

Sermon: "Looking for the Smart Pill"  
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor  
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2 Timothy 3:14-4:5  
SMART PILLS

Did you know that it might be possible to buy a smart pill in the near future? I'm not making this stuff up. It's true. One drug company is developing a pill that will help us aging baby boomers keep our mental edge.

Some have expressed reluctance to give healthy people a chemical treatment. After all, we know that many drugs prove later on to have some serious side effects.

But, I'm sure that if they put this pill on the market, there will be many people who give it a try. In the land of instant everything, why not try something that will increase our mental functioning with little or no effort?

#### POLITICAL ADS

Many of us have been complaining about the political ads that have been filling the airwaves these past few months. Almost all of them have one thing in common. They distort or oversimplify the facts.

But, do you know why we keep seeing them on TV? The ads are effective. Despite what we say about them, statistics show many people make decisions based upon political ads. Why? It's easier than actually doing the research and checking to see if the claims are true.

We are unwilling to do the work necessary to learn the truth about important matters, and in some cases it may be that we would rather not have our opinions challenged by the truth. The TV sound bite becomes an instant fix for our lack of knowledge. (I guess it could be worse. Some people say that they base their political decisions upon information obtained from Comedy Central and the late night comedians!)

#### SIMPLISTIC THEOLOGY

The same is true when it comes to faith. Many are always searching for the quick and easy "religious smart pill," the quote from Scripture that confirms what we already believe or the pithy religious saying that fits conveniently on a bumper sticker.

Recently, bad theology has even made its debut in the popular novel. In "The DaVinci Code," the suggestion is made that the Roman Catholic Church conspired for centuries to keep secret the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the child born of their sexual alliance. The book is well written and is filled with tantalizing riddles, but it's all fiction. It's a novel. A first year student of church history could easily refute this so-called "theory."

But, some who are less discerning have been seduced into believing the story line of this novel. There are at least four or five books on the market debunking the religious theory of a work of fiction! What a waste of ink! But, I'm not surprised. We live in a world that has a hard time distinguishing between what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong.

In order to keep our bearings, in order not to be taken in by the fast talk of con men and con women, we need to get beyond our search for quick and easy answers.

## THE GOSPEL STANDARD

In our lesson for today, the Apostle Paul is writing what amounts to his last will and testament to the church. Soon after these words were written, Paul was probably beheaded, martyred on behalf of the gospel. And in this letter, young Timothy is being charged with keeping the true faith in a turbulent and dangerous world.

But, how can he live up to this difficult task? How can he avoid being “taken in” by the charlatans disguised in religious garb? How can he avoid bending to the political and social pressures of the day?

According to Paul, the key to success lay in sticking with the written word of God as the source of all truth. Those seeking the truth in political debate might do well to visit [factcheck.org](http://factcheck.org) on the intranet as a start. And those having questions about matters of faith would do well to check God’s written word, the Bible.

In the world of faith, the Bible is our [factcheck.org](http://factcheck.org). Many people can and do say all kinds of things about what is right and true. But, the important question for the Christian is not, “What do others say?” The important question is “What does God’s Word say?” The Bible is our only rule of faith and practice.

Don’t assume that just because a pastor or someone that you trust says something that it is the gospel. Look it up for yourself. Salvation does not come from following our own feelings or hunches about things. Salvation comes from hearing the gospel as God has presented it in the Bible.

## DOING THE WORD

All of us have the capacity to kid ourselves when it comes to the message of the Bible. We would like to make the yoke easier and the burden lighter than Jesus had in mind.

When we read things in the Bible like “woe to you who are rich, it is easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle” than it is for you to enter the kingdom of heaven or “turn the other cheek” or “put away your sword” it becomes very hard to justify our society’s conspicuous consumption and militaristic ways.

Many people quote our passage for today with great admiration. “All Scripture is inspired by God ...” Scripture is God-breathed. Don’t speak against the Bible in this “neck of the woods.” After all, we’re in the “Bible belt.”

But, then many of those same people turn right around and promote a way of life that is not in line with what the Bible actually says. In that case the Bible is not the sacred tradition, the objective truth that forms a foundation for our life. The Bible is merely a “good luck charm” used to bless what we already believe.

