

Preaching the Gospel

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

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Article 4 on How To Prepare A Sermon—

HOW TO WRITE A SERMON – BEGINNING THE OUTLINE

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In my previous articles I explained how I separate note gathering from outline writing. During the note-gathering stage I write down ideas about what I want to say in my sermon. Those notes are in random order. Some of them may even repeat other notes. There are many of them I may not even use in my outline. But collecting those notes helped me to learn my topic and get ready to write the outline. I now have four to seven pages of notes about turning the other cheek. I have had several days to meditate on the topic. It is time to write the outline.

You should have only a few main points in your sermon. I like to have three main points, though some topics require an extra point or two. To come up with the main points for my sermon on turning the other cheek I reread Matthew 5:38-42 and then reread my five pages of notes. Here is the outline I come up with:

Turning the Other Cheek – Matthew 5:38-42

Introduction: Jesus demands difficult things of us.

- I. People were misapplying the Old Testament law, verse 38.
- II. Jesus forbids us from retaliating, verses 39-41.
- III. Selfishness is the real problem, verse 42.

Conclusion: We need God's help if we are to behave as we should when we are wronged.

When I preach from a text like this I like to make my main points follow the text in sequence, if that is possible. (If nothing else, at least it helps my hearers estimate when they will get to go home!) You may want to organize things differently. That is fine. As long as it is *your* outline it is likely to go smoothly when *you* preach it.

When I made my pages of notes I was careful to leave space in the left margin. Now I will use that space. I read over each note and decide where in the sermon it fits. If the note has to do with retaliation, I will write a 2 in the left margin. If it belongs to my introduction, I will write "Intro" to the left of it. Some notes may not fit at all. They seemed like a good idea when I wrote them down, but they just do not fit this outline.

I may have written down some notes about whether we should forgive someone who has not repented. Those notes may be fine for another sermon, but they do not fit this one. I will put an X beside them. Some notes I may no longer agree with. I have studied enough now to learn that what I wrote at the beginning of my studies was mistaken. Those notes get Xs too.

Sometimes I will have a note that can fit two different categories. It depends what I do later with my outline as to which topic they go under. For example, I have the note, "When I hit back at the person who hurt me, I am thinking of myself, not the other person." That fits both sections II and III. I will write "2 or 3" in the margin and wait until later to decide where it will end up.

In rare cases I find that I have written notes on two sermons instead of just one. I may have picked a text that turned out to be too long for me to cover in one sermon. In that case I organize the notes that go with the first sermon and just write "S2" in the margin for any notes that belong with the second sermon.

At this point I should have something written in the left margin beside each note. Instead of being random notes they are now organized notes. In the next article we will see how to use those organized notes to flesh out the outline.

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More on the INTRODUCTION

A brother wrote that he doesn't think the hearers say to themselves "So what?" when a respected gospel preacher announces his subject. Of course he is right. We preachers should be glad of that! But—the preacher should imagine his audience saying that even if they are not! Then he will be careful to construct an introduction which will help them see how important the sermon is FOR THEM! Yes, the hearers have an obligation to pay attention with interest, but we preachers also have the job of helping them by showing why they should listen. So, work on your introduction. It is important.

Planning and Preaching

Mark Roberts

It is an often heard comment from preachers: "the hardest thing for me is to decide what to preach on." The old joke that goes with the comment is "the most inspiring thing many preachers see during the week is sunset Saturday night." I would like to suggest an approach that will help cure the "oh no, what am I preaching this week?" panic attack. It involves planning and scheduling.

Please don't gasp at the idea of planning what you will preach. Sometimes we seem to resist such structured efforts when it comes to "spiritual" matters. I wonder sometimes if this comes from listening to the charismatics who believe the Holy Spirit will move them in the moment to know what to do. Of course, He doesn't directly inspire charismatics or worried preachers on Saturday night! The Bible actually honors

planning. Ezra prepared himself to do the work of the Lord (Ezra 7:10). Jesus clearly had a plan when He was here, knowing where to go and when to go there (see Luke 9:53; John 7:30; 8:20; Mark 14:41). Paul planned his preaching trips (see Rom 15:26-28). While we always plan with one eye on the potential of Jesus' return and our own mortality (James 4:13-15) planning reflects the order and design of our Maker in us.

Further, planning brings a huge number of advantages to the preacher.

