

A Letter to the Church at Providence in 2023 Part 5

sermonaudio.com

Letter to Providence Church

By Ty Blackburn

Preached on: Sunday, October 29, 2023

Providence Church

2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Timothy 3. 2 Timothy 3. We're continuing to take a few weeks off from our exposition of 1 Peter and dealing with some subjects that the Lord has put on our hearts, put on my heart particularly and hearts of the elders and some of you have asked questions and we wanted to respond to that. So we're continuing to look at messages that relate to issues and questions that the congregation has expressed but also burdens on our hearts and last Sunday, I preached a message on what is sound expository preaching and we talked about what Bible exposition is and why it should be the basic diet of the church, why the Lord intends that, and today I want to talk about what is sound topical preaching. Obviously we've been doing some topical preaching these last few weeks as we've stepped back from 1 Peter and we want to talk about what makes topical preaching sound and I think as we look at this, you're going to see some really wonderful things about the Scripture this morning and the way God has spoken to us in his precious word that I hope will be a real encouragement to you. As a point really of departure, we're going to read a few verses from 2 Timothy 3. We're not going to be expositing this. We're going to be drawing on one principle here and then dealing with this topic, this question, what is sound topical preaching, how do you recognize a topical sermon that's been faithful to the Scriptures and faithful to the Lord, and we want to read from a passage we looked at last Sunday, but focus in on a few different verses. We're going to read verses 14 to 17 of 2 Timothy 3. Paul writes there to young Timothy,

14 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, 15 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, as we come to Your word, we come with joy and also with a sense of our abject need, Lord, that we are in need of grace. We pray that Your Holy Spirit might minister through Your word to each one here, that You might give us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts that are responsive to Your word, and may Your word, which goes forth from Your

mouth, accomplish the purpose for which You sent it. For the glory of Jesus, we pray in His name. Amen.

So what is sound topical preaching? From time to time, through the years, 30 years of ministry, most of the time we are expositing books, but there are times where it comes time to preach on a topic and so I want to explain what topical preaching ought to be and what makes it sound when it is done. Even though it shouldn't be the main diet of the church, it's a necessary spice as it were. You know, you make a meal and the meal's a lot better if you use some spices, right? Salt, pepper, and a lot of pepper actually. No, but anyway, so what is sound topical preaching and I'm going to have five points for you this morning as we look at this, at this topic. The topic is topical preaching, hearing a topical sermon about topical preaching. Isn't that interesting? So the five points, they all begin with D. So the first is the definition of topical preaching. Definition of topical preaching and there's three subpoints under this definition of topical preaching. First of all, where it starts. Where does the sermon start? The sermon starts not with the text, but with a topic. Expository preaching, the preaching starts with the text. You're working through the text, usually consecutively through a book. The passage directs the sermon. Well, topical preaching starts with a topic or a question or an issue, something that is in the lives of the congregation, something in the culture; current events prompt a question or a burden that the church is confronting and so the pastor seeks to bring the word to bear on the very real need to understand something in their lives.

So topic, issue, question. That's where the sermon starts. That's the first part of understanding the definition. Secondly, not just where it starts, but what it seeks to do. That's 1B, definition, what does a topical sermon seek to do? It seeks to bring the whole counsel of God to bear on the issue or the topic. Whatever the question is you're asking, it can be things like, what does God say about the last days or Israel in the world? That would be a relevant topic right now, right? Or what does the Lord say about how we're to respond to culture as it gets darker and darker and darker in our world? How do we live in that? That's a topic or various issues that the culture is raising. But whatever the issue, or it could be something like, what does the Bible say about marriage? What does the Bible say about the person and work of Christ? Is Jesus fully God? What does the Bible say about that? That's a topic and you preach a sermon on something like that. Well, when you select a topic, there's a burden. The question is, what does all of God's word have to say about it and the faithful pastor's going to try to, or faithful preacher's going to try to bring all that God, at least look at everything that God says and make sure that what he's bringing in his message is consistent with the whole counsel of God. Not that you're going to hear from every verse in one sermon, no, that would not be wise, especially on a topic that the Bible says a lot about, but you want to try to hear the whole counsel of God. So the preacher seeks to discover the whole counsel of God on the subject and to deliver a message that's consistent with the whole counsel of God on the subject.

