

Preaching the Gospel

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

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Article 6 on How To Prepare A Sermon—

HOW TO WRITE A SERMON – LEAVE OUT WHAT DOES NOT FIT

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In the previous article we completed the process of writing a sermon. We began by collecting notes in random order, which allowed us to concentrate on studying the topic without worrying about the final order of presentation. We ended with an organized outline in enough detail to preach. In this article I want to discuss something I touched on last time – leaving out points that do not fit.

Which do you find easier to read, Genesis 1 or Proverbs 15? After you have read them, which is easier for you to remember? Genesis 1 contains an orderly account of the six days of creation. In Proverbs 15 nearly every verse is a separate proverb with very little connection between them. Genesis 1 was written as a story and is easy to follow. Proverbs 15 is a collection of wise sayings that are quite useful, but I'm sure the writer expected people to use one at a time as the occasion required. They were not designed to be very readable.

When we present sermons we need to make them more like Genesis 1 and less like Proverbs 15. We need to present an organized sermon that is easy to listen to and easy to remember. In order to do that, we have to be ruthless in eliminating points that are off the subject. Those points might be great points, but they will just detract from our sermon if we throw them in where they do not fit. Of course, before we can start chopping out points, we have to have enough points that we can afford to drop some of them. I suspect the reason why some preachers' sermons sound disorganized is because they had so few points to start with that they could not afford to drop any. The method I have suggested in this set of articles allows me to make enough notes in advance that I have plenty to spare. Over the years I have developed a feel for how many notes I need to make a complete sermon. I have found that I need around 70 notes before I begin my outline. It will likely be different for you, but over time you will get a feel for how many you need.

In addition to omitting what does not fit, it is important to consider the relative importance of your various points. Is a point about what courts should do today as important as one about how the Christian should behave when he is insulted? Obviously not. I want to make the point about modern courts because some people misapply Jesus' teaching to our modern court system. But that point is not nearly as important as how a Christian ought to behave. I should make sure I have a lot fewer sub-points about the court system than what I have about the Christian's behavior.

In the case of my sermon on turning the other cheek, it is a textual rather than a topical sermon. A textual sermon is designed to preach about a single passage of scripture. That passage might be only a few verses long, as in the case of Matthew 5:38-42 or it might be as long as several chapters. The Book of Jonah, for example, could be preached in a single sermon.

Preaching a sermon on a passage is not the same as teaching a class on that passage. In a class you are helping people learn how to study in depth. It is quite appropriate to show how the passage fits with the context (in this case Matthew 5-7) and with parallel passages (for example, Luke 6). You may also want to consider how people have misapplied the passage. Your goal is to get the class to understand the passage.

A sermon, on the other hand, is usually designed to get people to change their behavior. The entire sermon has to be designed to accomplish that purpose. In the case of a textual sermon, the purpose statement has to be directly related to the purpose of the text. In this example I am trying to preach what Jesus said in Matthew 5:38-42. I stated in the first article in this series that my purpose in preaching this sermon is to “Help people avoid retaliating when someone mistreats them.” I did not pull that statement out of thin air. It is exactly what Jesus’ purpose was when He preached those verses. I need to make sure that all of the points in my sermon are contributing to that purpose. In addition, I have to make sure that I accomplish that purpose by using the text I am preaching on. I must keep in mind that this is not a topical sermon on anger or revenge. Although I may refer to other scriptures about anger to illustrate what Jesus said, my sermon has to stay focused on the words of Jesus in this passage. I need to try to give the same emphasis to my points as what the passage gives. For example, if I am preaching a textual sermon about “Judge not, that you be not judged,” (Matthew 7:1-6), if I spend most of the sermon explaining that people today misapply this passage when they say we should not preach against sin, I am not doing a good job of preaching from this text. I might teach truth in that sermon, but it is not a good sermon *on the passage*. It might be appropriate to say a few words about misapplications of the passage, but my job as a preacher needs to be to teach people what Jesus said. People need to go home after that sermon determined to quit judging their neighbors. If I spend half the sermon teaching them that it is good to judge, they will not go home with that lesson.

So make sure each of your points works to accomplish your purpose in preaching that particular sermon. Be ruthless and get rid of any that do not. You will preach a much better sermon as a result.

My prayer is that you will preach sermons that are scriptural, easy to follow, and worth listening to. And may God be glorified by them.

