



Preparing for the Kingdom-Part 4

Learning to Listen to the King's Prophets

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Well, it is interesting to see what little kids carry around in their backpacks. Have you noticed that? Parents can all attest to that, especially in the summertime when they're free to put in their backpack whatever they want—like summertime on vacation. And I remember when my boys were little and I would occasionally, you know, see them opening up their backpack, look into their backpack. And it would be all the stuff you would expect little boys to have. You know, they'd have little army men, or games, or a coloring book, or, you know, whatever—all the little things that they would have in there. And then there's always random things as well, like sticks and rocks and washers. You know, I gave up asking about it after a while—just things that they were enamored with, sticking in their backpack.

But inevitably summer would come to an end and September would roll around, and then the teacher's supply lists would come out. And now, all of a sudden, time to clean out your backpack. All the things that you have in your backpack—we've got to sort. Now, if you want to keep a washer or two in there, okay? I don't care about that. But a lot of stuff has to go and you now have to load it up with the things on this list. And it's all the things that you would expect from the teachers: the binders, the folders, the pencils, the rulers—all that stuff—and you pack all that up in your backpack.

Now, the kids never like that. This is their space; their backpack is cramping their style. Seriously, September just cramps their style altogether. But the backpack now is not theirs. Now they have a new lord of their backpack: the teacher.

Now, they always balked at that, and I would have to always remind them of a few basics in life. Number one: you're not in charge. That was always a good one to lay on my kids. You're not in charge, man. You don't have free rein to put in your backpack whatever you want at any time all around the year. You are a kid under authority. So, you know, just get over the fact you're not in charge.

Number two: you've got to realize if you just take whatever you want to school in your backpack, you're going to get expelled—especially my kids, with what you carried with you. You know, you can't just take everything you want—your candy, your bubblegum, your, you know, your cap gun. You can't take that to school; you're going to get in trouble. So you've got to clean this out.



And number three: you've got to realize this is all ultimately for your good. I realize you don't like it, it cramps your style, you'd rather have, you know, toys and all kinds of other, you know, gum in your backpack. But these are the things that are going to help educate you. Your teacher is not your enemy. And certainly I am not your enemy. I am here delivering the message from your teacher so that you can learn that this is the most important thing for this season of your life at this time. And stop your whining and complaining and just do it. That's important for them to realize.

Well, I want to talk to you this morning about your "backpack"—we're talking about your life. I want to talk about the teacher's supply list. And I want to talk about the people that deliver that list to you. Those are the components. You have your life, and you have now a new Lord of your life. And that Lord has messengers who are giving the list about what needs to be in your backpack and what needs to be jettisoned from your backpack. And you've got to get into the place where you recognize you're not in charge. Some things in your life that exist there now—if they stay in there, they're going to get you in big trouble. And you know what? All of this isn't just to rain on your parade. This is really for your own good. Your God is not your enemy anymore, and certainly what he wants in your life—it may cramp your style to get rid of this and put this in instead—but you know, he has good plans. And he does care. And these are for his glory and your good.

And not only that—I, delivering this information to you, I'm not your enemy either. I'm just trying to be faithful to get into your life what the Bible says should be there. I'm just the messenger.

Now, when it comes to delivering the message from the Lord of life, and doing it well, Jesus said there were none better than John the Baptist. He was the best at delivering the Lord's information as to what needs to be and what needs not be in your life. That's just—he says he's the greatest. And that's a superlative statement. And it's really a shocking statement when you read what John the Baptist actually preached and how he preached. But it is what our text this morning says.

And if you haven't opened your Bible yet, I want you to look at this. And I want you to consider this text from a couple of angles. Let's start just by reading it—Luke chapter 7, verses 24 through 28. I want to look through these verses, and I want to recognize a little bit of the context even before we read it, and that is we've just come off of a mild rebuke. You might remember the two emissaries of John had come from his prison in the Jordanian desert, and they traveled all the way up to Galilee in northern Israel. And they had then said, "John's wondering if you're really the guy or should we look for someone else?" And Jesus said, "Tell them this and this is happening, and I'm fulfilling these aspects of the Messianic promise." And so, yes, you know, you should know just by seeing what you've seen and telling what you've seen, and that will relieve his doubts. And then verse 23: "Blessed is the one who is not offended," who doesn't stumble over me. Now what is that? Well, Jesus wasn't



doing—at least in the timing that John would want—not doing it on John’s schedule, not doing it the way John would think it should be done. “Blessed is the one who is not stumbled by me, who’s not offended by me, who doesn’t see my timing, my plan, as a scandal.” That’s my own kind of veiled admonishment—I get that—if not less than a veiled admonishment.

Now, all the people are listening to Jesus deliver that. And just to try and safeguard the people who are saying, “Well, yeah, John, he’s a doubter. I’m glad I’m not like John, you know, poor John,” Jesus turns to the crowd and says this in verse 24: John’s messengers have gone; Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. He said this: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see,” verse 25 says, “a man dressed in soft clothing—you know, fine silk, linen suits? What did you want? Behold, those dressed in splendid clothing—they live in luxury, and they’re in kings’ courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet?” Ah! That’s it. “Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written”—quoting now Malachi 3—“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” Here’s the punch line, verse 28: “I tell you, among those born of women”—anybody in the room qualify for that, right? This is an idiom—everybody. That’s a big statement. Everybody breathing God’s air on God’s green earth—everybody on the planet—“of those born of women, there is none greater than John.” I mean, there’s his assessment. Now he adds this line—which is a bit of a head-scratcher, but we’ll get to this in a minute—“yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he,” than John.