So that's where it starts, the topic, not the text, what it seeks to do, bring the whole counsel of God, why is it necessary? Well, because the Lord wants the Scripture to instruct us in how we're to live. It's there even in the passage we just read when he says all Scripture is inspired by God, literally God-breathed, that is, all Scripture, I love this,

how the Lord gave us this verse in 2 Timothy 3:16, all Scripture, the word Scripture is graphé, it means that which is written. All that which is written is breathed out by God. Inspired by God literally means breathed out by God. It's a word Paul coined, theopneustos. It means God-breathed, literally. Inspired is a good translation, but I wish they just said God-breathed. That's what it literally says. Every letter and word written in the Bible was breathed out by God. It's really important because sometimes folks have gotten mixed up. They'll say, "Well, I believe the Bible's inspired, but it doesn't mean it's all perfect." This is kind of a neo-orthodox position that became, well, throughout the history of the church has been trumpeted, but particularly in the mid-20th century became popular, that is the idea that God inspires the thoughts of the human author, but between here and here, things might have gone a little wonky. And so they look at Paul or they look at the personality of the author and try to discount what the Scripture says, "Well, I think that was Paul getting a little carried away. Yeah, it's inspired, but it's not inspired on the text." This text says that the text itself, that which is written is breathed out by God. So yes, God's using fallible men to give a perfect word, that's what the text says. So it tells us that, but then it also says the reason he gave it to us was so that it would be profitable, valuable for life, it would provide doctrine or teaching, it would reprove us, it would correct us, it would train us in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequately equipped for every good work. That is, the Scripture is given to make you able to do everything God has called you to do. That means the Scripture's given to help you know how to live a godly life in a crazy world. So you encounter issues, the Scripture's there to show you how to confront those issues. Does that make sense? So the Bible is there as a resource for that kind of instruction. God wants to make us adequate and the Bible's been given for that purpose.

So we looked at the definition, where it starts, what it seeks to do, why it's necessary, but then secondly, I want to share with you the description of topical preaching. We looked at definition, second point is description and I think this is a healthy description or a helpful description, four subpoints here of what you're trying to do when you address a topic, a topical sermon, or you as a Christian in just sharing the word with another brother or sister, you want to look at the whole counsel of God and you want to speak, how do you do it? Well, let's talk about this. Describe the process. Here's four components. First thing you do is you survey the Bible. Survey the Bible, you look at all that Scripture has to say, you use a concordance to help you find key words, but you also just, it's not always just the words, it's the concepts. So often the concept of say the love of money, you don't just look for every place the Bible has the word money, you're going to look for places where Jesus talks about the heart or where your treasure is there will your heart be also. The word money doesn't occur in some passages where he's talking about things like that. So you've got to survey the whole Bible. That's the first subpoint. Then you distill relevant facts from each text. You're trying to answer a question. You distill relevant facts from each text. That is, you try to discern what does this particular text add to what I know about this issue? Then you thirdly, assemble all of these texts together and this is like if you're really doing the full blown thing, this is what you would do. You want to know what the Bible says about an issue? Let's say marriage. You know what the Bible says about marriage? Let's find everything the Bible says about marriage and let's bring it all together, survey, distill relevance, assemble, and then synthesize. Then you try to

synthesize and distill what does that all have to say and now I want to formulate in kind of like systematic theology language, the Bible, this is, here's an example of something that you would distill from the Scripture as you look at everything the Bible says. When you go to Genesis 2, for instance, the creation of marriage by God, that'd be a key passage. You could look at the Song of Solomon for the romantic picture of marriage. There's verses in Deuteronomy about marriage, there are verses in Malachi about marriage, there are verses all over the place about marriage, but key passages, Ephesians 5, probably the most important passage in all of Scripture about marriage, Ephesians 5:22 to 33. "Wives, submit to your husbands as unto the Lord for the husband's the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body." So you have that passage, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." You have 1 Peter 3:1-7 which we just recently went through as we were expositing 1 Peter. A number of other passages you would bring into the room. I like the image that I heard a professor of mine use that systematic theology, this is really systematic theology by the way, thematic preaching, doctrinal preaching, another word for that is thematic preaching, which is really systematic theology, you're trying to look at all the Bible has to say about a topic. That's systematic theology. He said one way to think about this, this is the image that my professor used, was imagine you're trying to see what the Bible says about a topic, bring every text into the room and put them around a conference table. Think about that. Every passage in the Bible gets a chair at the table and some of these subjects, you'd have to have a really big room and a lot of chairs. Other subjects, you wouldn't need such a big room, you might not need but just two or three chairs; you might have to step back and look at it in a different way for principles that might speak to the subject. But some passages, I mean some issues, you would need a lot of chairs at the table. Marriage is one of them. The room would be full. But, this is what I really appreciated about his analogy too, is he said, what you want to do as you think about it though, is weight your various passages, I mean they all are God's word, but where God chose to speak most clearly, make sure you really hear from that one in kind of a setting, agenda setting way and he said, that's the chair passage. So like the chairman in the room. You've got all these passages around the table, the chair passage. For marriage, that would be Ephesians 5 to me. I think that's the chair passage. It's the clearest passage on marriage in all of Scripture so it needs to lead the discussion, but you want to hear from everything.

