

We Teach

A while back, I was attending a **conference** for pastors and church leaders. Which I'm not gonna lie: not my favorite setting. Don't know if you guys have noticed this, but pastors can be a weird bunch. **Not me—just all of the other ones.** Anyway, *at this particular conference*, there were two mainstage speakers that most people there were excited to hear from. We'll call them **Steve and Matthew**. Steve got up on the stage first. Steve's talk was titled *From the Promise to the Payoff*. And the gist of the message was basically that if you obey God—if you're faithful in all the small things—he will eventually reward you handsomely for that obedience. Case in point, Steve said, *he leveraged a lot of his time and money to build relationships with guys he played football with in college. And now, because of that obedience, God had rewarded him with one of the largest churches in America, as a reward for that obedience. Promise, then payoff.*

Next, Matthew got up. *Matthew's talk was a little different than Steve's. Actually, very different.* His message was about the story of John the Baptist. If you're unfamiliar with the story, John the Baptist was a prophet who lived around Jesus' time. He was incredibly faithful to what God asked him to do throughout his life. But he encountered a lot of *suffering*, sometimes *because* of his obedience. He was eventually thrown into prison, and then beheaded, all because he spoke truth to power in his day. But it didn't go well for him as a result. The takeaway line from Matthew's talk at the conference was "follow God...it could end badly for you."

So two keynote speakers. **Two completely opposite messages.** One said following Jesus will lead to tangible, visible rewards—and that's why you should do it. The other said following Jesus is worth it *regardless* of reward, and that Jesus *is* the reward. And *that's* why you should do it. Now, you might have a strong opinion on which of those is more correct (I do too). But here's why I bring it up. While I was at the conference, I **ran into an old friend** of mine. And as I was catching up with him, I happened to ask what his favorite part of the conference had been. And he said "by far, both Steve and Matthew's sermons. They, by far, have been the *best*."

And **internally I was thinking** *that can't be true. They literally said opposite things. They contradicted each other at every turn. Those two messages can't possibly both be your favorite.* Now, to my friend's credit: I think what he was feeling was that those two guys were the most compelling *communicators* at the conference. And that was certainly true, without a doubt. But the *content* of their teachings could not have been more different.

But my friend's comment, I think, **raises a very important question**, which is **what makes a sermon good?** What differentiates a good teaching, from a *bad* one? Or a mediocre

one? Is it the *content*? Is it the *giftedness* of the communicator? Is it humor? Relatability? Insight? Research? All of those things? Something else entirely? What constitutes a *good* sermon? What makes teaching, from the bible, good? **And that's a question that matters—maybe even more than some of us realize. For instance, thousands of Christians in early America supported the slave trade because they were *taught* that the bible did too. Millions of German Christians supported the horrors of Nazism because they were *taught* that the bible was okay with it too. And then *inversely*, substantial *strides* were made in the civil rights movement of the 1960s because of what Martin Luther King and others *taught*, from the bible, about justice.** You see, what the church *teaches* does *matter*, deeply. And *therefore*, it matters that we know how to *recognize* good (and bad) teaching.

Last Sunday, we kicked off a **new series** all about the Church that we've called *Church Matters*. Basically, we're taking a moment to pause and ask why we do *this*: why it's important to gather together, with other followers of Jesus, on a regular basis. We said last week that a lot of us tend to go into autopilot when it comes to stuff like this. And that's not necessarily *bad*. But it's also good to occasionally turn autopilot *off* and unpack *why* we do, what we do—so we don't *forget*. So that's what we're doing during this series.

