



# THE PREACHER'S COMPLETE SKILLS GUIDE

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# THE PREACHER'S COMPLETE SKILLS GUIDE

## Editor's Note *by Matt Woodley*

It happens every Sunday. Week after week, in churches across the globe, someone stands up to preach a sermon. Regardless of church location—Manhattan, Lagos, Singapore, Rio de Janeiro, Chicago, Phnom Penh, Brussels, or Barnum, Minnesota (population 460)—regardless of denomination—Baptist, Anglican, Lutheran, Pentecostal, or Presbyterian—you can (or at least should) count on one common thing in the worship service: a sermon. Someone will stand up before the people of God and declare, “This is the Word of God.”

The sermon is a rare and daring art form. It's a combination of Bible study, theological reflection, creative essay, pastoral encouragement, prophetic challenge, loving appeal, Christian catechesis, and old-fashioned storytelling. As a friend of mine from London recently said, “Where else in our culture do you see volunteers listening (without interruption) to someone talk for about 30 minutes”? It's a strange mode of communication.

But for followers of Christ it will never get outdated. According to the Apostle Paul, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Of course God works in many ways besides a sermon, but many of us started following Jesus or matured in Christ through a similar process: Someone wrote and then preached a sermon. God used it to touch our heart. Christ brought us from death to life, or from sin to repentance, or from ignorance to truth. What made the difference? The power of the Holy Spirit worked through the humble, bold, loving act of someone opening God's Word to us.

At PreachingToday.com we believe in the power of preaching. We believe that it's a supernatural process and a human craft. God produces the results, but he uses our human (and sometimes flawed) efforts. Over the past 25 years working to inspire and equip preachers, we identified nine stages of a preacher's life. Then we invited nine of our finest contributors to write a “foundational article” on that aspect of preaching. This booklet contains all nine of those nuts-and-bolts foundational articles.

Here's a brief summary of what we've called “The Preacher's Complete Skills Guide,” or the nine stages of a preacher's weekly sermon prep rhythm:

1. **PREPARE YOUR SOUL.** Preaching always comes through a preacher's heart and life first. So the first step is not to illustrate or apply the text for others. The first step is to live the texts that we preach to others.
2. **PLAN YOUR PREACHING.** At some point you have to determine how you will preach through God's Word. Haphazard or poorly planned preaching schedules cannot convey “the full counsel of God.”
3. **GET THE BIG IDEA.** As Dr. Haddon Robinson was fond of saying, “Preaching should be a rifle shot, not a buckshot.” In other words, sermons are most effective and memorable when they revolve around one central, big idea—an idea drawn from a specific biblical text.

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4. ORGANIZE YOUR SERMON. As preaching professor Dr. Joel Gregory says, at some point the preacher “Must bring ‘order’ to the sermon out of the ‘chaos’ of the material.”
5. FIND THE BIG STORY. Every biblical text belongs in the larger story of God’s story of redemption in and through Jesus Christ. This chapter explores how to connect your sermon to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
6. ILLUSTRATE YOUR SERMON. AS Bryan Chapell argues, “Illustrations do more than adorn thought or clarify what is difficult to understand ... [They] persuade, stimulate involvement, touch the heart, stir the will, and result in decisions.” Here are some practical ways to illustrate effectively.
7. APPLY THE MESSAGE. Every sermon should answer the following simple question: So what? In other words: Who will be listening to the sermon and how can you help them live what the text says?
8. DELIVER AND EVALUATE YOUR SERMON. Every sermon should be delivered with passion and clarity. We should also have a way to evaluate our preaching so we can keep growing as preachers.
9. PLAN SPECIAL TOPICS. Finally, we also noticed that preachers need some special resources and inspiration to preach during those high-pressured big days, like Christmas, Easter, Holy Week, Mother’s Day, and so forth.

Of course this isn’t the only way to approach your weekly sermon prep process. Nor do these articles provide everything you need to know on every preaching subject. But it’s a good place to start our journey of offering our sermons to Jesus week after week. It’s a good framework to think through areas where we’ll need to grow in our preaching.

But always remember that every time we stand up to preach we don’t make anything happen. In Paul’s marvelously simple and liberating words, “God gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6). Or as the master preacher Haddon Robinson, liked to say, “Of course, we will not give God that which costs us nothing ... Yet in the final analysis there are no great preachers. There’s only a great Christ who does startling things when we place ourselves and our preaching in his hands.”

Matt Woodley, Editor



## PREPARE YOUR SOUL

# Prepare Your Soul to Preach *by Lee Eclov*

### Introduction

Picturte a lone prospector peering into a cave on a barren Arizona mountainside. He's heard "there's gold in them thar hills" so with nothing more than some grub, a lamp, and a pickaxe he's come to this mountain looking for a vein of gold. He lights his lamp and heads into the darkness in hope of striking it rich.

Preparing to preach is like that. For most of us it is quiet, solitary prospecting. In school we learned how to study the Bible, the pickaxe work. Diligent study is harder and longer than most people imagine. If we are decent preachers the Word seems so clear by the time our people hear it they might be inclined to think that we just found scriptural nuggets glittering on the ground.

As difficult as study is, I at least know what I'm doing in that realm. I was taught well in the skills of exegesis, hermeneutics, and homiletics. But intertwined with our preparation of the Word is the weekly preparation of our own souls. I don't know which part takes longer but soul work for me is more unpredictable and often troublesome.

Once I asked several pastors just exactly how they prayed for their sermons. A common response was, "Well, before I start I ask God to help me and to bless my work. Then I get at it." That's a good start but it doesn't have much to do with the preparation of our souls. Apart from suffering, sermon preparation is the most rigorous soul work I know. Although there are exceptions, I suspect that sermons only go as deep into the hearts of our hearers as they have into our own.

### Get quiet

Nothing inhibits my study more than the noise within. Spiritual work cannot tolerate many distractions. My "do list," emails, and Post-It notes chatter on in my head so that God himself can hardly get a word in edgewise. What's more, my dull-headed weariness drones on like a 4 p.m. lecture. "Be still and know that I am God" is no small command. Prayer, at this stage, isn't a matter of what we say. It is just trying to quiet the relentless yapping inside.

Besides that, every single time I sit down to study I feel I'm already behind. Too much to do; too little time left to do it. I always feel like the White Rabbit who raced by Alice dithering, "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date." When we feel like that, prayer can seem terribly inefficient; a luxury even. "I'd like to pray, of course," I tell myself, "but God understands. I have got to get this done." God does understand and he will help. But I just can't hear him very well if I don't quiet my soul. I study the words but miss the message. "Though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

### Get small

When our son was young we would take him to a nearby park to play on one of those huge "recreational structures," a wooden wonderland full of passages and hideouts, swinging bridges and towers. A guy could get lost in there. Or in my case, stuck. It was an environment meant for small people. God's kingdom is like that, as is the study of Scripture. You have to be small



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to maneuver without getting stuck or banging your head. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The gate into every passage of Scripture is low and narrow. We can try to squeeze in, big lunks that we are, or we can allow the Holy Spirit and the sacred text to make us small. Every passage carries a kind of humility potion. Every role Scripture takes—“teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”—resizes us if we drink it down. If we let the Word work itself into our hearts.

To begin with, take stock of your heart. That can be like asking a shifty-eyed eight-year-old what he’s been up to. You’re not likely to get a straight answer at first. Persistence is necessary. Not all our sin and dishonesty lays brazen on the surface. We don’t always see how swollen we’ve become inwardly. It’s not easy to tell when you’ve gotten too big for your britches. So we pray often, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.” God will use your text like a stethoscope.

Our pastoral work—especially preaching—should make us great-hearted but it can backfire and just make us big-headed. You can start to think, “All these people came to hear me.” We can become like a kid with a Superman cape ready to jump from the roof. Of all the Bible’s failures, Samson is the one who makes me most twitchy. I have never forgotten a time many years ago when I got up to preach even while sin, like Delilah, snipped away at my God-given strength. My words that day had no lift, no life, no muscle. I do not want to ever forget the ominous shadow of the sightless Samson.

Besides making us right-sized, humility is a relief. Humility is rarely comfortable, but it is a relief. It’s hard to hold in all that spiritual helium. A humble soul can maneuver gracefully in the passages of the God’s Word. Small preachers are the best preachers.

### **Work with me**

We never come to sermon preparation in a neutral frame of mind. Frustration or enthusiasm, weariness or worry, all crowd up to the desk with us when we study. Such things are actually part of our soul’s preparation. God intended you to preach this text in the midst of this week. Thus, I cannot ignore what is happening inwardly. Good sermons, like pearls, are often God’s beautiful Word coating an irritating grain of sand.

Gordon T. Smith writes about a time when he was frustrated with some colleagues. His spiritual director told him, “Well, Gordon, it is sometimes helpful to remember that ‘difficult people are the faculty of the soul.’” Sometimes before I can preach I have to deal with the toxins that have built up inside. That soul work brings an authenticity and thoughtfulness to my sermon.

### **Prepare to serve**

You’ve been in a restaurant where your waiter greets you, “Hi. I’m Jack, and I’ll be your server this evening.” Server didn’t used to be a word. I think restaurants made it up because most waiters are not willing to say, “I’ll be your servant this evening.”



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Many of us love preaching God's Word so much that we're sort of amazed anyone would pay us to do it. We want to serve Scripture. We love the privilege. However, Scripture doesn't always let me say what I want to say. Have you ever hammered out part of a sermon only to hear your Bible whisper indignantly, "That's not what I'm saying"? Has the Holy Spirit ever scolded you, "Enough with the clichés!" or "That story you want to tell is more about you than me." Scripture can be a tough customer.

Paul wrote in Col. 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom ..." Stop. Look at it again.

Let the Word of Christ. That is our text, whether it is from Deuteronomy, John, or Hebrews. Jesus Christ is speaking and he is the text come alive.

Dwell. Like the God in his wilderness tabernacle. Like Jesus incarnate in this dark world.

In you. Like manna or the bread and wine. Like the Spirit at Pentecost.

Richly. In all its glory. Filling you till it is fulfilled in you.

A prepared soul requires the rich residency of the Word. Then we are ready to teach and admonish. Not before.

Paul continues in that verse, "singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." When we have served Scripture well teaching and singing are hard to tell apart. Good preaching has a kind of melody, like harmonizing with the Lord. When I was a boy standing next to my mother in church I'd hear her singing alto during the hymns. I still remember when I figured out how to do that—how to find the pitch a third below the melody and harmonize. Prayer during sermon preparation is how we find our pitch and bring our voice into harmony with God's Word. It's a beautiful thing.

Being a servant also requires me to consciously serve my congregation. They are not sitting out there for me. I'm there for them. Whether it suits me or not, I must meet them where they are.

Recently a couple of my most gifted women's Bible study leaders came to me in frustration. Most of the women in the group they lead just won't participate. Neither of these two experienced leaders could get them to respond or share. The leaders were thinking about starting another group for women who would do their homework and participate. After we'd talked awhile something dawned on me. "You know, we should thank God that they're coming," I said. "These are women who love the Lord and make it a point to be there. Even if they don't say a word or prepare as we'd like, we would rather have them there than not coming! After all, we're the servants."

A couple days later one of leaders wrote me that she'd been reading in Luke how the crowds came to Jesus. She wrote, "Jesus didn't turn them away just because the people had a different agenda than he did. No, he welcomed them." She went on, "Here's where the ladies' study comes in and where I think God is taking me: I need to get over myself. It's not all about me and me not using my gifts. These women are coming, I need to welcome them, and share with them about the kingdom of God." Now her soul is ready to take up the Word.



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### Flexing faith

Some parts of faith come easily to me as I study. For example, I trust that Scripture is really God speaking and that these are the words of life. I trust that God will use me to preach, a gift of grace. I trust that the people who listen will become better disciples of Jesus by listening. Those things are usually easy for me to believe.

The hard part of faith is often more subtle than those things. Faith isn't only thinking a thing is true. Faith is also the spiritual openness—vulnerability—to draw that truth into my actual thinking and actions. For example, I believe Jesus when he said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." But before I can preach it I need to believe it enough that I feel the hunger pains and realize how parched for righteousness I am. That is where faith isn't so easy. Getting my soul situated can take more time than reading commentaries! In that sense, soul preparation means putting off my laziness and taking up my spiritual responsibilities because I believe that will lead to the God-blessed life. I believe that if I love Jesus I will obey him.

Recently I saw a more elusive side of faith in the story of Martha, Mary, and their houseful of guests (Luke 10:38-42). The sisters had disciples to feed and the Lord Jesus himself to serve. Just like me when I get up to preach—disciples to feed and the Lord Jesus himself to serve.

Let's assume for a moment that Martha would have loved to listen to Jesus but her sense of responsibility overruled. Luke says Martha was "distracted by much service." I suppose Martha should have remembered how Jesus fed the five thousand and sat down next to Mary. But unless Jesus did that again, her guests were going to go hungry. Duty called. Responsibility snapped its fingers. I know that feeling. The responsibility of preaching—of feeding all those disciples and pleasing the Lord Jesus—stresses me out, too.

The thing Martha never imagined was that Jesus wasn't her guest. She was his! She wasn't there to serve Jesus. He was there to serve her. I don't know how Mary, who I assume was as responsible a hostess as her sister, showed such extraordinary faith that she could stop to listen. Not one in a thousand responsible people would have done what she did. Somehow she trusted that Jesus wanted to feed her even more than she wanted to care for him and his followers. Which of those two sisters would you rather hear preach?

To prepare our souls to preach we must allow Jesus to serve us. And that takes a unique stretch of faith—faith enough to shift the weight of responsibility from me to him. Faith enough to be quiet and listen.

### Eureka!

When we prepare our souls as well as our texts, Jesus walks with us incognito, the way he did with the two Emmaus-bound disciples in Luke 24. He meets the yearning of our hearts with Scripture till we know what they meant when they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us"?



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Like the prospector we go alone into the mine with our lamp and pickaxe. Jesus said in Matt. 13:52, "Every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." When we prepare our souls as thoroughly as our text God's people receive great and godly treasures. But they also hear us shout for joy, "Eureka! Look what I found!" That is a rich congregation.





# PLAN YOUR PREACHING

## Plan Your Preaching *by Bryan Wilkerson*

### Introduction

Everyone loves a journey, setting out for a destination—known or unknown. They promise us new vistas, fresh learning, unexpected thrills and challenges, and deeper relationships with those with whom we share the road.

