movement of the 19th century, we lack certainty. Why is this? We blame the external pressures of modern secularism, but this is like Eve blaming the serpent. The real truth is that we have grieved the Spirit. We stand under divine judgment. For two generations our churches have suffered from a famine of hearing the words of the Lord” (*God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*, 1965, pages 11-12).

2] Because this form of prophesying is better than the extraordinary.

In 2 Peter 1:17-19 the apostle reminds us of that unforgettable sight and sound when Jesus was transfigured, “when we were with him on the holy mount.” Peter and the others heard “a voice ... from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” What could be more wonderful than to hear the Father’s voice? This is the near equivalent of His voice through extraordinary prophesying.

However, Peter says, “scripture” is “a more sure word of prophesy,” i.e. in the sense of permanence, literally “firm, steadfast, unalterable.” This is now the form in which God speaks to us – through the written Scriptures, and when those Scriptures are preached. This is to be preferred because it is not fleeting, only to be heard once, like on the transfiguration mount. We have it with us in the Bible and through preachers. In fact, the gospels recording those words and Peter in his epistle writing them, shows this! Let no one therefore hanker after prophets and voices from heaven – God has given us His “more sure” word now “as a light that shineth in a dark place” that it might shine in our hearts until the perfect day. To this we must give the more sure heed.

3] Because otherwise we forfeit the other way of knowing God.

Which is prayer. Proverbs 28:9 says, “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.” God says if we do not listen to Him, He will not listen to us. If we despise His way of speaking through preaching, He will despise our way of calling upon Him through prayer. Can there be a worse chastisement than this? Therefore, “See that ye refuse not him that speaketh” (Hebrews 12:25).

3. What can we do to avoid despising preaching

The substance of what follows is adapted from Joel Beeke’s excellent booklet *The Family at Church – listening to sermons and attending prayer meetings* RHB, 2004, pages 8-13).

a] Listen with *an understanding, tender conscience*.

Jesus’ parable of the sower presents us with four kinds of listeners, all of whom hear the same word. Only the last is the understanding, fruitful listener. Some of God’s seed falls on rich, fertile soil. Jesus says this listener hears and understands God’s Word (Matthew 13:23). Just as a seed quickly takes root in fertile soil, so the truth of God implants itself into this listener’s eager heart. As a plant springs up, growing deep roots and showing healthy leaves, the Word of God is deeply integrated into this listener’s life, family, business, relationships, and conduct. With the help of the Holy Spirit, this listener applies the gospel teaching he hears on Sunday to his life throughout the week.

b] Listen *attentively* to the preached Word.

Luke 19:48 describes people who were very attentive to Christ. Literally translated, the

text says, "they hung upon him, hearing." Lydia showed such an open heart when she "attended" or "turned her mind" to the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14). Such attentiveness involves banishing wandering thoughts, dullness of mind, and drowsiness (Matthew 13:25). It regards a sermon as a matter of life and death (Deut. 32:47). We must not listen to sermons as spectators but as participants.

c] Listen with *submissive faith*.

As James 1:21 says, "Receive with meekness the engrafted word." This kind of meekness involves a submissive frame of heart, "a willingness to hear the counsels and reproofs of the word." 13 Through this kind of faith, the Word is engrafted into the soul and produces "the sweet fruit of righteousness.""

Faith is the key to profitably receiving the Word. Luther wrote, "Faith is not an achievement, it is a gift. Yet it comes only through the hearing and study of the Word." If the chief ingredient of a medicine is missing, the medicine will not be effective. So be sure not to leave out the chief ingredient, faith, as you listen to a sermon. Seek grace to believe and apply the whole Word (Rom. 13:14), along with the promises, the invitations, and the admonitions as they are spoken.¹⁴

"The whole Word is the object of faith," wrote Thomas Manton. Therefore we need "faith in the histories, for our warning and caution; faith in the doctrines, to increase our reverence and admiration; faith in the threatenings, for our humiliation; faith in the precepts, for our subjection; and faith in the promises, for our consolation. They all have their use: the histories to make us wary and cautious; the doctrines to enlighten us with a true sense of God's nature and will; the precepts to direct us, and to try and regulate our obedience; the promises to cheer and comfort us; the threatenings to terrify us, to run anew to Christ, to bless God for our escape, and to add spurs to our duty."

d] Listen with *humility and serious self-examination*.

Do I humbly examine myself under the preaching of God's Word, trembling at its impact (Isaiah 66:2)? Do I cultivate a meek and submissive spirit, receiving God's truth as a student while being intimately aware of my own depravity? Do I seriously examine myself under preaching, listening for my own instruction rather than for the instruction of others? We must not respond like Peter, who said to Jesus, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" We must listen to Jesus' admonition: "What is that to thee? follow thou me" (John 21:21-22). When the marks of grace are set before us, we must ask: Do I experience these marks? Do I listen for the truths of God, wanting to be admonished or corrected where I have gone astray? Do I relish having the Word of God applied to my life? Do I pray that the Spirit may apply His Word, as Robert Burns put it, to my "business and bosom"?

When a doctor tells you how to maintain your health or that of your children, do you not listen carefully so that you can follow his directions? When the heavenly Physician gives you divine directions for your soul, should you not listen every bit as carefully so that you can follow God's instructions for your life?"

The preached word – "prophesying" – is the word of God leading us to the God of the word. To hear Him, believe Him, know Him, follow Him, obey Him, serve Him, prepare to be with Him. It therefore deserves all our ransomed powers, our best and our all. Those who bring this are those who will be blessed and be made a blessing. May the Lord enable us to "despise not prophesyings" by doing the very opposite, to the glory of His great Name.