

Itchy Ears
II Timothy 41-:4
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First Federated Church
Peoria, Illinois
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On our first night in Kampala I woke up around 1:30 in the morning. As I tossed and turned, trying to get back to sleep, my mind continually returned to a sermon that I preached shortly before leaving the States. It was based on II Timothy 4: 3: *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but have itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.*

The phrase *itching ears* captured my imagination.

“Itchy ears” lead people to leave “sound principles” and seek after “teachers” who will reinforce their own passions, prejudices and bias. In other words, “itching ears” draws us into little intellectual ghettos.

As I lay there I got to thinking about how Paul’s words address our own experience. Our society has become increasingly balkanized and fragmented.

For example, when I was a kid, America got its television news from one of three networks; ABC, CBS or NBC. Today, though, we can choose from a seemingly endless number of television news outlets; from CNN “the most trusted name in news” at one end of the spectrum to the “fair and balanced” news of the Fox network at the other. In other words, if we wish, without too much effort on our part, we can readily reinforce our own bias and prejudice by exposing ourselves only to those who agree with our preconceived notions.

While laying in the dark of my hotel room I got to thinking, “What *are* the ‘sound teachings’ that Paul was so concerned about?” No doubt, he had the teaching of Jesus in mind.

Jesus was once asked about the secret of a balanced life. He replied saying,

Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness and then everything else will fall into place.

The story is told of a college professor who tired of hearing all the excuses that accompanied incomplete assignments and complaints of “too much” homework.

One day she walked into her classroom with a large glass jar, a box of big rocks, a smaller box of pebbles, a bucket of sand and a pitcher of water.

“Today’s lesson is about perception.” she began. She looked around the room to make sure that she had her students’ attention.

“Class, please tell me when the jar is full.” She proceeded to fill the glass jar to the top with large rocks. “Is the jar full?” she asked her students.

“Sure,” came a response from someone on the back row sounding a little bored and peeved at the obvious question.

Without responding, the professor picked up the box of pebbles and gingerly poured the contents into the jar filling all the crevices around the big rocks with smaller pebbles.

“Class, is the jar full now?” A light chuckle went through the room. “Well, OK, now the jar is full,” remarked the same back row student to save face.

Again, without responding, she picked up the bucket of sand and slowly emptied the contents into the jar. The sand easily filled all the spaces around the large rocks and small pebbles to the very top of the jar.

“Remember class, this is a lesson about perception. Is the jar full?” “No” came a chorus of voices from the class. “No, the jar is not full.”

Her eyes twinkled. One more time, she picked up the pitcher of water and carefully emptied the liquid into the glass jar all the way to the top.

“Class, is the jar full?”

“Yes!” came the enthusiastic response from her students. The air was buzzing with the electricity of a teaching moment.

The professor waited until the room was quiet. “If you know what matters in life, what lights up your heart, what brings lasting joy and happiness, what is the next crucial step toward an important long range goal – do that first...and then there will time, energy, and space for everything else.” And she walked out of the room.

Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, Jesus said. To Jesus the Kingdom of God was not a place but a way of life, a mindset.

That is why, in another place at another time, Paul encouraged the church in Rome not to be *conformed* to this world but to be *transformed* by the renewing of their minds.

A few weeks ago Daren and I were able to share a devotional time with our Senior High youth group. On the night that we were with them we laid a large aluminum foil cross in the middle of the floor of the Commons. On that cross we placed and lit 400 tea candles. When the Senior Highs came into the darkened Commons, illuminated only by the light the tea candles, they sat in chairs that circled the cross. Basking in the light, they were led in a series of devotional readings interspersed with reflective songs. One of the songs was Amy Grant’s “My Father’s Eyes.” In it she sang:

*I may not be every mother's dream for her little girl
And my face may not grace the mind of everyone in the world
But that's alright as long as I can have one wish, I pray
When people look inside my life, I wanna hear them say*

*She's got her father's eyes
Her father's eyes
Eyes that find the good in things
When good is not around
Eyes that find the source of help, when help just can't be found
Eyes full of compassion, seein' every pain
Knowing what you're going through, and feelin' it the same*

One of the great Protestant Reformers, John Calvin once observed that we are spiritually “near-sighted” until we put on the spectacles, the eye-glasses of Scripture. Near-sightedness, as you know, means that you can see things up close fine, but you cannot see things far away. The more near-sighted you are, the more limited your focus. Some people are so near-sighted that they literally cannot see beyond their own nose. Spiritually, near-sightedness is called “selfishness.” It manifests itself in “greed.”

While flying from Nairobi to London I struck up a conversation with Anoop Shah, the CEO of the Kensta Group, a large paper and print distributor in Africa. As we talked about the challenges facing the world that we share—and especially his native Kenya—he said that he thought that the root of the problem is greed.

What else would cause baby formula and toy manufacturers in China to knowingly distribute poisonous products, or a major peanut processing distributor in the States to knowingly distribute salmonella tainted products into America’s food chain?

At one point he reflectively quoted Gandhi who once said that there are enough resources on this planet to meet everyone’s need but not everyone’s greed.