So it's survey the Bible, and as you do it, when you go to a passage like, say for instance, Deuteronomy 24, I think it's verse 5 or 6, it says when you're newly married, a man should not go off to war for a year, but he should seek to make his wife happy. It's really something, that's right there in Deuteronomy. Second giving of the law, here's an instruction to young husbands and to their military generals. "Hey, you just got married, oh, you're off duty for a year. Go home, make your wife happy." So that's like, if mom ain't happy, ain't nobody happy, there it is in the Scripture. No, that's not exactly, I'm not really saying that but it is saying the foundation of marriage, what does it say though? It's a direct command, it's a legal instruction, but what it's telling you, you distill out the truth. What it's saying is that a new marriage, the foundation is essential, right? So you draw that out and that's at a seat at the table. That's one of the many facts that you would bring together and then you want to synthesize that down into a full out statement.

Now, that's the description of topical preaching. Thirdly, third point is the difficulty of topical preaching. This is where I'm going to share with you the beauty of Scripture. This is like another way of describing the same points. The difficulty of topical preaching shows you the glory and beauty of Scripture. The difficulty of topical preaching is seen in two things. There's two subpoints here, the nature of Scripture and the purpose of Scripture. This is really something. I've been thinking about this this week in a deeper way. It's been such a blessing. The Bible is not given to us, God has not given his holy word to us in language that reads like a theological textbook. Think about that. If you haven't read a systematic theology textbook, you need to own one, you need to own a good one, and you ought to read it. Systematic theology is important, but God did not give us his revelation as a systematic theology textbook. He didn't start off like systematic theology does, with the doctrine of Scripture, then move to the doctrine of God, then move to the doctrine of man, to the doctrine of Christ, to the doctrine of the atonement etc., and that's what systematic theology does. It tries to tell you everything that God's word says about the Bible, everything God's word says about God and who he is, everything the Bible says about man and who he is and his great need etc., all the way through. But the Lord could have revealed his word that way. This is where it's good to have an inquisitive mind. Why did God do it the way he did it?

Now listen, think about this for a moment. If his chief goal was to silence the heretics, if his chief, and that's a worthy goal, isn't it? In fact, Scripture makes it clear, Paul tells Titus, "You must silence these guys that are speaking false teaching," in Titus 1. But if God's primary goal, it's certainly a goal, but if his primary goal was that, wouldn't it have made sense to give it in a systematic theology form? That way you could have just undid Arianism right away. You could say that the Bible might say something like this, Jesus is truly man and truly God, or fully man and fully God. Every aspect of humanity, he has. Every aspect of deity, he has. You don't find that in the Bible, not explicitly. You find it implicitly and powerfully and incontrovertibly. It's there, but God didn't give it like a systematic theology textbook. Just think about that. He didn't give it, the Bible, to us like an instruction book. I mean, there are some instructions, like I said a minute ago. One is, hey, when you're married, don't go off for war for a year. Love your wives as Christ loved the church. Submit to your husbands. Those are instructions, but the whole Bible doesn't read like just a set of instructions. Like this is what you're to believe, and it starts with this is who God is, and he is, here are the attributes of God, just like a systematic theology book, here are the names of God, here are the doctrine of the Trinity, the complexity of that, here's laid out. No, he didn't reveal it that way.

The arrangement and content of the Bible are very different than we might have expected and this actually makes doctrinal and thematic preaching more difficult. I mean, if it was a systematic theology book you had to look at, you would just say, "Okay, what's your question? All right, chapter 27, I'm going to turn to it right now, we're going to go over it right here, here it is." But the Lord didn't do that. Why not? Instead, he arranged his book in a very different way. He gave us a book that, as we read earlier, is perfectly divine, completely God-breathed. Every word, all Scripture, everything that is written is God-breathed and yet it is God-breathed in human language and human literature. You have

