Things You Can’t Learn in School

PREACHING

25 Things You Can’t Learn in School

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Preaching: 25 Things You Can’t Learn in School
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I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 2 Timothy 4:1-2

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.

I preach the Word; that’s what I do.

I preach because I have to do it. I don’t sense a choice in the matter at all.

I preach because nothing else can satisfy the urgency and passion that God has ignited in my heart for His truth and His people. The same should be true for you. If you can go sell cars or shuffle stocks instead of being a pastor and preacher of God’s Word, then go do that.

For the rest of us, I’m grateful for a brief opportunity to talk about our common goal: being the best proclaimer of God’s truth that we can be. I’ve signed up to do this for a lifetime and want to be continually growing in effectiveness. I’d like to pass along some things about preaching that I’ve learned so far that may be helpful to you as you serve the body of Christ.

We all know some things are better caught than taught. Formal instruction is necessary, but there are still those pieces that you have to figure out for yourself. Often it is those pieces that determine your success or failure. You can’t learn these from a textbook; you can only pick them up by experience, both your own and from those you trust.
For all the difficult trade-offs that come with living your Christian life in public, we get the joy of holding God’s Word in our hands, rightly dividing the Word of truth, and watching it change lives. That’s so much bigger than having free weekends.

[Signature]
ABOUT THE PREACHER

SECTION ONE
#1 YOUR PREACHING MUST FLOW OUT OF YOUR OWN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.* James 4:8

I’ve heard it said that *you can’t teach what you don’t know, and you can’t lead where you don’t go.* If you don’t know God and His Word personally and experientially, you’ll never be able to teach about them effectively or powerfully. Unless your preaching is drawn from your own experience, it will get thin and stiff and silly—fast. You might be able to pull off a masquerade for a month, but you can’t keep it up for a year.

I’ve been in the same church for almost 2 decades. I have over one thousand separate, studied, prepared, outlined, illustrated, completed messages. In 15 years I’m going to need a thousand more. You better have something going on with God if you need to come up with that much content.

I was seven years old when I gave my life to Christ. I remember clearly my mother opening her red Bible and sharing with me all the provision God had made for my salvation. Ingrained in my memory is kneeling beside her bed, surrendering my life to Christ, and receiving His great salvation.

Over the course of these last, now almost 40 years, I’m *still* having an experience with the Lord—this week, today. When I preach, I’m not talking *about* Him, I’m drawing on the love and true-ness of an on-fire relationship with Christ that is continuing to happen in our hearts.
I commend to you the process of sanctification as the first lesson on preaching. You have to have a current, ongoing experience with God.
#2 YOUR PREACHING REFLECTS WHO YOU ARE.

But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. 2 Corinthians 4:2

The greatest compliment anyone could give you about your preaching ministry is that the way you preach is the way you are in real life. The key word is authenticity. The preaching of truth is communicated through an individual’s personality. Naturally, it’s going to come out differently from each of us.

Be who you are in the pulpit. Don’t act bigger than you do in normal life. Don’t talk or play a part you think others expect. Don’t copycat your favorite pastor or seminary professor. God loves how He made you and believe it or not, you’re perfectly suited for the message that He wants you to proclaim.

Yes, you can work on clarity and conviction. You definitely should strive to improve anything that could cloud your communication. Just keep it authentic. Martin Lloyd-Jones masterfully said: “Preaching is a truth coming through a man on fire.” Your preaching must be a true expression of the man God has made (and is making) you to be.
Your words were found and I ate them, and your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart. Jeremiah 15:16

Your Bible is not just your textbook, not only the most important book in your library, nor the most critical career tool. Your Bible is your daily bread; it’s your lifeline to God. I believe very strongly that you have to be in the Word for yourself, every day. Don’t pull it out for sermon preparation. Be in the text daily as your life depends on it. What food is to your body, Scripture is to your soul. Devour it like a hungry man at a banquet.

GET A SYSTEM

Make it your life practice to read through the Bible on your own every year. Mark it up as you go, write in the margins, engage in the text for no other reason than it’s God’s Word to you for today and for a lifetime.

Right now, I’m reading in Numbers. I don’t have any plans to preach through Numbers in the foreseeable future, but I’m studying and writing notes in the margins. It’s my meal for today.

I’ve developed a color coding system for my personal Bible study.* (*A bookmark explaining these color codes is available from Walk in the Word.) Using one of those pencils that rotate around to five or six different colors, I mark my Bible according to the truth taught:

• **Blue** highlighted verses talk about the nature of God.
• **Green** is God’s Word challenging me to grow.
• **Brown** cautions me about sin, Satan, spiritual warfare and danger. (*Stay away from brown!*)

• **Yellow** is about miracles, angels in heaven, and the return of Christ.

• Everything in **light blue** is God’s Word about God’s Word or worship.

• **Orange** highlights God’s Word giving me comfort.

• **Pink** refers to relationships and getting along with others.

• **Red** magnifies Jesus Christ the Lord in all of His glory, prophecy about Christ, salvation, and all that Jesus is doing. (Red verses are amazing!)

A system like this is an important part of a preacher’s life. No one taught me this, but I knew I needed something. Other people have their own systems. Steal, adapt, personalize, create—just get your system organized and get into God’s Word.

Note: I would add to this the importance of memorizing God’s Word. Not only do you need critical passages of Scripture on the tip of your tongue, you need to be edified by God’s Word resident in your mind. You need to mull it over like a dog gnawing on a meaty bone.

**TOPICAL STUDY**

Develop a thematic, systematic plan to your overall personal study. Sometimes I organize my time by books of the Bible, sometimes by themes. Earlier this year I was chewing on “what determines the favor of God”—why do some people have God’s favor and others don’t?
I asked myself: what do the Scriptures say about Joseph finding favor in the eyes of Pharaoh? Or Daniel finding favor in Nebuchadnezzar’s eyes? What is this favor that God gives us with people? How can we cultivate it and what happens when we lose it? It’s been an amazing study. Someday it may become a sermon series but right now it’s just a theme I’m chasing through Scripture for my own spiritual nourishment.
#4 DON’T PREACH IF YOU’RE NOT RIGHT WITH OTHERS.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

Don’t preach if you’re not right with God.

Don’t preach if you’re not right with your wife.

Don’t preach if you’re not right with your family.

You say, but I’ve got to preach this weekend! Well then, you’ve got some work to do at home. Fix it before you get behind the pulpit. Don’t open God’s Word before people unless this private piece is right.

