

Hearing Ears or Itching Ears?

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2 Timothy 4:1–4 (NKJV) “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: ² Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

Ministers will one day stand before God and the Lord Jesus Christ to give account of their ministry and their message. Although every believer will stand before the Lord to give account of what they did with the time, talents, treasures, and truth committed to their trust, ministers will stand before the Lord with a greater accountability because what they teach and preach will affect many lives whether that be positive or negative. James, the half-brother of Jesus, said, “*My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*”¹ Before a person seeks a position as a pastor, preacher, or teacher in the body of Christ, they must seriously consider the awesome responsibility and accountability that will rest upon them for what they teach and preach. With this understanding, the apostle Paul gave a charge to Timothy that is relevant to every minister of the gospel. He called as witnesses God the Father and the Son Jesus Christ before whom he would stand and be judged. There is no higher witness. There is no higher accountability. There is no higher Judge.

Paul charged Timothy to “preach the word!” Ministers are called to preach God’s Word. They are not called to preach their opinions, traditions, philosophies, creeds, preferences, speculations, culture, fads, experiences, or the like. The disciples understood this: “*And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.*”² The early church followed their example: “*Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.*”³ Those early ministers were faithful to preach the word!

Paul also charged Timothy to “be ready in season and out of season.” By this Paul meant that Timothy should be ready to preach the word whether people were receptive or whether they were hostile, whether from opportunity or from necessity, and when the spiritual climate was favorable or when it was unfavorable. The faithful herald must proclaim the message of his King regardless of the conditions under which the message must be proclaimed.

Paul admonished Timothy to “convince”, “rebuke”, and “exhort”. Convincing shines the light of God’s word to expose sin and to bring conviction upon the sinner. Rebuke brings a divine reprimand and warning to a stubborn sinner. Exhortation makes an urgent appeal for the sinner to repent and to obey God’s Word.

Such is a daunting task for the faithful minister because the deceptions of sin, of the flesh, and of the devil are unrelenting. Thus, Timothy is charged to preach the word with longsuffering. Ministers must preach God’s word faithfully regardless of circumstance or response. They must never surrender ground to the lie. They must never abandon the hope of breakthrough and conversion.

Paul exhorted Timothy to use “all teaching”, i.e. to teach the entirety of the word. People often justify their sin by lifting a text from its context. A text out of context becomes a pretext for a lie. The minister who carefully labors in and faithfully teaches God’s word equips believers with the truth so that they might both speak the truth and discern and reject the lie.

Why was Paul adamant that Timothy preach the word? It is because a time of apostasy is coming. Apostasy is a falling away from the faith of those who once professed it. A time was coming when people would no longer endure (allow) the preaching of sound doctrine. Why? Their pursuit of fleshly desires would outweigh their pursuit of the truth. As a result, they would develop “itching ears.”

¹ James 3:1 (NKJV)

² Mark 16:20 (NKJV)

³ Acts 8:4 (NKJV)

An itching ear is a *rebellious ear*. The LORD told the prophet Isaiah, “Now go, write it before them on a tablet, and note it on a scroll, that it may be for time to come, forever and ever: ⁹ That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the Lord; ¹⁰ Who say to the seers, ‘Do not see,’ and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits. ¹¹ Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.”⁴ The LORD told the prophet Ezekiel, “Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, which has eyes to see but does not see, and ears to hear but does not hear; for they are a rebellious house.”⁵

An itching ear is a *straying ear*. It is bored with established truth: “...they will not endure sound doctrine...” People with itching ears “...will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to idols.”⁶ It seeks to hear something new: “For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.”⁷ It wants to be told that God approves of their carnal and depraved desires: “...but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers.”⁸ It seeks to hear something positive and pleasant. The late Baptist Revivalist Vance Havner, in his book, *Playing Marbles with Diamonds*, wrote: “The devil is not fighting religion; he is too smart for that. He is producing counterfeit Christianity so much like the real one that good Christians are afraid to speak out against it...We are plainly told in the Scriptures that in the last days men will not endure sound doctrine and will depart from the truth and heap to themselves teachers to tickle their ears. We are living in an epidemic of this itch, and popular preachers have developed ear-tickling to a fine art. Today, the angle is to avoid ‘negative’ preaching and accentuate only the positive.”

An itching ear is a *soliciting ear*. It solicits teachers who say what it wants to hear. Consider the saying, “Teacher, teacher, scratch my ear. Tell me what I want to hear.” The following list contains just a few things people want to hear today. “Tell me that God has changed with the times and that the Bible is out of date.” “Tell me that God doesn’t judge anyone, and neither should we.” “Tell me that God loves and accepts me the way I am. I don’t have to change.” “Tell me that God made me like this and I just need to embrace who I am.” “Tell me that there are many ways to God and that truth is not absolute.” “Tell me that God accepts people of every religion or no religion at all.” “Tell me that God wants me to be happy, blessed, and problem-free.” “Tell me that God is okay with whatever makes me happy.” “Tell me that God will never send me or anyone to hell.” “Tell me that everyone goes to heaven when they die.” God deliver us from itching ears!

God desires that we have hearing ears. Eight times in the Gospels Jesus said “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” Seven times in the Book of Revelation Jesus said, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Jesus wants us to develop spiritual hearing. Spiritual hearing goes beyond natural hearing. It penetrates the mind and sinks into the heart. Spiritual hearing listens with the heart. It desires to hear what we need to hear rather than what we want to hear. It accepts the charges against us and acknowledges the error of our way. It rethinks life in the light of what Christ has said. It allows the word of God to transform our entire world view. It hears the call of God to come out of this corrupt and dying world to live our life in the light of eternity. A hearing ear takes action to obey God’s word.

Do you have itching ears? Do you want hearing ears? Then repent of any desire to hear what you want to hear and ask God to give you ears to hear His word. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

⁴ Isaiah 30:8–11 (NKJV)

⁵ Ezekiel 12:2 (NKJV)

⁶ 2 Timothy 4:4 (NKJV)

⁷ Acts 17:21 (NKJV)

⁸ 2 Timothy 4:3 (NKJV)