Okay, let’s take this a section at a time. Let’s look at verses 24 and 25 and look at these rhetorical questions as Jesus asked. And they’re obviously things that John was not. Now he’s about to say John is the greatest, then a curious statement about even the least in the kingdom being greater than John. But he’s asking two rhetorical questions that John clearly is not. And you might look at rhetorical questions like these and you might think, well, you know, clearly the answer is “no,” but the way that they’re worded—and I read the rest of the Bible—I think, well, the answer is often “yes.”

Take a look at it again, verse 24: When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John, and he asked them, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” And if you play the saxophone or whatever you do—you understand—we’re not talking about a reed (the instrument reed). I mean, we’re talking about these big plants that usually sway on the riverbanks as the wind blows. And as they all are together, you can see them just kind of, you know, the wind’s blowing, and they just sway back and forth. That’s the reeds shaking in the wind. He said, “Is that what you went out to see?” That’s rhetorical question number one.

And you think, well, the answer is “no.” But you know what—whatever that means, and we’ll look at that in just a second—it seems pretty obvious. But if you think about what that means, the answer is



often: well, that's who I'd kind of like the preachers to be. "So, would you like to see a man dressed in soft clothing? You know, silk, linen, fine clothes?" "Oh, no; those dressed in splendid clothing—they live in luxury, and they're in the kings' courts." That's really not who you went out to see.

Now there are two categories here: the guy who looks like he's "dressed for success," and the guy who's compared to a reed swaying in the wind. Now you say, "Well, that wasn't John." I get that—that wasn't John. The question is, is that what you went out to see? And the answer would be, well, no, I guess not if I had to think about it. But you know what? If you read throughout the whole Bible, you see a lot of people flocking to people that preach that are like reeds that are swaying in the wind. And they are like the people that are the epitome of worldly success. Both of those Jesus is trying to contrast: that's not who John was—even if that might be what you wanted John to be. And guess what? After they heard John preach, a lot of people said, "I wish he were more of a swaying reed, because he sure is rigid. Man, he hit us right between the eyes with those truths, and he's not budging and swaying on anything."

There's a lot of talk in the Bible about people that are seen as godly—people never swaying to the opinions of people. Have you noticed that? Jesus was described that way: "You care about no one's opinion; you teach the way of God truthfully." See, that's the messenger you want. The kinds of messengers that we often want are the kinds that represent God as the kind of swaying deity—let's call it this: the kind of adaptive deity. Now let's give that a category name—number one in your outline, if you're taking notes—put it down this way: we need to understand our God-preferences. Our God-preferences start with this: I'd like a god that's a little more loose on the issues than the one in the Bible. So it'd be great if I could have some preachers that would sway a little bit more and would accommodate my preferences as to what I would like God to be.

Now, when I thought about my kids packing their backpacks for September as little kids, I thought back to that assignment they would often bring home, and it would be, "If you were in charge of school for a day... If you were in charge of school, how would it be?" And of course as soon as they did those assignments, I quickly shredded them. I don't want you to think that way—for a lot of reasons. You're not in charge; if you did whatever you wanted, it could be dangerous. And you know what? All the things that we do there are for your own good. I don't want them to think that way.

But I went on the internet this weekend as well—"Let's find some of those assignments, if I can find any recordings of those, anybody's PDF assignment." And I found several. Are you ready? Let me read you a couple high points.



Here's Savannah, elementary school student. "If you were in charge of school, how would it be?" Number one on her list was: "The teachers can't talk." Limo rides to lunch. Recess all day. Not even called school. I get to sit on my desk. I can run around all I want. And there'll be no work. Love Savannah's idea of school.

Ryan—of course, maybe a little more reasonable—soda fountains in the hallways. I get to play all day. No homework. Candy in the library. School only lasts four hours.

Asiana says—now this is kind of gross; as an adult we can't take it anymore—but it says: "Water fountains would all replace water with chocolate syrup." But she was thinking big on the playground; she said: Six Flags rides on the playground.

Elijah wrote: "No one gets in trouble. I get to eat cake every day."

Aaron says: "No school buses—limos instead bring us to school. I get to bring my phone and my video games to school. I can wear whatever I want. And I think school should start much later so I can sleep in."

My favorite was Taylor—had the average guy thing: "I want pizza and soda every day for lunch. I'd like free ice cream every day. I want two-hour recesses. And on your birthday, you get \$1,000." As long as we're dreaming, why not?

Now, if I said, "How would you like the Bible to read? If you were in charge of the universe, what kind of God would you put in charge of things?" It may not sound quite as immature as Savannah and Ryan and Elijah and Taylor—I get that. But it really wouldn't be the God we do read about in the Bible, would it?

Now, one of the reasons we don't like the God of the Bible so often when we read it—it kind of grates against our sensibilities—is because we live in a day where the winds of cultural opinion are blowing so strongly. When we read something about God being so rigid, let's say, on sexual ethics and how people—what they do or don't do sexually—then, you know, all of a sudden now, with the strong



headwind of culture, we start saying, “Well, man, I wish God were just more... I don’t know... I wish the rules were a little bit more lenient in this department.” Or we read about the judgment of God—we’re reading right now in the Old Testament. We’ve come through Joshua and are into Judges. We read all these things that are happening and all the things that God does in response to wickedness. We think, “Wow, I wish God just weren’t quite so vengeful.” And this whole topic in the New Testament of hell and Jesus—if I were going to make this thing the way I want it, I’d probably take those things out.

