

Theme: Itching Ears Need to Hear the Truth

1) For their correction. 2) For their salvation

Of all the weeks for it to happen, I suppose it was no coincidence it was this one. We were all coming back from our vacation in Alaska. As our plane began its final descent into Minneapolis, my ears began to ache from the changing pressure. Down we went, and up went the pressure. Chewing gum wasn't helping, neither was jamming my fingers in my ear to let out the pressure. Finally, we landed, but the relief didn't come. Still, I was waiting, yearning, longing, for my ears to pop. Then nothing, no relief! I went on with the trip home, yawning, drinking water, swallowing every few seconds, all the random little things to coax your ear into popping. Nothing! It had to have been a few hours later when I least expected that finally, one ear popped with pain and then came some sweet relief. But the other was still as full as ever.

The night passed. We finished the car ride home from Minneapolis to Appleton. Still, nothing doing except the incessant urge to jam my fingers in my ear and itch my ear canal to make the pressure go away, all of which only makes the irritation worse. Day and night the urge became more intense. All the remedies: pinch your nose and blow. Pinch your nose and swallow. All worthless! I was getting so desperate I was starting to consider doing the things Dr. Google explicitly said not to do, like digging around in there with cue tips, bobby pins, or even matches, all of which I knew would be really bad. But I was quickly beginning to not care what I had to jam in there so long as it might satisfy my itching pressure-filled ear. So great was the irritation, the fixation, the desire for relief of my itching ears. That's a dangerous and desperate place to be: to not care about what goes into your ears so long as you think it may provide some relief.

Of all the weeks for it to happen, I suppose it was no coincidence that it was this one. I sat down to begin studying the words of our text. **"For the time will come when people will**

not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” (2 Tim. 4:3)

This week I learned more than I ever wanted to know about the intense desire of an itching ear and what it might lead you to do to relieve them. And wouldn't you know it, this is the week that Paul uses the “itching ears” metaphor to warn his son in the faith, Pastor Timothy, (who happens to be my namesake) about the spiritual danger that he and his people would soon face.

That brings us to the two main temptations for today, the two spiritual pitfalls caused by “itching ears”. The first temptation is for the people, people out there in the world, yes of course, but don't think you can dodge, it's for people in here too. (And I sit in the same pews you do!) It's the temptation to put or purposely allow bad things into our ears to bring relief; to invite these things into our hearing in order to scratch the itch.

Paul is warning Timothy about people out there and even in here who aren't going to want to hear the truth of sound doctrine, which might initially hurt to hear and make us feel bad, but is exactly what is needed. Instead, they are only going to want to hear what feels good initially, what scratches the itch and satisfies the urge, what relieves the irritating itching sensation. That's a dangerous and desperate place to be: to not care about what kind of false teaching or godless myths are going into your ears, so long as it makes them feel better for the moment.

Paul goes on to tell us about the great lengths people will go to scratch the itch. **“Instead, to suit their own desires they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”** Honestly, that is a brilliant solution of our sinful flesh to

scratch the itch, (almost as good as sticking bobby pins or matches into your ear): to go and find someone who will say exactly what you want them to say and then only listen to them. I promise you that will be able to find someone who will tell you whatever wicked thing you want to hear and soothe your conscience about it. The only problem is, that solution that will wind up killing you.

Remember what it did to Eve way back in the garden. God said, **“You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”** (Genesis 2:16,17). But then the devil came along and created a little itch, **“Did God really say you must not eat...?”** And then he showed her a way to scratch the itch. **“God knows that when you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** That was enough to turn Eve aside from the sure word God had spoken, and instead tickle her ears with the promise of the knowledge she would gain. So she took the fruit, gave some to her husband, and both of them brought disobedience and death into the world.