Preaching can be like that. Each year pastors have the opportunity to lead their congregations to new and better places with one another and with God. That's what we call it at Grace Chapel—the Teaching Journey. A preaching calendar is texts and dates; functional, clarifying, but not all that inspiring. A teaching journey offers discovery and growth, for both preacher and hearers.

In his book, *Strategic Preaching*, William Hull makes a compelling case for this kind of intentionality in building the preaching schedule. He writes, "The most effective sermons come from a concerted effort to guide the congregation in achieving its God-given destiny one year at a time." In other words, we can think of each year as a distinct and strategic leg of a congregation's journey toward spiritual maturity and missional impact.

With that in mind, let's plan our next trip.

### Choosing a destination

Travelling without a destination is called wandering. It's a pleasant way to spend an afternoon, but not very productive or satisfying over the long haul. (It can also look and feel a lot like being lost!) So, "What should I preach this year?" is the wrong question to ask. It too often leads to wandering. Better to ask, "Where do we want to go this year?"

Every spring our ministry staff sits down to consider this question. (Our ministry year at Grace Chapel runs from September to August, following the public school calendar which generally begins after Labor Day.) Over the course of a couple of meetings and/or a retreat setting, we assess the health and vitality of the congregation and try to discern where the Lord might be leading us next. Like shepherds looking over the flock, we ask ourselves what the flock might need in terms of diet, environment, and direction. We typically ask questions like:

Spiritually, where do we need to take the congregation next year? Here we consider which biblical texts, theological truths, and spiritual practices we might need to explore. Sometimes this is driven by our commitment to teaching the whole counsel of God—balancing Old and New Testament, narrative and didactic texts, etc. Other times we sense a weakness or a hunger in the congregation that needs to be addressed—understanding the Holy Spirit, cultivating spiritual disciplines, family issues, etc.

Several years ago we were coming off a contentious and disheartening season as the congregation wrestled with some internal governance issues. We sensed that we all needed some soul-searching and spiritual renewal. We declared the next ministry year to be a year of



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Transformation: Becoming More like Christ. Our teaching journey that year took us through the Beatitudes, the spiritual disciplines, and the life of David.

Organizationally, what needs to happen in the life of the church this year? We establish and prioritize ministry objectives and transitions for the coming year—revitalizing small groups, a building project, planting a church, an evangelism or discipleship initiative, etc. We don't want our sermons to be stump speeches that simply serve to drive an organizational agenda, but they can and should provide biblical inspiration and instruction for ministry growth. A corporate CEO once told me how he envied pastors, who every week have an opportunity to cast vision and values to the entire organization! Pastors, who are both preachers and teachers, need to leverage that opportunity.

When we launched our multi-site initiative four years ago, we spent the ministry year re-visiting and re-vitalizing our core commitments to Going Deeper (fall), Getting Closer (winter), and Reaching Wider (spring).

Culturally, what questions and challenges might people be wrestling with this year? We attempt to discern and even anticipate regional, national, and global trends or happenings that might impact people's lives and the church's ministry. If it's a presidential election year, a series on biblical citizenship might be in order, or the kingship of Christ. If the nation is in a season of economic decline or prosperity, there might be stewardship issues to explore, or teaching on the providence of God.

In addition to these brainstorming and discernment discussions, I will sometimes invite a focus group of laypeople to sit with me for a couple hours and share their questions, challenges, and experiences with a particular topic, like spiritual formation or family life. I invite a cross-section of the congregation, and send them a few thought questions in advance, and/or some biblical texts we might be considering.

With input from these various groups and sessions, I go off on my own and work out a road map and preaching calendar. Typically I try to get away for a day or two to allow time for prayer, reflection, walks in the woods, and uninterrupted hours with my Bible and legal pad. On my August retreat I'll lay out the general flow of the year from September through June, and a week by week calendar including text, topic, and big idea through Advent. I'll do a similar thing before the winter and spring seasons. Now that I have a staff to work with, I have found it helpful once or twice a year to ask another pastor to run point on a series or two, like Advent or summer. It gives me some breathing space to be more creative and reflective, and develops them as preachers.

Ultimately, it is my job as senior pastor and teacher to synthesize this input and craft a concise declaration of our destination for the year. Our ministry theme typically falls under one of our three core commitments: Going Deeper, Getting Closer, and Reaching Wider. This past year we felt it was time to challenge our congregation to be more outward-focused, both in our personal lives and as a congregation. Our Ministry Theme became, Living on Mission: Where Your Life Meets God's Heart.



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## Mapping the route

Having determined a destination, the next step is to map out the route. From a teaching perspective, consider how to get the congregation “from here to there” over the next year.

We often use a template that we have adapted from Dallas Willard’s work in spiritual formation. Willard spoke of an essential progression from vision to intention to means. Vision describes and clarifies a preferred future state—I want to get in shape. Intention involves a decision of the will to move in a new direction—I will join a health club. Means describes the activities by which we actually make progress toward this preferred state—three workouts a week, a low-fat diet, and an accountability partner. The genius behind Willard’s approach is the simple reality that people don’t typically change until they want to change, and then decide to change. If we simply instruct people in Christian truth and practice without first engaging the heart and the will, we get conformity without real transformation.

With this formational template in mind, we map out a teaching journey that will lead us through seasons of Vision, Intention, and Application (VIA). In the fall we cast Vision for some change or improvement in our lives as Christ-followers and as a congregation. We try to paint a compelling picture of whom or what we might become if we were to grow into God’s purposes for us. There will, of course, be plenty of opportunities for practical application in these messages, but the focus will be on seeing the big picture of God’s will for us in this particular area. We actually call the first Sunday after Labor Day, “Vision Sunday.”

As we transition from that fall season to the new calendar year we call the congregation to make a commitment to pursuing this new and better way of living. This Intention step might take the shape of a Commitment Sunday at the conclusion of the fall series, or it might be accomplished through a brief mini-series. January, with its focus on a fresh start and resolutions, is a natural time for this kind of emphasis and intentionality. In the spring season, we focus on practical Application of the biblical principles we have been learning, often with a thematic series or two focused on relationships, lifestyle, contemporary issues, etc.

This simple road map through the regions of Vision, Intention, and Application, will also include some “side trips” to accommodate the liturgical calendar—Advent, Lent, etc.—and congregational life—missions week, stewardship Sunday, etc. We treat the summer as a season of Renewal, backing off the intensity of the school year with a series that is visitor-friendly and that people can drop in and out of without feeling lost. We might explore the Psalms, or the parables of Jesus, or a series of biblical character studies—Unsung Heroes. (We actually produced a series of “trading cards” for this series that people could collect from week to week, each one offering a synopsis of the character and message for that week.)

## Packing our bags

With a destination determined through our discernment process, and a road map in front of us, we’re now ready to decide what our particular teaching texts and themes will be.



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This past year, we launched our Living on Mission emphasis with a 10-week Vision series on the missionary journeys of Paul. We followed Paul from city to city, discovering the various dimensions of missional living that emerged along the way. I realized as I planned and preached the series that in thirty years of preaching I had taught Acts 1-10 many times over, but had never systematically worked through the middle chapters of the book! Each city brought into focus a different aspect of the Christian mission—understanding God’s heart for the lost (Philippi), learning and living the Scriptures (Thessalonica and Berea), engaging the culture (Athens), etc. The compelling stories from Paul’s life on the road, with illustrations from the lives of contemporary Christ-followers, offered us all a better narrative for our own lives and travels. In the midst of that series, we were able to shape our two Global Awareness Sundays into the overall theme with a focus on Joining God in Hard Places. Organizationally, the series also provided biblical inspiration and vision for the launching of a third campus that fall.

As we ended that first series just before Advent, we shifted into Intentional mode. On the final Sunday of the series, we “commissioned” the entire congregation with a formal charge and prayer, just as we typically commission our Summer Mission Teams. A baptism Sunday near the end of the series offered people an opportunity to make a public commitment to following Christ and living on mission.

In January we blended Intention and Application with a four week series entitled, Work Matters. We considered how to leverage our working lives for kingdom impact, beyond simply tithing our paycheck and putting a Bible on our desks. A variety of texts helped us to explore the biblical themes of vocation and human flourishing, as well as how to appropriately serve people and share our faith in the workplace. Each Sunday we formally commissioned people who worked in various sectors of society—Education and Child Rearing, Commerce and Culture Making, Health Care and Human Services, and Government, Law, and Justice. (We typically like to offer a short, seeker-friendly series in January that might compel Christmas visitors to return. The practical, life-related focus on work accomplished that effectively.)

Continuing the Intentional emphasis, we spent the month of February tracking Jonah, the reluctant missionary. We explored the internal and external forces that tend to keep us from living on mission.

The season of Lent provided an opportunity to take a break from our missional focus and do some soul care and spiritual formation. (We’ve learned not to hammer the same theme all year long. People can get weary of it—preachers, too!—and we don’t want to overlook other issues in people’s lives and faith.) This year we explored the seven deadly sins in a series entitled, Sick: Facing What’s Wrong Inside. It set up a dramatic and welcome celebration of Life! on Easter Sunday.

In the spring season we returned to our missional theme and leaned heavily into Application with a series entitled, Every Day Matters. Each week we considered the missional possibilities of some aspect of daily life—household chores, parenting, being a good neighbor, everyday encounters, leisure time, etc. We were able to “synch” some of these topics to appropriate Sundays, like



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Mother's Day, and to the liturgical calendar's notion of Ordinary Time. On several occasions we included faith stories or interviews with people who were living out these truths in their daily lives. While the series was packaged topically, each week's message involved the exposition of a biblical text, as it does every Sunday at Grace!

### **Making Mid-course corrections**

As helpful and strategic as it is to chart and follow a road map, there are times we need to take a detour or even go "off road" for a week or a season.

Sometimes such moments are obvious. In the spring of 2013, we were in the middle of a series from Ephesians 4-6, exploring the practical application of Paul's teaching on being "in Christ." (We had launched the year in the fall with a vision-casting emphasis on Ephesians 1-3.) On Monday, April 15, the Boston Marathon bombing literally shook the city, physically and psychic-ly. While no one from the congregation was hurt, we had many who had run or volunteered for the race, including first responders in the medical tents and law enforcement. It was immediately obvious that a scheduled sermon on marriage from Ephesians 5 wasn't going to cut it that week. So we went instead to Psalm 10 and traced David's movement in prayer from anger to justice, from grief to comfort, and from fear to faith. It was a relevant message for many seekers who found their way to church that day, and our own folks appreciated our readiness to scrap our plans in order to speak to their hurt and questions.

Sometimes the need to change course or make a detour is more subtle. A few years ago in a staff meeting we were sharing a variety of pastoral concerns we had for folks in our congregation. Some involved loss and grief, others were financial or circumstantial. It suddenly struck us that quite a few people in our congregation were hurting, and that the nation itself was struggling through a season of financial uncertainty and hardship. Even though we had already crafted a strategic teaching journey for the year, we sensed the congregation needed something different. We rearranged the calendar and added a short series from 2 Corinthians that we called, Jars of Clay, in which we explored some of Paul's teaching on faith and perseverance in the face of hardship and testing.

Having a road map enables you to take detours and make adjustments, yet still arrive at your destination.

### **Arrival!**

As it turned out, the journey toward Living on Mission led to some remarkable growth in the congregation and the ministry. The missional emphasis provided biblical grounding and congregational energy for launching two new campuses. We had over 800 people participate in a Spring Serve day, scattering across the city to bring beauty, health, and vitality to surrounding communities in Jesus' name. But what I found most gratifying was to hear our people using the language of mission as they spoke about their work, family life, and involvement in the community. Preaching through these missional texts and themes had a very personal impact, as well, as it prompted Karen and me to host a Bible study for our under-churched neighbors.



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It always feels good to pull into the driveway at the end of a long trip, having made it to your destination and enjoyed some new discoveries and growth on the way. So it is for the congregation as well as the preachers at the end of a teaching journey. Travelling through the varied terrain of Vision, Intention, Application, and Renewal provides an engaging and satisfying sense of movement, progress, and discovery to the church year. The congregation may not be aware of these seasonal shifts in mood and content. All they know is that they had a nice trip, and they can't wait to see where we might go next!



## GET THE BIG IDEA

# How to Get the Big Idea *by Mark Mitchell*

## Introduction

In his book, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson states, “Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept.” He goes on to say, “A sermon should be a bullet, not buckshot. Ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture.” Robinson calls this the “big idea.” Others have called it the central idea, proposition, or theme of the sermon.

Discovering the big idea of a passage of Scripture is not always easy. It can be like staring at one of those 3-D pictures for a long time until the image begins to take shape and then appears. In the same way, you will often have to stare at and study the text for a long time before the big idea appears. The following is meant to be a pathway to help you discover the big idea of a passage. Throughout this journey we will consider the story of Mary and Martha from Luke 10:38-42.

## Step 1: Find and limit your text

If we believe in expository preaching, the text of the Bible must form the core and backbone of our message. This begins with choosing a text of Scripture that is a complete unit of thought. We might picture this as the skin of an apple. The text holds together and contains the material from which you will formulate your big idea.

Regardless of whether you are preaching through a book of the Bible or a single text from a book of the Bible, you must limit the text to a paragraph or unit of thought. The Bible was written as individual books. Each book of the Bible has its own unique message. Even the book of Judges, which contains a great deal of historical information, was written to prove a theological point: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). However, as the human author developed the message of his book, there were natural breaks in the message he wrote. Each of these units of thought build on each other as the writer constructs his argument. To preach in keeping with the author’s intent we need to identify those units of thought and how they relate to each other.

How do you go about locating the thematic unit (paragraph)? Using common sense, and our own understanding of language, look at the passage and decide where a particular thought begins and ends. In other words, figure out where the author changes the subject. Here are a few guidelines to help out:

- Remember that there were no chapter or verse divisions in the original manuscripts of the Bible. Even the paragraph divisions included in most modern versions of the Bible were placed there by editors.
- Is there a natural and logical beginning and ending to the thought or subject? Sometimes, major connective words can help, such as “therefore” and “consequently.”



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- Be mindful of the literary genre you're working with. In narrative literature, the writer will often change the subject by starting an entirely new story. In poetic literature, the subject will change with a new verse or stanza. In a letter, the subject will change with a new paragraph.

The story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42 is clearly a unit of thought in that Luke changes from one story to another. However, while it seems randomly placed in the narrative, it is not unrelated to the material that surrounds it. It is preceded by the story of the parable of the Good Samaritan told in response to the question a man posed to Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" It is followed by the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray and the Lord's teaching on prayer.

