

Preaching the Gospel

A monthly magazine for preachers and those who want to preach.

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ARTICLES ON PREPARING SERMONS

My oldest son, Kenneth, has sent me six very useful articles telling in detail how he prepares sermons. I think you will get a lot of good out of them. I will print one or two in each issue for a while.

HOW TO WRITE A SERMON – GATHERING THE MATERIAL

J. Ken Williams, Bangor, Maine, U.S.A.

For me, coming up with a topic for a sermon is usually my most difficult task. Maybe that is why I like to preach sermon series. I only have to come up with a new topic every few months! Nevertheless, coming up with the topic is only the first hurdle. It is quite a task to go from a blank piece of paper with a title written at the top to a full sermon outline with enough detail to make a good sermon. In this series of articles I will present the techniques I use to go from the initial title (including the purpose statement) to the finished outline. This technique does not require a computer, though later in the series I will present some methods that make it easier to use in Microsoft Word.

When I first began writing sermons I tried sitting down and writing the outline first thing. I soon discovered that that technique did not produce very good sermons. I learned that I needed to work on the sermon in two distinct stages:

- 1) Gathering material for the outline.
- 2) Writing the outline.

It usually takes me two to four hours to gather material, though I never do it all at one sitting. Writing the outline takes another two hours and I usually do it in one session. In this article and the next I will discuss what I do in the material-gathering stage. After that I will cover the outline itself.

The material-gathering stage is the studying and learning stage. What I like about it is that I don't have to worry about organizing my thoughts. I take a few sheets of paper (it usually takes me four to seven pages per sermon) and just start writing down all the ideas I might like to present in my sermon. Every idea starts on a new line. It doesn't matter if it is connected to the idea on the previous line. The goal in this stage is to put down as many ideas connected with the topic as possible. It is possible (quite likely, in fact) that I will not use all of the ideas I write down. That is OK. I will decide what to use when I write the outline. For now, my job is just to come up with

thoughts and write them down. As I write these notes I leave about half an inch of space in the left margin. I will use that space later to organize the notes.

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Let's suppose that I have decided to write a sermon about turning the other cheek. The text is Matthew 5:38-42 from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. (In fact, I am probably in the middle of a series on that Sermon!) My purpose statement is, "Help people avoid retaliating when someone mistreats them." Here are some of the thoughts I would jot down as I gather material.

- "An eye for an eye" was a judicial command, not a personal command.
 - Jesus certainly was demanding something difficult in this section.
 - "Do not resist him who is evil" – there really are evil people in this world.
 - If you are slapped on the right cheek by a right-handed person, it must have been with the back of his hand – what a terrible insult.
- Jesus is not telling us we cannot protect our lives. He is telling us how to handle insults and other such wrongs.

These are not written down in the order I will present them in the sermon. They are just in the order in which the thoughts occur to me. That is the beauty of gathering material – I don't have to worry about how the thoughts will be organized. This allows me to come up with a much wider variety of ideas. It is likely that I will have a richer sermon as a result.

With a typical sermon I may be able to fill only half a page with ideas off the top of my head. Just five more pages to go! In the next article I will discuss how I fill the other pages with ideas.

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HOW TO WRITE A SERMON – SOURCES OF IDEAS

J. Ken Williams, Bangor, Maine, U.S.A.

In my previous article I explained how I write a sermon in two distinct stages. The first stage is the gathering stage. I try to gather up as many ideas as possible without worrying about how they are organized. In fact, I don't even worry about whether I will use every idea in the finished sermon. I'm sure I won't use them all, but I don't have to worry about that until the next stage.

At the end of that previous article I had succeeded in filling up half a page with random notes about turning the other cheek. From past experience I know I will need four to seven pages to make a good sermon. (Or at least to fill up the time! Whether it is a good sermon or not may be out of my control.) When I started this task I thought I was just brimming with ideas about turning the other cheek, but I have exhausted those ideas and am only a fraction of the way to my goal. It is time to get help from other people. Here are some resources I find helpful.