And **today** we're going to **talk about one practice** of the gathered church that goes all the way back to the very beginning: **the sermon**. From the earliest days of the New Testament church, one thing the church did was *teach* from the Scriptures. Acts 2 is one of the first detailed descriptions we get of the early Church and some of the things they did. And right at the very *beginning* of the description is that the early Church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ *teaching*.”¹

In other words, an **important part of the early Church** getting together was them listening to what the apostles—the early Church leaders—*taught*, from the Scriptures, *about* the Scriptures. Best we can tell, the early followers of Jesus would huddle up in one place—sometimes in a *home*, sometimes in a *public* place; one of their leaders would read a passage from the Scriptures of their day, or maybe *reference* several passages; and then *expound* on what was read. They would give instruction—teaching—*from* the bible.

So **simply put, this is why** we, here at City Church, do something similar to that every Sunday. We have a member of our congregation read a passage, and then myself or one of the other leaders here give a teaching based on it. That's not a *new* idea—it's *actually* a really, really *old* one. So this morning, what I want to do is talk about *why* we

¹ Acts 2:42

do that, *how* we do that, and why it *matters how* we do that. Today will be a teaching, *about* teachings. Very meta in that way. Make sense?

So if you've got your **bibles**, turn with me to the book of **2 Timothy, chapter 3**. If you're newer to the bible, 2 Timothy is a letter written from the apostle Paul, to a young protege of his named Timothy. Timothy was one of the *leaders* of a church in the city of Ephesus. And here, Paul is giving Timothy some instruction about the significance of the *Scriptures*, which then turns into some instruction about teaching and preaching *from* the Scriptures.² We're gonna look at a couple verses towards the end of chapter 3. Pick it up with me in verse 16:

[16] All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, [17] so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Okay. **From those two verses**, I want to lay out a number of things for you, about how we approach teaching and preaching here at City Church. About what, in our view, makes for *good* teaching. And our hope is that by doing that, we will help you discern good teaching from bad teaching here, and whatever other communities you find yourself a part of in the future. You ready? Okay, first, **good teaching...**

...is Scriptural.

In other words, **good teaching is based on the bible**. Look at v. 16: "All *Scripture*...is useful for teaching." But more *fully*, it says "all Scripture is *breathed out by God*, and (therefore) useful *for teaching*..." **Scripture is the only thing that is breathed out by God and therefore is useful for teaching in this setting**. Orthodox followers of Jesus have always believed that this book—the Bible—is *inspired* by God himself. And when we say that, **we don't just mean that he inspired the things in here in the way that looking at a sunset might inspire someone to write a poem about it. Or to post a photo of it on Instagram. We mean God wanted these words written by the people that wrote them**. Now, he *did* that *through* their individual intellects and personalities and languages and all of that—he *didn't put them in a trance and dictate the words to them*. But still, these words are God's words, written down *for* followers of Jesus throughout history. Which is *why* they are useful for teaching.

On the other hand, my opinions are *not* breathed out by God. Now, they're *my* opinions—so obviously they're *really good* opinions. *I* think so, at least. But *still*, they're *not* breathed out by God. My life *experiences* are not breathed out by God. My current

² For this second part, see the beginning of 2 Timothy 4.

opinions on the inner workings of the American government landscape are not breathed out by God. My hot take on the last Supreme Court decision is not breathed out by God. Do you see what I'm getting at? **Just because someone stands behind a pulpit** (or a cocktail table?), **and calls what they're doing a "sermon," does not make it good teaching.** What makes it a good teaching is when *Scripture* is used to teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness. Good teaching is based on the Bible.

Which means **it's not wrong, once you've sat through** a teaching *here* or anywhere else, for you to ask: *does the bible actually teach that?* Is that what the bible says, or did that just *feel* right when that person said it? Those *can* be different things. I heard one pastor put it this way:³ on any given Sunday when I teach, my guess is that about 90% of what I say is correct. Let me explain. About 90% of what I say up here, hopefully, is spot-on. About 10% of what I say, probably *isn't* spot-on. Now, hopefully it's never outright *heretical*. Maybe just a little *off*. Maybe I should've studied that idea or that phrase a little more. Maybe I should've said what I said a little differently, with a little more nuance. Maybe the content was right, but the *tone* was off. Things like that. Simply put, *I* am not infallible. The Scriptures are infallible, but *I* am not. So occasionally, I'm gonna miss the mark with how I teach the Scriptures.