### Step 2: Study the text

Biblical preaching is about exposing the message of the text of Scripture. Having found a text to preach on, it is necessary to learn all that we can about that text using the historical-grammatical method of inductive Bible study. If the unit of thought is the skin on the apple, the detailed content of the passage is the flesh of the apple. The immediate goal of this is to determine the original author's intended meaning, because a passage cannot mean today what it didn't mean then. There is no easy way to do this. It takes time and hard work. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain the details of biblical exegesis, but the assumption is that work is being done before you can go on to the next step.

In studying the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42 there are several interpretive questions that need to be answered in determining Luke's intended meaning: Why is this story placed here in the narrative? Who were Mary and Martha and what was their relationship with Jesus like? What cultural expectations are assumed in this story concerning hospitality and meal preparations? What did Jesus mean when he said to Martha, "... few things are needed-or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her"? What did Mary choose?

### Step 3: Determine the topic and outline of the text

To this point, we've found a text for our sermon and limited the text to one unit of thought. We've also studied the text to understand the author's intent. We have a good idea of what the text is saying. Now it's time to work on bringing it all together. The best way to do this is to determine the broad topic of the passage and its major sections by writing an outline.

- Determine the general topic of the passage: Like the flesh of the apple, the topic of the passage is the most accessible to us. It's the broad subject that the original author was addressing. Is the author talking about marriage? Government? Christian ministry? Prayer? Money? Relationships? If you can't identify the general topic, you need to go back and do more study. But it should be fairly easy to "sink your teeth" into the subject.
- Write an outline of your passage. This outline breaks the passage down into its natural sections as a result of the study of the text. There will normally be a few major sections, each with their own subsections. The outline is a reflection of the flow of the author's





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argument in the text. Every sentence should somehow be accounted for in the outline. This outline is NOT a sermon or a preaching outline. The sermon outline will be derived from this outline, but the two are not the same. As you make your outline, be sure to use full sentences so each point contains a complete idea.

After studying Luke 10:38-42 and the surrounding context I determined the topic of the passage is “the proper spirit of service.” In the previous story, Jesus told an expert in the law that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. When the man asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus went on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan in which a man saw a need and did what he could to meet that need. It seems that Luke placed the story of Mary and Martha right after that to show that if we serve our neighbor with the wrong spirit we spoil everything. Instead, we should learn to be like Mary and sit at the Lord’s feet and let him pour into us before we attempt to serve others in our own strength. The fact that Luke places this story right before Jesus’ teaching on prayer indicates Mary’s example has something to do with prayer. Perhaps the proper spirit of service is to let the Lord serve us through prayer so we can more effectively serve our neighbor!

An exegetical outline of this passage is as follows:

- I. Jesus is welcomed into the home of his friends Mary and Martha (verse 38).
- II. Mary and Martha each relate differently to the Lord (verses 39-40a).
  - A. Martha is distracted by all her preparations.
  - B. Mary is preoccupied with Jesus as she sits at his feet and listens.
- III. Martha complains to Jesus that Mary has left all the serving to her (verse 40b).
- IV. Jesus gently corrects Martha and affirms Mary’s choice (verses 41-42).
  - A. Martha’s service rendered her worried and bothered.
  - B. Mary chose the one thing necessary, which could not be taken away.

### **Step 4: State the exegetical idea of the text**

Returning to our image of an apple, we have identified the skin as the unit of thought and the flesh as the easily accessible details of the passage. The next thing to find is the core, which is the exegetical idea of the passage. Like the core of an apple, it is usually the most difficult to get at. The exegetical idea is a single unit of thought that binds together and gives meaning to all the particulars of the text.

We find the exegetical idea by answering two questions. First: What is the author talking about? This is called the subject. Second: What is the author saying about what he is talking about? This



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is called the complement. The complement completes the subject. At this point, the subject and complement should be stated in a way that addresses the biblical world, which the author was addressing, rather than the modern world, which we live in now. Later, when we craft the homiletical big idea, we will word it to address the modern audience. The following are two examples of using these two questions to get at the exegetical idea, beginning with Luke 10:38-42.

Subject: In contrast to Martha, how does Mary show the proper spirit of service?

Complement: By placing herself in a position where the Lord could serve her.

Exegetical big idea: Mary shows the proper spirit of service by placing herself in a position where the Lord could serve her.

Here is another example from Ephesians 4:7-13:

Subject: What is the purpose for which the ascended Christ gave gifts to the church?

Complement: So that the church will be built up and reach Christ-like maturity.

Exegetical big idea: The ascended Christ gave gifts to the church so that the church would be built up and reach Christ-like maturity.

This exercise becomes much more difficult as you deal with longer and more complex passages of Scripture, as well as different genres. For example, in narrative literature, the big idea is often not explicit in the text and interpretive skills must be at their finest to understand the author's main point.

### **Step 5: Craft the homiletical big idea**

We are now ready to determine what the sermon's big idea will be. The homiletical big idea is similar but also different from the exegetical idea of the text. The main difference is that it is stated in language that addresses the modern audience rather than the biblical world.

The purpose of the homiletical big idea is to give unity to the message. The human mind craves unity and order. God has created us to seek unity and order in any presentation of ideas. Unless we take time to provide the sermon with a unified focus and a clear sense of where we're going, people will find us frustrating to listen to. Furthermore, they will seek to find a big idea in the chaos of our message. Our big idea, however, may not be the one that we're trying to communicate. The best way to unify the sermon is to summarize it in one complete sentence that accurately captures the truth of the entire message.

The statement of the homiletical big idea should be biblical because expository preaching is relentlessly committed to exposing the text of Scripture. When we state the homiletical big idea, we're telling people what God wants them to know and do from this text of Scripture. We have no authority to do this unless the Scripture is actually teaching what we say it's teaching.

The statement of the homiletical big idea should be brief because length and complexity obscure truth rather than clarify it. The longer your homiletical big idea, the harder it will be for you

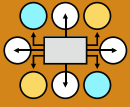


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and the congregation to remember. This also means that the big idea should be clear because unclear statements don't communicate. An unclear homiletical big idea can take the form of an incomplete sentence, such as "Paul's charge to Timothy" or "The goal of Christian love." These phrases don't really communicate anything because they're incomplete. Another way of making the homiletical big idea unclear is to use unfamiliar language or technical jargon. An example of this is, "The incomprehensible omniscience of Yahweh encapsulates every form of ontological reality."

Finally, the statement of the homiletical big idea should be memorable, because the Scripture's truths are memorable. The stories of the Bible are told in memorable ways. Each Psalm was originally set to music because songs are easy to memorize. Proverbs are memorable. They are written to pack truth into "sound bites" that are easy to learn and easy to pass on to your children. Even the teachings of Jesus were given in a memorable way. He taught in parables, which were stories that often had a surprise in them. If the Scriptures were written in such a way as to be memorable, it's incumbent on us as preachers to communicate memorably. In crafting a homiletical big idea for Luke 10:38-42 I stayed close to the wording in my exegetical big idea: The key to maintaining the proper spirit of service is placing yourself in a position where the Lord can serve you.

Notice that this is a full sentence; it is brief and worded so that it addresses the modern audience. Notice also that this idea turns on the idea of service. We normally think of service as something we do for the Lord, but this idea turns that upside down and speaks of his service to us, making the idea memorable.



## Organize Your Sermon *by Jeffrey Arthurs*

### Introduction

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a great preacher of London in the mid-twentieth century, knew that organizing the sermon is one of our most difficult homiletical tasks:

The preparation of sermons involves sweat and labor. It can be extremely difficult at times to get all this matter that you have found in the Scriptures into [an outline]. It is like a . . . blacksmith making shoes for a horse; you have to keep on putting the material into the fire and on to the anvil and hit it again and again with the hammer. Each time it is a bit better, but not quite right; so you put it back again and again until you are satisfied with it or can do no better. This is the most grueling part of the preparation of a sermon; but at the same time it is a most fascinating and a most glorious occupation. (Preachers and Preaching, 80)

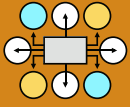
This article can't (and shouldn't) stop the "sweat and labor," but it can help you strike skillfully. Four procedures help us structure our sermons so that they reflect the passage's flow of thought and make that flow clear to the congregation.

### First procedure: State the 'exegetical outline'

In Step 3 you articulated the passage's big idea, and to do that you had to comprehend the passage's flow of thought, so as you begin Step 4 you already have a good handle on what we call the "exegetical outline." This is the movement of ideas in the passage. Write them down in complete sentences. Be clear and thorough as you summarize the conceptual "hunks" of the text (Don Sunukjian's term, Invitation to Biblical Preaching). This component of our study is part of basic exegesis, so if you have gotten away from that discipline, get back to it. Charting the flow of thought with a mechanical layout, grammatical diagram, or semantic structural analysis, is an indispensable step in creating an expository sermon. Identifying only a general theme is not enough to reveal authorial intention. You need to lay out the major ideas and how they relate to the big idea.

As you outline the text's flow of ideas, you can expect to see these patterns of thought, common to the ways we think:

- Problem-Solution.
- Cause-Effect.
- Contrast (Not this, but this).
- Chronology (First this happened, then this, then this).
- Promise-Fulfillment.



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- Lesser to Greater.
- Argument-Proof.
- Explanation-Application.
- Principle-Example/amplification.

Other patterns exist, and once you train your mind to think in logical categories like these, discerning flow of thought becomes second nature. The first six patterns use inductive reasoning as they start with particulars and move toward a conclusion or principle. The last three patterns use deductive reasoning, starting with the conclusion or axiom and then explaining, proving, or applying the idea.

We will use Psalm 19 to illustrate each of the procedures of Step 4.

## **Example: Exegetical outline**

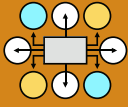
Psalm 19

The flow of thought in this psalm is pretty straightforward because it has three distinct sections all dealing with communication—the heavens' silent communication, the Torah's verbal communication, and the psalmist's personal communication (his prayer of response, "May the words of my mouth be acceptable . . . .") The challenge of Psalm 19, in terms of organization, is the seams, the connections, between the three sections. The psalm lacks transitions. No words link the sections, so the exegete must discern the connections. Why did the author weave these three descriptions of words into one fabric? What was his intention?

- I. The heavens proclaim a silent word—God is great. (1-6)
- II. The Law blesses the one who heeds. (7-11)
- III. The psalmist responds by asking God to justify and sanctify his actions and words. (12-14)

As stated above, the challenge of this psalm is discerning the connections between the sections. The common feature is communication/words. In the procedures below, I'll suggest how to show your people that flow of thought.

Clear structure of the sermon depends on crystal clear understanding of the flow of thought in the passage. Do not rush this foundational procedure in your exegesis—stating the exegetical outline.



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## Second procedure: Rephrase (and possibly re-order) the points as a 'homiletical outline'

Using John Stott's metaphor of "standing between two worlds," the exegetical outline resides in the world of the text, and the homiletical outline resides in the world of the listener. Compare:

Exegetical Outline	Homiletical Outline
Past Tense	Present Tense
Third Pierson	First or Second Person
Summarizes the author's thought	Summarizes and applies the author's thought to the congregation
Follows the textual order exactly	Usually follows the textual order, but can also follow "thought order"

I'll illustrate the last item in this chart using a passage from 1 Thessalonians, but first let me illustrate the top three items. In the examples that follow, notice that the outline no longer sounds like a commentary—"The psalmist said such and such." Rather, it sounds like a living soul addressing living souls.

### Examples of homiletical outlines

Here's a homiletical outline of Psalm 19:

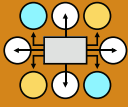
- I. The silent word to us: The heavens show us the glory of God. (1-6)
- II. The written word to us: The Law promises blessing when we obeys. (7-11)
- III. Our personal words in response: Lord, deliver us from sin. (12-14)

This outline reveals the gravitational center that holds the psalm together (communication/ words), demonstrates the flow of thought, and shows its relevance by using first person pronouns and present tense. It is the skeleton of a sermon, not a lecture. It flows inductively, paving the way for the big idea which occurs in the last point: "May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord."

Here's another exegetical outline I used for a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8:

- I. The Command: Avoid sexual immorality. (1-3)
- II. The Means: Three instructions show us how to avoid sexual immorality. (4-5a)
- III. The Rationale: Four reasons tell us why we should avoid sexual immorality. (5b-8)

To return to the issue above—the issue of "textual order" and "thought order"—Donald Sunukjian gives this helpful example (Invitation to Biblical Preaching, 56-64):



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Textual order: “Don’t get mad when the paperboy throws your paper in the bushes.”

The arrangement is Effect (don’t get mad) to Cause (the paperboy throws your paper in the bushes).

Thought order: A sermon from this “text” could rearrange the textual order into the more natural thought order of Cause-Effect. This would help the listeners follow the sequence of ideas. Thus:

- I. (Cause) Sometimes the paperboys throw your paper in the bushes.
- II. (Response) When that happens, don’t get mad.

Although expository preachers usually adhere to textual order, rearranging the points of the homiletical outline can clarify the meaning of the text. Here’s an example is 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 arranged in a different order:

- I. The Command: Avoid sexual immorality. (1-3)
- II. The Rationale: Four reasons tell us why we should avoid sexual immorality. (5b-8)
- III. The Means: Three instructions show us how to avoid sexual immorality. (4-5a)

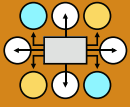
The logic of the second outline is “What, Why, How?” I believe that that flow of thought is more psychologically effective than “What, How, Why?” Listeners do not ask, “How can I obey this command?” until they are convinced, “I need to obey this command.” When I preached this passage I opted for the second outline because it reflects the thought process of most people. It is deductive, stating the big idea early (“Avoid sexual immorality”), then proving and applying that idea in the rest of the sermon.

The examples above demonstrate that expository preachers have latitude when it comes to structure. Our normal procedure, once again, is to follow the exegetical outline when creating the homiletical outline, but pastoral wisdom will sometimes suggest that we rearrange the points into a different order.

### **Third procedure: Link the points with clear transitions**

Oral discourse occurs in time. It starts at, say, 11:20 and ends at 11:49. It is a river of words that, once spoken, pass on never to return. The words fade when the echo fades. In contrast, written discourse occurs in space. You are reading this article on a spatial object, your computer screen or sheets of paper. This gives you the ability to read the same sentence three times, ponder it, underline it, discuss it with the person next to you, skip it, or lay it aside and return to it next week. With written communication, the receiver controls the flow of information.