- A concordance or a Bible search program like e-Sword (free at <http://www.e-sword.net/>). For my sermon on turning the other cheek I will look up scriptures with the word “anger” and make notes on any I think I can use in this sermon. (e.g. Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:8)
- Read Bible dictionaries. There are several in e-Sword. I look up “anger” in the ISBE and get a few more scriptures to add to my notes.
- Read commentaries. E-Sword has several commentaries. In this example I read Barnes on Matthew 5:38-42 and learn what it meant to be forced to go a mile. I add notes on that for my sermon.

READING THE SCRIPTURES

“I learned from you, although I do not think you ever specifically instructed me about this, that simply reading the Scriptures well from the pulpit, with good emphasis, inflection, and respect for punctuation, etc. can bring the words alive and maybe preach as much as any comments one makes. I have tried to do the same through the years, and get comments from time to time; and always credit you. It is amazing how sometimes preachers can be so alive with THEIR words of exhortation, but so deadpanned and monotoned in reading the words of the Spirit.”

--From a letter to me from a preacher who, when young, preached in South Africa.

Matthew Henry’s commentary suggests that Jesus’ command in this section is first negative: do not take revenge; then positive: be charitable and beneficent. I add additional notes, changing the old-fashioned “charitable and beneficent” to my own words – “be kind and loving”. I find it helpful when I am making notes from commentaries to put them into my own words at this time. Otherwise I am liable to copy someone else’s words directly into my sermon outline. If I do copy someone’s comment verbatim, I try to add a note about where I got it so that I when I use it in my sermon I can give proper credit.

Pulpit Commentary is one of the most useful resources I have found for this kind of research. You cannot get it for free, but you can get it on CD for \$50 (<http://www.ageslibrary.com/pulpit.html>), which is a real bargain. Pulpit is divided into two sections: exposition and homiletics. The exposition section explains the passage verse by verse just like other commentaries. The homiletics section gives complete sermon outlines for various passages in a chapter. In the case of Matthew 5:38-42 there are six different sermons by six different writers on that one passage. I probably will not agree with everything those writers say, but I can get a lot of good ideas to add to my notes.

One thing the Pulpit Commentary CD version lacks that I really liked about the hard copy version is a topic index. In the last volume of that set is an index that covers all the sermon topics in the Bible. I can look up “anger” and find sermons on it in Proverbs, Ephesians and other places. The CD version has a search capability, so I can probably find the same information on the CD, though I think the index was more useful.

- Online resources. Mark Copeland has a lot of sermon outlines on his site (http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/), including a very thorough sermon on this exact passage. I should be able to get a lot of good ideas from that outline.

There are a number of excellent sources for sermon illustrations on the Web. At <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/> under “anger” I find a nice quote by Frederick Buechner: “Of the 7 deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun.” Under the topic of “Revenge” there are several stories too long for my sermon, but one about Abraham Lincoln is short and makes a good point, so I add it to my notes.

<http://www.bible.org/illus.asp> has a similar list of sermon illustrations, but in addition to topics it has Bible references. Unfortunately, it has nothing for Matthew 5. In the topic on anger, though, there are some great quotes that I jot down for possible inclusion in my sermon.

A Google search on “turning the other cheek” turns up many more pages, some of which look useful. This is generally a resource of last resort, but if I see I do not have enough notes to make a full sermon, I will use it.

- There are also more specific resources available for particular topics. For example, Paul Earnhart has a wonderful little book on the Sermon on the Mount titled Invitation to a Spiritual Revolution. His book includes three pages just on this passage about turning the other cheek.

By the time I have gone through very many of these resources I should easily have enough pages of notes to make a sermon. Since several of the resources I listed included sermon outlines, you may wonder why I go to all this trouble when I could just use a ready-made outline. I will consider that question in my next article.

A Free Monthly—*Gospel Guide* is a free monthly on-line magazine of 8 pages “designed to teach basic principles of the gospel of Christ.” Edited by Billy Norris and with regular articles by Curtis Flatt and Bobby Graham, it contains no advertising. The articles are good sermon material. The web page address is: www.gospel-guide.org and back issues are available.

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. – 2 Timothy 2:2

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