Actually, if we read the message of Scripture with an open mind, all of us will find reason to question and change many things in our lives. I challenge you to read a passage of Scripture and ask yourself, “What do I need to change in my life in response to this passage?” Something will come to mind.

I have found that when I do this I almost always find some significant area of my life that needs to change. Indeed, according to this passage, that’s the function of Scripture. Scripture is designed

to challenge us with the truth. It exposes how our ways are not God's ways. The Bible presents an alternative way of thinking and living. The Bible helps us see how we should live. (2 Timothy 3:16)

### TAKING IT PERSONAL

There are three specific ways that Scripture can be used to change us. Scripture can be used for "argument, reproof, and appeal." (2 Timothy 3:16 b, NEB) Some people are tormented by doubts and need to be convinced by arguments. Others have fallen into sin, and need to be rebuked. Still others are haunted by fears and need to be encouraged.

Most of us, at one time or another, fall into all of those categories. Listening to Scripture then must be an ongoing process. When we read Scripture, we are constantly being challenged to be the people that God wants us to be. And the more we really listen to the witness of Scripture, the more we will be shaped into the kind of disciples that God wants us to be.

It is not a matter of just mastering the content of Scripture. Very few have come to faith because they took a college course on the interpretation of the New Testament. (Quite the contrary I suspect.) But, many have come to faith when they have looked at their own life in relation to the claims made by God's Word, when they have taken it personally.

To put it another way, it's a matter of being willing to submit our lives to the scrutiny of Scripture. We do not interpret Scripture. Scripture interprets us. Scripture shapes us into the people that we should be. Scripture gives us the resources we need to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. (2 Timothy 3:17)

### LORD OR THERAPIST?

Conservative columnist, David Brooks of the New York Times suggested that Americans no longer take religious doctrines seriously. He wrote that pastors in order to fill the pews have developed seeker-sensitive churches where the "technology is cutting-edge, the music is modern, and the language is therapeutic."

I think Brooks has a point. Doctrine is being downplayed in favor of a more "me-centered" therapeutic approach. And that approach has been successful in attracting a large following in some cases.

But, notice that this passage takes the opposite tack. We read the Bible not to enhance ourselves and build crowds of followers. We read the Bible in order to submit ourselves to the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and quite often that means going against the crowd. Quite often that means being unpopular instead of popular.

Look at how Jesus is portrayed in this passage. He is not the great therapist who helps us through the rough spots. Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth. Jesus is the judge who has the final say on everyone, living and dead. His final reign is never far away.

### A TOUGH SELL

In light of that imminent regime change, Paul tells Timothy that his job is not to adjust the message to the needs of the people. His job is to persistently preach the unadorned gospel message "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable." Timothy is to tell God's truth. Whether people like it or not is immaterial.

The young preacher is encouraged to deliver the gospel with a sense of urgency and intensity. It is not to be a cleverly devised argument. Instead, Timothy's preaching is to be a simple statement of the faith revealed in Scripture. (2 Timothy 4:2)

Paul again emphasizes that this kind of preaching will not always be well received. In fact Paul tells Timothy that he can expect rejection from those who will not tolerate "sound doctrine." What is the reason that won't accept sound doctrine? It interferes with "their own desires." (2 Timothy 4:3)

## ITCHING EARS

Many people reject biblical authority not because they have taken the message and claims of the Bible seriously and found them wanting. Many people reject the biblical message because the Bible does not fit with their preconceived idea of what is right and true.

In that regard, I guess all of us, depending on the issue are from time to time guilty of being a people with what the Bible calls "itching ears." We want preachers and teachers who scratch us where we itch. We want leaders who reassure us and tell us that we're always in the right.

That's a pleasant fiction, believing that we're always right, but of course deep down inside we know that it's just not true. Taking the message of the Bible seriously means leaving behind the delusion of self-righteousness, and it means giving up control of our lives in general.

There is a different yardstick used to measure our lives, the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Our reason for being, our purpose in life is radically changed. Instead of living for ourselves, we live for God's kingdom.