Only by God’s grace can I say this, but not one time in my ministry have I stood up in the pulpit when I was not in an A+ position with my wife. Ever. This is priority because to do otherwise is detrimental to my marriage and to my own soul. My wife Kathy says that one of the blessings of being in the ministry is that problems cannot linger through the weekend. They must be—will be—have to be resolved.

Early in our marriage we learned to watch out for the enemy and his cruel cunning. As the weekend approaches and we are getting ready to worship, he’ll often drop a little bomb in the middle of our relationship. We’ve learned to stop right there and sort it out. If you endeavor to speak truth to other people while you’re ignoring it in your own life you’re nurturing a cancer in your spirit. You’re injecting yourself with a poison that will destroy your ministry and your desire to serve the Lord. That’s
why this is important enough to include at the top of our list.

It’s also critical to be right with the leaders of your church. We have multiple services every weekend. After our first on Saturday night, while people are exiting the room, all the ministers who were part of the weekend planning duck into a back room and together we put our service through the shredder. Why did we do this? Why was it like that? Through the years I’ve learned to be calm in those meetings but it’s not uncommon once in a while for the atmosphere to get intense about something we really want to improve.

I care very deeply for these ministry partners, especially our worship leaders. After any heated session, Matt, our Worship Pastor will call me, or I’ll call him to ask, is everything OK between us? We know we must pay close attention to this or we’ll end up on the platform performing for people instead of leading them into God’s presence.

Take this to heart. If a rift in a relationship is allowed to go unchecked anywhere in your life, your ministry effectiveness will unravel like a bad sweater and your heart will become hollow in a hurry. Always resolve everything...now.
#5 READ BROADLY.

*That you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.*

Philippians 2:15

I wish I had developed the discipline of reading earlier in my ministry. From the beginning I’ve loved biographies of great saints like Oswald Chambers, Charles Finney, Adoniram Judson, and D. L. Moody. In the last few years I’ve begun to extend my reading topics to include secular biographies, leadership and other areas which just plain interest me. I love to read about scientific discoveries—both the micro (the human body) and the macro (the universe).

I read broadly first because of the fascinating facts I pick up about our culture and our history. It extends my source of illustrations—out with clichés and in with a wider perspective on our world. I’ve also been surprised by the bridges this new information helps me build with unbelievers outside my “church world.” At the least, it helps me ask intelligent questions. I read extensively for the same reason I get to know my neighbors and guys at the gym—it reminds me that we are light and life to a world without Christ and without hope in this world.

To see my personal recommended reading list, go to www.jamesmacdonald.com/favorites_books.aspx.

For a list of my top 10 titles on preaching, go to page 62 of this book.
ABOUT THE TRUTH

SECTION TWO
#6 PREACH THE AUTHORITY OF GOD’S WORD WITHOUT APOLOGY.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Romans 1:16

Read that right (correctly). The authority is in God’s Word—not the preacher. We don’t preach with authority, we preach the authority of God’s Word. And we do it without apology. Don’t spend anytime thinking about what your people want to hear; think instead about what God wants said. We’ve built our whole church on the principle that if we’re saying the things that God wants said, God will fill the seats with folks to hear it. How obvious does that seem? If God looks down on the northwest suburbs of Chicago and sees our church, I hope He chooses to “get some more people over there—they want to hear My Word and they’re fired up about My Son.”

You might think, “Well, that’s easy for you to say since you’ve got a big church.” We’ve held to the priority of preaching the authority of God’s Word without apology when we had 100 people. I still remember the stinging comments from visitors who said at the door or when I’d call them on the phone that week, “We’re never coming back to your church; we don’t want anyone to talk to us like that.”

When you apply this principle consistently over time, you’ll endure a crucible of testing and proving how committed you are to God’s Word. You’ll be systematically preaching through some passage and the week that you’re coming down hard on the topic of repentance, your board chairman tells you that his unsaved aunt is coming to church with them for the first time in twenty years. As
you’re preaching you notice her sitting in the front row looking like a deer caught in your head-lights. Should I have changed the topic to accommodate what I know would be easier for her to hear? No—I trust God. I preach what His Word says and give up control over topics and timing.

You can expect that people will get up and leave while you are preaching. You’ll read their faces or their lips, “Get your things Martha, we’re out of here.” Sometimes a group will leave together and empty a long row. I never think, “Well, they probably all had to go to the bathroom.” No, people hit the crash bar on the back door in a different way when they’re not coming back. As hard as that is to take, remind yourself that if you don’t have people walking away from your ministry saying “this is a hard saying, who can accept it?” (John 6:60), then you don’t have a ministry like Jesus had.

In God’s goodness and favor, there will be frequent occasions when a sermon that’s been on the schedule for months will meet the exact need of the moment. Several months ago, our church leadership was in a furnace of trials: in the span of one month, our board chairman’s son was diagnosed with cancer, another board member’s wife found out she also had cancer—for the third time. A third leader’s family lost their young adult son in a sudden, tragic, drowning accident and our son broke his neck in three places in a near fatal car crash. The sermon topic that weekend, planned months before, was “Reality Check about Suffering,” just the next installment in a verse by verse study of 1 Peter. God is in control of topics and timing. I’ve had that commitment tested and proven countless times over the years.
If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 1 John 1:6

Tolerance and truth can not walk hand-in-hand. In a culture that prides itself on tolerance, the only people who are intolerant are those who think that truth reigns over opinion and subjective experience (like me).

People accept the intolerance of truth in every sphere other than the spiritual. Nobody shows up in math class and says, “I think 2 plus 2 should be 5 today.” We accept that it must be 4. My kids are fond of these Jack Handy “deep thoughts.” They love to quote, “instead of giving answers on the math test, I think we should all just give impressions. That way, if I have a different impression than you have, can’t we all be brothers?” Funny . . . and dumb . . . and reflective of our culture’s approach to truth.

To preach God’s Word without apology in a culture like ours you must brace yourself for an onslaught of accusations. Truth is not arrogant or pushy or obnoxious but it is narrow, unbending and intolerant of error.

The real joke is when the truth of the gospel is presented and received with this kind of “whatever seems right to you” mentality. We have believed the lie that we’ve got to tone down God’s Word before people can accept it. But 2 plus 2 will always be 4, not 5 or 3.

As a corollary to #7: Truth is the currency of transformation.