Not so in oral communication. The sender controls the flow, and communication breakdown occurs when speakers state key concepts only once, as if they were writing, not speaking. They believe that one utterance is sufficient, but in reality key concepts are quickly submerged in the



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current of words sweeping over the listener. Experienced speakers know that repetition and restatement are essential to avoid communication breakdown.

When we apply that axiom to the topic of this article—organization—we see that transitions must be stated and restated. A good transition is likely to feel labored and redundant to the speaker, but listeners will be grateful that you briefly freeze the river of words with deliberate redundancy, giving them time to catch up. Most listeners have only a foggy sense of what we are talking about as we preach. Blessed is the man or woman who links points with clear, direct, fulsome transitions. A good transition reviews the previous point and then directs the listeners to the next point. Using questions often works well.

## An example of transitions—Psalm 19

I. The silent word to us: The heavens proclaim the glory of God. (1-6)

Transition: The first part of the psalm has showed us that the heavens silently proclaim the glory of God. Without a word they tell us God is great. Now we shift our attention to written words, THE written Word, the Word of God, what the psalmist called the Torah. Here's the announcement: the Word of God blesses us when we obey. That's right, the holy Word of God revives our souls.

II. The written word to us: The Law proclaims blessing for the one who obeys. (7-11)

Transition: Silent words, written words, and now our own words. What words should we speak in response to the glory of God revealed in the heavens and the promise of God revealed in the Torah? We respond in prayer: forgive our sins and deliver us from evil. May our actions and our words be acceptable to you, O God.

III. Our words to God in response: Deliver us from sin. (12-14)

These transitions use various techniques to carry the listeners forward: review, redundancy, questions, and blunt phrases that signal a change or focusing of thought, such as "Now we shift our attention . . ." and "Here's the announcement . . ." Good transitions are pedestrian. Save your artistry for other portions of the sermon.

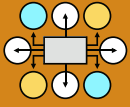
## Fourth procedure: Write the introduction and conclusion

A good introduction gains attention, surfaces need, and introduces the big idea. If the sermon is deductive the entire big idea is stated in the intro, but if it is inductive, we state only the theme (that is, the subject of the big idea without the complement). Here are two condensed examples.

### Examples: Introductions of Psalm 19

Here's a deductive introduction to Psalm 19:





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When a character saw Hamlet walking through the castle while reading a book, he asked what he was reading. Hamlet replied, “Words, words, words.” Just words. Just empty rhetoric. Just a lot of blah blah blah. Talk is cheap, right? [pause] Well, no. Some words might be cheap, but other words are silver and gold. Words can be powerful, life changing, soul enriching. The words of God are not cheap. His Word is a hammer that breaks up stony hearts, fire that burns away dross, water that washes, milk that nourishes, a mirror that shows us our true selves, a light for the path, and a sword that pierces our thoughts and intentions. We can dismiss some words—blah blah blah—but other words bring life.

This morning we are looking at Psalm 19, a poem about words: the silent words of the heavens, the written words of the Law, and our words of prayer in response. When we hear the proclamation of the heavens we know that God is great. When we hear the promise of the Law, we want to obey. But when we examine our hearts and see our hidden faults, we pray, “Deliver me, save me, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord.” Let’s start with the silent words of the heavens.

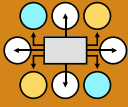
Here’s my report card on this introduction:

- Does it gain attention? I give it a B+. Beginning with Hamlet might cause some listeners to tune out immediately, but for my audience in hoity-toity Massachusetts, I think it would work. The reference to Hamlet is brief and immediately raises mild tension about the power of “mere” words. The tension would be even greater if the power of words was illustrated with a quick personal example (“Last week my children said to me . . . .”)
- Does it surface need? I give it a B. See the comments above about “mild tension.” How would you give the intro more zap? How would you raise the theme of words/communication in a way that rivets the congregation? Surface need and you will have all the attention you desire.
- Does it introduce? Yes. I give it an A. With deduction, it is easy to state the big idea and even to preview the main hunks. One aspect keeps it from receiving a solid A. The first paragraph with its brief metaphors and parallelism imply that the theme of the sermon is the Word of God. That is partially true, but not precisely true.

Now for an inductive approach to the same text:

When a character saw Hamlet walking through the castle while reading a book, he asked what he was reading. Hamlet replied, “Words, words, words.” Just words. Just empty rhetoric. Just a lot of blah blah blah. Talk is cheap, right? [pause] Well, no. Some words might be cheap, but other words are silver and gold. Words can be powerful, life changing, soul enriching.

That can be true even if the words are unspoken. Yes, unspoken. Non-verbal communication. A master strokes his dog. No words, but lots of affection, lots of communication. The musician creates music. No words, but it stirs us. The artist creates with color, shape, and texture. She uses



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no words, but she prompts us to meditate.

Psalm 19 says that God is an artist. The heavens are his canvas, and they speak to us. The skies above us are silent, but they communicate. What do they communicate?

Report card: Gain attention—B+. The intro uses concrete language and is thought provoking. Surface need—B. The intro creates some tension over “mere” words and raises curiosity, but it doesn’t do much more than this. Curiosity is enough to get a sermon underway, but it is minimal. Touching felt need is better. Introduce—A. The intro leads nicely into the first move of the sermon.

### **Example: Conclusion of Psalm 19**

The purposes of the conclusion are to summarize and drive home the big idea. These goals are often accomplished with techniques like a simple review, an epitomizing illustration, or a well-conceived prayer. The conclusion wraps a ribbon around the entire message to demonstrate its unity and move the listeners toward a specific response. I find that most pastors do well with introductions but are spotty with conclusions. This happens because we run out of time and energy in preparation, or we ourselves do not perfectly understand the unity of the message and its implications for everyday life. While application should be made throughout the sermon, the conclusion should bring the application to a burning focus.

A silent word from the heavens—God is great. An encouraging word from the Torah—blessing for those who obey. A personal word of response—Lord save me! In light of your greatness, in light of your radiant Law, help me! May the words of our mouths, and the musings of our hearts be an acceptable sacrifice in your sight. May the words of our mouths and the silent motivations of our actions, subterranean and unknown even to ourselves, please you. We need a rock, don’t we? Someone we can depend on. We need a redeemer, don’t we? Someone to rescue us not only from this world but also from ourselves. Thank God, he has provided a redeemer. His name is Jesus. He is our rock and our redeemer.

Report card:

Summarize—A-. The conclusion efficiently summarizes the three points of the sermon and demonstrates the unity of Psalm 19 one final time.

Drive home the big idea—B. The style (parallel phrasing) helps heighten affect. Pointing to Jesus helps prompt the listeners to worship our Kinsman-Redeemer. The conclusion uses singular and plural pronouns, thus making the application individual as well as corporate, although this is probably too subtle for much impact. The application could be more pointed with a few concrete images that show “words” and “meditations”: “May our words honor you—our words to our kids, our words to the boss, our words to our teammates. Our meditations when the paycheck doesn’t last until the end of the month, our meditations when our co-worker takes all the credit. May our meditations honor you.”



# Find the Big Story *by Rick McKinley*

## Why it matters

One of the easiest and worst habits that preachers make is filling their sermons with should and ought's. There is no quicker way to create religious people than by piling up their morality task list with more do's and don'ts. What people need every Sunday is to see Jesus revealed through the pages of Scripture. It is so important that we get our people to Jesus because Jesus saves people from becoming religious hypocrites as well as spiritually lost prodigals.

I like to think of my job on Sunday as preaching the text so that it will pull back the curtain on all that God is, and then pull back the curtain on all that I am and we are. Then in one sense get out of the way, so that people can deal with God who has revealed himself to us in Christ.

What we all need is to see and hear Jesus revealed each week through his Word so that we can be transformed by his grace and power. At the center of the story of God the pinnacle moment of history is the coming of Jesus into our world to live the life we couldn't live, die the death that we should have died, raise from the grave that was marked for us, and ascended into heaven where he prays without ceasing for us, that he might completely save us.

There is so much hope and practical invitations to faith in our Christology, and the hope of preaching is that people will see, and know and follow Jesus by faith. It is our impossible task to show them Jesus as the hope of every passage we preach.

So how do we do that? Well, it's easier to talk about than do but here are a few thoughts.

## One warning

As best as you can start with what the author intended his audience to hear. One mistake that we can easily make is jumping to Jesus and skipping over what the author intended the text to mean. This creates some really suspicious allegory and some very interesting hermeneutical gymnastics.

In order to have people trust the Bible they have in their hands, we have to handle it in a way that is trustworthy. When we talk about getting them to Jesus we are not speaking of jumping past the meaning of the text in its own context, nor are we assuming that we stuff Jesus into the passages even though he doesn't really fit. If we do this then people may grow suspicious of our preaching as someone who has another hidden agenda they are cramming into the pages of Scripture, bypassing what the passage is actually talking about.

We can get to Jesus, but we need to move from the author's intent outward toward the larger narrative of scripture. We get to Jesus in the text by not starting with Jesus, but ending with Jesus. There are plenty of passages that are dealing with Jesus directly like the Gospels, but there are many more that are not dealing with Jesus directly. Those are the passages I have in mind for this article.



## FIND THE BIG STORY

### 4 guide rails to finding the 'Big Story'

I imagine concentric circles. We start with the author's intent and work outward to get to Jesus. Not the other way around. The four concentric circles are:

- Authorial intent
- Redemptive history
- Systematic and biblical theology
- The person and work of Jesus

#### *Authorial Intent*

In step one you find out what the passage means for the author. Resist the urge to apply it too quickly to our current setting. Instead, let the message speak for itself. What is the author communicating to his audience at his time in history? How would his original listeners understand the passage? The author had something to say and in most cases wrote it to a particular audience. That is crucial to preaching the text with integrity and being trustworthy. Don't preach your ideas here, find the author's idea and preach that. However, if we stop there we might not get to Jesus. So what do we do when we feel comfortable with our understanding of what the author intended his passage to mean?

For example, Sidney Greidanus in *Preaching Christ in the Old Testament* shows us what this looks like in Genesis 22, the sacrifice of Isaac. For most preachers we quickly preach the sacrifice of Isaac as a Christological image. Isaac is the one carrying the wood; the Father raises the knife, etc. Greidanus urges us to start with what the original author/listener would have understood. Israel is the audience. Israel never would have seen Isaac as the Messiah. Why? Because Isaac was them! If Isaac dies in this story, there is no Israel; they are a people who only exist in the person of Isaac in this story. That means to get from Genesis 22 to Jesus; we can't go through Isaac in this passage.

#### *Redemptive history*

Step two involves placing the passage within the story of redemptive history. One question you can ask is "What is God doing with this message, or in this story?" This step may include actually placing it within the timeline of Biblical history, but even more than that, it is placing it within the mission of God's redemptive history.

Here I am asking questions about the circumstances of the hearers of the passage. What are the conditions in which they are hearing this text? Is Israel in exile, the church in persecution, or division? God is doing something in history and with history. His redemption is unfolding and the passage you are about to preach has taken place somewhere on the timeline of God's redemptive history for the world. If you want to get to Jesus you have to know where redemptive history is going and where it has come from in order to discover where a particular text fits into the whole.



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In Genesis 22 we find ourselves in a place of redemptive history that is just beginning. Isaac sacrifice catches us off balance. The other cult god's of the day require child sacrifice. Does the God of Abraham and Isaac as well?

We are looking back from our vantage point through the cross going all the way back to the very beginning of God's saving the world through Abraham. Something is taking place in this story that is connected to the history of redemption, but what is it?

It is the ram in the thicket. As Abraham holds the knife above his promised miracle son Isaac, God steps in and in the words of Abraham speaking to Isaac on the way up the mountain, "God will provide the ram, my son."

### *Biblical and systematic theology*

Step three helps you reach a theological principle in the text. It is the step that takes the original message to the original audience and turns it into a timeless principle that applies the truth of that Scripture to God's people throughout history. The text is teaching us something about God and ourselves, and a particular truth can go from standard definition to high definition when we bring to light the fullness of the theological beauty that is God.

God provides the ram in Gen 22, begins to show us something that the whole of Scripture confirms. God in his grace provides a way through sacrifice that we are spared and saved.

### *Jesus*

Step four is about bringing our people to Jesus. In this step we think through how this principle is answered most pointedly and powerfully in Jesus.

In Genesis 22 Gredanius helps us not just jump to allegory but to interact with the text deeply and meaningfully as we consider authorial intent, redemptive history, biblical theology, and now we can move to Jesus quite seamlessly and faithfully.

We no longer jump to Jesus, but faithfully lead people to see that God is the God who demands the sacrifice and provides for the sacrifice. Ever since God provided a ram for Isaac, he has been working out his salvation throughout the history of Israel's sacrificial system. God brings it all to the world altering culmination of history in Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The God who demands the sacrifice became the sacrifice so you and I can belong to the Father.

These four steps function as guide rails for me as I think through preaching Jesus in every text. Preaching the text should work its way outward from the author's intent to faithfully get to Jesus. If you reverse the process, which I have been guilty of, we end up very far from what the author intended and we essentially use the text to preach our own idea and therefore teach our people implicitly that they can likewise do whatever they want with the Scripture.



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### How do the different aspects of Christ reveal the hope of the gospel in your text?

As you discover what the author intended for your particular passage you may not always get the clarity that Genesis 22 gives us with a ram in the thicket. Here are some things to think through.

- How does Christ engage the idea of the text that you are preaching?
- Is it some aspect of the person of Christ?
- Is it some aspect of the work of Christ?
- Is Jesus the hope of the text?
- Is he the answer to the text?
- Is he the fulfillment of the text?
- Is he the empowerment to obey the text?
- Is he the meaning of the text?

These questions help us to drill down and discover Jesus in our text and offer Jesus to our people as the hope they have been given to live faithful lives as new creations in Christ.

A while ago I was preaching through the book of Judges, which is a very depressing book. It starts depressing with a few bright spots of deliverance only to be followed with darker and deeper spirals into sin. Finally, we are left with Judges 21:25, "At that time there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

What an upbeat note to end the book on. So where do you take that? Do you preach obedience? Is that what Israel needed, more willpower and commitment? Do you make it about the secular culture that we live in and point to those people out there, thus moralize it and get yourself and your people off the hook?

Or do you preach Jesus as the King who has come to liberate us from our own darkened hearts, without him we all spiral deeper into sin, but through him we are made righteous through his new birth. Jesus is the King that the people of Judges needed and longed for, and has been made available to us right now.

When we preach Jesus well, you can feel it in the congregation. Something changes when you get to Jesus. The sermon moves from instruction and proclamation to worship. You can almost feel the room lift with a thankful relief that God's grace has come to us in Christ.