Now, here’s the thing: you want to find a preacher that will tell you what you want to hear? You can find one, can’t you? You want to look at the cultural opinion polls about the way we want things to be, and then you want to find a preacher that will say those—let’s call it this: the kind of preacher that’s a reed that sways in the winds of opinion and cultural perspectives—you can find one. They’re out there. Jesus asked the question, “Did you go out to find a preacher like that?” Now the answer is: John certainly wasn’t that. But, you know, unfortunately, if you’re reading the Bible, there’s a lot of times in biblical history that’s exactly what kind of preacher we wanted.

Let me give you one example. Go back to Jeremiah 23. Jeremiah chapter 23. Here is a passage that speaks to God’s concern regarding how far the preachers had gone to acquiesce to the opinions of the culture. This is a bad time in Israel’s history. There was rank wickedness. There was idolatry. There was all kinds of immorality. And the preachers got up to preach, and you know what? The people liked the preachers because they seemed to accommodate the cultural norms. And God has a commentary now on the preachers. Verse 16, Jeremiah 23:16. It says, “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets”—now think about this. This is like when the teachers start talking like the students, talking about, you know, syrup in the drinking fountains and, you know, Six Flags rides in the playground. When they start saying those things, now you’ve got a problem. The principal has to step in and say, “You know what? Don’t listen to your teacher. Don’t listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes.” What kind of hopes? Well, they’re the kind of hopes that come from their own mind. They’re making these things up as they go. “They do not come from the mouth of the LORD.” Because when the Lord has spoken, those things don’t change. They are the moral standards of God; they don’t change. “They say continually”—this isn’t just every now and then when they wimped out—“they are continually saying to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart”—his own passions, his own desires—“they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”

You think you can find preachers like that today? You think you could find people with a cross on their pulpit, who are sitting there with an open Bible today, telling people who despise the standards from the Scripture—what it says about whatever, pick a topic—and because it’s not going to play well on a morning news show, because it will never be hailed as great ideas by our culture or the, you know, the Hollywood elite—you think you can find preachers that say, “It’s okay”? Of course you can. They’re a



dime a dozen. And God's commentary on them is: don't listen to them. What they're telling you is not true. They're filling you with hopes as though God is some kind of adaptive deity that you can make into anything you want. You can't.

"And then," he says, "here's the problem." They're not adhering to the word. Verse 18: "For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word?" God's got an opinion about sexual ethics—it's just not an opinion, though. When God speaks, it's the truth. And you know what? A preacher needs to stand and hear that, and he needs to pay attention and listen to God's word. And then, guess what? You wouldn't have this reed-swaying-in-the-wind preacher. Promise of judgment—verses 19 and 20. Pick it up in verse 21: "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people"—love that line—"and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds."

I think about that. When it comes to preaching, I prefer a preacher—at least in my flesh—who is promising me chocolate syrup in the drinking fountains and rides on the playground and limos to take me to lunch. I like the sound of that. But the one that I'm supposed to listen to is one who stands in the council of the Lord, takes the words of God, and delivers God's word to God's people—even if it grates against some of the things I would want, and it changes my behavior. It confronts me with my sin, and it leads me to repentance. That's what "turning" means. We don't have an adaptive deity, and you shouldn't seek out preachers that are going to tell you what you want to hear. You just can't—you shouldn't. We don't have an adaptive God.

What's this thing about fine clothing? Splendid clothing—right? What's with all that? Let's think about that for a second as you turn back to the Gospel of Luke. Turn with me to Luke 16, if you would. The clothing picture here—"soft clothing"—it's a weird translation, but it has the idea of, you know, fine clothes. It's contrasted to John the Baptist, who dressed in camel hair—which I know can be understood today as a nice overcoat or whatever—but camel hair was this, you know, scruffy, mangy hide that was put over him just to keep the weather off of him and to warm him, with a leather belt. And not only that, he's eating locusts and wild honey. This is his diet. And this is his rough-looking outfit. And certainly he's not in splendid clothing.

Now, what's the difference? We can take the guy in the grungy clothes, compare him to the guy with the splendid clothing—the courtier in the court, this guy who you would find in the king's court—and you look at those two and you say, "This guy—I don't know—struggling to make it. This guy—success. This guy—mangy guy—doesn't seem to obviously get it, and he hasn't done well in life, and he's just wearing the stuff he can find to put on his back. This guy—successful." A lot of people, when



they want to choose their avenue of information from God, they want to find someone that they see as the epitome of worldly success. They want someone who is popular. They want to see someone who's rich. They want to see someone who's wealthy and healthy and wise—as it's put right here: prosperity gospel. We want someone who has all the accoutrements of worldly success. Why? Because those are the things I like. I'd like God to be able to give me everything that I want.

But let's look at it this way: we want an adaptive deity who likes everything that I like. And if we want that kind of God—and you want to find a preacher to give you that kind of God—it's everywhere. As a matter of fact, you want to contrast John in his camel-hair outfit to someone who's the absolute opposite of that, you might as well just pick the band of Pharisees, because that's exactly what they were. They were rich and wealthy and loved all the emblems of worldly success. Why? Jesus is about to reveal it here in Luke chapter 16.