the Bible, you have all of the genres of literature represented in the Scripture, I mean, all the major genres throughout history. I mean, think about this. God spoke to us in stories. That is, now these are true historical narratives, of course. He's only telling us what actually happened. When you're reading history in the Bible, you're reading that which truly happened. Time and space. But he speaks to us by telling us stories. 40%, more than 40% of this Bible is historical narrative. Think about it, Genesis, historical narrative. Exodus, mostly historical narrative. Numbers, historical narrative. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, historical narrative. Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, historical narrative. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, historical narrative. But he's telling us who he is, who we are, our need of Christ, he's giving us doctoral instruction in stories. Why? Because his ways are much more wonderful than our ways. Essentially, he's not just interested in informing your mind, he's interested in capturing your whole heart. When you read a story, you are drawn into the story not just intellectually, but emotionally. It's powerful.

But it's not just historical narrative. He also, he does give us law, significant portion of law, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and other places where law occurs in different places, instructions that, you know, where you're commanded to do things, you could say that's law. Poetry, Psalms and other places, but a whole book of the Bible are basically poems, songs of praise and worship. And not just songs of praise and worship, songs of lament where the psalmist is pouring out his heart to God. In fact, Psalm 62:8, David says pour out your hearts to God. God gave a whole book of the Bible where people are pouring out their hearts to him to show us that he wants you and me to pour out our hearts to him. He's not just interested. If he was just interested in protecting us from heresy, he could have given us a systematic theology book. If he was just interested in instructing us in right living, he could have given us an instruction manual. But he didn't do that. He gave us his word in the way he did to captivate our hearts.

See, wisdom literature, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, I mean, basically, historical, here's a seven, people define it seven or eight, I think seven is the way I like to think of it, seven literary types, that's what genre means, types of literature. You have historical narrative, you have law, you have poetry, you have wisdom literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job. You have prophecy, prophetic oracles, the prophet proclaims acts of judgment. He says, "God is going to judge you." That's prophetic oracles. That's essentially what prophecy is, and there's also the foretelling of the future but it's mainly speaking God's word to nations that are about to be judged. Apocalyptic literature, Daniel, Revelation, heavy imagery and beautiful pictures that capture us up into the future events. And then you have epistles, letters that are written by men who were the apostles of God to direct to definite people in definite circumstances with definite purposes. And you have all of this, he gives his word. So the nature of Scripture, it's a literary masterpiece. You read it, it's just glorious. I mean, the imagery in the Psalms and Proverbs. Even one of the things that you see as you read the Bible and you learn more about Hebrew poetry is so much of the prose is poetic. There's often fascinating imagery going on and also things like chiasmic structure, chiasm, you may say, chiasmic structure, A-B-B-A, stuff going on. There are Psalms that are acrostics. Psalm 119, every stanza of eight verses begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's like in English it would be A, B, C, D, E, F, G, all the way down to

Z. That's how it starts and that's how it flows. So what's God doing with that? There's this beautiful artistry going on. That's the nature of Scripture.

So the difficulty of topical preaching is you're going to go try to find out systematic theology like statements, because basically systematic theology is indicative sentences, statements of fact about some issue that you're trying to find out, but you're going to have to go to a book that is not organized that way to find these statements of fact. You're going to have to use great care in interpreting the Bible to distill out what it's really saying about an issue and good theologians do this. Let me show you an example of this. Proverbs 23 and verse 14. This is how a verse that would be at first glance doesn't look to have anything to do with something, would speak to something. This is a verse that Louis Berkhof in his systematic theology uses at an interesting place and it's not on parenting because he doesn't talk about parenting in his systematic theology. It's all about just the big headings of systematics. But Proverbs 23, verse 14, well let me read verse 13 to get context, but verse 14 is what we want to see. "Do not hold back discipline from the child, Although you strike him with the rod, he will not die." I love that. Not really worrying too much about...anyway, it's definitely not time-out kind of things going on here. But we've got to be wise and the Bible speaks about love and nurture in other places. But anyway, it's saying you need to discipline your kids. Look at verse 14, "You shall strike him with the rod And rescue his soul from Sheol." That is, discipline is very important for children. That's the main teaching of that passage but that passage can be used for more than just that and Louis Berkhof includes verse 14 in his section on the afterlife and he uses it to show that Jews, that Israel, Old Testament believers believed in the afterlife. They believed there was life after death because of a verse like this, "You shall strike him with the rod And rescue his soul from Sheol." There's some people who say they didn't believe in that. That's a false teaching that goes around and so he takes this verse, which is not about the afterlife primarily, right, you wouldn't necessarily find that just by looking up major passages on life after death. It's about parenting but it incidentally speaks to this issue and a lot of times when you're looking at a subject, you're going to draw from passages that aren't directly related to it because what's happening here is he's saying, listen, Berkof is pointing out that the Bible-believing, faithful Jew, according to Proverbs 23:14, had in his working knowledge and understanding, there is life after death. Sheol's real. Do you see that? And so that's how it comes into systematics. So sometimes you might think somebody's misusing the text because they do that, but in reality they're interpreting the text correctly. Make sure that you think that through before you raise that issue. It can speak to things incidentally.