Now **here's the problem: I don't know which 10%** *is off*. It's not like I'm putting my notes together before I teach and go "alright, here's where I need to put the *wrong* stuff!" I don't know what I don't know. So for us to be a healthy church, I actually need each of *you* to *test* what I say. Hold the things I say up against the Scriptures and ask: *is that what the bible teaches?* And especially when I *regularly* teach a concept or an idea that isn't correct, come and tell me. Then, we'll all be better off as a result. Make sense?

Okay. Now, I will tell you this: **biblical teaching and preaching isn't primarily about style.** There can be all kinds of different *styles* of teaching and preaching that are all *based* on Scripture. I've **heard people teach** in a *style* that is compelling and captivating and has you on the edge of your seat, just wondering what they're gonna say next. And they did all of that in a way that was Scriptural. I've heard *other* people teach in a style that was monotone and informational and came across like the driest of college professors giving a lecture. And *that* teaching was Scriptural too. Good teaching is not really about *style*.

~~We even see this in the bible, to some degree. A guy named Apollos was apparently a very gifted, compelling communicator. But Paul, evidently? Not so much. He actually admits himself that he wasn't a very gifted communicator, at least in person.⁴ In fact, at~~

³ John Mark Comer, a former pastor at Bridgetown Church in Portland, put it this way in several of his teachings.

⁴ See 2 Corinthians 11:6

~~one point in Acts, we're told that a guy listening to Paul speak for hours falls asleep, falls out of a window, dies and has to be resurrected.⁵ Which might not have been because Paul was a boring communicator, but I bet it didn't help.~~

Scriptural teaching and preaching **also isn't really about *method***. Some people would say that the *only* way to teach the Scriptures is by going, line-by-line through a book of the bible. The only *problem* is that if you teach through every book of the bible, line-by-line, you'll never find a single place that says that is the only way to teach it. How about that for irony? So you *can* do it that way always, but you don't *have* to. Here at City Church, we like to spend *some* time walking, line-by-line through books of the bible (like we've been doing with Matthew), *and other* times, we like to *use* various Scriptures to speak into various questions and issues of our day. Both are great. We like to do both. But my point is that **when we say "good teaching is based on Scripture," we're not really talking about *style*, or even *method*—we're talking about *content*. The *content* of good teaching is *based on*, and consistent *with*, Scripture.**

The **last thing I'll mention** here is that all good teaching *should*, at some point in the teaching, **point us to Jesus**. **If teaching is truly consistent with Scripture, it should lead us to Jesus—because that's what Scripture itself does.** Look with me at **John 5** up on the screen. This is Jesus leveling a critique of the religious authorities of his day, and he says this to them:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. (But) these are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.⁶

Jesus says that the Scriptures all testify about *him*—they all *lead* to him. So **if you teach, or teach from the Scriptures, and you miss Jesus, you need to go back and read or teach them again.** So the hope is that in every teaching we give up here, we help you see and appreciate and savor the beauty of Jesus, and what he accomplished on our behalf. That's always the ultimate goal with any teaching: pointing people to Jesus. Make sense? Okay. Second, **good teaching...**

...is useful.

So look again back at v. 16. It says that "all Scripture is *useful* for teaching." **That word *useful*** in the original language could mean "*useful*," "*profitable*"—or even "*helpful*." All Scripture is *useful* for teaching. **So if we've taught the Scriptures in a way that *wasn't***

⁵ You can read this story in Acts 20:7-12.