He's preaching on money. He ends this in verse 13 by saying, "No servant"—this is Luke 16:13—"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other"—there's going to be conflict of interest and eventually you're going to have to choose—"or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." Eventually you're going to have conflict in the loyalty and you're going to have that choice to make. "You cannot serve God and money." You've got to make your decision. Am I going to be popular? And am I going to be successful? And is the world going to applaud me? And is everything going to work out here in terms of worldly success? Or am I going to choose to please God? Now, if you're rich and you have worldly success, it doesn't mean necessarily you're not serving God, but you've got to make a decision about who you're going to serve. And the point is: one cares about the things of God and one cares about the things of themselves—their comfort and their convenience. And they do it all in the name of God. And that's a big problem in the pages of the Bible, and it's a big problem today.

The Pharisees heard him teaching on this—look at the next verse, verse 14—and they were, Luke adds, "lovers of money." Now think about that. Even Luke, Dr. Luke, who probably did pretty well, to look at the religious leaders of the day and say, "Oh, those guys showing the money—those guys love that." I mean, it shows. You want to talk about what they were eating? They weren't—after their preaching—sitting down to a meal of locusts and honey. They weren't sitting around dressed with some old, you know, outfit on and a leather belt. These guys—they loved all the things that made them seem to be great worldly successes. And because they loved money—because they didn't like his teaching—they ridiculed him (bottom of verse 14).

And he said to them—here, you can ridicule me all you want—"You are those who justify yourselves before men"—not before God. You're not looking at the standard of God and trying to measure



yourself by that; you're looking at yourself and justifying and measuring yourself by the standards of men. You care about the things of this world—that's your standard of success. "But God knows your hearts." God knows you're not about him. You do it all in God's name, but you're not about him. "For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." That's worth underlining, isn't it? Another, you know, line that never ends up on a Dayspring card. "What is exalted among men"—does that mean every last thing that man has ever thought was cool? No, not saying that. But in this context, the trappings of earthly success—those aren't the things that God cares about. As a matter of fact, he contrasts Christians with this: Gentiles—they're seeking after those, they're running after all those things; that is their priority. But you: seek first the—you know this—Matthew 6—the kingdom. Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness, and all those other things... You're worried about clothes? You'll have clothes. They may not be the splendid clothing of the courtier, but you'll have something to wear. And it may not be the fancy meals of the Pharisees, but you'll have something to eat. God will take care of you—all these things will be added to you. Food and clothing and shelter—you'll be fine. Worry about the kingdom first. Choose to serve God and his righteousness.

What's exalted among men—unfortunately, God sees us all entangled in the trappings of worldly success, and he says, "You know, it's an abomination to me." As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians—and in 1 Timothy chapter 6—it becomes a trap and a snare. The love of money—it is the root of all sorts of evil. That's a problem. So I don't have an adaptive deity who likes everything I like, who shares all my valuations. And that's not what I should ever seek in my preacher.

Which, by the way, is a good place for us to start just in terms of application: don't ever look for a preacher who's going to tell you everything you want to hear. Don't ever try to make a decision about your church based on whether or not all the sermons make you feel good or lead you into a more successful and prosperous life. Don't ever make a decision on that.

So how do I make my decision? Back to our text, verses 26 through 28a. "What did you go out to see?" Oh, you didn't go out to see the swaying, acquiescing preacher, or the picture of worldly success. No, you went out to see someone who's going to tell you something from God—a prophet. Is that what you went out to see? I tell you, you did go and you did find a prophet. I tell you, he's more than a prophet. He's the ultimate prophet. "This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face; he'll prepare your way before you'"—a quotation of Malachi 3, which was the great promise that at the change of dispensation between Old Covenant and New Testament times, you would have this person that would speak and prepare the way for the coming Messiah—would come in the power and the spirit of Elijah. You remember all that from Malachi 3 and 4. And he says, "I tell you, among those born of women, there's none greater than John."



Now, I don't have a lot in this text here to go by, but I did just come out of chapter 3, which might be good—to go back to chapter 3, where I actually have a record of his preaching. And I have Jesus saying, “You went to see a prophet. You got a prophet. You got a great prophet. You got a prophet that was the ultimate prophet that was prophesied—that would come before the coming of Christ. And I’m saying he’s the greatest guy ever. I’m saying you got a great, faithful prophet.”

Now, if you want to find a preacher, if you want to know who to listen to, if you want to know whom to be taught by—you don't want someone who's going to be swayed by opinion. You don't want someone who's just going to say, “Hey, listen to what I say about God, and you'll be a success in this world.” You don't want to listen to that. You want to listen to a messenger who's going to be faithful to the message. Let's start with this—number two: you need to rightly measure a messenger's success.

Let's start with the word “prophet.” If you go back to the Old Testament—which of course is where we define these concepts—the word for “prophet” in the Hebrew Old Testament is the word *nabi*. *Nabi* is the word that you could translate very woodenly and literally as “mouthpiece.” God has to pick a human mouthpiece and speak to his people. And the Bible uses that picture of mouthpiece like a megaphone—that the prophet is going to be one who speaks—to put it eloquently in Jeremiah 23:22—“to speak my words to my people.” He's just the conduit. What matters is God getting the information to the person who has to jettison some things and add some things, which comes to the message of how to get forgiven: I turn from my sin, I put my trust in Christ. The success of the prophet is measured by how faithful he is to the one who sent him.