I find it interesting that many of the healing stories in the gospels have to do with the restoring of sight. Equally interesting is John Newton’s famous hymn “Amazing Grace” which begins with the words, “Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; **was blind but now I see.**”

In our lesson Paul encouraged a young Timothy to continually challenge people to put on the spectacles of God’s love in Jesus Christ and to see the world as God sees it; to have, in the words of Amy Grant’s song, their Father’s eyes.

Another way of saying this is that Timothy is to encourage his community of faith to travel through life on what I call “the Jesus-Way.”

The Jesus-way is exemplified in His teachings. For example, a rich young ruler once approached Jesus and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied saying, “Keep the commandments.”

“Which ones,” the questioner asked. “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not lie, Honor your father and mother, and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The young man said, “All these things I have done. Is there something I lack?” And Jesus answered, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you have treasure in heaven; and come follow me.”

When he heard this the man went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions. One of the gospels say that Jesus loved the man—loved, I believe his intensity and desire to do the right thing—and that he was sad when the man walked away.

The young man’s trouble was not in his possessions but what those possessions represented to him. He thought that they were the source of his security but the security that they provided was only illusionary.

Jesus once told another story about a man whose barns were full of grain. When the next year’s harvest came in he had no place to store it so he asked himself, “What will I do?” Striking upon an idea he answered his own question. “I know, I will build bigger barns.”

As the barns were being constructed, Jesus said, the man was a fool because he died before they were completed. “What good are his bigger barns now?” Jesus asked his listeners.

Henry David Thoreau who once observed that we think we own our possessions but in reality our possessions own us, if we are not careful.

Jesus did not want the rich young ruler’s wealth. He wanted the young man to realize that his ultimate security lay not in what he owned but in who owned him.

Jesus’ challenge to the young ruler was to not let the transitory separate him from the Eternal. This battle is continuous. It is waged not just on major fields of life, but more often than not, in the small things.

A few years ago I had an ongoing correspondence with a man named Charlie Shedd. His name may be familiar to some of you. A generation ago

he was one of America's leading pastors. He wrote 35 best selling books and was in the 1960's and early 70's, as popular as Max Lucado and Rick Warren are today. In one of his books he talked about a spiritual struggle that manifested itself in something as simple as his smoking pipes. In the book Brush of an Angel's Wings he began his story with a little poem.

He wants it all?

He wouldn't be asking us to give up even our comfortable little habits would he?

Or would he?

He goes on to write that in his retirement years one of his favorite diversions was to smoke a pipe. "I don't actually remember," he wrote, "how I got into this, but somehow tobacco pipes had always fascinated me. It may have happened back there in my courting days when I loved to watch my Danish father-in-law with his pipe. In near reverence he would clean his pipe, fill it, draw on it, and blow smoke rings to absolute perfection."

"I had created a habit I thoroughly enjoyed. And the pipe smokers in my congregation kept me well-supplied with new pipes, plus their favorite tobacco."

"One day as I was studying my (collection) of the faces of Jesus...I heard a voice from the inner chamber (of my heart ask): *"In which of these faces would a pipe look good?"*

"From that moment I seemed to know my pipes had to go. But not right away."

Well, for several summers Charlie Shedd and his wife Martha vacationed at Playmore Beach at Rocky Mount in the heart of the Ozarks. One summer he brought his pipes along with him. Something moved him to get out his box and handled his pipes one by one. Somehow that act of handling those pipes reminded him of "hand" as in "hand over."

"You know what happened?" he wrote. "The Lord and I had it out. Once and for all we settled it... His way."

"On the appointed morning I took up my pipe box. My beloved pipe box with all those wonderful pipes, and I rowed out to the middle of the

lake. At least a half mile from our cabin, I lifted the box gently and dropped it over the side of the boat. “Good-bye, you poor dears. This I am doing for the Lord, and this is a farewell forever. May you rest in peace.”

“Only they didn’t.”

“The next morning where do you suppose my pipes were? *They had washed up on our very beach, right there in front of our cabin!*”

“One hundred cabins where they could have settled. Or was it two hundred? One half mile they’d traveled. Or was it several miles bouncing on the lake before they decided to come home?”

“You can imagine the long talks we had that day, Martha and I. She knew I loved my pipes and how much I wanted to keep them. She liked them, too. They made her think of her father. Now, I argued again. Couldn’t I keep them at least as souvenirs of an unbelievable happening? Might I have possibly made the wrong decision? Had I been unduly pious about my faces of Jesus?”

“Over and over I argued, but always back to the same cruel words—Renunciation. Surrender. Commitment.”

“The next morning, while it was barely day, I rowed back to the middle of the lake. Martha was with me this time, to hold my hand. With the other hand, one by one I took each pipe, dropped that particular old friend overboard, and watched it sink to the bottom of the lake.”

“There you are, Lord. This time they’re yours.”

Charlie Shedd concludes his story with these words. “Forever; this is his call to us: *All I want is all of you for all of Me.*”

The time is coming, the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, when people will have itching ears accumulating for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.

Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness and everything else will be added unto you.

Disciples serve, for the glory of God. Amen.