Now, okay, so back to the difficulty. It's not just the nature, but the purpose of Scripture. I want to get to this, the nature, and why did he not organize it as a systematic theology text, but gets to the purpose of Scripture. This is still number three, the difficulty of topical preaching. Look to the nature of Scripture, now the purpose of Scripture. Apparently to the Lord, there's something more, even though theological clarity is very important, don't misunderstand me, theological clarity is very important, it's a matter of life and death. You get things wrong on the Trinity or on the atonement, it keeps people out of heaven, okay? And the Lord makes this clear in his word, but he doesn't deal with it the way we would think he would, because there must be something even more

important than theological clarity. And what it is, is God, because he made us and he knows us, he knows that if he just spoke to us in propositional truths, we would be like Isaiah said the people of Isaiah's day were, we would honor him with our lips, but our hearts would be far from him. God looks on the heart. He's not just interested in you knowing what your creed should be, though creeds are important. A right creed is essential, but it's not sufficient. Essential, but not sufficient. The purpose of Scripture is to capture the heart. So God speaks in the various ways he speaks to capture our hearts and one of the things he does is he makes it a little bit difficult to find out what you want to find out if you just be, we're honest about it. It's just difficult.

Now you and I might think that's really a bad idea. Why didn't he make it easy? I mean, because we like everything to be easy, don't we? I mean, don't you get frustrated when something doesn't work like it's supposed to? You know, everything's easy, easy, easy, easy. You get discouraged. You know, like I heard a comedian talking about he was pumping gas and the little kickstand thing wasn't working and he's like, "Man, now I got to hold it the whole time, can't believe this!" And we used to always have to hold it, many of you remember. It was a great invention when they finally came up with that, like why didn't somebody think of this years before? There's always something new to invent. But we want everything easy, but God apparently doesn't want everything easy. Jeremiah 29:13, it's two verses after a verse that a lot of people know. A lot of people know this verse and like to claim it. Jeremiah 29:11, "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans not to harm you but to give you hope and a future,'" and like to have that up on their walls. But verse 13, two verses later says this, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." Verse 14, right after that, "'I will be found by you,' declares the LORD." When? "When you seek Me with all of your heart."

God does not make it easy to find him, but he will be found by those who seek him. Just like, you know, if you want to find gold, you don't go looking on the top, just go around on the top of the surface of the ground, do you? You've got to dig for it. You want to find diamonds, they're not just laying around. God put them in the earth. You've got to dig for it. And so when it comes to sound doctrine and sound theology, you have to dig for it. Knowing the Lord, you've got to want to know him. Now, all that he needs, it's there, and the beautiful thing about Scripture is it is clear and plain also. There's this tension, the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, that is that Scripture is clear in its essential doctrines, but it still doesn't mean it's easy. You need grace. You need the Holy Spirit to open your eyes. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, the natural man does not receive the things of God for they're spiritually discerned. You have to pray for God to open your eyes. You have to want him to speak. You can read the Bible lifelessly for years.

So one of the purposes of Scripture is to draw out our hearts. He makes us want to seek him and the way he reveals things draws us into the text. So it's not an easy task but it's also something that really does engage the heart. You think about this, I mean, you read the Psalms and you hear the psalmist mourning, you hear the psalmist saying things like, "How long, O Lord?" This is David, half the Psalms are written by David, a man after God's heart who the Lord loved greatly. When you read through Kings and they're

constantly, David's constantly being brought up by the Lord in Kings because David is the standard and it says this, you know, he had a heart like his father David, or he was like David in this respect, only he didn't do this, but he was pretty much like David. And then others, no, they weren't like David at all. David's the standard, God loved David. But God took David into, because God loved David so much, he took him into a lot of adversity, and he brought him into valleys. I mean, he was anointed king when he was probably, we don't know exactly how old he was, but probably like between 13 and 15. He didn't become king until he was 30. He was anointed 13 to 15. I'm going to be like, "Lord, hey, please just anoint me at least 29. I'm willing to wait a year, but let's don't do this 13 to 30 thing." Because David not only was not king, he was running for his life much of that time from the king. Why is God doing that? Why did God do that to someone he loved so much? Because he wanted David to get to know him as his rock and refuge and fortress like he says in Psalm 18 when he was delivered from the hand of Saul. He piles image upon image in Psalm 18, "My refuge, my fortress, my deliverer, my rock." He came to know him.