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### Example from Amos

In 2014 we preached through the entirety of the Bible, at Imago Dei Community, in a yearlong series titled "The Story." One of the motivations for this series was to help people see the connection between each book to God's main story. As you can imagine, the Old Testament books provided a challenge. Here's how I went after the book of Amos on one Sunday.

#### *Step 1 what did Amos want his listeners to hear?*

Here was a man called by God to prophesy to the people of Israel at a high point in Israel's history. Israel had found themselves in a place of wealth, prosperity, privilege, and power. However, in the midst of that they forgot about God. They forgot the story of the God who saved them. In doing so they also lost their love of neighbor. God's message through Amos to Israel exposed their sinfulness, which they tried to hide under religiousness and false worship. His message was basically I see and know what you are doing with what you've been given, and it matters to me.

#### *Step 2 Redemptive Histories*

It was important to root the story of Amos in Israel's larger story and in God's redemptive history. God had a vision that his people would love him and love others. He gave Israel rules guiding them in the proper care of widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor. Deuteronomy says if they followed these laws there would be no poor among them.

But in the book of Amos we see that Israel had wealth and power and indeed there were poor among them. We see the oppression of the poor for the gain of the wealthy. It is into this context that God sends Amos to confront the sinfulness of his people.

#### *Step 3 Biblical Theologies*

God tells Israel they were sinful for oppressing the poor and living in abundance and privilege with their eyes closed to the poor and afflicted. It is easy to see many correspondences between that culture and our culture in America. However preaching a sermon on the sinfulness of America would not be in line with the intent of the original message.

Israel's sinfulness was not based on their being a wealthy nation but on their being the people of God. Their sinfulness was all the more egregious because as God's children they were acting contrary to his character. The message to them was to come back in line with God's vision for his people.

The original message was to Israel, but the principle is that God cares about how his people use the abundance he has given them and he wants them to generously give from that abundance in love to their neighbor.

#### *Step 4 Getting to Jesus*

If I'm not careful I could easily preach moralistic solutions to this problem. As if doing more good deeds or giving more money to charity would bring us in line with God's vision of his church.



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But, I would rather preach Jesus as the one who made himself poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. Jesus, the one who gives his people abundance and fills them by his grace so that they can give generously to their neighbor. I would rather tell my listeners that the answer to this problem is not in creating some social program but in our falling more in love with Jesus. To begin to see what he sees, to weep over what he weeps over, to love who he loves, and to love how he loves. So that as we experience his love, his grace, and his mercy we can extend it forth in love to our neighbor.





## ILLUSTRATE YOUR MESSAGE

### Illustrate Your Message *by Joel C. Gregory*

#### Introduction

A box of clamshells hugs the cash register at a student café on Turl Street in central Oxford, UK. On the back of the box customers may read an invitation to take a clamshell to their tables if they wish to talk with a stranger while eating. The box of shells played with my mind while I sipped lentil soup from an oversized white porcelain coffee cup. The biting winds that blow and then suddenly go made me hold the soup bowl with both hands. This café sits in the middle of 10,000 of the brightest young adults in the world. In addition, hundreds of tutors and fellows occupy the same dreaming spires. Why would such folks need to take a clamshell to a café table to indicate openness to a lunchtime conversation?

As a Texan alone at the Bodleian Library next door to the café, I wondered, Am I supposed to take a shell? How would it be perceived among the best and the brightest if a superannuated visiting Texas professor plopped a shell down by his soup? What if I put a shell down at my little spot and nobody wanted to talk? What if this whole thing was just a shell game and I was an unwitting player?

On the other hand, what if this shell display was the best idea for getting connected since Bluetooth and Wi-Fi? What if this quaint singular display became a universal custom? What if every Waffle House and I-Hop with lonely folks offered clam shells for willing lonely talkers? Perhaps some overfunded foundation would shell out to make this conversation starter go global. The result would be the end of loneliness and a golden era of koinonia would fill this lonely planet.

Yet preacher that I am and story sleuth that I be I could not help but think of biblical insights related to that little display. The Psalmist complains, "You have put away all my acquaintances" (88:8). A clamshell would have mocked his situation. Paul is obviously alone in his Roman cell (2 Timothy 4). He needed more than a clamshell. Or what of the Psalmist's cry in Psalm 25:16, "Turn to me and be gracious to me because I am lonely and afflicted?" This isolated singer needed more than a clamshell. Shortly after seeing the clamshell in the café I knew that this mollusk was going to show up in a sermon.

Rather than belaboring conceptual ideas about sermon stories consider this clam story. The vignette above demonstrates the qualities of sermon stories that work. Let's examine some of those qualities moving from the particular of this homely story to some generalities.

#### You can understand it.

Anyone of any age anywhere able to listen to a sermon can grasp this simple story. You do not have to be an art historian, medievalist, literary critic, Hellenistic linguist, or NFL fan to understand and identify with the story. A preacher of memory was discoursing on Christ's statement: "I am the Light of the world." He wandered into an exotic explanation of wave and particle theory, angstroms, lumens, photons, and the like, leaving his congregation in the dark while talking about



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light. If you have to give an exposition of the illustration you have the wrong story. Sermon stories are like jokes. They either work or they do not. If you have to illustrate an illustration find another one. You do not have to explain a box of clamshells.

### **The story comes in a larger frame of reference familiar to the preacher.**

I was there in front of the clamshells. I did not read this in Dr. Smellfungus' anthology of 10,001 Sermon Illustrations That Do Not Sound like You. William E. Sangster, the greatest Methodist preacher of the 20th century, gave us one of the best books on illustrating sermons, *The Craft of Sermon Illustration*. Concerning all collections of sermons stories he recommended burning such books. When you get sermons stories from collections of other preacher's sermon stories you are finding jewels without their setting. You are discovering odd shaped, used windows without knowing whether they came from an ancient castle or a Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece. Those windows just don't fit your house. When you discover a story in a book you are reading or a café where are sitting you have both the jewel and the setting, the house and the window. When you stand in front of Ruben's *Descent from the Cross* (1611) and look and ponder and peer and search every square inch of the painting you find it in context. Then you can read the notes on the museum wall beside it and compare it with other paintings of the Cross in the same museum. You have an experience in a larger frame, pun intended. I walked across the street to the café. I ordered the soup. I was in the context and knew it as a lived experience, not a secondary source. I pondered picking up a clamshell.

### **The story found me—I did not have to find the story.**

You already know that the best sermon stories are not the stories you frantically seek at 1:00 A.M. Sunday morning on Google because St. Augustine himself could not understand what you are saying about Romans 9 without some analogy. You are begging God like David Brainerd praying for conversions to give you any lived experience or something that even remotely connects your scholarly exegesis of the Greek with some aspect of the harassed 21st century lives sitting in front of you. Stories run from you screaming "I don't want to go to church this morning" if you try to stalk them at the very door to the sanctuary. You run up to the story like a matchmaker at midnight and introduce the story to your sermon: "Get married right now." The story shouts, "We haven't even had a date."

The very best stories find you. Karl Jung late in his career wrote a final book on synchronicity, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. He invented the word. The noun refers to events that are apparently random and without causation but come together meaningfully. There is correspondence without known causation. My wife is shopping for Christmas dinner while I dutifully push the grocery basket. She has a recipe calling for hazelnuts. I am somewhat vague about hazelnuts among the nut family. After trekking into the house with the groceries I ask her for a small dish of the hazelnuts. Settling down into my red cracked imitation overstuffed reading chair I open a new book edited by Richard Foster. For every one of an annual 52 weeks Foster introduces another new spiritual formation guru. The book randomly falls open to the writings of a woman I have never read, Julian of Norwich. I am curiously eating my hazelnuts. Nut in hand I read:



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And in this vision he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazel-nut, lying in the palm of my hand, and to my mind's eye it was as round as any ball. I looked at it and thought, "What can this be?" And the answer came to me, "It is all that is made." I wondered how it could last, for it was so small I thought it might suddenly disappear. And the answer in my mind was, "It lasts and will last forever because God loves it; and in the same way everything exists through the love of God." In this little thing I saw three attributes: the first is that God made it, the second is that he loves it, the third is that God cares for it. But what does this mean to me?

Have you ever swallowed an entire hazelnut?

I needed that message. Yet a sermon I was writing waited for just that very thing. Jesus sends two anonymous disciples into Jerusalem to meet an incognito stranger carrying a jug of water on his head. He will lead them without GPS to the house of another stranger where they will ask to borrow what would become a very famous Upper Room. All of it was apparently random, a hazelnut moment (Mark 14:12-16). Finding a clamshell at the café was another such moment: right thing in the right place. Hazelnuts and clamshells find you.

### **The story is personal without exalting the preacher.**

The late J.D. Grey wrote a humorous book, *Epitaphs for Eager Preachers*. Each chapter began with a tombstone icon atop the first paragraph. One chapter had this epitaph on a preacher's headstone: "He hugged himself to death." How many personal stories are an exercise in self-display? The preacher prays more, sacrifices more, has a more perfect family, and is generally three feet above contradiction. I remember reading John Wesley's journal as a freshman ministerial student at Baylor University. He awoke at 4 a.m., chanted psalms, read the Greek testament for an hour, prayed for an hour, mortified his flesh, and so forth. I tried it ... for three days. It turned out that I would either imitate Wesley or flunk from sleep deprivation. In contrast with that story a number of personal pastoral stories leave more than a faint impression that the preacher is a creature at the upper limits of spiritual imitation far beyond the poor souls in the pews.

My humble clamshell story shows my own reluctance to take a shell to the lunch table, reticence to try it and even my Walter Middy-type thoughts of universal clamshell koinonia. That is, the story is one that reveals my own clay feet. I did not take a clamshell, stand on a chair, pray for everyone in the café, and start a clamshell church. When you tell a personal story tell the story in a gentle self-effacing way that shows the kryptonite weakening your Superman image. The people will love you more and your sermons will help them more.

Consider a further reminder. Limit personal stories. Today the default story for many preachers much of the time is the "guess what happened to me" story. It is a cheap way to find an unrelated story that screams while you drag it into the pulpit, "I don't belong here." Let me tell you a little secret. Lay folks get tired of the three-cute-things-that-happened-to-you-and-your-family-this-week stories. There is a world of literature, art, music, sport, biography, and clam shells out there. Finite mortal that you are you cannot have enough personal experiences to illustrate the richness



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of the gospel. Tell the clam story once and clam up.

### **The story sounds lifelike rather than dramatic.**

Since the Victorian Era sermon stories have suffered from histrionics. Missionaries boiled in oil or feet frozen off in the tundra for Jesus have arrested the attention of congregations who nevertheless tell themselves, "I can't be a Christian in this little town if it takes that much drama." My earliest memories of sermon stories in the 50s were World War II dramas, ambulances with sirens screaming, little boys caught up in crushing machinery, endless stories of fire trucks, Napoleon, emergency rooms, Alexander the Great, Vesuvius, and other such dramas. Here is the rub. Most of them had nothing to do with the quiet lives of the folks in the pew. None of the folks listening to those sermons expected to conquer an empire and about once in a lifetime they would go to the emergency room. Such stories produce the illusion that Christian discipleship is possible only in pulse-racing heart-pounding crises.

That has nothing to do with the schoolteacher who has to pay for supplies out of her own pocket. The engineer who has to make yet one more international flight to explain a jet to buyers in Kuala Lumpur while missing his son's basketball tournament does not feel like Napoleon; he just feels worn out. The divorced single mother working three jobs does not think of D-Day; she just wants to survive. You need to find kitchen-sized stories for meatloaf moments in Peoria not eleven course dinner stories on the Ile de Cite in Paris.

As a 20-something preacher who had begun preaching at sixteen I was a PhD student serving an inner city pastorate. My sermon stories thrilled a blue-collar congregation with Xenophon's Anabasis attached to an occasional riveting explanation of the finer points of the pluperfect tense of the Greek verb blepo. I was attracting a fair number of university students who thought that was all cool. A senior woman, a retired schoolteacher, cornered me and exercised what you might call a ministry of confrontation: "The people who built this church do not understand a thing you are saying." She had a certain way of making that point perspicuously clear in about a dozen ways before I escaped the corner of the church hall where she had gripped me like Fritz von Erich. Senior church ladies can do that.

Charles R. Swindoll to the rescue. In Texas preachers stand at the church door in howling winter and blazing summer freezing or broiling while parishioners say such things as, "That sure was a sermon." In the late 70s more than a few who had just heard me piped up with an observation about someone else's sermon: "That was an interesting little talk you gave. Do you ever listen to Chuck Swindoll?" After getting over such an invidious comparison I started listening to Swindoll. It changed my illustrating forever. Chuck told stories about real people in Southern California where he was at that time. He told about dogs that ran off and came back, postal workers that went an extra mile and retired church members that did quiet heroic things. I cannot remember a Napoleon, Julius Caesar, or Cleopatra in his sermons. He sat his sermons down squarely in the lives of regular folks. That changed my story telling. I started telling more stories about clams and fewer about Hellenistic heroes. I still let Leonidas and the Spartans into a sermon now and then, but only for a limited engagement.



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### **The best stories are clear windows and not stained glass.**

Stained glass calls attention to itself. You look at it and not through it. You admire the stained glass itself and not what you might see on the other side. They have their place but you would likely not wish to live in a house with only stained glass windows. Most of us wish to look through the window to what is outside. The best sermon stories do not cause the congregant to exclaim, "What a story. We have a brilliant story-finding preacher. He is the Einstein of illustrating, the Verdi of anecdote, the Neil Armstrong of story stalking." To create that response is to miss the point.

Stories should be streetlights, not Tiffany lamps. The cut-glass lamps created by Charles Tiffany are now expensive collectors' items. Aficionados place Tiffany lamps in conspicuous places to call attention to the lamp. Visitors to their homes exclaim with admiration, "You have a Tiffany lamp." No one reads by the light of a Tiffany lamp. The lamps are intended to call attention to the lamp.

On the other hand, very few nighttime walkers stop, gawk at a streetlight and exclaim, "My, what a streetlight. That is the finest streetlight I have ever seen." By their very nature streetlights show the way more clearly; their function is not to call attention to their presence. So also are the best sermon stories. They are streetlights that make the way to the text clearer, not Tiffany lamps that distract from the text.

