

What Makes a Good Sermon?

I'm in a phase right now which I am affirming and refining my philosophy of ministry. It's just good to think through everything on a semi-regular basis because we grow in Christ and are always reforming our ways to His words. No one is ever done growing. I like to share my thoughts with others. Today, I am thinking about what it means to have a godly sermon. God has been restoring my excitement and vision for preaching in the church over the past couple of years. Honestly, my own preaching has changed significantly in a short time. While some things have been affirmed for me, others have changed significantly. I use far fewer words than I once did. I have learned that lengthy sermons, even if they sound great, are typically a sign of pride in a preacher. At least, that was the case for me. What were hour-long sermons became more like 30-45 minute sermons because I worked to cut out everything that was me and trust in the sufficiency of Scripture. I have come to generally distrust anything too lengthy because preachers are actually instructed to speak less to say more (cf. James 1:19; Ephesians 4:29). The passionate displays of people rarely accomplish God's righteousness. It seems to me that many people have moved a long way from the sufficiency of scripture in preaching. If we have to add our hype, whatever form that takes, to the sermon to make it more appealing, there's probably not much that will sustain the health of the Christian body. As preachers, we are here to feed the people a good meal, not junk food. We forget that Christ is the chef, not us. We are waiters.

A sermon doesn't have to be heresy to be bad. All we have to do to preach a bad sermon is forget about the sufficiency of Scripture. Consider what the Bible tells us:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (1 Timothy 3:16-17).

My words are not profitable for other people. God's words are. If I spend my time speaking God's words, they will accomplish much. If I spend my time speaking my words, whatever I build is for me and not God—it won't last. The Scriptures speak to the condition of the church in large part. I think over a vast majority of sermons I have heard in my lifetime, and they pretty much follow the same format:

1. Open with a personal story, joke, or other hook.
2. Read a passage of Scripture or organize your topic to flip between many passages of scripture.
3. Hopefully talk about the passage of Scripture read.
4. Make an illustration or provide an object lesson.
5. Close the sermon with a challenge, application, and/or invitation.

In many cases, preachers rely on their charisma to carry the sermon instead of providing real meat for the congregation to chew on. They will jump to effective worldly homiletics in their sermon prep instead of dividing the word of truth rightly. Charisma may create followings, but it doesn't produce mature disciples. I know because I used to rely on a certain level of charisma

and loudness when I preached. People like it, but they didn't benefit much. It is how I tripled the size of churches I pastored, but when I left, so did the people I won to the church. The stories, intrigue, and excitement produced "followers," not disciples. Sadly, that's where most of our churches today are. Their death is insured by the very thing they think will bring life. This is why Jesus said what he did to the church in Sardis,

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. So remember what you have received and heard; and keep *it*, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 3:1-6).

Jesus chastised the church because it was going beyond what it received—His word. After all, Jesus gave His disciples a simple instruction in His Sermon on the Mount,

For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:18-19).

The focus is always to be God's word alone. Notice the text, those who don't keep and teach the Scriptures aren't necessarily heretics, but they are least in the kingdom of Heaven according to Christ's words. A sermon can sound good and Biblical, but still ultimately hurt rather than help, as Jesus made clear later in His sermon on the mount,

Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness' (Matthew 7:22-23).

Throughout Scripture, the command is always to never add or subtract anything from the text God has given,

You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you (Deuteronomy 4:2).

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18-19).

Preaching is a serious business, and not a role to be taken lightly. It is why James warned,

Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment (James 3:1).

Needless to say, if we are ten minutes into a sermon and haven't read the Bible, God's words are an afterthought rather than the message. Unfortunately, I've seen some guys stand on stage during a sermon time for an hour talking about all kinds of things while the Bible sits there closed on the stand. I hear people telling their own stories and end up talking more about themselves than Christ. People boast in their own successes or the successes of their churches, trying to paint good pictures and get people excited, and effectively raise themselves up instead of, like we are taught in Scripture, boasting only in our weakness so God's strength is made evident.

Some people also simply fail to exposit the text. In their sermon prep, they begin with a topic and go fishing for a text they can make work for the topic they want to talk about. Come sermon time, the lack of preparation is evident because they will read the text and then talk about a lot of stuff not addressed by the text. This problem in particular is exacerbated around holidays because "preachers" are trying to find a verse to fit a holiday. They'll have three points, but those points are not provided by the Bible. Even if there is some good practical advice, the congregation was still served a mediocre meal rather than the word of God—which actually sustains us.

Some illustrations can be good. I'm not typically a fan because I think they most often stand in the way of the text rather than helping to explain it. Illustrations and object lessons take a lot of time when we could simply say what we mean and move on so people don't feel like their time is being wasted. Much of the time, people will remember the cool illustration but not the Biblical truth it was meant to illustrate, so it is counter-productive.

Because people always feel a need to challenge others or make application at the end of a sermon, sometimes they will force it and apply the text in a way that it doesn't actually apply. David slaying Goliath does not apply to our struggle against our "giants." That is a narcissistic way of reading and applying the text, yet because preachers feel they have to be relevant and issue challenges, virtually everyone talks about us slaying our giants as if there is any real connection in the text at all.