This totally turns conventional wisdom on its head. We tell our children, "You can be anything you want to be." Certainly we want to encourage our children and let them consider as wide a range of options for the future.

But, in the final analysis, what we should be saying to them (and to ourselves for that matter) is this: "God has a plan for our life. There is a job that God wants us to do, and all of us need to listen for God's call."

## TRUTH IS THE ANSWER

The people of my generation had a saying, "If it feels good, do it." And I must say that my generation and probably every generation after mine have pretty well lived up to that standard. We are an "itching ears" generation. We long to hear a constant word of affirmation, and we have traveled near and far in search of that affirmation.

But, as important as affirmation may be, sometimes we need something more. Sometimes we need to be challenged. Sometimes we need to be rebuked. Sometimes we need to hear some sobering truths. Submitting our will to the will of God, and His Word enables us to receive what we really need to grow and develop.

I think that our desire to always hear only affirmation accounts for the unsettled spiritual state of so many. Instead of becoming practitioners of faith we become shoppers for an easy answer. One young man recently said,

"When I was 19, I tried Christianity. Just didn't get the point of it all. Lost interest in a few months and moved on to transcendental meditation. It really helped, for a while. Then I lost interest in

that too. From my experience, I just don't think that I'm cut out for this religion stuff. I don't know. Maybe I'll try yoga next."

Our Scripture for today refers to those who have turned away from the truth and "wander away to myths." (2 Timothy 4:4) I think this young man represents someone who has taken this path. For those who do not have the patience and persistence to hear and obey God's word as found in Scripture, there is a constant searching.

It's as if they are chasing a spiritual mirage. Each new venture seems promising, but in the end there is no cool water, no satisfaction of a basic spiritual need.

## THE SOURCE OF LIVING WATER

I believe that if we persist in trying to follow the will of God as revealed in Scripture and the life of Christ, we will find true satisfaction. We will replace the chasing after mirages with the living water of God's truth. Oh, certainly there will be times of discouragement, and there will be times when we forget who we are and whose we are.

But, over the long run, if we are willing (as the apostle Paul put it) to let every thought be taken captive by the word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, if we are willing to evaluate our lives daily by the objective standard of the Bible, then it is possible to find a sense of purpose and peace even when the world around us rages with insane violence and confusion. (2 Corinthians 10:5)

A church that I passed yesterday had on its sign board, "Under the same management for over 2,000 years." I find that to be a comforting thought that in this rapidly changing world there is something that does not change, something that is never outdated.

God's word as Amy Grant's song puts it is indeed a "lamp and a light" in a dark and dreary world. The truth of the gospel sets us free from being a slave to the latest trend. The truth sets us free.

## THE SQUIRREL'S LESSON

An English preacher of the 19th century describes studying a beech tree one afternoon. Like a skilled naturalist he noted the color of the leaves, the texture of the bark and the intricacy of the branches. Such study was, for him, a form of grateful prayer to God as rich as any study in the library.

On this particular day, he noticed a squirrel running up the branches, leaping from one to the other, playing in every nook of the great tree. The squirrel moved among the branches as if the trunk were Main Street and the smaller branches country lanes or alleys; somewhere among the branches were his house and daily food.

As he reflected imaginatively on this inquisitive, frolicking squirrel, so wonderfully at home in the beech tree, he draws this analogy to our relationship with Scripture.

"Well, now, the way to deal with God's word is not merely to contemplate it, or study it, as a student does; but to live on it, as that squirrel lives on his beech tree. Let it be to you, spiritually, your house, your home, your food, your medicine, your clothing, the one essential element of your soul's life and growth."

This being "at home" in Scripture is certainly an alternative to the seemingly endless quest for a new smart pill or new philosophy that is going to fulfill one's every desire. Jerome described the

Bible as a lake, where one may stay on the surface or choose to explore the infinite depths of truth contained within it. I think God has called us to go deep sea diving!

A daily smart pill might increase your memory, but a day spent studying Scripture with an open heart and a searching mind will increase your love for God, make you a wise person, and enable you to discern false teaching the next time it comes to the box office or the bookstore.

May God's Word truly be a lamp unto our feet.

Amen.