Somewhere C.S. Lewis defines the difference between looking at and looking with. When a stream of sunlight shines through a crack in an old shed you can see the sunlight cutting through the darkness. Yet inevitably you look along the beam of light to see what it falls on at the end of its brightness. You look with or along the light, not just at the light. The light leads your eye to what it strikes. The clam did not cause me to ponder the world of bivalve mollusks or the Cambrian Age. You looked through it at the strange pathos of human loneliness.

### **A sermon story should be no longer than necessary.**

For the most part movements in a sermon explain the Bible, tell a story and somehow pin the whole thing to the practical, moving it from isness to oughtness. The relative weight of these elements varies from preacher to preacher and sermon to sermon. Craddock will have more stories and John MacArthur will have more Bible. Yet virtually all homiletics professors agree that the text should dominate, the Word should direct the sermon. Few would argue that the purpose of preaching is the expounding of good a yarn while attaching a text at the end of the tale (although this does happen with troubling frequency). The story plays a supporting role and is not there to be nominated for the preaching Oscar. The text should leave with the Academy Award, not the story.

This means stories need to make cameo appearances. They are not the stars of the show. Stories are supporting actors not the leading lady. That implies a limitation to the length of the story. When stories are so long they diminish the text, wash over the text like a tsunami of verbiage, and carry the text out to sea never to be seen again, the story has flooded the sermon.



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When you look at your sermon as a created manuscript or brief, mark how much of the sermon is story and how much is exposition. In the evangelical world text dominates. By literal word count or number of lines on a page, the text has the most space. When stories gobble up the majority of words in a sermon you need to go back to your exegesis and ask yourself how you can popularize the explanation of the text without drowning it in anecdote. Text dominates.

Now this does not mean that you stop preaching when you tell the story. An organic story that truly roots in the soil of the text is as much a part of the sermon as the explanation of where Ur is or the significance of a biblical covenant. Yet the narration of the text dominates the truly biblical sermon in time on the clock and words on the page.

### **Stories work because there is an analogy between the created world and the spiritual world.**

Once upon a time there was a famous debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner over the point of contact between the transcendent spiritual world and the imminent physical world. Barth famously maintained that the transcendence of the Word of God is without analogy. Brunner opined the opposite. Jesus has his own opinion. He compared his kingdom in analogies to farmers and birds, servants and kings, plowmen and pearl merchants. It seems that he settled the theology of analogy.

Between the tangible, mundane physical world and the unseen, transcendent spiritual world any point of contact is called the ground of comparison, or to be rhetorical about it, the tertium comparationis. Consider the ground of the comparison in the Parable of the Talents. The faithful disciple of Jesus is like the five-servant-talent in one way only. The disciple today does not literally have five golden coins that he takes to the stock exchange. The ground of comparison is willingness to take a risk for the sake of the master. Discipleship is like the natural world of human investment in one way: it requires risk.

I once had the privilege of sitting next to Eugene Peterson at a luncheon and asked him what principles he used in translating *The Message*. He replied quickly, "The natural world is illustrative of the spiritual world." That is, God has so ordered creation that there is an analogy between nature and super nature. Sermons stories work because that is the case. I am not like the entire situation of the clam in the box by the cash register at the café because I am a bi-valve mollusk. I am like that entire story because I too need to take a risk to talk to a stranger. That is the ground of comparison. I am not like a clam in a box in any other way.

Consider this. Stories are extended metaphors. When David wrote "My God is a Rock" he did not imply that God is made up of sediments under pressure or lava. The ground of comparison is stability. Sermon stories are extended metaphors or similes that emphasize the ground of comparison. The preacher must be very clear about that ground of comparison. I would not tell the clam story to prove, for example, that Noah put two clams on the ark. I would tell it to frame the one way in which my human situation is like the situation. The entire framework of clams in a box at a café enabling conversation with a stranger suggests my reluctance or insecurity to do so. Do not strain the metaphor. Metaphors are both like and unlike the source they compare



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to something else. Think through the ground of comparison and emphasize that ground in the sermon to the exclusion of others. Otherwise you might be like the politician who exclaimed, "I smell a rat. It's in the air. We must nip it in the bud." That would suggest a flying blooming rat!

Behind the use of sermon story as analogy hides a theology of revelation. Austin Farrer maintained that God only can know God and have direct access to God and we can only know him by analogy to creaturely existence. We cannot even name God without analogy and at the same time knowing the limits of that analogy. That is to note that the sermon story as analogy is not a mere appendix but belongs to the theological necessity of talking about God in terms of human analogy.

### **Sermon stories may be point or counterpoint.**

You will miss half of the possible illustrative material if you do not consider in each case what the opposite of the illustrated truth might look like. If you are speaking of generosity you may also use a counterpoint illustration of greed. If you wish to underscore humility you may contrast it with a story of hubris. Should you want to picture life with divine guidance you can display that truth against a backdrop of someone who became hopelessly lost. All stories may be on point or the opposite of the point.

That suggests a use of secular literature in preaching. Bill Anderson goes further than I would but asserts that there is "sacred" Scripture and "secular" scripture. The latter refers to the mirror that literature holds up to life. In that regard literature serves as an analogue of redemption. When you use literature in your sermon that demonstrates the cost of a non- or anti-Christian life you are using literature as a counterpoint. James Joyce is no friend of evangelicals. He was educated as an Irish Jesuit Roman Catholic but renounced the faith. His dour, depressing, and hopeless book *Dubliners* in each of its depressing short stories demonstrates the consequences of a life without a living faith. The disappointed characters in that collection of futile stories act as a "secular" revelation of life without God. Surely care would be taken before introducing the modernist Irishman into a sermon. With students, college chapels, or literary enthusiasts his stories are a counterpoint to a life of faith with hope.

A clamshell is just around the corner. The living Christ is your friend and helper in preaching. Fifty years of experience preaching has taught me that he has prearranged stories awaiting your discovery. Perhaps you will consider the qualities suggested above as you sift through your own shells.



## Apply Your Message *by John Koessler*

### Introduction

In a landmark article in the July 1928 issue of Harpers Magazine, Harry Emerson Fosdick described expository preachers in these words: "They take a passage from Scripture, and proceeding on the assumption that people attending church that morning are deeply concerned about what the passage means, they spend their half hour or more on historical exposition of the verse or chapter, ending with some appended practical application to the auditors." This was not a compliment. "Could any procedure be more surely predestined to dullness and futility?" Fosdick wondered. "Who seriously supposes that as a matter of fact, one in a hundred of the congregation cares, to start with, what Moses, Isaiah, Paul, or John meant in those special verses or came to church deeply concerned about it?"

Whether or not his caricature of expository preaching is accurate, Fosdick's observation about the congregation still rings true today. In this post-biblical culture, it is truer than ever before. Nobody comes to church "desperately anxious to hear what happened to the Jebusites." They want to know what the Bible has to say about their own lives. But to answer that question responsibly, the preacher must pay attention to the Jebusites as well. Sermon application involves more than adding a few practical suggestions to the sermon. The trajectory of the text is both toward the audience and forward in time. Even the Bible's ancient narratives were "written down as warnings for us" (1 Cor. 10:11; cf. Rom. 15:4). Application is at the heart of biblical preaching.

### Step 1: Identify the application of the text

Preaching is more than problem solving or inspirational speaking. The goal of the preacher is to facilitate an encounter with God through his Word. For this reason, the preacher's first concern is with the biblical text. Before we can say what implication the text might have for our audience, we need to determine what it meant for the original audience. Good applications are the fruit of good exegesis and sound hermeneutics. This does not mean that the sermon applications we make will always be identical with those in the text. Often the cultural and theological context of our audience is too different to take the biblical application as it stands.

Leviticus 19:9-10 is a good example of this. The specific application of the text is simple and concrete. During harvest God's people were not to reap the corners of the field, gather the fallen ears, glean the vineyard bare or pick up the grapes that fell to the ground. These were to be left "for the poor and the alien." However, since most of my audience is probably not made up of farmers, the original application would be meaningless to them. Even if my audience consisted primarily of farmers, the biblical practice would still not have the intended effect because those who need an economic safety net lack the means to harvest what would be left behind. They would be unable to convert what they harvest into food or finances. What is more, since we are not under the Law of Moses, it would not even be legitimate to issue such a command. But the work of exegesis and hermeneutics does enable me to discern a broader theological principle behind the original command. Those who revere God provide for the poor according to the measure of God's supply (cf. 1 Cor. 16:2). This principle can be the basis for drawing implications





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for today's audience. We too need to provide for the poor. Our giving should be intentional. It should reflect God's generosity to us. Those who have more, should give more. Those who have less can also give in accordance with what they have.

### Step 2: Exegete the audience

The aim of sermon application is to build a bridge from the Bible to today's listeners. This requires that we analyze the audience as carefully as the text. This analysis involves more than identifying some felt need or problem which the sermon can solve. When we exegete the audience we identify a need which correlates with the text. The biblical text is not merely a springboard. In expository preaching the preacher assumes that the text itself is aimed at the audience. Consequently, audience need is part of the DNA that shapes the sermon. If the first step in sermon application is to identify the need which the original audience had for the truth of the text, the second step is to ask where this need shows up in contemporary life.

Most of the sermon applications we make rarely come as a surprise to our listeners. They are not shocked to hear us say that they need to love God or their neighbor. They are not surprised to learn that their prayer life is not all that it should be or that they need to read the Bible more frequently. Many times our listeners already know where they fall short. What they don't understand is why. They want to know how they can close the gap between what they are and who they would like to be. In this regard, the task of the preacher is similar to that of a medical doctor. Sermon application is more than merely pointing at problems. The preacher's aim is to help the audience understand the nature of their problem in light of Scripture and respond in a way that is consistent with the truth of the text. Application involves both diagnosis and remedy. Since our initial applications are often superficial, four diagnostic questions can help us to probe more deeply:

- *Who?* Who will be listening to the sermon? What does the problem or need reflected in the text look like in their lives? The "who" question should be answered specifically and situationally. As much as possible, think in terms of particular names and faces. This is not so that you can target a particular individual in the congregation with the sermon, but so that you will look at the need of the text from multiple angles. The issues the passage raises for the elderly widow are probably not the same as those it would bring to mind for the parent of small children or teens.

If I were preaching a sermon based on Leviticus 19:9-10 in the chapel of the college where I teach, I would need to recognize that my audience is made up primarily of people who are in their twenties and living on limited means. They feel compassion for the poor but tend to see themselves as having little to offer. They also live in an urban environment marked by economic extremes. Homeless people panhandle on the street in front of million dollar condominiums. As a result, they may be tempted to think that the admonition of the text is not directed toward them. The sermon application should emphasize that concern for the poor is a responsibility of the entire community of faith and not just the wealthy. The response called for in the text also reflects an approach to giving in which the amount is based upon God's supply. Even those who have little can contribute something.



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- *What?* What kind of response is required by the truth of the text? What may be keeping your listeners from responding this way? Begin by trying to determine the response that the biblical writer expected of the original audience. In some passages this expectation is explicit. The text states the expected response. In other passages it is implied. Like the previous question, the answer to this diagnostic question should be framed contextually. However, since the life situation of those in your audience differs from one another, it should also be stated as a principle. The more specific the answer the more likely you are to exclude some of your listeners. Emphasize the principle and illustrate it with specific examples.

The principle reflected in the specific directives of Leviticus 19:9-10 required God's Old Testament people to be intentional about providing for the needs of the poor and the alien. My sermon application might contrast this with the spontaneous strategy many Christians use when it comes to giving to the poor. They feel guilty when approached by the homeless on the street but are uncertain about how to respond. How much should they give? How can they be sure that what is given will really help those who receive it? Intentional giving will enable my audience to think about their own ability to give and consider alternative methods for distributing the resources God has entrusted to them. Answering this question will force us to consider the difference between the culture of the text and our own culture. But it can also point to creative methods for addressing the problem. One pastor I know was inspired by Leviticus 19:9-10 to suggest that his congregation plant a community garden. Church members tended the garden but anyone in the community who had financial need was free to take the produce.

- *How?* Answering this diagnostic question will enable you to “put a face” on the application for your audience. This is a question of concrete response. Are there steps that your listeners need to take? What is the next thing they should do in order to respond to the truth of the text? There is a danger with this question. Every sermon does not need to be reduced to a specific behavioral objective. Such an approach reduces sermon application to a “do list” and lends itself to moralistic rather than gospel centered preaching. We should look at the application through the lens of grace, answering the “how” question by pointing to the power of the cross and the enablement of the Holy Spirit. An application based on Leviticus 19:9-10 might suggest steps for developing an intentional strategy for giving. It could also describe non-monetary methods of caring for the poor. I might highlight one or two local or national organizations that rely on volunteers to deliver their services.
- *Why?* Why should our listeners respond this way? What motivation is stated or implied in the text? Motivation is the missing element in many contemporary sermons. We often tell people what God wants them to do but fail to give them a good reason for doing it. Addressing the question of motivation is not pandering. The Bible often appeals to self-interest in its commands (Ezek. 18:31; Matt. 5:12; 16:26; Rom. 6:20-21). Motive is the spark that ignites human response and moves our listeners from mere acknowledgement of truth to obedience.



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The only explicit motivation mentioned in Leviticus 19:9-10 is expressed in the phrase: “I am the Lord your God.” This is the language of command. It indicates that concern for the poor is not optional for the church. But it also emphasizes God’s abiding interest. Why should our listeners be intentional in making provision for the poor and marginal in their community? Because this is an area of great concern for God (James 2:5). It is a concern that is reflected in both Old and New Testaments. Elsewhere the Scriptures provide additional motives. Often the Bible urges us to see ourselves in the plight of the poor (Exod. 22:1; 23:9).

All four diagnostic questions do not have to be answered in every sermon. But by considering each question in turn, we know how to frame the sermon’s applications for our particular audience.

### **Step 3: Inflect your applications**

Haddon Robinson once observed, “More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis.” One reason for this is our tendency to preach every application with the same force. When we preach we inflect our voice to make the significance of the words plain to our hearers. We should also inflect our applications by stating them with varying force. The distance the audience has from the cultural and theological context of the biblical passage, combined with their own differences in age, gender, or background, call for thoughtful framing of the sermon’s applications. Because we believe in the authority of the Bible and are convinced that we have derived our applications from the biblical text, we are tempted to state every application with the force of law. Some applications do have the force of a command. The text requires the same response by all. But this is not always the case.

Robinson identifies three levels of legitimate application. The first level is a “necessary” application. This is an application whose relevance for everyone is clear in the text. It is expressed as a command and failure to comply is disobedience. To ignore such an application is a sin.

