

Teaching #1566 - Sunday, June 10th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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LISTENING TO THE WORD IN FOUR STEPS (continued)

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, *for reproof*, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

In our last teaching in this series we launched into the four specific steps for listening to the Word with fruitfulness. That last word is very important. There's a *goal* to our listening. The *goal* of the whole process is clearly marked out by Paul in **verse 17** - "...that the man [or woman] of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

That's the *target*. We want to be men and women of God. And, more than that, we want to have *good works* abounding in our lives. We want our *relationships* to be full of good works. We want our *ministry* for the Lord to be full of good works. We don't want our lives to be *empty*, or *vain*, as the Scriptures put it. We don't want to be spinning our wheels. We don't want to hold some isolated beliefs about God that make no difference to the fruitfulness of our actions and plans.

So Paul says God has a plan. He has provided something very special. Because it is very easy to *overlook* or *undervalue* this provision, Paul reminds Timothy that the Bible isn't just another book of information or instruction. There is lots of religious instruction in this world. Most of it is helpful enough as far as it goes. But the Bible is different from anything else. The reason it will accomplish its goal in our lives is its unique *origin* and its unique *inspiration*:

2 Timothy 3:16 - "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...."

God is very good at accomplishing His purposes in this world. Think of the power of His Words. Think of the power of the *speech of God* as His words alone form matter from non-matter, spin galaxies into space, cause various forms of *non-life* to turn into *life*. That's the power of God's Word.

So Paul wants to encourage Timothy that He must not forget this. God's Word - the Scriptures - mustn't be thought of as anything other than *living and active and powerful* to accomplish their purpose in our lives.

So, with the *goal* in mind (making us into men and women of God), and the *provision* of the means (the Scripture inspired by God) Paul describes the four steps to listening that will activate God's will and way in ordinary people like us. We studied the *first step* in our last look at this passage. The first step is *teaching* (16). Nothing can germinate from a closed book, or an empty head. There must be teaching. The Word must get into our lives. This takes more than most people think, and we looked at that whole process in detail.

Now we come to the *second step* in producing Biblical change - "*reproof*" - "All Scripture is profitable for teaching, for reproof..."(16).

1) REPROOF IS THE LOGICAL SECOND STEP AFTER TEACHING

Once I see the standard - once I see the truth - once my mind is informed by the light - I immediately am made aware of *how far short I fall of that truth*. Until my mind is confronted by the divine, objective truth from God, I can pretty much satisfy myself with the relative thinking of the world. I'm as good as most other people. I'm *better* than many. And if my conscience bothers me too much at some point, if I just wait long enough, it will soon be softened and jaded by a host of self-esteem experts who will tell me I'm just being too hard on myself. They'll tell me God just wants me to be happy and fulfilled. And they tell me whether that happiness comes on *my* self-centered terms or *God's* makes no difference to Him.

But once my mind sees the truth - the *real* truth - *God's* revealed truth - my moral standards hit the speed-bump of revelation. I'm awakened to the ugliness of the sin in my own heart. What I once saw as merely a *weakness* is now identified as *rebellion*. Something begins to hurt in my soul.

It's important to remember that this whole process is perfectly healthy and Scriptural. Paul described it in his own life:

Romans 7:7-9 - "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, *I would not have known sin* [Really? Paul - a teaching Pharisee wouldn't have known these sins?]. *I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."* [8] But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. *Apart from the law, sin lies dead*. [Not that sin doesn't exist. Rather, we don't codify all these things as actual sins] [9] *I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died* [He was still alive physically, but found all his attempts to justify himself by his own religious works and moral standards was useless and lifeless]."

Don't miss Paul's simple point. Without the knowledge of God's law, Paul didn't see the sinfulness of covetousness. Without the truth of God's Word, he just didn't *see* this sin in his life at all. In fact, he was much more at peace *without* God's Word than *with* it. That's why it is always dangerous to measure the spiritual health of your heart by the state of inward peace or comfort or serenity.

I hear that a lot. People constantly tell me they must be righteous in God's eyes because they feel very comfortable with their relationship with Him. They feel they are on good terms. They continue in their sinful ways and feel loved and accepted by God. And they need to hear Paul say the only reason Paul wasn't bothered by the sin of covetousness was *he was unaware of the presence of that sin in his own heart.*

But then the truth came. Then life-giving *reproof* came. The light was turned on. And it turned up all those unexposed areas in the corners of Paul's religious heart. That's the process of *reproof*. It is designed to follow the teaching phase. In fact, contrary to what many have been led to believe, if there is no period of reproof after the teaching, then somehow the teaching has been incomplete and deficient. Certainly the process should never *end* in reproof. But it must always *include* reproof.

Now, why does Paul go into such detail regarding this to Timothy? Why does Timothy need to be reminded about the ongoing need, both in his *own* life, and in the ministry he has to the *church* he pastors, about this step of reproof in the making of a man or woman of God?

