

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Epiphany 4 (Christian Education Sunday)
February 2, 2025
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Where does it itch?

Remember when you had chickenpox? Most of us had chickenpox as children—although younger generations may have gotten the chickenpox vaccine and been spared that miserable disease. If you've had chickenpox you remember that your whole body was covered with little sores that itched like crazy. All you wanted to do was scratch them! But scratching only made them worse. Scratching them made them itch all the more, and you scratched them open, so they bled and festered and wouldn't heal and left scars. Some parents even put mittens on their children's hands to keep them from scratching open the chickenpox. And Mom said, "Don't scratch!"

But not all scratching is bad. Sometimes it's very satisfying to scratch an itch. You might say to your spouse, "Honey, can you scratch my back?" (I ask her because I don't have one of those back-scratchers that you can buy at the airport souvenir shop that says, "Arizona—the Grand Canyon State.") And my wife helps me out. She scratches where it itches, and I say, "A little down and to the right . . . Yeah, right there! Perfect! Thank you!"

As human beings we have spiritual needs that need to be met—we have itches to be scratched, so to speak. Some of them are itches that should not be scratched, and some of them are real needs that need to be met. Today we have another "Epiphany Moment," and as we focus on Christian Education today we ask, "Where does it itch? Where do we need to be scratched?" Today let's learn the difference between where our sinful nature *wants* to be scratched and where our spirit *needs* to be scratched—in a good way.

This Scripture we're looking at today, 2 Timothy, is the last will and testament of the Apostle Paul. These are the last words that Paul wrote before he was executed. Paul the apostle and missionary had been through some very hard times. He had made several long journeys to different places to preach about Christ. He had been imprisoned several times, shipwrecked, whipped, stoned and left for dead—Paul had experienced a hard life in his work for Jesus. But now, as he writes this second letter to Timothy (Timothy was a younger pastor who needed Paul's encouragement), Paul knew that his time was short. This was it. It was only a short time before he was going to be with Jesus. So he writes to Timothy to encourage him to keep on fighting the good fight, to hold onto the faith, and to keep standing firm for Jesus.

Along with encouragement, Paul also gives Timothy a strong warning: *Preach the word. Be ready whether it is convenient or not. Correct, rebuke, and encourage, with all patience and teaching.* ³ *For there will come a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, because they have itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in line with their own desires.* ⁴ *They will also turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths.* Where does it itch? If it's your ears that itch, and you're listening to hear the things that you want to hear, that's a very dangerous thing. We don't have to look far today to find preachers who only scratch where people want to be scratched and tell people only what they want to hear. So what does "itching ears" preaching from a false teacher look like? It looks like a lot of things:

A preacher might scratch people's itching ears when he preaches a gospel of prosperity. He says, "If you're a Christian you'll always be happy and prosperous and successful. God will bless you with a nice home and a fine car and a good job and a happy family. Being a Christian is the path to the good life." That sounds good and scratches my ears right where they itch, but it's not true. God doesn't promise that. It certainly wasn't true for Paul—and he was an apostle of God, who suffered greatly for his faith in Jesus. He told God's people, "We must go through many troubles on our way to the kingdom of God." Still, it's a very popular message today, and many people are seduced by this false teaching. Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." The prosperity gospel is a lie, but it's popular because it scratches an itch to enjoy a Christian life without carrying the burden of the cross.

Or another popular approach to preaching is to preach against all of the sin out there in the world around us—our culture, our government, social media, take your pick—but not preach in a way that convicts the people who are listening. That scratches itching ears, but wringing our hands and pointing out all the evil out there doesn't convict me and you in here. It doesn't remind me that *I* need to repent of the sins I'm guilty of. It doesn't remind you to repent and turn away from sin and self and turn to Jesus. Convicting *them* is always more fun than convicting *myself*. "Tell *them* to repent. Don't tell *me* to repent."

Or here's another form of itching-ears preaching that's very popular in conservative, Bible-believing Christian churches today: It's to preach good, biblical, conservative values without preaching Christ. Talk about the blessings of family. Talk about love. Talk about being pro-life. Talk about being a patriot and a good, law-abiding citizen. Talk about making a difference in our communities and being a force for good and beacons of light. God bless America! But there's no talk

about *Christ!* Do you see the problem? Jesus didn't come to be an example and a role model and an inspirational teacher. He came to be our Savior and our Substitute. Jesus came to crush our proud spirits with a message of repentance, he came to convict us of our own sins, and he came to be crushed for us under the crushing weight of God's wrath against sin—because that's how seriously God takes our sin. Preaching that preaches a lot of good virtues but doesn't preach Christ is leading people down a happy, conservative, patriotic path that leads directly to hell without Jesus.