But so the Psalms then as you read them and I read them, it draws us in. The stories of the Bible draw us into the text. You read the narrative and you find yourself identifying with, you're supposed to, when you read Samuel, for instance, you're supposed to identify with David and not with Saul. Be like David, not Saul. Be a person with a heart after God. This tells us the Lord is, he's not just here to tell you what to do and how to live, he wants a relationship with you. It's really mind blowing. I was reading a passage this week and I'll just kind of summarize it for you. Ezekiel 4, I've been reading Ezekiel lately and I've gone on past this and one of the things you see in Ezekiel is how God called him to be a prophet, he's an exilic prophet, he's a prophet leading up to the exile and into the exile and through well into the exile, Babylonian exile, and God tells him some things and gives us some directions that are just straightforward. It's like, "Ezekiel, I want you to take a big brick," this is what he says in chapter 4, "take a big brick, write Israel on it." Now he's in Jerusalem at this time, "write Israel on it and I want you to set it down in front of everybody." Now God's obviously going to make people know that Ezekiel's doing something, he's not gone crazy, he's a prophet, "but just set it down in front of them and you start building a siege ramp to it and you surround it with like army looking things." He didn't have plastic army men, that would have been good if he had them then. He could have made it look really impressive. No, but he actually, he's supposed to do this. He's the prophet of God, and he's supposed to do this, "and write Jerusalem on it, build a siege ramp, and then you lay down on your left side for 390 days and make sure you take lots of beans and lentil and flour because you're going to make bread and you're going to eat it laying on your side." Now I'm sure he was able to move around and stuff some and things like that, but basically your station is just to lay down by that city with this piece of iron between you and it to show that God's wrath is on Jerusalem. And he says, this is what's so amazing, this is what hit me, he says, "Make bread, you're going to eat bread every day, and I want you to cook it over human dung." That's foreign for us in America, but you know, something like two billion people in the world still burn animal dung as fuel for heating and for cooking. Animal dung. He said human dung. Now listen, God's given him all these instructions. You do this, you do this, you do this, you do this, you do this, you do this, you do this, and then he says that and Ezekiel, after God stops

talking, says, "O Lord, I cannot do that. From my youth I've been completely clean. I've not eaten things I'm not supposed to eat, and it would make me unclean to cook my food over human dung." So the Lord says, "Okay, you can do animal dung."

Now stop and think about that. Slipped my mind, it slipped his mind that he could not eat over animal dung, I mean, over human dung? Is that what happened? No. But the Lord told him that to get him to ask the question, "God, I can't do that." He could have said, you know, if it was me, I would be like, just, "Oh yeah, of course you gotta eat, I mean, I wish it could be animal dung, I mean, human dung, but just do animal dung and cook over that." No, but God says human dung and he stops talking. He's drawing out his heart, says, "Ezekiel, I'm not just here to tell you what to do, I am that because I'm God, but I'm here for a relationship with you where you dialogue with Me." And Ezekiel comes back and says that and God says, "Yes, you can use animal dung." He still has to do it for 390 days and then 40 days on his right side. That's 14 months. Isn't that amazing? And the people still didn't listen.

But this is the Scripture is like that. God says things in his word that are not clear as we would like them to be. So many things. In fact, we have discussions all the time. We were having a discussion this week about a passage in Psalm 34 related to Samuel where David feigns insanity in front of the king of the Philistines and the question is, was David right to do that or was he lying? And so we're talking about that and one of the things I said was, I brought up Ezekiel and I said one of the reasons God brings up things like that in the Scripture is because he wants us to wrestle with him. He could make it so plain and clear if he wrote a systematic theology book, but he didn't do that because he wants you and me to wrestle with him like Jacob wrestled with him, and he not only wants us to wrestle with him, he wants us to wrestle with him with one another. He wants us to talk about these things. "What do you think? What do you think? Let's work it out. Why do you think that biblically?" And we help each other and iron sharpening iron. And the main thing is we learn to love this God who is not only the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things, but he is infinitely personal and wants to love you and you to love him with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind. This is the God that we worship and that's why he's spoken the way he has. He's drawing you out.