At the end of the day what you want to have happen when people come to your church is for their lives to be
changed. Truth is the currency of that transformation. The last time I checked, it’s still truth that sets people free (John 14:6) and it’s truth that God has committed Himself to support. God doesn’t have any loyalty to psychology or clever talk but He’s put everything on the line for truth. Jesus prayed in John 17:17, “Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth.” You don’t have to defend or dilute the truth. You don’t have to avoid or apologize for truth. God’s Word is like a lion—just let it out of the cage and it will take care of itself.
I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by His appearing in His kingdom preach the word! 2 Timothy 4:2

So, you’re a preacher? Then preach the Word. Whatever else you get done, make sure to get this done. Whatever you think is culturally relevant and currently cool—get over that and get on to this. Preach the Word in a way that honors God. Do it in a way that pleases the Master. Do the thing He’s commanded you to do.

As you know, the word used for “preach” in the verse above is kerusso. It’s to herald, to publicly proclaim and used 112 times in Scripture. It is the method of Jesus and the apostles. It’s the means of spreading the good news in the early church.

Preaching is the demonstration of God’s power. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:4, My message and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but in a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Some preachers want to be so clever. They want to work their audience. They want to tell all those emotional stories and manipulate people with words. Real kerusso is protection against that strategy in the church. If you publicly proclaim the truth, God will use it. First Corinthians 1:18 says, For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

I’ll say it again, your real job is simply to preach the Word. Preach the unchanging, eternal, powerful, all-sufficient, living, true, sharper than any two-edged sword Word of God. Second Corinthians 4:5 says Don’t preach yourself—preach Christ Jesus. Embrace that with your
whole heart now: The messenger is nothing but this message is everything.

Don’t preach all the inferential theology that divides and distracts faithful men and women from doing God’s work. You don’t have to build scaffolding around the Bible. It doesn’t need external support. Don’t get caught up subscribing to a theological system that seeks to give structure to the mysteries of the Bible.

Right now, those of you who are still thinking about the things you did learn in seminary are asking, But what about dispensations and T-U-L-I-P and Calvin? Listen, I am sure John Calvin was an O.K. guy, as murderous despots go. (Study a little church history.) And if he’s in heaven when we get there, I think it would be great to have coffee with him and talk about all the stuff he got from Augustine, etc. But Calvin is not in the Bible. I am not loyal to him and neither should you be. I am not of Apollos and I am not of Paul (1 Corinthians 1:12) and I am not of Calvin or Scofield or Charles Hodge. (But I hope to have coffee with them too. <SMILEY>) I am of Jesus Christ and I am of the Word of God. The faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3). Don’t allow anyone to intimidate you into thinking they have a higher view of God because they defend certain portions of Scripture and gloss over others. Above all don’t minimize God by trying to explain His mysteries. Scaffolding merely tries to explain things God hasn’t revealed. Be O.K. with the tension between some of the truth He has revealed. To live with them comfortably I just try to remember that He is God and I am not

I’ll say it again—just preach the Word. Don’t preach yourself, don’t preach your agenda, don’t preach inferential theology. Until you get the full counsel/Word of God

SECTION TWO
ABOUT THE TRUTH
done, don’t go looking for extra stuff. Man, the Word is where the power is. If you’re relying on your own clever content, you’re going to get fatigued and frustrated fast. You’re going to wonder how to keep playing the game. God has never promised to bless our little talks or “share times.” But He has promised the ROI on His Word to be eternal and amazing. That’s where the power comes from. Who would want to play in the NBA and never get off the bench? What kind of chef never makes a meal? Being a pilot gets really old if you never get to fly plane. If you’re not preaching the Word, then you’re driving the church bus on fumes. Preach the Word and get your job done.
#9 WHAT YOU PREACH DETERMINES WHO WILL COME TO YOUR CHURCH, NOT HOW MANY.

And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?” Matthew 13:27

You can build a church around a smiley preacher and have weekly pep talks. Lots of people are doing that. Folks leave thinking, “ooo—I love coming to church. It always makes me feel so good.” If you have a persuasive, approachable communication style you could probably get a few hundred people together to hear about self-esteem and how to build a better life for yourself.

You can also grow a church around the preaching of truth. Nay-sayers may warn you that nobody will show up but that’s not true. The choice to preach truth is not a resolve to have fewer in the pews; it’s a decision about who you’re going to reach. If you want to gather a body of sold-out, passionate, flame-throwing followers of Jesus Christ, preaching the truth is what will get you there. Truth determines who, not how many, come to your church. Focus on the depth and God will determine the breadth of your ministry. Feed people God’s Word—the only thing that truly satisfies the longing of the human heart and God will get people over to your church to hear what He has to say.
#10 THE POWER OF PREACHING IS IN THE BALANCE OF TRUTH AND GRACE.

*We beheld [Jesus’] glory, full of grace and truth.* John 1:14

Lastly in this section on truth, I’d like to commend to you something God has entrusted to me in increasing measure through the years. The power of your ministry is in the balance between truth and grace. The glory of Jesus is that He was full of grace and truth.

We all know people who are full of truth but no grace.

We all know people who are full of grace but no truth.

The awesome thing about Jesus is that He is not 50/50. He is *full* of grace and *full* of truth. He is totally truthful, but with so much grace. All truth and no grace is brutality. All grace and no truth is hypocrisy. But let your preaching be like Jesus, full of grace and truth and you will find greater power.

**WHICH ARE YOU?**

You are, by virtue of the temperament God has given you, either a truth or a grace person. If you’re not sure, check with your spouse or someone you work with. Figure out what you are so you can bring the other side in to balance your ministry.

I’m a truth person. I’ve had to work hard on communicating the grace part. One intentional practice I started as a reinforcement to grace was to dismiss every service with the words, “You are loved.” More than likely, the people have just taken to heart some challenging things from God’s Word and they’re heading out the door to make it their own. I want them to know as they go that I love them
and God loves them.

Love the people God has entrusted to your leadership. Remember that they are not lame, although at times, they do lame things. Let your truth-telling environment be infused with agape love. In fact, love them so much that you’ll tell them the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God.

**PLATFORM STYLE**

Another way I work on keeping the balance between truth and grace is my platform style. I used to stand behind the pulpit in the traditional way a pastor preaches. There’s nothing wrong with that. Somewhere along the line I felt the need to get closer to the congregation.