Do you think the result will be any different if you simply replace Adam and Eve’s disobedience with a different urge or itch for something God told us not to do? If you give yourself over to your desires to be or do something God says, “No” to, it will kill you. It’d be like standing by a power plant, looking at the sign that says **“Danger. High Voltage. Keep Off.”** But instead of heeding the warning of the sign, you listen to your bozo buddy standing next to you saying, “Ah, don’t worry about it. Go ahead, climb the fence! You won’t get shocked.” You’ll soon find out who the liar is and that you can’t free yourself from your body being shocked by electricity. Turning aside from the truth will kill you, and not just the body, but body and soul forever.

That brings us to the second temptation. This is one that faces preachers, those who've been called to preach in a congregation, but also to you who speak the Word of God to the people in your life. Since people don't want to hear the truth, those who preach are tempted to soften the truth, to stop speaking the truth or to find a different truth altogether, which is no truth at all. The pressure is on to start telling people what their ears want to hear: that it's okay to be whoever you want, live however you want, love whoever you want, and that you should be accepted and supported while you do it. That lie is everywhere right now, outside the Church and within visible congregations. The pressure presses in from every side, it's in all the shows, on the commercials, and it comes from your own families, pressure to not teach the truth but to give in and tell them what they want to hear.

As you might expect, it turned out the cure for all the pressure and itching in my ears was not any of the things I tried or wanted it to be. It wasn't itching, scratching and jamming things that don't belong in my ears. The cure was going to the doctor to find out the intense pressure from the plane ride was only a symptom of the double-ear infection I had, one in both ears, even the one I thought was the good ear. The cure was antibiotics to cure the infection from the inside out. The cure required patience and endurance, because I still had to wait a few more days to feel any relief.

That's a lot like the cure that Paul charges Timothy to apply to people whose (theme) *itching ears need to hear the truth*. Paul writes, **"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge. Preach the word;" (2 Timothy 4:1,2)**. That's the cure, the prescription that God gives to Paul and Timothy and ministers like them to give to others! The Word needs to be applied to people on the inside, to the heart and mind, and it works from the inside out to change

the outward symptoms and urges. So Paul tells Timothy the directions for how to apply it: **“be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” (4:3)** People may not want to take the medicine. The results may not be immediate. The cure may come with more pain as the law of God puts to death the infection of sin in our hearts. It may require great patience and persistence but it’s exactly what **itching hears need to hear 1) for their correction.**

Whenever you take your medicine, you always have to keep in mind that though it may come with side-effects, the goal is relief, healing, and restoration. And Paul reminds Timothy just a few verses earlier that this is the expressly-stated goal of a the Word of God. **“The Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:15,16).** God doesn’t tell the heralds of his Word to preach the Word just to make everyone feel miserable about themselves. He does it so that in our misery we will finally stop killing ourselves with all kinds of false cures and realize there is only cure that works—the Word he has spoken to us. It’s the Word that, yes, points out sin 1) for our correction, but also 2) for our salvation. It’s the Word that reveals to us **“the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (2 Timothy 1:10).** *Itching ears need to hear the truth of the gospel 2) for their salvation!*

So as Paul gives Timothy a few more general reminders, he mentions that one very specifically. **“But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (4:5)** The word for “gospel” in Greek is “euangelium”. “Eu” means good, and you can see the word “angel” which literally is a

messenger with a message. So an “evangelist” is one who brings the good message or good news! Timothy, as you correct and rebuke people and carry out all the duties of your ministry, be sure to share the good message. **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” (1 Timothy 1:15)** of whom Paul knew he was the worst.

The good message of God’s Word overcomes the worst of the likes of us, and it’s the very thing that gives Paul confidence to close this section the way he does. Hear the chief of sinners write with words of supreme confidence that God has salvation waiting in store for him and every sinner who trusts in Christ. **“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the God, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (4:6-9)**. So we pray, “Come to us, Lord Jesus, in your Word and transform the itching of our ears into a longing for your coming again, and take us at last whom you have healed with your blood to be with you forever.” Amen.