⁶ John 5:39-40

useful, that means we've missed something. In other words, good teaching is *practical*. The purpose of teaching isn't *just* to stand up in front of people and say true things about God or the bible. It's not *less* than that—but it is *more*. **We don't just want to say true things, but also to help all of us *implement* true things into our lives.**

James, the brother of Jesus, says it like this:

*Do not merely **listen** to the word, and so **deceive** yourselves. **Do** what it says. Anyone who **listens** to the word but does not **do** what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately **forgets** what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the **perfect law that gives freedom**, and **continues** in it—not **forgetting** what they have heard, but **doing** it—they will be blessed in what they **do**.*⁷

At City Church, **we don't just want to know true things** about God. We want to *do* something with what we know. We want to be *doers* of the word. So when we *teach*, our goal also isn't just to tell you true things. Our goal is to tell you what is true, and then help you learn how to *implement* what is true into your life. In 2 Timothy, Paul even gives us some *examples* of what *usefulness* looks like: sometimes it's teaching. Sometimes it's correcting. Sometimes it's rebuking. And sometimes it's training in righteousness. But good teaching is always *useful*.

This is **why we put together discussion questions**, based on the teaching, for your LifeGroup to discuss on a regular basis. It's to help you not just *listen* to what is said, but *do* what is said. To put the things we talk about into practice. When our Teaching Team puts together a sermon, we're asking two questions. First, *what does the bible say?* But then second, *what do our people need to do with what the bible says?* The first, we rely on careful studies and commentaries and people smarter than us to help us with. The *second*, we rely on the Holy Spirit and relationships with *y'all* to help us with. When someone stands up here and gives a teaching, they aren't just wanting to fill you with information; they're wanting to show *how* that information *transforms* the way you view God, yourself, and others as a result. Which feeds directly into our next idea. Which is that *good teaching*...

...is formative.

Paul writes, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, **so that** (end result) the servant of God may be **thoroughly equipped** for every good work.*" **Good teaching and preaching is**

⁷ James 1:22-25

actually a means to an end. It's meant to *form* us, over time, into the image of Jesus. So it's not just something I do because I want recognition, or because it feels good to be up here and have a captive audience—in fact, most days, to be honest, I'd rather *not* be up here. I'd rather be sitting across a dinner table with y'all. But I *do* it because it's a means to an end. It's one way that God has decided to *form* us *all* into who he designed us to be.

Back **at the very beginning of COVID**, we, like many churches, went completely online for a bit. And during those few months, the teachings I gave were literally me, in my office, talking to my iPhone camera. And can I tell you that is the most that I have ever *hated* my job as a pastor? Our staff will tell you: when Thursday would roll around and it was time for me to record the teaching for that Sunday, I just got real grumpy. And I'm sure there were probably a lot of reasons I didn't like it. But one reason was that it did not feel like I was teaching to form *people*...it felt like I was teaching to an iPhone. Because that's what it was.

What I love so much about doing this up here on Sundays is that as I am teaching, I get to see your faces. And because I know a lot of you, I know some of what's going on in your life—and I have that in mind as I'm teaching. And even those of you I *don't* know: I get the benefit of watching how you respond to things that we say up here on stage. Teaching and preaching is not just giving a speech in front of people: it is a means of shepherding, loving and caring for people. And that's tougher to do when you're just staring into a video camera or an iPhone lens.

One of **the best things for me** as a communicator is actually *not* when people come up to me or email me and say that the sermon was good. Don't get me wrong: you're welcome to do that. It's appreciated. But the best thing for me as a teacher of the bible is when I get to witness y'all being who God made you to be towards each other and towards our city. The biggest encouragement I can receive is when I get to witness examples of y'all being formed, over time, into the image of Jesus. That's better than any "good sermon" compliment you could ever give me. Because that's the *purpose* of teaching: *forming* people. *Equipping* people.

One of the ways we try to equip you guys is by training you to be **good missionaries** in the city of Knoxville. We want to equip you to know how to talk well about all aspects of faith. So that if you find yourself in a conversation with a classmate or a coworker or a neighbor about that, you know what to say. We've had quite a few people ask us over the years why we spend so much time on Sundays speaking to objections and obstacles people might have to faith in Jesus. And *one* reason for that is on any given week, there *could* be quite a few people who show up on a Sunday that *have* those objections. But

the *bigger* reason is that in our teaching, we want to model for you how to speak to those objections and obstacles, so that you have something to go on when those objections and obstacles come up with other people. It's just one way that we are seeking to *form* and *equip* you through our teaching.