I began by walking back and forth on the platform. Now I go down the steps and travel the aisles, making eye contact with many people. Sometimes I’ll put my hand on their shoulder or I’ll sit down next to them and address someone directly. What makes this effective is that the video camera projects this personal interaction up on the screen. As I’m preaching, everyone is watching the screen and engaged with me talking to that one person. They’re thinking, *He’s talking to me.* (By the way, the people in your church learn fast that if they don’t want that kind of up-close-and-personal attention that they don’t sit in the front. I would also never put someone in the spotlight if I didn’t know they could handle it.)

Here’s the test for you: when you’re that close, your church can see your sincerity of heart very well. You can’t hide behind the distance and austerity of the pulpit. When you’re 3 feet away from them, you’re forcing natural eye contact from both sides (you to them and them to you.) They’ll sense right away if you care about them or are just making it up for the show.
In the closing prayer I’ll often ask people to “close your eyes so that we can talk one on one...” In the end, preaching is you communicating with one person at a time. Everyone has come wanting a personal word spoken directly to them. People connect with God’s truth when the message touches the nerve of their doubts, questions, or fears. They don’t mind someone who will tell it like it is if the message and the messenger are real.

**BALANCE THE INTENSITY**

Another way to balance truth and grace is to control the tone and intensity of your voice. Preaching with passion is great but you can’t keep the RPMs at red line for a whole message or you’ll blow your engine. Change your pace at key intervals in the message. Build places where you bring it down to a whisper. Pause and let the truth sink in. Measure the dosage of truth that the congregation can receive at one time and leave space for people to chew and swallow the meat you’re feeding them.

The power is in the balance between grace and truth. Immerse people in the sense that they are loved in your truth-telling church. Let them know that this is a safe place for them to hear a life-changing message.
ABOUT SERMON PREPARATION

SECTION THREE
#11 SERMON PREPARATION HAPPENS IN STAGES.

The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way. Psalm 37:23

If you have some regular opportunity to communicate God’s Word to other people, then you know it takes a plan that stretches over a period of time to bring it together. You can’t do it all in one sitting. Preparation must come in stages.

Here’s how mine is organized:

STAGE ONE: Establish a preaching calendar.

TIMING: July previous to beginning of preaching year (Our preaching year is Sept.-Aug.)

Once a year, usually in the summer, I get away to plan the series I will preach in the coming year. I present it to the elders in August. They usually make a few changes and approve it. We then have a game plan for the year.

Some well-known pastors make a big deal about how they don’t plan in advance but trust that the Lord will speak to them on Wednesday or Thursday about what to preach on the weekend. I like to tease one respected colleague of mine who says this with, “That’s OK. He leads you a week before; He leads me a year before.”

I’ll never forget January 2000 when the sovereignty of God came to bear on this issue. We were going through one of the hardest conflicts we’ve ever faced as a church. A disgruntled staff member got hold of our church-wide mailing list and sent a hurtful, slanderous letter, most of which focused on me, to the entire body. I felt crushed.
Eight months earlier, I had planned on that Sunday to preach out of Mark 2 in a message titled, “The Servant Moves with Authority.” The message focused on Jesus Christ and the right with which He ministered and the often-negative reaction He faced. The grace of God buoyed me the whole weekend as I proclaimed our Lord Jesus Christ as a model minister thrust in the throes of conflict. You can’t tell me that the hand of God had not orchestrated that chain of events—nine months before—for the glory and honor of His name. I’ll never forget it.

**STAGE TWO : Create a map of the series.**

**TIMING: 2-3 weeks before the series begins**

A few weeks before a new series is scheduled to begin, I’ll set aside an entire morning and create a broad outline of its scope and sequence. For example, if the preaching calendar says I’ll be doing a series in Galatians, all I know at that point is that it will include 13 messages broken down in specific sections assigned to specific Sundays. Now I’m ready to dig in.

First, I’ll answer these questions:

- What’s the theme of the book?
- What’s the main thought?
- What is the series title?
- What are the parts?
- What are the individual message titles?

I put every series in a “package,” not because I think God’s Word needs packaging but because I believe God’s people need packaging. It helps them to know what we’ll
be focusing on during the coming weeks. A title and an image or a theme or a song helps us to get our arms around the same core idea.

**STAGE THREE: Get specific.**

**TIMING: the week of the message**

On Tuesday, I’ll repeatedly read the passage, and start thinking about an outline and the main theme. I’ll work through it verse by verse. What is verse 1 saying? How does verse 2 relate, support, or illustrate? I’ll spend a lot of time writing it out. I’ll group ideas together. I’ll draw lines and circles. I’ll climb into the text and get the big moods.

Thursday is “Outline-or-Die” day. I’ve got to have the outline on Thursday or nothing is good. That means getting the main focus of the text down on paper and filling in the various support points.

Now, a word about Fridays. The staff at Harvest know that I’m especially friendly on Tuesday. I’m OK to get along with on Wednesday. I’m a little bit on edge on Thursday, and pray for me and leave me alone on Friday. That’s just the way the week goes.

Sure, the congregation liked last week’s message, but that’s now in the rearview mirror. Every week I feel that pressure. “You’d better have it again this week, Pastor, ’cause we’re coming back and bringing our friends.” Do you feel that pressure too?

I never take appointments or calls on Fridays. I have several barriers between me and anything that would distract me. I start the day early and, generally speaking, don’t leave my office until my message is done. If I can’t figure out some point in the outline, I’ll work on it a bit on Saturday,
but as a rule I’ll have it done by late Friday afternoon.

When I came in the door on Friday night when our kids were young, they would ask, “Daddy, is your sermon done?” They knew that there were two kinds of Friday nights. There was the “it’s done” Friday night or the “it’s not-done” Friday night. My wife helped me a great deal by bringing down the velvet hammer with, “You better have it by Friday. We need you here with us. The kids don’t need you staring off into space like you’re trying to figure out the meaning of the universe. Do that at the office. When you come home, we want all of you.” That’s a great kind of pressure.


#12 PREPARATION IS HARD WORK.

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

Just so you know, I hate studying. I hate Fridays. I hate being glued to my chair. I hate being shut away in my office. I don’t like all of these books. Generally speaking, people who love to study, struggle with communication. People who hate to study usually find communication comes easier. God uses a lot of different kinds of people with a mixture of gifts to accomplish His purposes. Any way you cut it, sermon preparation is hard work.