So when you read your Bible, always remember this is the heart behind it. Even when you're perplexed. And there are lots of times you're perplexed. I'm still confused about things. I don't know the answer to that question I was talking about a minute ago about the feigning of insanity. I can make an argument for either side of the coin on that. I guess we'll find out when we get to heaven, and there's a lot of things that we're going to find out when we get to heaven. Eschatology, wow. We're going to find out when we get to heaven. That doesn't mean we're not supposed to talk about it now, yeah we are. We're supposed to wrestle with God about it, yeah we are. And with all that's going on in the world, yeah we should be thinking about it, absolutely. But as you do, don't just look for answers. That's what he's saying. "Don't just look for answers, look for Me. Know Me. Find Me. I will be found by you, says the Lord, when you seek Me with your whole heart." But it makes the process difficult. You're now going to narratives to pull out what the narrative says and you can't follow everything that happens in the story because just

because the Bible describes it doesn't mean it prescribes it. You've got to read it carefully. You've got to see what's the point of the narrative. Is this person being presented as a hero for me to emulate or someone upon whom the Lord is working and blessing? And even if so, not everything David did is worthy of emulation. Just read your Bible. Most of it is.

So God invites us into wrestling with him, that's the whole beauty of it, and so topical preaching needs to still be wary of this difficulty. That leads us to the fourth point, the danger it presents. The danger it presents. It kind of flows out of what we just said. You can read the Bible in a cold, detached way, merely intellectual; in your urge for simplicity and clarity, you can forget your heart. "I want to figure this out. I want to figure this out. I want to figure this out so I can control everything. I know what's right. I'm right." See that? The Lord has made things in places very confusing. There's so many things I wish the Lord had been clear on as a pastor especially. People have questions, and it's like, "We really need to know this, Lord." Sometimes it's just not there. It promotes humility. It promotes, related to, another way of saying humility is dependence. You depend upon the Lord. "Lord, you've got to help me. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to say to this person right now." You stay in the word, you keep reading the word, and he's shaping you little by little, but he's not giving you the answer. It's not like you have the map right in your hand. The way that you live the Christian life is God says, "I'm not going to give you the map, hold My hand. Follow Me."

It's a relationship and the danger would be that you would do that, and think about the Pharisees. That's what Jesus was saying when he said, "These people honor Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me." He was quoting Isaiah. Isaiah said that about the people of Israel in his day, 700 years later, Jesus says that about the Pharisees and about the Jews of his day. They were all about systematizing their faith. And listen, as I said earlier, systematic theology is important, it's essential, but it's only there kind of as a guide, bumpers for you, as it were, that you stay in between, but you wrestle with God in the text of Scripture. The danger is that you simplify to the point that you root out all the complexity of life and you become proud and self-righteous and self-sufficient. So even as you look at topics, remember you're trying to distill out truth from these passages and I said earlier, this passage says that the Israelites believed in the reality of death, Proverbs 23:14, life after death, they believed in that. Well, that's an important truth to draw out, but just don't let that become lifeless. Glory in who God is that he was showing them even then that there's life after death. Make that, help me long for that, you long for that, to be with him forever.

Now then, fifthly, the fifth point's the duty. We looked at the definition, the description, the difficulty, the danger, now the duty. We still need to do it. We need this, it's essential. I mean, doctrine is essential. In fact, there's a verse in the same book we started in, 2 Timothy 1:13, Paul says, "Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." And we can look at a number of verses like this where the word *didascalia* can mean, well this actually, the word *didascalia* doesn't occur here, but the idea of there being a pattern, the standard is the key word here, but you're going to see other places all through the pastoral epistles especially,

the word doctrine or teaching is repeated over and over again, the word didaschalia, and the idea is a set, identifiable set of doctrines and beliefs. And Paul is intimating the same thing when he says retain the standard of sound words. He's saying to Timothy, "Listen Timothy, to shepherd the church, to be a faithful pastor of the church, you need to continue to hold the standard. I've given you something." The standard here means a sketch, an outline. "I gave you a sketch or an outline of sound words. I gave you a sketch or an outline of sound doctrine. I showed you what is essential for salvation," in essence, "and I gave you that, and you need to have that with you as you shepherd the people and you look at the Bible." It's kind of like saying, "I gave you an early creed, it's basic, and it's a basic understanding of this, and you need that." And Christians need that. You need that from the time you're saved. You need some basic systematic theology. For instance, if you really didn't believe in systematic theology at all, you would wait after you got saved although it'd be questionable whether you were saved, but after you got saved, you might wait to figure out the doctrine of the Trinity until you happen to come over enough passages that made you look at it. Well, that's not practical. You need to understand that from the very earliest time of being a Christian. You need to understand the atonement, and you don't need to wait till you get to a passage that explains it completely. You see what I'm saying? Expository preaching, you go verse by verse, but you need both. You need a standard, and you need to be in the text.