So, to **summarize so far**: **good teaching is Scriptural, is useful, and formative.** Those are all things that good teachers do, and that you as the hearers should be looking for *in* good teaching. But with that established, what I want to do next is pivot and **shift our attention** to a couple aspects of teaching that have more to do with *your* role, as the *listener*. We've talked some about what *I* need to do; now let's talk about what *you* need to do. Two things here. First, *good teaching*...

...is made effective by how it is heard.

In all but one of the gospels,⁸ Jesus tells a **parable** (or a *story*) about a farmer who throws seed on four different kinds of *soil*. Jesus tells the disciples that the different types of soil in the story are meant to *represent* different postures towards the teaching of Jesus. They represent how we *hear*. *In* the story, *three* of the four types of soil ultimately prove unfruitful: the seed yields no results. Only *one* of them is effective. But what's interesting in the parable is that the *message* taught is the same every time. In the story, the seed is the seed is the seed is the seed. The *difference*-maker, according to Jesus, is actually in the *soil*. So ultimately, the secret to *effective, fruitful* teaching actually isn't in the teaching itself. It's in how the teaching gets *heard*.

Here's **another reason I know this is true**: people in the gospels heard *Jesus himself* teach. Think about that: I wasn't personally there, but I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that Jesus' teaching was probably *pretty* good. We might even say *perfect*. **And yet, some people heard the teaching of Jesus, and walked away unchanged.** Unmotivated. Unconvinced. Which tells me that ultimately, good teaching being *effective* is at least somewhat dependent on how it is *heard*.

The person who shows up here on Sundays *expectant*, with a heart willing to do the work of listening, considering, discerning, internalizing, implementing—*that* person's heart will bear fruit every time. No matter the quality of the teaching, no matter the giftedness of the teacher, no matter the depth of the insight, no matter the humor or emotion or lack thereof. **The heart that longs to hear will hear. But the heart that doesn't want to hear will find a thousand reasons to justify not hearing.**

⁸ Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:4-15

I have seen churches where the teaching is *phenomenal*. Like, way better teaching than you'll get *here* on Sundays or most anywhere else. And yet there will be people at that church, who have been there for *years*, who are some of the more spiritually *immature* people I've ever met. Even though they sit *under* that *great* teaching every week. *And*, I've been at other places where the teaching, to be honest, is not great. Kinda shallow, kinda surface, not very theologically deep—and yet I've met some *very* spiritually *mature* people who sit under that teaching. You see, the secret to effective teaching actually *isn't* in the *message*. What makes the message effective is how it gets *heard*.

So every week, *when I step down off this stage*, I go right over there, I sit down, and I pray. Depending on the week, I might be praying for any number of things. But **one of the things I'm praying for is for how you hear**. I'm praying that regardless of the quality of the teaching I just gave, that the Spirit will make each of us willing to *hear* what was said. I'm praying that he will make us *receptive*, like the fourth kind of soil. And just for clarity, *that includes me*. It's not uncommon that as I'm up here giving a teaching, I realize in the moment, "oh dang—I needed to hear that. *I* need to repent of that. *I* need to grow in that." And my hope is that all of us are taking that posture. Because the fruitfulness of the message is always determined ultimately by how it gets *heard*.

And *finally*, good teaching...

...gets repeated to others.

Look with me, actually, at the *previous* chapter of 2 Timothy from where we were earlier, up on the screen. This is **2 Timothy 2:1-2**:

*You then (Timothy), my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, **entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.***

So notice, there are *at least three levels* of teaching happening here. Paul, the author, teaches Timothy things from the Scriptures, that he wants Timothy to teach other people, who will then be able to teach other people. Do you see that? One final mark of good teaching, in Paul's mind, is that it gets *repeated*. It gets taught to *others*, who teach it to others, who then teach it to others.