With maturity, I’ve learned that I cannot pull off a sermon on the wings of good communication skills; I’ve got to have the content. Sure, if I wanted to move to a new church every 3 years I wouldn’t need to work so hard. But I want to feed the same people a satisfying meal year after year, so I can’t give them some warmed-up re-preach of a message that I took out of the freezer from two years ago. They’re trusting that I’m going to do the hard work of preparation year in and year out.

Someone once asked John MacArthur: “What’s the secret to good preaching?” He said, “Keep your butt in the chair until the hard work is done.” I agree. Don’t answer the phone. Don’t wander the halls. Don’t check your email. Don’t get tangled up in other “important” things and waste the day away. You thought you were working. You weren’t—you were fiddling. Do your job.
#13 IF YOU GET STUCK, MOVE ON.

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. Proverbs 11:14

One of the torpedoes that blows a hole in your productivity is getting stuck on a point in the outline. Maybe you need an illustration or further clarification and, as hard as you try, you can’t think of a good one. Take three swings at it and then leave it alone. Underline the point, write: “need illustration here,” and move on. You know that you need to do more work there later, but don’t let it derail you. Move on to the next point.

The flipside to this is equally important. If you’ve skipped something, make sure you go back to it and get it done. The point must be crystal clear to you, or it won’t be clear to the people. (Like the old saying, “A mist in the pulpit is a cloud in the pew.”) Wrestle with it until you have it. If you can’t sort it out in your office on Friday, it won’t come to you on the fly on Sunday. Trust me on that one.

Rely on your colleagues’ help on this point. I always check with my associate pastor Rick or my assistant. I ask, “Is this clear? Is this interesting? Can I say this?” When they say, “No, it isn’t.” Or, “No you really can’t.” I’ve learned: Don’t. If in doubt, don’t. Clever is good, and catchy is great, but nothing is worse than a “shock-jock.” When I say this, it’s going to really rock them. That’s great as long as you don’t confuse shock and life change as accomplishing the same thing. Avoid things with that sort of arresting attention that will linger in your church’s stories about you long after they’ve forgotten the point of the message.


#14 CRAFT YOUR MESSAGE NOTES.

Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. Proverbs 16:3

Never wing it. I wish I could tell you about the times I’ve tried, only to have it blow up in my face. I’ve erased the memories, but the scars remain. Never wing it.

A couple hours before I preach a message for the first time, I’ll get out my “black and white” sermon notes and my magic markers. Now it’s time to color this message on my brain.

The first marker is green. I highlight all the main points green. If I get home after the service, and realize I forgot to say the green, life will just stink. Blue is for textual comments. Everywhere I see blue, I’ll comment about what the Bible says about something. It’s a good test to have a lot of blue. If you don’t see enough, go back to the drawing board. Then orange—I’ll color illustrations, expansion, elucidation, and interest-gathering all bright orange.

Remember science class? We were allowed to go into an exam with one cheat sheet with all the formulas. Today, my message notes are like my cheat sheet where I’m allowed to have as much content that will fit on two sides of one piece of paper the size of my Bible. If I have extra illustrations, like extended quotes, I’ll tape them in the front flap of my Bible. I’ll put a directional in my notes that says: “see front left,” and I’ll open my Bible, read that part, and keep going. I even give myself stage directions.

As I write out the outline by hand on Friday, then highlight it with color on Saturday afternoon, I’m working at memorizing the sermon. I fill the page with mnemonic de-
vices like pictograms and directional arrows. I’ve been asked over the years why I don’t use the computer. For me, the uniformity would make it much more difficult to memorize.

Surprisingly, the process of writing the sermon outline by hand makes me less dependent on my notes. It’s now in my head—kind of. Remember that science test again? On your way to class, were you afraid that if anyone talked to you or if you sneezed all that information crammed in your head would come bursting out? That’s how I feel on Saturday night. Don’t bump into me, man, I might lose what I’ve studied. However, once I’ve given the message, then I have it. I won’t need to review the outline again until Sunday morning when I get to church.

When I walk into the worship center on Saturday night, the message is already fruitful or a failure. It was all determined by the preparation. When you streamline your system, then you can be free to grow in your communication style. You won’t grow in your communication however, if you don’t have the content. You’ve got to have a clearly organized, packed message. It may appear at times that I speak off the cuff, but I assure you that I don’t. Our audio tech guys tell me that the same message, taught in different services, varies only by 30 or 45 seconds every time. I’ll even stand in the same aisle and make the same point in three consecutive services.

Often the temptation is to attribute communication success to a person or a personality. I disagree. The battle for the preacher is not fought in the pulpit, but in his study in long, private, strenuous hours of preparation. That is the crucible of being a communicator of God’s Word. I can’t commend highly enough its importance.
#15 Finish What You Start.

The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. Titus 3:8

Have you ever sat through a service where the pastor has prepared pages and pages of notes? He’ll flip through them dramatically. He’ll get himself all worked up as he preaches through the first half of them, and then he’ll say, “We’ll pick this up next Sunday morning. Let’s pray.” Even when I was 11 years old, I thought that was lame. I’m sure he was thinking: If I stretch this out for a couple more minutes, I’ll be set for next Sunday too. So he throws in a couple more, “And while we’re on the subject,” and “this brings up a very good point...” Forget all that.

Come up with a brand new message from A to Z every week. Space out your notes, spending near-equivalent amounts of time on all of the content. Don’t meander or go hopping down a rabbit trail. I don’t believe that kind of preaching is edifying. A message is a straight line that pounds the same nail all the way through. It doesn’t waste words, go off on tangents, or throw away anyone’s time. To do anything less is not a worthy proclamation of God’s Word.

One more thing—No abbreviating. Watch out for those 20-minute sermons that have become the trend for ticklish ears. Do the math—it takes 10 minutes to set the rig up. It takes 5 minutes to take it down, so if you’re only drilling for 5 minutes you’re not going very deep. It takes a substantive amount of time to feed people substantively from God’s Word. It is an exhausting task. You’ve got to dig into the text to get the message out. You’ve got to pray the
Word—you can’t be effective unless you are affected. And then you’ve got to bring the Word. Your job is to proclaim it, not reason it out, or dialogue through it.

Luke 10:16 says, “He who hears you, hears me.” God is making His appeal through us. If that doesn’t send you back to your study, door closed, Bible open and you on your knees, then you need to reconsider your calling.
#16 DEVELOP THE DISCIPLINE OF OBSERVING LIFE.

Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Ephesians 5:8-10

Illustrations are all around you. Observe life closely enough, and they will come up and shake your hand. Hardly ever will you hear me say, “The story is told of…” because who knows whether it happened and, even if it did, it didn’t happen to me. I have all those 1001 Illustration and Quote books, but I hardly open any of them. I just don’t find them very compelling.

Recently, I was working on a sermon that contained a list of the characteristics of a revived heart. And I thought of groceries. Kathy had just come home from food shopping, and I had helped her in with the bags. In my mind, I saw Paul’s list in 2 Corinthians 7:9-11 as resembling a grocery list. He didn’t describe the characteristics in a sequence; nor did he divide them into categories. The list just came out as randomly as Kathy’s answer to my question, “So what’d you get at the store?”

My point is, I look for an effective picture of a scriptural point in the current events of my own life and in the lives of our church family. This is a much better hook for people to hang truth on than a canned illustration. Most of that thinking comes during preparation. However, I also carry a 3 x 5 card with me all the time, as well as have one at my desk at home and at church so that when something interesting comes to mind, I write it down. I hear a story, I see something amazing, I hear about some cool fact, and though I don’t know how I’m going to use it at the time, I capture it on the card. Someday, something I saw today will make it into a sermon. Be a student of life, and you’ll never run out of illustrations.
#17 LEARN TO SEE THE HUMOR.

A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. Proverbs 17:22

This might unsettle some people, but Kathy and I made the decision as parents that we were going to not only allow, but to encourage our kids to watch “The Simpsons.” I know that’s controversial and, granted, we’ve turned off episodes that were not honoring to the Lord. That aside, we watch “The Simpsons” together and roar at the brilliant satire, which is proven to be the highest form of humor. The writers of that show have created a social commentary, spoofing the absurdities of our culture.

I think the capacity to see that kind of humor by analyzing a scene is an important piece in learning how to communicate. I find a ton of things in the Bible that make me smile. If I analyze it through the grid of the social scene, I’ll see the funny or ironic or tragic details that I missed at first reading. As you sharpen and develop the skills of analysis, seeing both the humor and drama, Scripture will come off the page for you. It will change how you preach it. So you can debate with me all you want about the merits of “The Simpsons.” Our kids are very funny, and we’re hoping that will translate into great communication.
#18 PERSONAL ILLUSTRATIONS ARE GOOD.

*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Galatians 2:20

I was taught in college that personal illustrations are bad. I disagree. Here’s what’s bad: personal illustrations that make you look glowing. The church wants stories that make you look human. Make your wife look stunning. Make your kids appear above par, but everything stinks in a story about the amazing fruitfulness you had in sharing your faith this week. Tell them about your struggles; tell them the hard parts.

Be a pastor who shares his life with his church. Let them know some of your challenges, and what your prayer concerns are for your family. Let your real life come out in your preaching. Encourage them so that they can be fruitful.

Note: it goes without saying that you must have your family’s permission to share particular stories. If you win points at church only to lose them when you walk in the door at home, you’re ultimately gonna lose the game. Say up front that your family has your permission to tell the story.
#19 DEVELOP THE ABILITY TO READ PEOPLE.

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.* Psalm 111:10

I think a big part of passionate preaching is the ability to read people. When I’m preaching, I take snapshots of seating sections in my head and I assign them a number between 1 and 10 depending on how engaged they have been in the last 10 minutes. All the time while I’m preaching, I’m aware of how people are responding. *Oh, I’m losing her—get her back. He’s not following—rephrase that last point. Good, she’s tracking.* If you don’t have the ability to read people, you need to give yourself more to learning the craft of communication.

Sometimes Kathy and I visit other churches while on vacation. We’ve been in some churches where the preacher is pontificating up on the platform all the while the guy across the row from us is counting tiles in the ceiling. Can’t the preacher see how bored he is? (And how bored I am that I’m looking around?) If I saw that guy while I was preaching, I’d walk right over to him and get him interested. That’s why I come off the platform—I want people to listen. I believe I have something to say from God’s Word, and that God wants to use it in people’s lives. I want to get something across to them. Part of the gift of preaching is being able to read and respond to people.
#20 INSERT COMMERCIALS.

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.
Deuteronomy 6:7

People may be willing to listen, but at best, their attention span is about 5 to 7 minutes. Some preaching gurus tell us that we must keep their interest for 45 minutes. I agree, only I break that impossible total time down into smaller possible segments. You can help people stay with you by inserting commercials every few minutes. By commercials, I mean, some kind of break from exposition that will illustrate or illuminate or further interest them in the topic at hand. I usually have 8 to 10 per message. These are highlighted orange in my notes.

Some common commercials are:
A point of humor or human interest
A quote
A chart or map
Stickers, static cling, and bookmarks stuffed into the bulletin
Slides/pictures of people, places, or things related to the message
A prop

We live in a visual culture. Choose a wide variety of visual materials. It will be what people remember. Note: Make the prop work for you—use it like a laser beam to burn one key point rather than allowing it to steal the show. In a recent message on the centrality of the cross, I invited four people at a time to raise and then hold a 300-pound wooden cross in place at center stage. They stood there, holding up that cross, through the entire sermon. Easily the exercise could have stolen attention, but instead
the prop was central to the sermon. You know those four people will never forget it.

### Props I've Used in Sermons

- Cookies in a cookie jar
- Hats/Umbrella
- Cell phone
- Gift-wrapped present
- Music clips
- Marino, our family dog
- Suitcase
- Mirror
- My grandmother’s wall clock
- Trash bag
- Track & field hurdle
- Cardboard “dot” to stand on
- Water jars
- Science experiment
- Eggs in a basket
- Golf clubs
- 10 ft. ladder
- Balloons
- Our framed wedding picture
- Sword
- Audio tape of my first sermon
- I’ve worn jeans & also a tux
- Read letters from body
OTHER TYPES OF COMMERCIALS:

AUDIENCE INTERACTION

I’ll talk directly to someone, call her by name, pose a question, ask him to move over and give me a place to sit. Other times, I’ve asked an entire row to stand. I’ve asked everyone to write down a personal list in their notes (like, write down the names of 3 unsaved friends, or write down 2 things you’re waiting on God to answer). I’ll often ask people to raise their hands if they relate to something I’ve said. I’ve played “name that tune” on the piano during the sermon and “we’ve surveyed a 100 people and the top 10 answers are on the board.” A favorite is the planned or, better yet, the impromptu interview (including a few with my dad over the years).