I'll tell you why. It's because we'd all like to get to Godliness *without* reproof. We'd all like to feel that we can just be *encouraged* into the kingdom of God. We'd all like to think the presence of God always brings *nothing but peace* into our hearts. In fact, there is a very popular brand of spirituality around that teaches God is constantly working to do nothing but *affirm* His children. He never makes them feel uncomfortable. This is the whole approach of a slew of television preachers and authors who actually brag about never talking to people about their sin.

But that's not the way of New Testament Christianity. That's a different religion entirely. We constantly need to maintain the distinction between the terms *condemnation* (which the Holy Spirit never does) and *conviction* (which the Holy Spirit constantly does). Here's how you can always tell the difference:

Condemnation only emphasizes the negative. It only dwells on the fault. There is no emphasis on the *solution* after the fault has been exposed. *Conviction*, on the other hand, initially *feels* like condemnation. Conviction is like a needle that *does* hurt when put under the skin, but it is leading up to something healthy and life-giving. Conviction points out the sin, only with the intention of *removing* it and opening up the door to *new life and holiness and hope.*

Preaching and teaching without reproof is spiritually dead and useless. But it's also very popular. That's why most television ministries are about healing, miracles and victory. Reproof will land your program in the 2 to 5 a.m. time slot. Take note. Our religious culture *trains* us not to expect or have to be humbled by *reproof* anymore.

Teaching without reproof has always been embraced by our fallen human nature. The prophets encountered it way back in the Old Testament:

Ezekiel 13:9-12 - "My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and who give lying divinations. They shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord God. [They can't know God with their present positive religion] [10] Precisely because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace, when there is no peace, and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash, [11] say to those who smear it with whitewash that it shall fall! There will be a deluge of rain, and you, O great hailstones, will fall, and a stormy wind break out. [12] And when the wall falls, will it not be said to you, 'Where is the coating with which you smeared it?'"

Those are very important words. They are much more than just a record of some holy temper tantrum on God's part. That's not what those verses are all about. God's anger is expressed against any teaching that *purports* to be Biblical and life-giving in nature when, in fact, it doesn't root out the problem of sin.

That's where that image of plastering a rotten, decaying wall with whitewash comes in. If the drywall is all rotten and pulpy, you can't just buy a can of cheap paint and cover it all up. First you have to replace the old drywall. You have to scrape and tear out and sand. Then you have to fill and prime and clean and paint some more.

And the issue isn't just some legalistic hankering to hammer Christians over the head. Remember God's word to the prophets in Ezekiel's day. The issue is *fixing the wall so it will stand firm - fixing it so it will stand up - fixing it so it will bear the weight of whatever structure God wants to build up in that life!* That's the issue.

And you can't accomplish that without the temporary pain of reproof.

The Fall established the need for reproof right into the fabric of creation. **Before** the Fall, before the **entrance of sin** into this world, all man needed was **instruction**. But **since** the Fall, since man **disobeyed** what he knew from God in his heart, reproof is the step that opens up the heart to healing grace.

Every person needs to be absolutely convinced about this in his or her own heart. Ask yourself this question: **Do people just need instruction from God? Or do they need reproof?** Or, put in a slightly different way, **Do people suffer from ignorance in their relationship with God? Or are they guilty of rebellion against God?**

Of course, you're free to answer that question any way you want. But if you want to line your thinking up with the Word of God, your only option is **B - we are all guilty of rebellion against God, not just ignorance.**

That's what the Fall has done to all of mankind. And whether or not you have developed an appreciation for reproof will hinge entirely on your view of our present position as human persons. What do you see as our most urgent need? If our problem is merely unhappiness or low self-esteem then all we need is fulfillment and encouragement. If our problem is merely one of loneliness or discouragement then all we need is fellowship and happiness.

But if my problem is my willful rebellion and my replacement of God's place in my life with my own agenda, then I stand in need of reproof from on high that values the truth of God too much to whitewash over my sinful heart.

The attempt to **evade** the truth about ourselves and our actions is constant in the world and frequent in the church:

"Pastor Don, I've been rejected since I was a child and now I can't love anyone else. My parents constantly blew up at me and now I lose my temper with everyone else."

"Pastor Don, my wife and I are calling it quits. We've tried to make this marriage work, but we're just not compatible. We just weren't made for each other"

I now understand what incompatible means. It means I want to do what I want, and she wants to do what she wants, and, because we're both too proud and self-centered, neither one of us is willing to change. But once I've learned the art of framing the problem in terms that **remove responsibility from either party** I know I can go for counseling in perfect safety. Who can blame us for not being **made for each other?** That would have to be God's fault.

So here we are - all of us needy people. We all want change. We all want to be men and women of God. And God has a tool that He promises will be perfectly able to accomplish that task. But **before** it will work, it must be embraced and received on His terms, not ours. And wholeness always comes on the far side of reproof.

We're going to spend another full week on this subject. But learn now to listen to the sharp pain of the Holy Spirit's reproof through His Word. Don't confuse spiritual growth with always feeling good about yourself. Oprah is eternally wrong about this. Be contrite when God speaks to you. Stop whatever you're doing and hear with humility. Never be argumentative when the Word speaks. You will always find deeper joy on the far side of reproof than in ignoring the Word.