It is so *important for you to remember* that hearing teaching from the bible each week is not all about *you*. Hopefully, a lot of weeks, the stuff that we say very much applies to you in some way, shape or form. That's the goal. But occasionally, there are likely to be weeks where you go "yeah, I just don't feel like that was really for me, where I'm at right

now.” That’s inevitably gonna happen. And so something I would encourage you to ask on *those weeks* is “okay—if that teaching wasn’t for *me*, who might it *be for*?” What friend of mine, coworker of mine, classmate of mine, needs to hear this? And now that I’ve heard it, how might *I* be called to teach it to them?

Part of the reason “*church matters*” is because we are **all actually called to *teach each other***. *Colossians* says we should let the “word of Christ dwell in (us) richly, as we *teach and admonish one another*...”⁹ *Romans* tells us that we are “filled with goodness and knowledge...to *instruct one another*.”¹⁰ The Great Commission in Matthew tells us that we are all called to “go and make disciples of all nations...(which includes) *teaching people to obey everything Jesus has commanded us*. Here’s the point: if you are a follower of Jesus, congratulations: you are officially a *teacher*. At least in some capacity. And one of the ways you know your *posture* is healthy towards teaching is that you’re not just looking for how the teaching you’re hearing might benefit *you*—but also how it might benefit *others*.

~~*Let’s say we gave a teaching on marriage, and you’re not married. That means it probably doesn’t apply to you. But do you have married friends? Might it be helpful for them to hear some of what we talked about? Let’s say we give a teaching on parenting, and you’re not a parent. Do you have friends or family members who are? Is there anything they might benefit from? Sometimes I’ll hear people say that they brought someone to church with them so they could hear something we were teaching on. Or they sent them a link to a teaching we did so they could hear it. And sometimes that’s great. But also consider: might it be that God has you in their life, so that you can teach them in a really specific, helpful way? Sometimes that can be even more powerful than me, or somebody up here, teaching them.*~~

And then, **when you go through the effort** to teach someone, run what *you* say through **the same questions** we’ve already mentioned today. First, is what I’m saying *Scriptural*? The thing I’m teaching them—is it based on the bible? Second, is what I’m saying *useful*? Am I just about to throw a true statement at them about God or the bible? Or am I actually giving them something that *profits* them, *benefits* them? And finally, is what I’m saying done with the intention of *forming* them into who God made them to be? That’s how you know you’re giving someone *good* teaching. As followers of Jesus, we are ***all*** called to teach, in some way. And the hope is that the teaching we’re doing up here, week in and week out, isn’t just teaching *you*—but is also equipping you *to* teach. So *who* are you teaching? *Where* are you teaching? *How* are you teaching?

⁹ Colossians 3:16

¹⁰ Romans 15:14

Now, I know I've gone on long enough, and I don't want anyone in the balcony falling out of a window. So I'll just **leave you with this** from **Isaiah 52:7**:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news...

According to Isaiah, it is a beautiful thing to **be the person who comes bearing good news** from the Scriptures, and about what Jesus has done for us. When we enter into a relationship or a setting or a situation with the truths of the Scriptures on our lips ready to share, that is a beautiful thing. And in Romans 10, Paul makes it clear that that word from Isaiah applies to *all* of us who follow Jesus.¹¹ It's not just *my* job to deliver good news; it's *our* job. So that's my prayer for each and every follower of Jesus in this room: that we would have *beautiful feet*. That came out wrong. But you know what I mean. I want us all to be deliverers of good news. I want us all to be, in a sense, *teachers*. And *good ones*. I want us all to be *receivers* of the gospel, and *proclaimers* of the gospel. Such that it changes our lives, and others' lives in the process.

Let's pray.

¹¹ See Romans 10:14-15