Robinson calls the second level a “probable” application. Probable applications are almost as strong as necessary applications. Yet they cannot be stated with the same force. There is a strong degree of likelihood with this type of application but not absolute certainty. Compliance in this case is more a matter of wisdom and reason than it is one of explicit biblical statement. A probable application can be preached with force but should be modulated. “For example, a necessary implication of ‘You shall not commit adultery’ is you cannot have a sexual relationship with a person who is not your spouse” Robinson explains. “A probable implication is you ought to be very careful of strong bonding friendships with a person who is not your spouse.” We cannot say that no married person should ever have a close friend of the opposite sex. But we can question the wisdom of such a relationship.

The third level of application is even further removed from the force of a command. This is a possible application. The implications of the text at this level have relative force, due to differences in the life situation of our listeners. An appropriate application for one person may not be the best for another. The apostle Paul provides an example of this kind of distinction when he deals with the question of whether Christians in his day should eat meat that has been



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sacrificed to idols. The apostle begins by establishing a theological principle: “an idol is nothing at all” (1 Cor. 8:4). Not only was this assertion true to the explicit testimony of Scripture, it was especially suited to the application Paul planned to make for the Corinthians. This assertion was the rationale used by those who felt free to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. The apostle follows with a carefully nuanced observation: “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8). While some Corinthians felt free to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols, refraining from such liberty would not hurt anyone. Those who ate freely were no better off than those who did not. On the other hand, the one whose conscience was weak and ate anyway was “destroyed” (1 Cor. 8:11). The first step in his application was to emphasize the priority of sensitivity to others: “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall” (1 Cor. 8:13).

Later in his letter the apostle makes the application even more concrete by describing a situation which his readers might face daily. According to the scenario Paul describes, his readers were permitted to eat anything sold in the meat market without worrying about conscience. Likewise, if they were invited to eat in the home of an unbeliever, they could eat whatever was put before them. But once informed that the meat placed before them had been sacrificed to idols, they were urged not to eat out of concern for “the other man’s conscience” (1 Cor. 10:29). What is especially significant is that the specific response changed with the individual and the context. Some could eat meat and others could not, depending on the state of their conscience. For those who felt free to eat, their behavior was further constrained by context. In some cases it was permissible to eat and in others it is not. The overarching principle was one of sensitivity to others. As a general rule it was better to refrain out of concern for those whose conscience might be harmed.

Like Paul, we need to contextualize level three applications for our listeners by describing what they look like in real life. Story illustrations can be a good way of doing this. We also need to frame some applications as suggestions. Using phrases like, “some may need to ...” that will signal to our audience that the application is a suggestion rather than a command.

### **The bottom line**

Harry Emerson Fosdick was right. Nobody comes to church especially anxious to hear what happened to the Jebusites. We want to hear what God has to say to us. Yet the God who speaks today is the same God who “spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1). His words and acts have been recorded in Scripture for our benefit. We understand what God is saying to us by giving attention to what was written in ancient times. The key to application is to understand both the biblical text and the audience. In the end the sermon must answer these three fundamental questions about the text for our listeners: So what? Now what? Why? Any sermon which does this will do more than hold the attention of our listeners. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, it will transform their lives.



# DELIVER AND EVALUATE

## Deliver and Evaluate *by Hershael York*

### Introduction

Imagine that General Motors constructed a new car plant and appointed it with the most sophisticated technological innovations, staffed it with the most experienced and productive workers, and specifically tasked it with producing the world's most trustworthy and visually stunning vehicle. Imagine further that the workers and managers applaud wildly as the first product of so much innovation and preparation finally rolls off the assembly line—only to realize in complete embarrassment a tragic omission: they gave no thought or planning to deliver the new cars to dealers or the public. Even though they have produced what they consider to be the world's finest automobile, the massive operation is not near any railroads or interstates, so they have no system to get their breakthrough product to the consumers who need and want them.

Would anyone be so shortsighted and obtuse as to work diligently at design without thinking about delivery?

### Delivery matters

Preachers seem to be the last ones to admit that delivery matters. The same preachers who spend years in seminary or hours in the study often assume that their job is done once the sermon is prepared. They give deplorably little forethought to how they will communicate the message. While painstakingly parsing the syntax, they pay no attention to the emotional content. Though they carefully craft their words, they completely discount the effect of their demeanor when they speak them.

One has to wonder how anyone can read the Bible and conclude that content without planning, passion, and emotion is an acceptable way to deliver God's message. Ezekiel went to elaborate extremes to illustrate the truth he conveyed. Isaiah walked barefoot and naked to deliver God's word to Israel (not a recommended method, but it certainly proves the point!). Nathan told a heart-wrenching story to get David emotionally involved and committed before he delivered the intense confrontation of his sin. Paul's preaching was drenched with deep desire to see people receive Christ. Fishermen, housewives, and farmers would never stand for hours in the Galilean sun if Jesus were not inviting and engaging.

If content were all that mattered, preachers could save everyone a lot of time and trouble by emailing the manuscript to parishioners and encouraging them to stay home. If it were only about the substance of the message, the preacher would be totally irrelevant, but everyone who has ever sat through a sermon that is both true and boring knows better.

Instinctively, intuitively, and experientially everyone knows the power of personal human communication. Whether it be the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial calling America to honor her ideals, Ronald Reagan comforting a grieving nation after the crash of the Challenger, or an enthusiastic Steve Jobs revealing the first iPhone, words conveyed with earnest zeal and heartfelt eloquence get to the heart. That matrix of language,



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passion, posture, expression, volume, pitch, and pace is far more powerful than flat ink on a page could ever be. God could have chosen any form of communication as the primary means of teaching the church and spreading the gospel, but he chose preaching, an oral means. Any preacher who is serious about the message must also be serious about the manner in which that message is preached.

### **Engaging and effective sermon delivery**

Engaging sermon delivery doesn't guarantee results, but bad preaching does: it guarantees that people won't listen and therefore they don't even make an authentic decision to reject what was preached, let alone believe it. Everyone who has ever been to a preaching conference knows this. Two preachers can preach successively and one may hold the audience's attention while the other, though just as true and biblical, puts everyone to sleep. In fact, the magnitude of effective delivery is even starker. Two ministers could preach the same sermon verbatim and one of them might lift his congregation to the throne of God and the other one tuck them in for a nap, the only difference between them being the way they delivered the same message.

This is the paradox of excellent sermon delivery: the better the delivery, the less anyone notices the preacher. Dull or bad communication skills distract the listener so she cannot pay much attention to the content; good sermon delivery frees the listener to consider and perhaps absorb it.

With so many tools available in oral communication and so much at stake in the lives of listeners, why wouldn't preachers invest as much effort in communication as they do in content? Why would any preacher invest in books to study and then labor diligently at sermon building, only to ignore the delivery system?

If we do not want the hard work done in the study to stop short of an authentic hearing by our audience, then we must also give careful attention to the manner in which we communicate the biblical truth to the audience. Effective preachers understand and employ four key strategies that help them become more faithful communicators of biblical truth.

### **The emotion of the sermon must match the emotion of the text.**

Just as every biblical passage has an inherent meaning, it also has an intrinsic emotion. A careful preacher should exegete the emotion of the text with the same careful consideration as the meaning. Does the author intend to communicate joy, sorrow, terror, delight, or hopeful confidence? No text is flat. Like a block of wood, it has a grain and a shape that the woodworker must consider before he cuts; like a fabric it displays a warp and a woof that contribute to the beauty.

Just as the sermon should have a goal of cognitively revealing and teaching the truth of the text, so the preacher should understand and expose the emotional content because they are inseparable. In fact, presenting the truth without the emotion only distorts the message. Think of a person who ambles calmly to the front of a crowded theater, sighs loudly as if bored, and then says in a wearied monotone, "You might want to, like, maybe, think about getting out of here or



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something. The, um, building is, like, sort of, you know, on fire. So . . . whatever.” The audience would be confused. Some might even be amused. No one would be moved. The speaker’s behavior would completely undermine the meaning of the words themselves and would compel no one to respond.

Preaching something other than the emotion of the biblical passage obscures and clouds the text. To preach the lament of Psalm 137, for example, without conveying the sense of longing and grief that pervades it would alter and eclipse its meaning. How can the audience understand the agony and desperation of the rich man’s plea to father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers if the preacher reports it dispassionately? Everything the preacher does should have the goal of transmitting the emotion of the text because that, too, conveys meaning.

### **Good delivery means using specific communication skills.**

Emotion, urgency, and passion are all demonstrated through specific behaviors. These behaviors are the tools that make oral communication so much more powerful and immediate than merely writing. Words on a page are flat and two-dimensional, but words combined with communicative behaviors that enhance and drive them home have so much greater impact. The preacher’s communicative task, then, is to master and employ the behavioral skills that increase effectiveness.

**Eye Communication:** The primary skill for gaining credibility is the ability to make and to maintain eye contact. It has the greatest impact in both one-on-one communications and large group communications. Your eyes literally connect your mind to someone else’s since your eyes are the only part of your central nervous system in direct contact with another human being during the sermon. When your eyes meet the eyes of another person, the connection is personal and intimate. When you fail to make that link, it matters little what you say because they are not drawn in to listen. A preacher who reads his sermon with only brief glances will not hold the attention of the typical audience, but the ability to look at people in a meaningful way keeps them engaged.

Eye contact and eye communication are not nearly the same things. Mere eye contact can be fleeting, even darting. Communicating by looking at various individuals in the audience for three to five seconds greatly enhances the sense of intimacy and urgency. Whatever the emotion of the text may be, it will require a sustained and frequent eye connection.

**Gestures and Facial Expression:** Preachers must animate the message through facial expressions and arm movements that correspond with the message and convey energy. Charles Spurgeon told his students “When you speak of heaven, let your face light up with a heavenly gleam. Let your eyes shine with reflected glory. And when you speak of hell—well, then your ordinary face will do.” “The Prince of Preachers” was reminding his students that their faces had to match their subject matter.

Sometimes to illustrate this I tell my students a story about a little boy’s dog being hit by a truck while the boy watches in horror, and the entire time I tell it I am laughing almost uncontrollably.



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Though they are terribly confused by the way I relate my completely fictional account, a strange smile stays on their faces for the duration of my story. My behavior shapes their response. They smile because I'm smiling, even when cognitively they know that it's not a laughing matter. My behavior trumps the meaning of the words!

After explaining what just happened, I then warn them I have an even more offensive and troubling example, and with as lifeless and unemotional an appearance as I can muster, I explain the good news of the gospel to them with no passion, no smile, no warmth. They always break out in laughter as the realization that multitudes of preachers present the gospel exactly like that dawns on them.

Half of the battle of facial expression is learning to smile appropriately when preaching. I routinely get calls from pastors who confess to me that some of their congregation complains that they look "mean" when they preach. A smile disarms people and puts them at ease with the speaker. Obviously a preacher will encounter texts that would make a smile unsuitable, but that would be the exception. The default facial expression should be a pleasant smile with eyebrows raised rather than furrowed.

Similarly, avoid gestures that are threatening, like directly pointing at people. Use inviting gestures like extending your arms slightly downward with your palms up and toward your audience instead. As with facial expression, be conscious of how your gestures either convey or obscure the emotion of the text. Nothing has greater potential for reflecting that emotional content like the appropriate use of your face and gestures.

**Posture and Movement:** Good posture and measured movement on the platform reflect confidence and energy and hold an audience's attention. A speaker with poor posture fails to appreciate that people evaluate him or her and make assumptions in the first few seconds of the message. They make assumptions about the level of confidence, competence, and credibility. Poor posture seriously undermines the trust and openness of listeners.

Tall people often hunch over because they grew fast or early and perhaps feel self-conscious. Height, however, was not the problem, consciousness was. Still others slump because of a related weakness; they stick their nose in a manuscript or notes, so they slouch over to read them.

Whatever your reasons for slouching may be, some basic rules will help you stand with confidence and credibility. First, stand tall. Posture and poise go together, so stand with your shoulders back and your stomach in. Stand straight and move naturally, knees slightly bent rather than locked and rigid.

You also need to watch your lower body. You may limit your effectiveness and negate your energy if you rock back on one hip. That communicates that you really don't want to be there and distances you from your listener. Common variations of this mistake are rocking from side to side or going forward and back from heel to toe. Physically you will lean slightly forward,





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knees somewhat flexed. Keep your weight on the balls of your feet. Direct your energy forward, physically and psychologically, toward your listener.

Movement should not be frenetic or symmetrical, but should be easy and poised. Move to the side of the pulpit and stand confidently. Pivot to one side and then to the other. Gently move back behind the pulpit or lectern to glance at your notes for a while, then move to the other side.

Remember: sameness is the enemy. The preacher who does nothing to interrupt the visual field will not hold their attention very well, especially if a baby cries or any other kind of disturbance commences. Variation in movement aids the audience in their need to listen.

Voice and Vocal Variety: After nearly two decades of listening to student's sermons, I can say unequivocally that the biggest problem I see in sermon delivery is a lack of employing pitch, volume, and vocal energy that keeps a listener engaged in the content of what the speaker is saying. A listless, monotonous voice can suck the life out of the most profound biblical truths. The richest, most versatile instrument that exists, the human voice can produce an infinite matrix of volume, pitch, color, resonance, pace, tone, emphasis, and accent. Even so, few preachers use more than 20% of its range of possibilities.

Our minds are designed by our Creator to shut out sameness. People who live by train tracks can sleep through all of its noise every hour on the hour because they get accustomed to it. Even if a preacher hollers throughout the entire sermon, people can sleep right through it because it lacks a variety that keeps them engaged.

If you want to command the attention of an audience as well as reflect the emotional content of the text, consciously push yourself to extend the boundaries of those parameters the next time you preach. Get a little louder and a little softer; go higher and lower. Speed up and slow down. Take advantage of that rich matrix available in your instrument. Don't settle in to one level of pitch, pace, and volume and stay there.

Words and Fillers: Make certain that every sound that comes out of your mouth meaningfully contributes to the sermon. Choose language that is replete with meaning, with effective pauses and devoid of "fillers"—those annoying "ums," "ahs," and meaningless phrases such as "whatever," "you know," "like," and "I mean."

Fillers, also known as verbal bridges, tend to creep into our speech or sermon when we are trying to think of what to say next. Instead of worrying that you have to fill that space, learn to be silent until you get your thought and say the next thing. I guarantee that everyone who has momentarily drifted away will immediately lift their heads and be back in the sermon with you. Nothing gets attention as easily and yet effectively as a pause. It interrupts the barrage of sound and indicates a thoughtful deliberation. The pause indicates that what is to follow is momentous, worth listening to, weighty. Silence is your friend. Let it work for you just like your words do. Don't fill the silence with sounds or words that do not contribute to your meaning.