If I said, “Listen, I hate to bother you—I know we're just getting started here with church this morning—but I just got a call. Apparently your cell phone is off from your boss, and he was tracking, you know, someone from the congregation down and they ended up handing me the cordless phone from the main line of the church, and I know who you are, and I got this call from your boss. And I just got off the phone with him, and he gave me a message to give you. And so, number one, turn your cell phone on, and next time when he wants to get ahold of you, he wants to be able to reach you. But for now, I got a message from your boss.” That would be weird—to be, like, on a Sunday my boss would call me at a church—that's really jarring. “Wow, really? Well, what did he say?”

Now if I said, “Well, you know, he had some good things and some bad things to say.” “Well, tell me—what did he have?” “I don't want to upset you. I mean, the tone of his voice—it sounds—he sounds like he really likes you. I mean, I don't know, there was probably more love in his voice than concern, frustration. I just, I don't know. The gist of it just was probably more like, ‘Hi, how are you? Have a good weekend.’ There was other stuff, but I don't know, I don't want to burden you with all that. I just—” You'd be hating me at this point. “My boss called, gave you a message, and all you can



tell me is the ‘tone of his voice’ sounded like he really likes me? What are you talking about? Give me the details. What did he say?”

You see, that’s the problem. So often you find preachers who get up and say things about God, cherry-picking a few things in the Bible and giving you a message that really doesn’t present the whole of the story. Even if you just wanted to deal with one verse—the very first verse you ever learned: “God so loved the world... everlasting life.” Okay, well, that’s how it starts and that’s how it ends. But that’s really not the whole of the verse. But isn’t that what you hear by most people these days when it comes to the message of God? “God loves you. He’s got a great future for you.” Even read the rest of the verse: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son”—what does that mean? Well, we know what John talks about there: the death of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The problem is sin. The requirement is the justice of death. This human being, the perfect one, would be that sacrifice. “That whoever”—contingent now—“would put their trust in him, believe in him, should not perish”—there’s the threat. If I don’t repent, if I don’t trust him, I’m going to face the justice of God and perish—“but” instead “have everlasting life.” Oh, it starts with love and ends with everlasting life—those sound very positive. But there’s a lot between those concepts you’d better communicate to someone.

And as long as we’re talking about your preacher, let’s flip this over for just a second. Because it isn’t just you trying to be a proper consumer of preaching—this is about you also engaging in the work of delivering a message. Aren’t you required as a Christian to lead people to Christ, to be a fisher of men, to be an ambassador (2 Corinthians 5)? Aren’t you required to be one who is salt and light so that you can sit in your office where you work, and people can know that you’re a Christian, and you can speak up about Christ, and then at some point have that opportunity to tell them what God says about being forgiven? You’re called to be an evangelist—you know that. You have a message to communicate.

And the question is: how would you measure your success in this? If all the co-workers in your life get from you is “God loves you; he’d like to improve your life,” you haven’t been a very good messenger. Matter of fact, you’ve been a lousy messenger. I’d be better if you hadn’t said anything. Because when it comes down to it, you have distorted the message of God.

Not only that—you’re called to be a discipler, aren’t you? In Romans, it says that we are supposed to be apt in our growth spiritually and our knowledge of the truth—that we should be able to instruct one another. That’s why we have home fellowship groups where our chairs go face to face. It’s why we do Partners, our discipleship program—so we get face to face and teach each other. How do you teach a disciple to grow in his faith? I’ve got two clear objectives as a Christian. I’m not talking about preachers; I’m talking about you—every Christian. I’m supposed to help people understand how to be



forgiven, and then tell how forgiven people should live. Evangelism, discipleship. How do you get forgiveness? How do forgiven people live—“teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded.” I’ve got both of those responsibilities. The question is: are you going to be a faithful messenger of the word?

Maybe a passage on this one—2 Timothy chapter 4. 2 Timothy chapter 4, please turn to this passage and look at it. Because though it is given to a career preacher named Timothy, it really certainly applies to all of us insofar as we’re evangelists and disciplers. I’m called to win people to Christ, and I’m called to help them grow—how to get forgiveness, how forgiven people should live. That’s every Christian’s job. Now, this applies to all of us.

Verse 1, 2 Timothy chapter 4: Paul says to Timothy, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead”—those spiritually alive and those spiritually dead—“and by his appearing and his kingdom.” Wow, that’s a lot of stuff. What’s the verb? “Preach the word,” verse 2; “be ready in season and out of season”—when the winds are blowing in the direction of what you have to say, and when the winds are blowing against it; when it’s going to be popular, and when it’s not—“preach the word.”

Now what’s the motivation in verse 1? “I charge you” to do this delivery of the message “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge everyone”—including the person you’re sharing the gospel with, including the person you’re helping grow in Christ, including you as the messenger. He’s going to judge us all “in light of his appearing and his kingdom.” Keep the message really clear and straight. Think this through. That’s what a prophet does—small “p” in our case—in evangelism and discipleship. That’s what a preacher does. He does that in light of being charged “in the presence of God.”

Back to my illustration: I got a message from your boss; I’m supposed to deliver it to you. I walk in, I say, “Just got off the phone with your boss,” and I’m just about to start giving you the message. And your boss, who was calling in his car, actually was heading to the church because he knew you’d be here. He walks in as I’m about to tell you what the message is. He stands right next to me. And I start talking about the tone of his voice and how I think he really likes you and you might be the employee of the month next month. What’s he going to do? Punch me in the face. “What? That’s not what I called about. Oh, I might have had a pleasant tone, but I had a very specific message.”