Then there's the preaching that scratches itching ears because it is reasonable and makes perfect sense to our logical minds. How can Jesus be the only way to heaven? There must be many paths to God, right? No! Jesus is the only way we can be saved, because Jesus is the only one who lived as our substitute and washed our sins away with his blood sacrificed on the cross. How can a cute little baby be sinful? That cute child must be innocent, right? No! From sinful parents come sinful children. We are sinful from birth—before that—sinful from the time our mothers conceived us (Psalm 51:5). That's why we baptize babies and give them the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, so they can have forgiveness for their sins. Or another reasonable concept: good people go to heaven, and bad people go to hell, right? Except Scripture says there is no one good. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified (declared not-guilty) freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. The reality is: people who are convicted of our sins and despair of our own goodness find forgiveness and salvation as a gift from God in Jesus. It's not something we earn by being worthy; it's a gift of God's grace given to us who are unworthy.

To get at the heart of our real spiritual needs, we need a whole lot more than a little scratch where it itches. Scratching an itch—even in a good sense—is superficial. What we really need is something that goes a whole lot deeper—something that *cuts* a whole lot deeper. We need something called the Sword of the Spirit. That's what the Bible calls the Word of God. "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to the point of dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, even being able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness." The Word of God doesn't just scratch the surface; it cuts us wide open. It exposes the blackness of our natural hearts, the tumors of our sins, the infection of our guilt. It's all exposed; nobody escapes.

Super Bowl LIX will be played on February 9 this year between the Philadelphia Eagles and the Kansas City Chiefs. Most of you know this. Most of you will probably watch the game. But here's the question. You know who's playing in the Super Bowl this year, but have you ever read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)? Do you know who Abraham is? Do you know who Elijah is? Do you know who Daniel is? Do you know who Paul is? Many of you do, of course, but many of us here today do not. This is a problem! We know who the contestants are in a major sporting event, but we've never learned the teachings of Jesus? Do you think maybe that ignorance of God's holy Word reflects some pretty misplaced priorities? I'm going to tell you the straight truth, friends, and I'm going to tell you the straight truth because I love you. When we know more about popular culture than we know about God and his precious Word, we need to repent. You need to repent, and I need to repent. We need to get our heads straightened out and realize what is important and what is not. Because the things we're talking about here are a matter of life and death—*eternal* life and death. We need to repent of our obsession with trivial, worldly things and get serious about the things of God. The plane crashes this week in Washington and in Philadelphia remind us how fragile life is and how suddenly life can end. Do we really think it's okay to fill our heads and our hearts with all kinds of sinful media garbage and just say, "I believe in God, God loves me, and it's all good?" Do we really think that we can have a heart filled with rage and evil thoughts and vain pride and loveless, indifferent attitudes and selfish greed—but, hey, I know a couple facts about Jesus, and I'm good to go? If that's where we're at, we should be falling on our knees and praying that before this short life comes to an end God would give us repentance, so that when we have to meet him in the judgment—whether that's fifty years from now or this very night—we are ready. Meanwhile, our immortal soul hangs in the balance.

Do you understand why we all need Christian education? It's not just for our children in our elementary school or our Sunday school or our Lutheran high school. It's for me and you—for all of us—so that we can meet God in his Word, be strengthened by his love for us, cherish his precious forgiveness, and be ready to meet him when he calls us.

Christian education is not about acquiring information. It's about feeding our soul. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). It's not just stuffing facts into our brains; it's gaining eternal wisdom for our heart. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). It's about learning the depth of God's love, that he would give his only Son to die for *me*, the worst of sinners. That the price Jesus paid on the cross was more than enough to remove all our guilt and all our shame. And that by rising from the dead Jesus removes all our fears of death and judgment and hell. Christian education does more than scratch where we itch, and it does more than slice us open and expose our sin. God's truth bandages up our hearts and heals us by saying to us, "Humble child of God, your sins are forgiven!"

God's truth doesn't just scratch where we itch. It gives us what we need: A broken, humble heart. Forgiveness of our sins. Peace with God. Life with Jesus forever. Amen.