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### **Self-evaluation must be frequent and ruthless.**

The quickest and most effective cure to bad habits can be found in getting video feedback. Carefully watch a video recording of your sermon, focusing especially on these key behaviors. Do you move naturally or do you stand stiffly and passively behind the pulpit? Are your gestures threatening or inviting? Do you keep your head down and your eyes on your notes or do you show your audience that they matter to you by looking at them? How about your eye movements? Notice your length of contact and be aware of possible idiosyncrasies like eye dart or slow-blink.

Count the verbal bridges, the “ums” and “ahs.” It will be emotionally painful and not a little embarrassing, but you will become conscious of all those fillers and more likely to break a bad habit.

Does your facial expression make even the most joyful truths look heavy and burdensome? Do you smile enough? Do you seem appropriately likable as you preach? Does your delivery inspire trust in the messenger so they hear the message?

Listen specifically to your voice and make a rough chart of your inflection. With pen and paper in hand as you listen to yourself, draw an approximate graph line on the page that represents your voice. When your voice goes up, draw the line up, and then down when your voice gets lower. Before watching yourself on tape you may be unaware of your habits and movements, but the tape will not lie!

### **It feels different than it looks.**

Anytime you change something about your delivery, it will feel strange. Almost anything feels silly the first time—the first time you move out from behind the pulpit, the first time you use a real vocal variety, or the first time you pause instead of filling the silence with “and, uh . . .” The benefits you will experience, however, almost immediately are worth any temporary discomfort you may feel.

Remember that while it may feel very strange to you, it probably looks just right to your audience. That disparity between how it feels and how it looks will diminish as you get more and more comfortable with the new behavior.

Few preachers are naturally good communicators, certainly not at the level of holding an audience’s interest for a sustained period of time. We have to work at it, just like we work at learning Greek or writing sermon outlines. If you will alternately choose just one of these behaviors to work on consciously each time you preach, over time they will feel more natural and your delivery will improve dramatically. As the gap of disparity between how you feel and how you look closes, so will the gap between the content of the text and way you present it. The Word of God deserves our best efforts to get it right, and so does the congregation who faithfully shows up each week to hear it.



# Plan Special Topics *by Scott M. Gibson*

## Introduction

Andrew W. Blackwood, one of the preaching experts of the mid-twentieth century, wrote this about preaching for special services: “Special occasions call for skillful planning. Like the poor, they are ever with us, and their number bids fair to increase.”

An almost endless parade of potential special occasions confronts the preacher. Some come from the church year such as Advent and Christmas, Epiphany and Lent, then Easter and Pentecost. In addition to the church year there are also national holidays, as religiously oriented as Thanksgiving, as politically potent as the Fourth of July, or as sentimental as Mother’s Day or Father’s Day.

The chorus of voices vying for the spotlight on Sundays can be bewildering for the pastor as he or she intends to preach biblical messages to nourish the congregation during the course of a year.

Of course, as Blackwood notes, planning is key to good special occasion preaching. While there are some occasions for which a preacher can make solid preparations (Christmas, Easter, etc.), there are others that pop up unexpectedly (weddings and funerals).

Preaching at special occasions allows any preacher to speak the Word of God to those gathered, to round out the worship, and to bring focus to the occasion. A good biblical theology affirms that the preaching of the Word is worship. In these special-occasion services, the Word is to be preached. The special occasions we’re exploring have a liturgy, a series of readings and prayers associated with them. Our task as preachers is to complement the liturgy and speak God’s Word on the special occasion, making it a total worship experience.

What are the essentials preachers want to take into consideration when making preparations for preaching on holidays, at weddings, or at funerals, so that we can keep our preaching fresh?

## Essentials for preaching on holidays

Holiday preaching is often a challenge for the preacher. In this article I’m focusing on the major Christian holidays, not national days (the Fourth of July or Labor Day) or even the greeting card variety (Valentine’s Day or Mother’s Day).

The two prominent holidays for preachers are Christmas and Easter (Resurrection Sunday). In December and in the springtime preachers are considering ways to bring a fresh word to these familiar holidays. What can a preacher do to make each year’s sermon at Christmas or Easter unique?

First, get fresh perspective on the holiday. Try to recalibrate your own thinking about the holiday. Do some extra reading on the history of the holiday to broaden your perspective on it. Dabble into exploring the theological roots of the holiday that will enable you to understand the meaning of the holiday in a new, distinctive way.



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Second, take different angles on familiar texts. This doesn't mean that you redefine the biblical meaning of the text, but try to see it preached from different angles. For example, explore how you would preach Matthew 1:18-25—Matthew's description of the birth of Jesus. Take the text from the angle of Matthew who wrote to Jews, from the angel's perspective, or from Joseph's perspective. The idea of the passage remains the same but the way in which the truth is presented homiletically can be shaped differently.

Third, another take on homiletical perspective is to preach the sermon from the first-person. Haddon Robinson tackled the Matthew 1:18-25 text in his first-person sermon, "Joseph Davidson." Robinson became Joseph as he told the story of his encounter with the angel.

Or shake up your holiday preaching by writing an original story that keeps to the intention of the text. I've incorporated this approach regularly for Christmas Eve services. One of the stories, "Grandmother's Carpet" is based on Luke 3:1-6, the passage for the second Sunday in Advent (Cycle C).

Fourth, deal with resistances or familiarity. When developing the introduction to a familiar text you can acknowledge the resistance listeners might have when they hear that the sermon is going to be preached from a familiar text—once again! For example, I approached preaching from Isaiah 9:1-7—a familiar passage at Christmas time—this way:

Sometimes at this time of year we become both excited and maybe also uninterested. We're energized by the whirr of the season—sales and shopping and carols and gifts. We might even be eager to hear once again the story of Christ's birth, the predictions of his first coming as a babe in Bethlehem's night. Yet, for some of us, this certainly is an old story. It's as predictable as much as the sun shining the next day. We know what the story is all about.

We might approach the birth of Jesus with a big yawn. (Yawn.) "Not this again," we might secretly think that it's like the story of the preacher standing at the door after the service greeting people. It was a Christmas Eve service and people were filing out. A man slinks up to the preacher and says, "You know, I wish you preachers would find something else to talk about. The birth of Jesus is all I hear when I hear you preach!" Of course the truth is that the man only came to worship at Christmastime.

So when I tell you that today's text is from Isaiah 9:1-7, some of you may be excited—"Oh, we get to read and hear about the prediction of the birth of Jesus." Others of you might be thinking, "Here we go again."

I offer no apologies. This is who we are—we are people of the promise and those who love the Savior, those who have been embraced by God's Spirit, don't mind being reminded of what God predicted through his prophets that was fulfilled in Jesus the Christ.

But I ask you this morning, what is your response to the reading of this text? Is it excitement or boredom? Are you satisfied in its message or are you frustrated that you have to hear yet



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another sermon on the predicted birth of Christ? Your response may reveal your own spiritual temperature.

Preaching on the major Christian holidays—holy days—is the privilege of every minister of the gospel. Our task is to freshen up our approach to holiday preaching so that our listeners will genuinely see the Holy.

### **Essentials for preaching at weddings**

A word fitly spoken can add to the wedding ceremony and be meaningful to the couple and congregation. Some pastors conduct few weddings while others tie knots all the time. The question is how can we make each wedding sermon unique?

First, connect with the couple. Get to know them. Take notes about them. Ask them questions about their faith, their relationship to the church, family, friends, marital status, children, and the people coming to the wedding. The friendliness of the pastor and the investment of time and interest in the couple will be revealed when he or she stands up to preach. A congregation can tell whether the preacher cares about the couple and about the congregation. An effective wedding sermon links with the listeners—both couple and the congregation.

Second, like any sermon, a wedding sermon has focus. It has purpose, the target the preacher wants to hit by preaching the sermon. A good sermon has a written purpose statement. For example, “As a result of hearing this sermon, I want my listeners [the couple and congregation as they overhear the sermon] to know that Christ is the protector and pinnacle of their marriage.” A sermon with focus prevents the preacher from traveling all over the homiletical landscape.

Third, a wedding sermon is unique. There are no set ways in developing a wedding sermon. The main thing to keep in mind is to communicate a clear central idea. Although the central idea is developed from the text, in a wedding sermon the couple and the congregation play a significant role in shaping the idea. The central idea of the wedding sermon can be shaped by the following factors:

- The theology of marriage
- A great wedding text
- A text that bisects an aspect of the service
- A text that intersects with the couple’s interest and qualities
- A text that reflects the personality of the couple
- Texts that capture the uniqueness of the couple as revealed by the meaning of their names



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Thinking creatively about the theology of marriage, or a wedding text, or even the names of the couple can increase the freshness of your preaching.

A Christian couple may select a Bible passage that is meaningful to them, one that has become important in their relationship, or the life verses of the bride and groom. This will increase the connection of preacher and congregation with the couple, allowing a unique avenue for a personal, engaging sermon.

For example, if the preacher incorporates the names of the couple in the sermon, the first step is to work on determining the idea of the biblical text. At one ceremony Patrick and Marcy were standing before me. They were both Christians and chose Romans 12:9-13 as their wedding sermon passage. The exegetical idea of this passage is clear: Paul says to the Roman Christians that love is motivated by the Lord who helps them to do good every day.

As I considered their names, I discovered that Marcy means “from Mars” and Patrick means “noble, gentle.” Keeping in mind the idea of the biblical text, I worked with the names. The love Paul is talking about could not be expressed by his Roman readers on their own. It is a love that only comes from Christ, from out of this world (Mars/Marcy), and is gentle (gentle/Patrick) in everyday relationships. This truly is the challenge from the text, for Christians to love in all of life and its relationships, even marriage.

So here’s my homiletical big idea for the wedding message: “Christ is calling you to an out-of-this-world love that is gentle in all you do.” In the sermon I pointed out that it takes extraordinary love to be a Christian—and that’s not easy to do. Then I applied the text to the couple’s relationship as a married couple.

Fourth, keep the wedding sermon brief. Wordiness is not a virtue for wedding sermons. The sermon is only one part of the ceremony. Usually the couple and attendants stand throughout the service. We want them and the congregation to want to hear the sermon. Be brief.

### **Essentials for preaching at funerals**

Haddon Robinson says, “Death keeps a sloppy appointment book.” He’s right. Funeral sermon planning isn’t something that most preachers think about—or are prepared when the need to preach a funeral sermon arises. What are preachers to do in order to keep funeral preaching fresh?

First, funeral sermons that are most effective are connected to the Bible and to the listeners and fit into the flow of the worship service. The preacher wants to understand the deceased and the family and to appreciate the listeners who will be attending the funeral.

If we want to make our funerals effective and fresh they must be personal. How can we make our funeral sermons personal? The answer depends on a number of factors, including the length of the pastor’s tenure at the church and the relationship with the family. One of the keys to personalizing funerals is keep up-to-date records of pastoral visits. Records of family members’ names, relationships, hobbies, interests, and talents can be information woven into the sermon.



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Second, the funeral sermon is to be focused. Biblically-based sermons are to be listener-oriented. We all know that the funeral sermon isn't addressed to the deceased but to the mourners—the family and friends. Therefore, ministers are to shape the purpose statement of the funeral sermon keeping in mind the Bible, the listeners, and the occasion, for people to hear about the hope found in Jesus Christ.

A purpose statement might read: “As a result of hearing this sermon, I want my listeners [mourners] to know that at the end of time we will not mourn but will praise God.”

Third, a funeral sermon isn't a “cookie-cutter” sermon that can be preached at every funeral the preacher preaches. Instead, we recognize that every funeral is unique and every person who has died is unique, which calls for a fresh approach to preaching.

Some of the factors that help to make a funeral sermon fresh include an appreciation for the following:

- The theology of grace, salvation, forgiveness, faith
- Death as the Christian's hope
- A great funeral text
- A text that intersects with the interests of the deceased
- A text that reflects the personality and character of the deceased
- The favorite text of the deceased
- A text that captures the uniqueness of the deceased by using his or her name or occupation

The family may suggest a text from any of the above categories. The decision may be left to the minister—in light of pastoral visitation records, if part of the congregation. Of course, the pastor will assess the faith of the deceased and the family before settling on a text.

The sermon might be approached biographically, incorporating a person's faith, or citing an example of an item from the deceased's life that can be used to introduce listeners to a biblical truth. Another biographical angle involves incorporating a person's occupation, his or her role and contribution to the life of the local church, special interests, civic activities, friends, hobbies, or favorite things or personal characteristics. The sermon may include humorous stories from the family, stories that the deceased used to tell about him or herself, or humorous accounts from relatives, friends, or neighbors.



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Jim Prociuous was a dear Christian man from my first church. He gave of himself and his time. As I prepared his funeral sermon I noticed that the words Prociuous and “precious” sound alike. So in my sermon I played off these two words, leading the listeners to Psalm 116:15, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”

A homiletical twist on the biographical sermon is to turn the lens from the person who died to the mourners who listen and struggle to live. The biographical sermon does not obscure the listener from seeing the ultimate focus, God himself.

The manner in which a person died may impact sermon construction, particularly in cases of suicide, murder, devastating illness, or accident. Naming the cause of death will allow listeners to begin their recovery from grief at the same starting point.

The death of infants, children, or young adults is especially difficult. I conducted a funeral for quadruplets who died before birth. The young Christian parents mourned the loss of their children. The text was Revelation 7:9-17. The exegetical idea for the passage was, “John states that those who endure the struggle of living out their faith are protected by God, who will care for them forever.” Keeping in mind the occasion, the couple, and the congregation, I developed the following homiletical idea: “At the end of the story our tears are gone and God is praised.”

A doctrinal approach in developing funeral sermons can speak to the hope that Christians possess. Preachers can talk about the greatness and goodness of God and the Christian hope of future life in Christ in the presence of God. Shaping the doctrinal sermon to relate to the church year and specific events in the life of Christ might enable the preacher to tie the person’s life to that episode in the life of Christ. A funeral during Advent might suggest texts of preparation, hope, or expectation.

Fourth, funeral sermons are usually brief. Ministers generally agree on an upper limit of ten to fifteen minutes.

### **Conclusion**

Preaching is a privilege. We want to help our listeners every Sunday and on every holiday or special occasion to engage with the biblical truth in ways that will enable the truth of the text to stick—and our task is to find ways to make it fresh.