PHYSICAL RESPONSE

A memorable way to reinforce what God is prompting in them spiritually is to ask people to respond physically—cup your hands to receive or relinquish something to God, kneel beside your chair, hold a person’s hand, stand, come forward, write something down and leave it on the front platform step.

ROLE-PLAY

A few years ago, we were discovering the sovereignty of God in the life of Esther. We brought in two thrones (like the crazy medieval chairs on many church platforms), and I delivered the message, switching between four outrageous hats to clarify who said what in the narrative: crowns for Esther and Ahasuerus, a cap for Mordecai, and a velvet cavalier for Haman. The people got used to the silliness and quickly saw the true-life drama unfold.
**VERBAL DIRECTIONS**

In our church, when I say, “and all of God’s people said…” that means they are to repeat the last thing I said. (If they’re new to Harvest, they might be confused and say, “Amen,” since that’s what we’re programmed to say.) I’ll also direct them to tell their neighbor something or to underline a word or verse in their Bibles (or in their neighbor’s Bible). I’ll also say, “Look up here.” Sometimes that’s misunderstood as me wanting attention. No, it’s because while our people love to follow along in God’s Word, from my perspective walking down the aisles, all I see is the tops of their heads. I ask them to “look up here” simply because I want eye contact with them before telling them something really important.

**STORIES**

I find real-life stories in my congregation riveting. They model the human drama that most illustrates Scripture, usually in the normal routine of life. God’s faithfulness to people becomes an up close and personal thing to our congregation when you tell someone’s faith story and then interview or introduce them live. However, use these stories sparingly for the most effectiveness. Also, don’t tell every single detail about their lives or the people will sense that you’re just burning up time. Make the point, and then move on to the next thing. It goes without saying that the details of the story should be edifying to the person they’re about in your congregation.
ABOUT THE MESSAGE

SECTION FIVE
#21 GET THE BIG IDEA FROM THE PASSAGE.

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. Philemon 1:6

If you could ask someone on Monday what was the main point of your message on Sunday, they should come up with one word or a short phrase. It was about “repentance” or “how to get back to God.” Somehow your big idea should have eked out of the sermon in a memorable way.

You can ensure that this happens by putting your outline to the test. Think of your theme statement as the hub of a wheel. Every point in your outline is a spoke on that hub. Every other thing in the message has to connect back to the hub. Don’t fill your message with content. Get one message. Go back over your notes and cut everything that isn’t related to the hub. If repentance is my hub, the spokes would look like: Marks of repentance, a biblical overview of repentance, the definition of repentance.

I usually stick to one passage of Scripture per sermon. Not only are topical sermons tough to defend, but I also believe that when you’re flipping from one passage to another, you give people the sense of “Wow, what an amazing preacher!” As opposed to when you get the whole message out of one paragraph, and they go “Wow, what an amazing Book!” (Anyone can buy a good Bible concordance for a topical message.) The end goal for preaching is to get people into Scripture for themselves. They’re not going to remember your message past Tuesday, but they’re going to remember the impact of God’s Word for a lifetime. If the outgrowth of your ministry and mine is that they are learning the Bible for themselves on a more
regular basis, then we can put all our Monday doubts on the curb.
# 22 DON’T PREACH YOUR HOMEWORK.

*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* Ephesians 5:17

That phrase in the Greek literally means, “don’t be a Bible fat-head.” (Just kidding.) When I hear guys preaching their etymological studies, I sadly shake my head. For whose benefit do you spout the languages? Yes, sometimes the original text does shed new light on a word. Definitely use it then, but be careful of drawing a dividing line between how you study the Bible and how your people can study the Bible. You want to invite them into the text, not intimidate them from a lofty distance.

I also never preach my theological issues. And I categorically never preach my interpretative choices. You know better than anyone that there are well-respected scholars who see a particular passage a different way than you might. You’re not helping matters when you muddy your preaching by addressing the various interpretations. I preach what I believe the passage means—end of discussion. Why be so definitive? I don’t want to undermine people’s confidence in God’s Word. People shouldn’t think that they can open the Bible and make their own choice about what it means. Almost without exception, I believe the Bible can be understood in a straightforward, literal interpretation. I try to bring that to bear in the lives of the people I’m preaching to.

Do your homework, but don’t *preach* your homework. Don’t unload everything you’ve got in one heap. If you’re giving out on Sunday everything you got from your study, you should have been in your study longer. When you do your homework, you can stand with confidence and say, “This is what the Bible says.” Have a lot more going on behind the counter than what you put on display.
SECTION FIVE
ABOUT THE MESSAGE

USING COMMENTARIES/STUDY BIBLES

• Maximum three: one exegetical, one classic, one homiletical

• Consult commentary only after developing the outline

• Be aware of what major study Bibles say about a difficult text

• Be familiar with how different Bible translations read since the people will be using a variety of versions. (See especially NIV, NASB, NKJV, and ESV.)
#23 BRING APPLICATION.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Matthew 28:19-20

OUTLINE THE APPLICATION

Examine your outline. Is it focused on how God’s Word intersects with people’s lives? Or is it about Paul or Moses or David, as in a) Paul believed this, b) Paul did this, and c) Who cares about Paul? Nobody should show up in your sermon outline except your people. The end game isn’t Paul—it’s them. Your outline is about what they should do: a) We must believe this, b) We must do this, and c) We must . . . whatever.

My homiletic outline is applicational. I also have an interpretative exegetical outline I weave through the sermon, but the end result is always application. Always keep application close by; never go more than a couple minutes without helping your people see how to make the truth work in their lives.

Note this word of balance: Outlines are a lot more important to preachers than they are to the church body. It’s healthy to remember that God’s Word changes lives, not our packaging of Scripture.

WORDSMITHING THE OUTLINE

• State main points positively whenever possible.

• Cover any negative points early in the message.

• Use active rather than passive statements.
FRAME THE SERMON

I keep the train on the track by maintaining a strict, repeating cycle in every sermon:

I. Point #1

Text: what does the Bible say?

Meaning: how do we interpret this?

Illustration: what does this look like in my life?

Application: how can I put this in skin? Or how do I walk this out?

II. Point #2: repeat above.

III. Point #3: repeat above again.

That’s the pattern of every one of my sermons. Don’t unload the application at the end. If your energy or preparation time got short that week, the best practical help your people will get will be some rushed, “So go do it” or “Trust God and persevere.” And if the service is running long, they might even get some lame, “And may God bless this truth to your heart,” which interpreted means, “He better, because I don’t have a clue how to make this true in your life.”