All this being said, I want to ask what makes a sermon biblical and good? What makes the words coming out of our mouths honoring to God and nutritious for the congregation? What should we major on and what should we cut out altogether. Ask any preacher, and you'll get a

different answer. While some people advocate for reading the text only, others allow for anything they think will attract people into church. If you are listening to a sermon, how can you know the sermon is actually good for you and the church you are in, and that you are not merely being manipulated by the hype but not consuming anything nutritious? Below, I am including a biblical sermon evaluation checklist, a sermon prep checklist, and a heart-check list so we can determine what is worth saying from the pulpit and what is worth listening to.

Sermon Checklist

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Introduction

- Is the question of the sermon, the question of the text?
The text answers a particular question. The preacher should not start with a question but with the text. To teach the text well, the preacher should ask the question the text answers.
- Does the intro call attention to the text or the individual?
We want our introductions to point the reader into his Bible instead of to personal experience because the Bible is the words of life.
- Is there one, clear central passage?
Every passage has its own context. Preachers should avoid proof texting their points using many different passages because there are different contexts. Just teach what the text at hand says.

Body

- Do the points match the passage?
Are the points made in the body of the sermon clearly identifiable in the text? The points of the sermon should use the same words as the passage itself. We want to preach from the text, not use the text to proof text our own claims.
- Is the question of the sermon, the question of the text?
The text answers a particular question. The preacher should not start with a question but with the text. To teach the text well, the preacher should ask the question the text answers.
- Does the message drive us back to the text?
If you have to put down your Bible to listen or follow along with notes on a screen or in a bulletin, the sermon is most likely not take from the text and is adding too much.
- Are the preacher's claims also found in the text?
If the preacher is making claims the Bible doesn't make, there is a disconnect between the word of God and the words of a man.

Closing

- Does the application of the sermon follow reasonably from the text?
If the application doesn't follow from the text, it has no business being spoken from the pulpit.

Sermon Prep Checklist

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Reading

- Are you starting with the text instead of starting with a question you feel burdened to answer? God's Word has all the power and provides our points for us. We should ask the congregation questions in response to the text, not ask questions of the text based on what we or others want to hear. God's Word is our authority, not the shifting waves of human thought.
- Do you know the literary and historical context of the passage you will present? Context is key. Without context, we will misread a passage every time and misappropriate it for the church.
- Are you focussed on a single passage instead of many? Simpler is always better. Cross referencing may be good, but because different passages have different authors and contexts, sometimes flipping back and forth creates more confusion than clarity on what the Bible says.

Mapping

- Did you map the verse and get to the point of the text before developing your points or application? The text provides all this information. We shouldn't get ahead of God in our sermon prep. Let His word, not your thoughts, lead you.

Writing

- Are the explicit points of the text also your points? Are the points made in the body of the sermon clearly identifiable in the text? The points of the sermon should use the same words as the passage itself. We want to preach from the text, not use the text to proof-text our own claims.
- Does your application **follow** from the points of the text? We want to apply the Bible, not use the Bible to justify application we decided on before finding a text.

What to avoid completely

- Long** personal stories / illustrations. We are preaching about Christ, not ourselves. Some short personal stories or illustrations may help. But if there is any chance at all it will distract from Christ—Leave it out. The sermon is not about you.
- Lengthy and unnecessary explanations of the Greek or Hebrew. Our objective is not to show off our intelligence but to make the Bible known.
- Systematic theology is great, but leave it in the study. We are not to add to the Bible when preaching, and much of systematic theology is abstract and speculative.
- Don't use gimmicks. God's word doesn't need help. "Preachers" who ride horses into sanctuaries, repel from ceilings, or otherwise add their flare to the Bible come across as thinking Jesus needs their help. He doesn't.

Heart-Check List

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A preacher may possess skill in the study and on stage, but unless his heart is right before the Lord, his sermon won't be right before the congregation.

And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

- Have you written your sermon to empower the congregation for each one's act of service? If this was not your motivation, throw your sermon in the trash—God has you here for a reason, and don't settle for less.
- Have you written your sermon to build up the body of Christ? If your sermon feels like a visit to the principle's office, throw it in the trash. Your calling is higher than you've made it.
- Have you written your sermon to bring unity of faith and knowledge of Christ? If not, you are not fulfilling your purpose as defined in the Bible.

An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. *He must be* one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), *and* not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside *the church*, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil (1 Timothy 3:2-7).

- Does your sermon reflect a temperate personality? Screaming, yelling, raising one's voice, getting caught up in a moment, or being pugnacious may generate an applause from worldly people, but it is not the character of a pastor according to Scripture. If we are to be temperate in life, showing self-restraint, it must be important especially from a platform of any kind.
- Does your sermon reflect a prudent thought process? As Christians, we consider the thoughts and feelings of those we are speaking to. If we are trying to push our agendas or make the church in our image or similar, we have erred and sinned against God in our positions.
- Is your sermon respectable? If we are using the stage to complain about people in or out of the church or to be passive aggressive, we have sinned. If we use God's platform to address our personal pet peeve's, we must step down. God's word is sufficient. The people are His, not ours.
- Is your sermon inviting? Does it include the audience? Are you talking to people instead of at them. A proper sermon goes two ways. God wants us to speak to our church families, not at them.
- Does your sermon reflect a gentle and peaceable personality? Worldly religion seeks leaders that are not gentle, even in speech, or peaceable in their presentations. Godly pastors are not harsh, matter-of-fact, or ungracious in any way.
- Have you written your sermon for the benefit of others instead of self? With the trend toward content development in our day, sermon writing for personal gain—greater audience, revenue, and attention—is on the rise. If we are developing content **instead** of serving people, we have sinned against God.