

A Little Greek

In Season and Out of Season

By Joel Stephen Williams

Paul told Timothy to "Preach the word; be instant [prepared, NIV; ready, NASB] in season, out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). The NRSV renders it: "Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable." In English we have a rhyming oxymoron, that is, a figure of speech in which the opposite or contradictory terms are combined: "In season, out of season," or as the NRSV puts it, "Favorable or unfavorable." The same is present in the Greek, "*eukairos akairos*." Both words come from *kairos* which means time, so they mean "timely" or "untimely."

The exact meaning of this phrase is difficult. Does it refer to Timothy, to his potential hearers, or both? Is it saying that Timothy should preach if it is convenient for him to do so, and even if it is not? Or is it saying that Timothy should preach to people whether it is convenient for them or not? Or both? An excellent article by Abraham J. Malherbe addresses this issue and the meaning of the phrase (*In Season and Out of Season: 2 Tim 4:2*, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 [1984] 235-43).

The Greeks frequently spoke of seizing the right moment (*kairos*) to deliver a speech and adapting one's words to the actual circumstances (Ibid., 236). Words could be appropriate for an occasion, or inappropriate. Timely, or untimely. The Greek philosophers gave "serious consideration" to "the emotional and moral conditions of those persons they sought to benefit" (Ibid., 237). The exception to this would be the group of philosophers called the Cynics who frequently offended others with their lack of tact and excessive frankness. By way of contrast, Seneca "would speak only to those who were in a condition to receive a benefit" (Ibid., 239). Philosophers would look for the right opportunity or moment, maybe in private, individual instruction, maybe in group instruction, to give sound advice to another. Certain occasions were not deemed appropriate for sharing criticism, such as at a time of misfortune. Some people should not be corrected when they were in the presence of others, such as a mate or students, since embarrassment might prevent the best reception by the hearer (Ibid., 240).

It is very likely that Paul had this proverbial Greek way of speaking in mind when he told Timothy to "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season," (2 Tim. 4:2). However, Paul not only tells Timothy to speak appropriate words at appropriate times, but also he instructs him to preach "out of season." The setting for the Pastorals provides a likely explanation. Timothy was confronted with false teachers who "were no well-meaning individuals who [had] gone astray and [were] open to reason and persuasion which would effect their return to the truth. They [were] obstinate and their unwillingness to endure sound teaching would appear to place them beyond the pale" (Ibid., 242). Nevertheless, Timothy should make an effort to correct them with his preaching. Even if it did not seem timely or likely to succeed, Timothy is directed to preach without giving consideration to whether it is opportune or inopportune to do so" (Ibid.).

Inopportune times for preaching were to be encountered in the future: "For the time (*kairos*) is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3, 4). So Paul is telling Timothy to declare the truth — no matter what. Preach whether people listen or not. Preach whether you are "successful" or not. Preach if you think it will do some good, and even when you doubt it will do any good. The message is too important and eternal destinies hang in the balance. Preach the word — period!