“I’m charging you in the presence of God.” He’s the one who entrusts us with this message—that’s a verb that continues over and over in 1 and 2 Timothy. We’ve been entrusted with a deposit. We’ve got to keep it and make sure it’s clear and unadulterated and unconfused and deliver it. You are an ambassador of Christ—as though the President were standing next to you—every time you open your mouth. Think about that. “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, the judge of the living and the dead, and in light of his appearing and his coming kingdom. Preach the word.” Don’t back off. Don’t sway. Don’t change it. Don’t morph it into whatever might be acceptable in season and out of season.

And he adds some words—look at these: “reprove, rebuke, and exhort.” Reprove—show someone his fault. Rebuke—tell them to stop doing whatever they shouldn’t be. Exhort—encourage and plead with them to do what they ought to—with complete patience and teaching. “For the time is coming,” verse 3, “when people will not endure sound teaching.” Think we’ve arrived at that time, have we not? “But having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.” Now at some point you’re going to tell the truth at your lunch table at work about what it means to get forgiven, and they’re going to say, “Next—I want someone else from another church to give me a gentler, kinder, milder version of this. I want to accumulate some other spokesman of God and his Bible that will tell it to me in a way that doesn’t have the hard edges that you have. I want someone who’s going to sway this a little bit in the direction that is much more palatable to me.” You’ll be replaced, and so will I—and I am every Sunday, by the way. People walk out, leave here, never come back.

Now remember the context of all of this: the context is John is the greatest ever. What kind of preacher was he? He was one who reproved and rebuked and exhorted. And if people walked away—whatever—he wasn’t going to suit the passions of the hearer; he wasn’t going to tickle the ears of those he preached to. “When that happens,” by the way, it says, “they turn away from listening to the truth,” verse 4, “and they wander into” some other version of the message—which, according to Paul, “is a myth.” “As for you, be sober-minded”—I’m always sober-minded when I think the person that gave me the message is listening to me deliver the message—“endure suffering”—and that’s always going to happen when I don’t bend my message to suit the hearer so that he doesn’t get mad at me or he still likes me—“do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” Because when we start to tweak the message—as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1—you will remove the power from the message of the cross. I mean, the ingredients all have to be there to bring out the message of the gospel and the message of spiritual growth. The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. If I start tweaking it and messing with it and give you things that I think you’re going to like, then I remove the power of it all. 1 Corinthians 1—we have no time to look at that.

And we should look at this before we leave this—Luke chapter 3. Just to remind you of John’s preaching—if you want to talk about Jesus saying he’s the greatest preacher, I’m thinking, well, I’d



like to read some of his sermons. What kind of preacher is he? You think he's the best—the greatest prophet ever? Wow. I would like to read some of his prophecies. How does he sound? I want to know how he starts his sermons. What are his introductions like? Does he illustrate things?

Luke 3:7: He—John the Baptist—said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers!” Ah—not probably how I learned to start sermons in seminary: call people names. I don't know; it's not good. Why? Because he's a mean guy? He hates people? That curmudgeon preacher? No, it's not. Why? Keep reading: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” He knows what's at stake. He understands that his message is for people to repent and then come and symbolize that repentance with baptism. And here are people that are not repentant wanting the symbol of baptism, and he calls them a name—snakes—slithering, shrewd, wanting the appearance of something that they don't have possession of. And he says, “There's wrath to come. You must bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and [be done] with your excuses and [your] egos.”

I'm just thinking to myself—here's a guy who really cares about people. “Oh, it doesn't sound like a caring preacher to me—caring preacher—he's going to say things in a nice way.” Really? Do you think they would have listened to him had he just said, “Well, you know, I don't know. Maybe you should check your heart a little better. Maybe... are you sincere? Okay, come on.” I mean, come on. Here are these people out there caring about appearances, wanting people to follow in behind them: “I want the latest, greatest thing, which is baptism by John. And you know what? I don't care if my life's full of hypocrisy.” John cared.

All I'm saying is this: there'll be people that won't listen to your gospel—and they'll call it “your gospel,” because they can get a gospel down the street that sounds different and more pleasant to them. But I don't want it to be because I'm angry or frustrated, or someone who just likes offending people. I have no interest in that. I'm such a nice guy—really. I want to make sure that what I'm doing is simply caring about the One who sent me with the message. Because at night, as I often say, I don't go home thinking, “Man, Mike, you were too direct today. You were too forthright. And you were too straightforward. You were too harsh today.” I don't think about that. That's not my fear. You think, “Well, it should be your fear.” It's not, because I'm not worried about really what you think of the message. I'm afraid when I lay in bed at night thinking, “Wow, was I direct enough? Was I forthright enough? Did I really—did I hold back? Did I tweak this just so that they'd give it a hearing? You know, I don't know—maybe that wasn't harsh enough.”

You need to realize what matters is standing before the judge of the living and the dead—not whether or not people loved what you said or felt good about it. This, by the way, was a full-of-courage kind of message. Drop down to verse 18—just to give you a sense of this: “With many other exhortations,”



which is a big word—to entreat, to urge, to plead—“he preached the good news to the people.” It didn’t feel very “good” to understand that grappling with the gospel often doesn’t, because it deals with sin and judgment and God’s justice. “But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife”—it was an immoral marriage—and John didn’t care if it was the tax collector (you can look above; he’s dealing with tax collectors in verse 12) or the king of Galilee—Herod Antipas, the tetrarch—didn’t care. He was going to tell him, “If you’re wrong, you’re wrong.” And it cost him—talk about enduring suffering. “He added this to them all”—to all the evil things that he had done—verse 20—“he locked John up in prison.”

