

Preaching Guidelines for Students

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Constructing a Good Sermon

As with any task in a Christian's life, you must be led by the Holy Spirit. People want to hear from Him, not you. The good thing is that the Holy Spirit will use whatever you have to offer. If you have a teacher bent, then He'll use your teaching abilities. If you are more the mosaic speaker who can verbally paint several pictures and then pull them all together at the end to complete the image, He'll use that too. Jesus often spoke in parables – sometimes several different parables one after another to fully describe His one point. So you don't need to copy anyone (that can actually be disastrous and come across as very insincere) or be worried about not being good enough. Just be you and allow the Holy Spirit to use what you have.

No matter what style you use, there should always be

- An introduction to the sermon – very briefly introduce the topic
- A body of information – make whatever points, and tell whatever stories and illustrations you have here. An old method commonly used was to label each point with a catchy word or phrase so that people could remember the points more easily, but I remain unconvinced. You decide on that one.
- A conclusion – this should in some ways answer/fulfil your introduction. It is a summation or concluding remark that people take home with them.

Some of you may be asked to deliver a Sunday message at a church service, or to speak at a small meeting or gathering, or to assist a new church, or even preach as part of a mission's outreach. Knowing how to preach is, therefore, important.

Without spending too much time in details, there are three main sermon formats:

1) Topical – the preacher has a particular topic he/she wishes to cover (eg. Grace, The Cross, etc.) then commences bringing together supporting Scriptures from various places to cover the topic in detail.

Although, street preaching could be said to fall into this category, the use of copious Scripture references on the street is not always useful. The passers-by do not carry Bibles, nor are they familiar with it. Ensure your sermon is Biblically based, but don't spout references. You can mention that the Bible says ..., but keep your message short, sharp, and to the point.

The *Pro's*: You have the opportunity to do an in depth and thorough coverage of whatever it is the Holy Spirit is telling you to talk about.

The *Con's*: There's a danger of pulling Scripture verses out of context or from an obscure Bible version, in order to make your point. As was once said, "*If you take the text out of context you are left with the **con** only!*" If you use Scripture to support your opinions, it is an abuse of the

Word. We are to uphold the truth of the word at all times. Scripture supports Scripture. Be careful with this one.

2) Textual – the sermon is based on or around a single text. (e.g. a parable or a particular Biblical event, or even some kind of instructions from the epistles). Other verses can be called upon for clarity but generally a single or a couple of points/lessons are being gleaned from the text itself.

Pros: “A picture is worth a thousand words” as the saying goes. Likewise, using this kind of illustration can punch the meaning home, and make it memorable.

Cons: You run the risk of looking like a fool if you jump to erroneous conclusions, assuming meaning in a text that was never there to begin with. Therefore, always check carefully with other similar Scriptures, other Bible versions, commentaries, and Bible expository dictionaries before your enthusiasm causes you to make some strange new claim. Given there has been centuries of Biblical studies before you, if you are correct in your assertions, it is more likely that someone else has already drawn the same or similar conclusions as you.

For example: When using parables, be sure to understand fully the point of the parable, to who and why Jesus told it.

There is also a danger when using Old Testament passages as comparisons/parallels to New Testament church behaviours etc., to add meaning or symbolism where none was intended. For example: Xyz means such and such, and can be likened to, therefore, we should do the same. Avoid this unless you are absolutely certain.

3) Expository – this is where a passage of Scripture is examined in the cultural setting of the original people for whom the Word was written. Once what is cultural is stripped away, the real point of the passage is *exposed* (hence the label “expository”). It is then up to the preacher to present this message in a manner which is culturally relevant for today.

Pros: This is a very accurate and digestible method of preaching the word to modern congregations.

Cons: This can take some practice & skill. It will always require a little further digging and research, which can take time.

Sermon Topics?

The choice of sermon topic can be paralyzing to the uninitiated, so a few tips may be helpful here. Remember, you are not your own but bought with a price. As such, you are His mouthpiece, and not in the pulpit to make a name for yourself. God has entrusted you this opportunity, so be attentive to what He wants to say for the day!

Some general topic selection tips:

If speaking in a missions setting, you may be expected to preach a salvation message or a testimony. Don't veer off into something else. Keep it short, to the point, and use memorable illustrations.

If preaching in another person's church, or even at a church conference, there may be a subject that you've been asked to speak about. It may be the case that the Pastor of the church may have simply heard you speak on this topic somewhere else and wanted his/her congregation to benefit from that also. You must always honour the Pastor of the church to which you have been invited. It's not your pulpit! Talk it over with them first to hear their expectations (including time frames). If there is some reason why you feel you should *not* do this, don't accept the invitation to speak in the first place!

Conversely, if you have been given the choice of sermon topic whilst away in another church, listen firstly to the Holy Spirit. It is advisable you choose (or ask the Holy Spirit to choose) from a list of sermons you have already prepared, know well and are comfortable delivering, AND which you know carry a Holy Spirit anointing.

Sometimes there'll be something important that the Holy Spirit is burning in your heart to say to this church. Usually that's the sermon you should preach. One caution is that you ensure it is in fact, the Holy Spirit stirring in your spirit.

If this burning message begins in your own church, the Holy Spirit may put it on hold until He has fully revealed all He wants you to say. Don't be too quick off the mark until you have it all!