First, it makes us more effective in our preaching. If the public schools need a curriculum to properly educate their students, why shouldn't preachers? What goals do you have for your hearers, preacher? What should your listeners know and be better equipped to do in the service of the King by year's end? Without a target how can you know if you are successful? If we don't plan we end up preaching on either what interests us (but may not be of value to the members of the church), what we can easily scare up on the Internet (but again, may not meet the members' needs) or what we can prepare quickly and easily (once again, probably missing the members' needs). When we plan we have the time to think about the people we regularly preach to and what they need to genuinely grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord without the pressures of "I need to be getting up a sermon right now." Some congregations may need regular doses of first principles. Some churches may need to revisit fundamentals. Others may need something different. Who knows what your people need? *You do!* When you plan you can scale your preaching to effectively "put the salve where the sore" is. Preaching is a delicate balancing act. We need to present first principles, combat error, encourage righteousness, teach doctrine and much more. By planning we can fit together all that the congregation where we preach needs by taking a *long range view* of those needs.

Second, planning makes it easier to preach. When we plan out our preaching we know well in advance the various sermons that need to be written. Thus we can watch for illustrations, stories, anecdotes or even Bible passages in our study that will fit into that sermon. See something in the newspaper on pornography? You remember "I am going to speak on that next month." You clip it out and drop it in the "sermons to be done" file. The week comes when you need to prepare a sermon on pornography. You may have long forgotten that piece in the newspaper but you open the folder and there it is ready for you!

Further, we can mark on the calendar days where our audience may vary, such as holidays where we have a large influx of visitors or "vacation holidays" where a bunch of our own audience may be gone. For example, on Mother's Day we have lots and lots of non-Christians present each year. Many mothers ask their grown children to come to church with them on that day. I want to be ready for that so that I can present some material that challenges non-Christians to really think about spiritual matters. So, when I open my sermon planning folder and see "Mother's Day sermon for the Lost" marked down it is easy for me to envision my audience, be enthusiastic about the sermon, and get right to the writing. Without planning I might end up presenting "just another sermon" and miss a great opportunity to influence the lost.

There are many other advantages but I hope these convince you to give it a try. How do you do it? It is not hard. I set aside a morning (not Saturday morning!) and get out a folder where I've put all kinds of sermon starters, notes I've jotted down and other sermon ideas. I look at my goals for the year for Westside, and print out a three column worksheet with the numerical date for the next three months' of Sundays and

blanks for each Sunday's morning and evening service. Then I fill in gospel meetings we are having, my absences to be on vacation or in a meeting, and special holidays (like Daylight Savings Time when everyone is sleepy!). Then I pray. I'm about to put in motion what will fill our pulpit for the next quarter of the year and I want God to guide me so that I will choose well and choose wisely!

Next I look over the preaching plan I have put together. The preaching plan for the year determines the basic themes I want to cover each quarter. For example, I have decided that I should preach first principles at least once a month, every month, on a Sunday morning. I look at the schedule and put in a first principles sermon (and not on a Sunday when everyone will be gone). The preaching plan also includes that I am preaching expositively (straight from the text) once a month in Psalms. That goes on the schedule in the appropriate evening slot. Other topics I (or the elders) want covered are looked at, and a sermon title/idea to cover that topic is written in on a blank. Things begin to take shape. Soon I have the twenty four or so sermons I will preach over the next quarter blocked out.

Now, does this mean the schedule cannot be changed? Of course not! If things change I will alter it in a heartbeat. I recently canceled what I had planned and preached instead on church and individual benevolence because of hurricane Katrina. That was needed right then. What I had planned was not, so it rolled off a week. The schedule is very flexible but it gives some form and structure to my preaching.

Naturally someone groans at the thought of giving a whole morning to planning. "I'm so busy," the preacher protests. I hear you – I'm a full-time preacher and my schedule is anything but empty! Yet Solomon says "If the ax is dull, And one does not sharpen the edge, Then he must use more strength; But wisdom brings success" (Eccl 10:10). How much *more* time will you spend frantically flailing around trying to decide what to preach, and probably not do as well at it, if you don't plan? Saying "I'm too busy to sharpen my ax" makes more work, doesn't it? In my experience, the time spent planning pays off ten-fold each week when a sermon idea and title have already been decided for me and often there is accompanying material to get me started. Sharpen your ax!

We plan what is important and matters to us. Brides plan their weddings for months in advance. No one goes on vacation and decides to just wander around. No, we look at maps and make reservations. We plan our finances so that we can buy a house, pay for college or retire. Again, we plan what is important. Preaching is one of the most important things in the entire world. It matters to God and it ought to matter to us. For me, that means it must be planned! Preacher, plan your preaching! You, and your audience, will be glad you did.

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