More could be said, but let me say this: when you look in the mirror—or you’re picking a pastor—make sure you rightly measure a messenger’s success. It’s about faithfulness. It’s about boldness. It’s about courage to say the truth even when it’s not popular.

Number three—verse 28b, the bottom of our passage: “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he”—“yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he”—that is, John. This is weird. He just said in verse 28 (the first half), “John’s the greatest.” Then he says, “Oh, now he’s great, and I just hailed him as great, but you know what? Anybody in the kingdom—even the least person in the kingdom—[is] greater than John.” How can that be? Are you saying John’s not in the kingdom? In this context, and in this use of the word “kingdom,” that’s exactly what I’m saying. And you know what? Neither is anybody else in the crowd.

What’s the point, though? He wants everybody in the crowd to get into the kingdom, and he wants John to get into the kingdom. Now, we can all be card-carrying citizens of the kingdom. “You got your card?” “Oh yeah, I’m repentant; I put my trust in Christ; I got here on my...”—my citizenship is in heaven. Not what we’re talking about. When we march through the portal of heaven—when we get into the kingdom—everyone there is more honored, more amazing, got more accolades. It’s a blessed—better to use an old word—blessed experience, a happier experience, a better experience, a greater experience than any of the accolades you could get on earth—any of the kudos you could get from Christ on earth. The blessing that comes from deity on the servants of God is greater in the kingdom than even the greatest accolades from the Messiah himself on earth.

In other words, what we’re talking about here—if you want a cross-reference on this, look at Luke 13:29–30—we’re talking about the coming to the reclining at the table in the kingdom of God. That is going to be a better experience than any kind of blessing we get from Christ on this earth. That should be an obvious concept.



But here's the other thing: he says, "the least in the kingdom is greater." That brings up another question—wow, "least"—that sounds like there's people that are greater than the least. That sounds like you've ranked people in the kingdom. "I know that doesn't happen." It does happen.

Give you a quick set of verses on this—then I'll tie this all together. You're reading Matthew 5:19. Matthew 5:19 says, "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called 'least' in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices them and teaches them will be called 'great' in the kingdom of heaven." Great and least. What are you saying? In the kingdom there are rankings?

Matthew 19:27–28. Peter says, "We've left everything to follow you. What are we going to have?" Jesus says, "Truly, in the new world, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me"—looking at the Twelve—"will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Now, that's the kingdom age. The people in the twelve tribes are in the kingdom. These guys are at the top of the pecking order in the twelve tribes, and they are at the top—sitting on twelve thrones. There's ranking in the kingdom.

Mark 10:37–40—if you're taking notes. Mark 10:37–40. James and John, along with Mom, come and say to Jesus, "We want to sit at your right hand and your left hand in the kingdom." And Jesus says, "Oh, stop with all of that—we're all equal in the kingdom." Is that what he says? No. He says, "Are you able to drink the cup that I'm going to drink?" In other words, are you able to go through the suffering and the sacrifice that I'm going to go through? "I mean, you want to be at the top of the heap? It's going to cost." They said, "Oh, we're able." He says, "Yeah, well, I don't know about that, but you're going to drink a cup, all right. But you know what? It's not right now for me to be telling you who's going to sit at the right hand or the left—that's for those for whom it has been prepared" (verse 40). What's the point? Yeah—there's rankings in the kingdom. And that ranking depends on what? Depends on fidelity. Depends on sacrifice. Depends on obedience.

All of that reminds me of two things: Jesus is concerned about people being in the kingdom and not being out of the kingdom—outer darkness, weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. And he cares about your ranking in the kingdom.

Here's the thing: if I contort the message of the gospel, I can't even save people, according to 1 Corinthians 1. And if I try to build you up in Christ and I don't give you the true whole counsel of God—if I'm holding back or contorting the message—I can't even build you up in Christ. And



therefore, in the kingdom, I can't even advance your ranking in the kingdom. You know what God cares about? He cares about those things: people not going to hell, and people growing up in Christ and being rewarded in the kingdom one day.

Number three: I need to keep God's goals in view. It's one of the reasons I'm motivated not to hold back on giving you the truth of the Bible. The reason I don't want to tell my non-Christian friends some other version of Christianity that he likes better—because it doesn't have power to save him. And I want him in the kingdom. And I want you to grow in Christ. And if I didn't want you to grow in Christ, I'd give you fluffy messages that would always—you'd always drive home, "I love that guy, and I love that church, and it made me feel good." That's what you would feel every week if that's all I wanted. If I wanted a big church and everybody in here, and I could get my own stadium too, then I'd just preach messages to make you feel good. But I want you to have a higher ranking in the kingdom. "That's so base." Don't start with me on that—"Oh, that's so fleshly; I don't care—I'd just be glad to be there." The Bible says you *should* care.

Let me quote Lewis on this, because he says it so well: "If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoic philosophers and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires"—our ambitions for those things—"not too strong, but too weak."