Even after consultation with the Holy Spirit, He may leave the choice of sermon up to you. That doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit is silent, or that He will not be with you as you preach. What it does mean is that He has given you some freedom in the choice. Of course, if you choose outside of His will, He'll be quick to put a check in your spirit.

Topic & content inspirations:

Inspiration can come from various places. My old Bible School teacher, Ps Tony Smits, that sermons had various beginnings. He explained that we could:

- ***hatch-em*** (sit working on it over a long period of time),
- ***scratch-em*** (receive inspiration in strange places and have to scratch something down quickly on whatever you can find so that the revelation is not lost),
- ***catch-em*** (while listening to another preach or teach, the Holy Spirit illuminates some particular aspect of the sermon – ie. you catch a *revelation* that acts as a catalyst for your own sermon),
- ***snatch-em*** (you use someone else's thoughts, points or even the whole message. On that point there are books of sermons and sermon outlines readily available online and in stores),
- ***batch-em*** (you may be studying a particular book of the Bible and from your revelations of the book you create several sermons as a series. You may also be studying a particular topic that is far too big for one sermon and needs to be sliced up into sermon size pieces. Whatever the reason for a series, it is important to include a very short recap what has been covered thus far before you commence the content of the next sermon in your series),

- ***patch-em*** (a message made up of points from all kinds of places. For example: particular Biblical texts, your own inspirations and revelations during your own study, thoughts of others, illustrative stories, day-to-day life experiences, proverbs you've heard, and so on. These will all come together to make one coherent message.)

Your responsibility:

If you end up becoming the pastor of a church who is responsible for feeding the flock each Sunday, one big thing to remember is that you cannot constantly preach from your own experience or your congregation will never grow beyond your experiences. You must give them a balanced diet of the word. That means that there are certain topics that must be presented *regularly*, especially if you frequently have new Christians coming into your church and you are their main source of Biblical teaching, (i.e. You're the sole person responsible for their well balanced diet of the Word). The writer of Hebrews has this to say:

*“Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are **accountable to God.**” – Hebrews 13:17 NLT*

Topics you may wish to include: a Salvation message, Baptism, Christ in us, Righteousness, Baptism of the Holy Spirit, etc. You get the drift. If you make up a list of essential topics, you may want to cycle them through every one to two years. Whatever you do, wait on the Holy Spirit before deciding what to preach.

His message first:

In saying that, however, you must also be willing to surrender your pet sermon to the Holy Spirit, especially if at the last minute He tells you to preach on something else. Just as a musician/singer/dancer must know the piece they are about to present, and have a repertoire of pieces they know well, a preacher who can preach a variety of sermons at the drop of a hat can be very useful to the Holy Spirit. Paul instructed Timothy to diligently study the Scriptures.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” – 2 Timothy 2:15 ESV

This is why memorisation is useful, but understanding the full context of the Scripture verses is even better. Of course, this means disciplined study and daily Bible reading. Remember that those who teach will be accountable for every word.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” – James 3:1 ESV

Be positive & encouraging!

Always speak in a positive manner that encourages people to go deeper with God, even if the message is challenging. Remember, it is not your job to change people's hearts. Only God can do that! He is the author and finisher of our faith and He perfects us over our lifetime. You are His delivery system for half an hour or so only. As such, **never, denigrate anyone from the pulpit!!** Never berate, threaten, cajole or order the congregation about. These are not your servants but are God's children you're talking to, and you will be answerable to Him.

Delivery

It is important to look at all your congregation in order to engage them and to invite them into listening to your message. Try not to eyeball just one person. Often there will be those who really look interested and you may feel like talking to them for the most part, but try to avoid this if possible. If you are nervous about looking at people, look at the back wall, moving your eyes slowly back and forth. You can also defocus your eyes and slowly move them around the room.

Keep hand gestures to a minimum as they can seem larger than life and can become a distraction. A common nervous body language trait is to touch your nose like you are sniffing. Try to avoid this.

Know your material well enough that you are not “umming” and “aaring”. This means you may need to find an empty room and practice delivering it to the walls a few times first.

Dress code may or may not be so important on the street, but if you are preaching in front of a congregation, especially as a guest in another person’s church, you should always be neat, modest, within the culture of the church, and not showy. You are not there to make a fashion statement and anything that can cause a distraction will detract from what you are trying to say. I had an older lady beeline me after I finished my sermon and told me that the small ironing crease in my collar was distracting her the entire time, so much so that she found it difficult to concentrate on what was being said. It just goes to show you that little things do count, and can be easily avoided with a quick check of your clothes before you leave home.

Speak clearly and, if there is no microphone (this may often be the case whilst street preaching), try and project your voice to the back of the church without yelling. This may take some practice. If you are using a microphone, be sure to hold it correctly, and at the right distance from your mouth. (You may need to ask the sound engineer if you are unsure about this.) If you are using a battery pack cordless mic, be sure the batteries are fresh and the pack secured well before you take the pulpit.

Try not to walk too much if it becomes distracting, but a little can engage the congregation as they feel you are including them.

Always keep one ear out for the Holy Spirit as you preach. Allow Him to preach through you. You are His mouthpiece after all! This is both a privilege and great responsibility.

Always respect the wishes of the “father of the house” and the culture of the church. If you have to finish in ten minutes, finish in ten minutes. If you cannot speak on certain topics, don’t. Remain in submission and honour the leaders.

Remain humble! Jesus is the star of the show. It is the Lord who is to be exalted through His Word, and His people to be encouraged. If you do this, He will lift you up in due season.