

Is the Church Preaching an Impractical Message?

“We are not focusing on what is seen, but on what is not seen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18, Evangelical Heritage Version)

I heard a well-known former leader in the LCMS imply in a recent interview that too much preaching in our church body has become impractical. And I don't think that it's a secret that people want to hear sermons filled with information that applies to their lives as they journey through this world. But in what sense is preaching supposed to be practical? I'm aware of sermon series on a wide range of topics – including a series on what the Bible has to say about our sex lives. And even I myself find it interesting when studies conclude that there may be earthly blessings (like health benefits) in worshipping God. Yet, the words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians ring in my ears when I consider practicality and the preaching of God's message: ***“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19, ESV).***

The context of the previous passage was aimed at those who don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus. For as St. Paul himself said: ***“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17, ESV).*** See, Paul was willing to place the entire validity of the Christian religion upon the claim that Jesus bodily rose again because he was absolutely certain that Jesus had conquered death.

My friends, if Christ hasn't been raised, we have no hope because Christianity then is false (like every other fake religion). And I think that the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:19 can also apply to the church's preaching as well. For ***“we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19, ESV)*** if we only focus upon the earthly benefits that our Lord and Savior can give us. For ***“we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19, ESV)*** if we receive the message of Christ crucified and risen but opt to ignore it and instead concentrate upon, proclaim, and follow something else. And many individuals, preachers, congregations, and even denominations which identify as Christian do that very thing - they proclaim a worldly Jesus who serves only as an ideal example for people to follow in this life.

Now, don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that there isn't value in preaching God's Law as a guide to how we should live. But what I'm talking about is the preaching of Jesus as merely a therapist or a moral teacher – even though this type of preaching could be viewed as beneficial to parents, civil leaders, or other secular authorities in this world. Such preaching also complements the doctrine of religious groups who don't believe in the miraculous events described in the Bible or who don't view Jesus as God. For see, preaching which only views Jesus as a therapist or an ethical philosopher could easily be described as practical in the eyes of the worldly. But has the church been called to be practical according to secular standards? And are practical quips and “how to” lessons what sinners need most from God's church?

Well, Holy Scripture teaches that we entered this world separated from God by sin. We have a fallen & corrupt nature and are subject to death. While information about fixing personal

relationships or wisely planning our finances or developing better leadership skills or learning how to manage stress can all be useful, yet only God's Son took the guilt & punishment of all our sins upon Himself and reconciled us to God by laying down His life in our place. And only Jesus rose to everlasting life – walking out of His grave three days after He was crucified. For it's true that in this world ***“the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away”*** (Psalm 90:10, ESV). But separation from our Creator goes beyond this life. It lasts forever.

My friends, only Jesus delivers us from that hell. And this Good News is only revealed in God's Word. So, why would the church's proclamation ever be centered in that which is entertaining or exciting or novel or even practical to living everyday life? God's people have been given a one-of-a-kind message to tell. Wouldn't the church be negligent if her message primarily focused upon something else?

You know, if Christ hasn't been raised from the dead, if His life, suffering, and death upon the cross hasn't saved us, then it would make sense to live this life centered in what is most important to me personally – to be focused upon myself and the world in which I live. For if Christ has not conquered sin and death, then believing in Him would be ridiculous. His testimony would be untrustworthy because He didn't rise as He promised. And that would mean that we have no hope beyond this life. ***“If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’”*** (1 Corinthians 15:32b, ESV). This would truly be a practical approach to life if Jesus didn't rise.

But see, as St. Paul (and the entire New Testament) tells us, Christ has conquered sin and death. He has delivered us. And the living Lord delivers His cross-won absolution and salvation to us through His Gospel in the Word and Sacraments. And this Gospel isn't sexy, financially profitable, or even practical from a worldly point of view. But it gives what nothing else in this world could ever provide – namely, real hope, true peace, total remission of sin and guilt, and genuine consolation in the face of suffering and death. For life in this world often is painful, and the things of this world are perishing. But what God gives lasts forever. Some may not find this Gospel to be a practical message, yet it certainly is a message of deliverance and a message that proclaims the trustworthy promise of everlasting resurrection life in a real heaven which awaits. And this is a message that every person needs to hear. Therefore, ***“we are not focusing on what is seen, but on what is not seen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen are eternal.”*** So, we proclaim Christ crucified and risen.

See you at worship to hear God's Gospel,
Pastor