As Jonathan Edwards said: heaven is intended for various degrees of honor and blessedness, happiness. Some are designed to sit in higher places than others. Some are designed to advance to higher degrees of honor and glory than other people. Though they're all seats of honor and blessedness—or happiness—yet there are some that are more so than others.

These guys didn't make this up in their sleep—you understand Jesus taught this repeatedly. Here's one basic one you learned as a kid: "Store up for yourselves treasure in heaven." Stop groping down here to run after all those things like the Gentiles do. Worry more about serving God—seeking his kingdom and his righteousness. You know what that will do for you? It'll increase your ranking in the kingdom. You know how I'm going to get that? Only by getting the true, unadulterated word of God into my life. And all I'm saying is: I'm a messenger in your life, and you're a messenger in other people's lives. And your calling should be: I don't care about how popular it is; I don't care how it makes people feel; all I care about is whether they hear the truth and they understand it—and I say it clearly and forthrightly. And that's what matters. I'm a messenger. John, according to Jesus, was the greatest messenger of all. He ends this commentary on John by saying, "You know what? Let's think about the



kingdom—how great it’s going to be there. And even the, you know, least in the kingdom—it’s going to be a great experience. I want to not be the least. And I don’t want you to be the least.” And that means I’ve got to preach the word to you. And we’ve got to encourage each other with the truth—not with some varnished version of it.

Alright, I’m out of time. But homework assignment—can you write this down? 1 Thessalonians 2:1–13. I don’t think I put this on the back of the worksheet. I put several passages there I’d like you to look at this week and prep for your home fellowship groups, or just your own family time in the word—but this one I don’t think I put on there. And I want you to look at this passage—or did I? You can correct me. Is it on there at all? 1 Thessalonians 2? No? Okay, thanks. This passage—which I wanted to get into, but I have no time for—if you look through this text, I want you to see someone who wasn’t eating locusts—John the Baptist. We’ve got Paul now speaking of his preaching ministry. You can see all the elements of everything we talked about this morning here. God is saying, here is Paul willing to suffer, not worrying about opinion, not trying to please people, and yet caring passionately about those that are hearing him speak. I want you to be motivated as an evangelist and a discipler, as well as becoming a consumer of preaching with the right kind of appetite based on that standard.

Why don’t you stand with me and we’ll let you go.

Let’s pray.

God, I know to be faithful to your word—what Jeremiah 23 says—to proclaim your words to your people, or proclaim your words to those that we hope become your people, is not always going to be well received. Sometimes it gets a negative response. And God, our temptation—just like my temptation—is to somehow dial it back. Maybe I can leave that out. Maybe I don’t have to talk about that part. God, free us from falling to that temptation. Keep us from giving in to that impulse. Let us recognize that as ambassadors of your truth, the President is standing right next to me; the One who sent us with the message is always listening to how we portray it.

And God, while there are many things we could do to tweak it—so we could make it sound like it’s all going to be whatever we want, or at least it’ll be a lot more of what we want—then God, we’re really going to stand in your presence one day as the judge of the living and the dead and have to give an account for this. It’s going to lower our ranking in the kingdom. And God, even for that principle—which I didn’t have time to prove as I wanted to and take us where we needed to go—I just pray for those that don’t even understand that part of your word, which is repeated over and over and over



again, that there is a concern that we should all have about what this life is going to do to affect the next one.

And God, I know so often—we are in a place where we are just giving in to the pressures of caring about people’s opinions and thoughts. And it’s doing ourselves damage; it’s doing damage to your truth. And God, we’ve got to stop that. I preach this, obviously, with a mirror up in front of my face, because I have to make these decisions all the time—as well as my congregation—but we can’t judge our success by what people thought of what we said. So free us from that, and give us the right thought. Let us be able to stand with John the Baptist—not because we’re purposely trying to be crass or harsh, but because we desperately care about people. And more than that, we care about fidelity and the honor that we bring you by being accurate with the message.

And God, of course it doesn’t mean we’re trying to chuck pearls to swine everywhere, and just going into everybody in our office and saying, you know, whatever it is that we know to be true. Obviously there’s a setting and a time and a prep for this in people’s lives. But when it gets to that place where we’re ready to speak into someone’s life the truth of your word, let us be clear, and let our conscience not be pricked by the fact that we’re tailoring this. We want to speak forthrightly and clearly and plainly, and the chips will fall where they fall—there’s nothing we can do. So often they’ll say, “I’m done with that.” They’ll walk away; they’ll accumulate for themselves people that are going to tell them what they want to hear. We can’t change that, God. So help us to chalk that up as part of the suffering—hardship. We just want to be good evangelists and fulfill our ministries.

So, God, help us. I know part of the timidity that makes people acquiesce and tailor the message is the same timidity that causes some people in this room never to speak up at all. They don’t talk about their faith; they don’t talk about their relationship with Christ. And I pray that would change this week—even just one conversation. Open the door so it’s clearly put right in their path, where they have to speak up about Christ this week. And when they do, and people sneer and roll their eyes and go, “Oh, you’re one of those; and I’m sure you’re not even progressive enough to think open-mindedly about these things,” I pray that we’d be willing to hear that ridicule. And as we learned earlier in the Gospel of Luke, rejoice in that day, because when people say those things in that day, there will be great reward for us being earned in heaven.

So, God, let us care more about you than people’s opinions—loving them all the time and in the whole process of that as we care about their soul and their growth. Dismiss us now with opportunities—all kinds of opportunities this week—to put this message into practice. In Jesus’ name, Amen.