So the duty is to give that standard, that gospel basic summary, basic theological sketch, every Christian needs that. That's why creeds, confessions are good. The Apostles' Creed was an early example of the church doing that. London Baptist Confession, doctrine that we value greatly. New Hampshire Confession of Faith 1833 is our doctrinal statement with some slight modifications. We use a good summary of doctrine, you need that, and there's the duty of preaching topically because there are issues that need to be addressed, as we said earlier, and in reality, that's what you see in the epistles. They're actually doing topical preaching in the books of the Bible. 1 Corinthians I shared with you is exactly just laid out like a series of topical messages but every, I mean almost every epistle is addressed at some topic. Galatians, Paul wrote because he was concerned about the topic of what justification by faith was all about and that burned his heart and he wrote Galatians for that purpose. Do you see that? It was like an extended topical sermon. Colossians, he writes against the Colossian heresy, which was kind of a combination of Judaizing and Gnostic, proto-Gnostic tendencies. John writes against, well not full-blown Gnosticism, but some really seriously developing Gnostic tendencies in 1 John, 2 John.

So the Scripture does that, and we need that, the duty of that. In fact, we need to speak to the issues of the day. You need your church to do that. So I try to do that when I'm expositing and something lends itself to it, but it's appropriate for us to topically address them as well. In fact, the faithful pastor needs to address the issues of the day. We all need that. I love what Martin Luther said, one of my favorite Luther quotes. Listen to this, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking," do you hear that? I'm going to read that first part again so you get it. "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment

attacking, I am not confessing Christ. However boldly I may be professing Christianity, where the battle rages, the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace to him if he flinches at that one point." We need to speak to the issues of the day. We need to speak to the issues that are confronting the congregation wherever we find ourselves and that's why there's the duty of topical preaching, because the word of God is sufficient to equip the man of God for every good work.

The glory of the gospel, what God has done for us in Christ, we need to have that understanding, that basic, fundamental understanding that Jesus, fully man, fully God, dying in our place on Calvary, atoning for our sin by becoming sin for us, giving us his righteousness, rising from the dead, giving eternal life to all who repent and believe, to repent and believe you've got to be born again, these are all essential things we have to learn about early in our Christian life and so there's topical instruction that should be a part of the regular life of the church. That's why we have the course "Fundamentals of the Faith" that we teach regularly. Give you the fundamentals of the faith if you're new to Christ. You need to take that class. You need to read books with other Christians who will help you work through basic doctrine. But listen, as you develop that standard and you retain the standard of sound words just like Paul said to Timothy, you have that working knowledge of basic doctrine, then you come to the Bible day by day and you just dive into the Scripture and you let God capture not only your mind but your heart because God has given his word not merely to inform the mind but to transform the heart. Not merely to engage the intellect, but to inflame the passions. Not only to change your mind or your thinking, but to change your will and to bend it into submission and obedience to Christ gladly. That's the purpose of the word.

So when you read your Bible this week, read it, as it were, on your knees, but read it expectantly, looking to a loving Father who's inviting you into his heart, a Savior who's saying, "Come," who is closer than a brother, saying, "Come and understand who I am." That's what God's inviting us to. That's the beauty of the Christian life. We're not people that have a religious system. Though we do have a religious system, we have something far greater, we know the living God. "You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your great grace in speaking to us in Your word. We thank You that You've given us everything that's necessary for life and godliness, everything in Your word that can make us equipped, adequate for every good work. We stand amazed that You're a God who wants to have a relationship with us. Your greatness is unsearchable, Your majesty beyond our ability to conceive, omnipotent, omniscient, we are of yesterday and know nothing, we are dust of the earth, our glory is like grass, flowers of the field, the flower fades, grass withers, and yet You invite us into Your counsel, into a love relationship that will go on for all eternity. Thank You, O Lord. Thank You for giving Your word exactly as You've given it. Make us students of Your word, not so that we might increase our intellect, we certainly do want to do that, but not merely do that, but

that our hearts might be truly surrendered to You in loving adoration, and that we might walk with You until You take us home. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.