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HOW MANY MAIN DIVISIONS?

The main divisions of your sermon are very important. They should take the listener step-by-step to the goal you have set for your lesson. When you have decided on the goal and subject for your sermon, and have been studying and gathering much material, you must organize it. This is when you must decide on your main divisions.

You want your main divisions to be stated in simple, clear language—your language, not the language of a book, and the exact words you intend using. You should state each in the same form as the others—that is, use a clear sentence for each point. When you read the main divisions by themselves, you should be able to get a good idea of what the sermon is. And each main division should be of roughly the same importance.

But how many divisions should you have? Of course, the number will depend on the lesson, but you should aim at **FEWER RATHER THAN MORE!** Having three main divisions usually works out best. Your audience can follow and remember three main points better than more.

If you have more than four main divisions, see if you can rearrange your material under fewer headings. I heard a sermon which had seven reasons why we should assemble. Those reasons could have been addressed under three headings, and the sermon would have been improved.

But occasionally your lesson will require more main points. For instance, I have two lessons on Love based on 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. There are fifteen qualities of love in those verses. So my two sermons are titled: *Seven Things Love Is*, and *Eight Things Love Is Not*. By using the blackboard, overhead or PowerPoint I can keep these points before the eyes of the people. If there is a large number of main points, putting the number in the title of the sermon helps.

But try very hard to keep to three main points for your lessons. I think you will find that your sermon will “flow” better and that you will be able to maintain more audience interest. This means that you will truly be able to accomplish the goal you have set for yourself.

DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS

Although this magazine deals mostly with sermon preparation and delivery, we must also consider other aspects of the work of a preacher. And one which must be faced is the fact that the preacher is going to have big disappointments in his work.

Uncommitted Brethren

This past week I talked with a preacher who voiced a problem most of us face. He spoke of brethren who will not come to Bible classes, though they will come for the sermon. No matter how well you meet their excuses, they still will not attend. What a disappointment!

Before I began to preach I was sure I knew what the trouble with the church was and that I could fix the trouble with good preaching in six months. I was right on the first point—I knew the trouble. But I was very, very wrong on the second point. A lifetime of preaching will not change some people!

This is a problem Jesus faced. Big crowds were coming because of His signs and the food He served (John 6). But when He forced them to consider spiritual things, they left Him. “As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.” (John 6:66) What a disappointment to Him who wanted to save these people!

The solution? Well, it is not tailoring the services to suit the carnally-minded! Jesus did not change His preaching. He let the people leave. So we must not change the teaching of Jesus in any way, but must teach and preach the truth in love and earnestness. If there are those who will not listen, there is nothing more we can do. We must “let them go”.

Those who fall away

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul describes the converts of a preacher as stones placed on the foundation of Jesus. Then he writes, “Each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.”

The preacher, or other faithful Christian, has worked hard with an individual, teaching him or her and setting a good example. When things do not go well, the faithful Christian admonishes and restores such a one. But sometimes we find that the one we have been praying for, teaching, sacrificing for, has become a hypocrite and is altogether lost to the world. This was our experience in Eshowe. Just this past week it came to light that one of our young men has been on drugs and is in all sorts of worldliness. What a loss!

This loss is described by Paul this way, “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” (v. 15) We who suffer the loss must look to Christ, and we must search ourselves to be sure that we are truly living for Him. Yes, we are suffering great loss, but we have a wonderful reward to look forward to. Even though our efforts for that individual have gone for nothing, the Lord is pleased with what we have done and we will have an eternal reward.

Ungrateful brethren

But there is another type of disappointment. Sometimes brethren do not treat a preacher as they should. Perhaps they do not give him enough money. Maybe they are critical of his efforts.

Now the preacher has a problem—with HIMSELF! If he allows himself to dwell on the ungratefulness of his brethren he can become very sorry for himself, and even bitter. We must not allow that to happen.

The solution? Remember that you are not working for the brethren, you are working for God! You are God’s servant to serve men with the gospel. Let God reward you. If the brethren cause you to suffer, then be like Paul. He wrote, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; . . . I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:12,13)

Some who read this magazine may be thinking of preaching full-time. Remember the things in this article. Preaching the gospel is the most wonderful work in the world, but only when we are prepared to take the disappointments that inevitably go with it. Before you decide to preach, make sure you are ready and able to meet those things without becoming bitter or discouraged.