Better to weave the application through every point of the entire sermon.

I always struggle with sermons that are framed:

First point: text

Second point: illustration

Third point: application
A few years ago I was talking with a very respected preacher who believes that the sermon frame should be “Expound the text, close in prayer, and the Holy Spirit will make the application.” We’ve had several discussions about that and as you can imagine, we agreed to disagree.

I believe that you should be just as conscientious about your application preparation as you are about your interpretation preparation. After you’ve explained the text, your people may be thinking: Great. Now we know what it means—big deal. What does it mean to me? What does it mean to my life right now? Preach that—and preach it through the whole message.

Not bringing an application is like inviting your dinner guests to unpack your groceries and then sending them home hungry. Good preaching is like satisfying their appetite all the way through to dessert.

**GIVE PEOPLE A RESPONSE-ABILITY**

I believe the difference between good exposition and a life-changing sermon is in the opportunity and challenge to respond. Operate on the assumption that the Holy Spirit is working His truth in their hearts and that they want to get right with God. Give them specific instructions on how to respond. Make it a risk of faith and explain how this obedience translates into their relationship with God (for example: Resolve that conflict now or else . . . Respond in repentance now before . . . Wait for God’s relief from that difficult circumstance because . . . Don’t carry this back out to the car.) Mix up the way you prompt their response so that they don’t anticipate it and resist.
#24 PREACHING HAS DIFFERENT VOICES AND CONFRONTS VARIOUS NEEDS.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-12

If we think about the various types of preachers we represent, we can generally divide our gifting into four categories per Ephesians 4:11-12.

FOUR TYPES OF PREACHERS

Some preachers are teachers. They focus on what the text says. They can tell you the seven different Greek words for the verb “to know” and why it’s critical for you to differentiate between them. They instill into people an insatiable appetite for the truth and people gratefully say, “Wow, I’m so glad I know that now.”

Some preachers are shepherds. They feel the comfort and encouragement behind every passage of Scripture. They guide people by name to the truth in a relational, compassionate tone of voice. They walk beside them with a crook and staff, and people follow because they trust that both the preacher and the path will lead them to safety and security.

Some preachers are evangelists. They read “good news” on every page of the Bible. People respond to their invitation to be saved even when the sermon is about stewardship. There seems to be a neon sign flashing above their heads that reads, “This way to Jesus.”

Some preachers are prophets. They say, “This is what God said. Now let me help you obey Him.” They understand where the hurdles are in the Christian life, and they
run alongside the faithful, whispering courage to them to persevere and to help others who have lost their way to get back on the path. Prophets call people to “fix their eyes on Jesus” and to keep going in the right direction.

**FOUR WORDS OF INSTRUCTION**

I love that God has made even the preacher to serve His kingdom in unique ways. But even if you see yourself in one definitive category, 1 Thessalonians 5:14 tells us to be aware and serve the needs of our whole body. The verse roughly covers the types of gifting we just discussed. Look closely:

“We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Thessalonians 5:14</th>
<th>“Hi, my name is…”</th>
<th>Internal focus</th>
<th>What they need from you:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admonish the idle</td>
<td>Rebellious</td>
<td>Will: I know what to do. I’m not overwhelmed at the thought of it. I’m just not willing to obey yet.</td>
<td>To be challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage the fainthearted</td>
<td>Discouraged</td>
<td>Emotions: I know what to do. I’m willing to do it, but some fear or hurt is keeping me from stepping up.</td>
<td>To be encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help the weak (literally weak-minded, those who do not know)</td>
<td>Untaught</td>
<td>Mind: Jump! How high? Just tell me what I should do.</td>
<td>To be taught</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Every Sunday, individuals sit in your church with one of three general needs, or a combination of each. As a teacher, shepherd, evangelist, or prophet, you will naturally be drawn to minister to one of these groups in particular. First Thessalonians exhorts us to address everyone. Study the chart (above). It will help you be aware of where each group is coming from.

Understanding these groups will also help you to address the right need. What would happen if you challenged the discouraged? Taught the rebellious? Encouraged the untaught? I’ll tell you—there’d be a lot of frustrated, stuck, angry people. This is a call for balance in your content. Put something there for everyone. At times, it might naturally come with explaining the text (mind), illustrating (emotion), and drawing application (will). When you call people to application, keep in mind that it can wear many faces. Call the weak-minded to understand what God’s Word teaches. Call the rebellious to surrender their will for God’s. Call the discouraged to hope in God. And always, according to 1 Thessalonians 5:14, “be patient with them all.”
For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

And finally, a general point. I learned by experience, not in school, that the greatest sin in the ministry is to bore people with the Bible. One of my seminary professors instructed us to tell more stories in our sermons. “Why?” I asked. “Because people are going to be bored.” I remember thinking: No, you’re bored. I’m not bored at all. I’m gripped. I’m engaged. I’m fired up! I’m not working myself up, I’m really excited about what’s in God’s Word and how He’s changing my life and the lives in our church body.

If you are excited about what’s in God’s Word, and you have a passionate, real thing going on with Him (full circle to first point), then people who listen to you will be excited about it too. Like the old hymn says, they will forget the channel and see only Him.

Preaching God’s Word is one of the highest callings a man could serve. I challenge you to continue learning how to do it well and to expand this list with more insight into this ministry we love.

Father, thank You for Your servants. Thank You for the privilege of handling Your ever relevant, eternally necessary Word. Might we handle it rightly. Might we divide it accurately. Might we always base our confidence in Your promise that heaven and earth will pass away, but Your Word will not. Help us to redouble our efforts to be devoted to its proclamation wherever You plant us that it might bear fruit unto eternal life.
and the building up of Your church for Your own glory. We ask this in Jesus’ name.
TEN BOOKS ON PREACHING THAT YOU’VE GOT TO READ

• Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today, John R. W. Stott

• Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, Haddon Robinson

• Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon, Bryan Chapell

• Creative Bible Teaching, Larry Richards

• Preaching and Preachers, D. Martin Lloyd-Jones

• Preaching that Changes Lives, Mike Fabarez

• Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving the Holy Spirit in Your Ministry, Arturo Azurdia

• Supremacy of God in Preaching, John Piper

• Teaching to Change Lives, Howard Hendricks

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