

A Sermon Preparation Check List

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I. Preaching is holy persuasion. It is not the recitation of a running commentary on the text—it is not a collection of insights gained from Bible commentaries. Therefore, it is advisable to run a check during your sermon preparation to ensure that you are employing the elements of persuasion.

1) Persuasion is essential if we are preaching to change lives. Craft your message as if a court were listening; as if the listeners have their arms crossed while their minds are silently saying, “Why should I change?” Preach for a verdict so that your listener is convinced God is speaking to them. Picture your audience as friendly, but internally resistant to change—how will the sermon overcome the ‘so what’ factor? Show them why, and where they are wrong. Make it clear why they should stop doing certain behaviors and begin doing what God requires. To assist in writing a sermon manuscript which is able to persuade, make a table or chart. On the left side, list what the Word of God requires. On the right side, list the resistances to obedience (excuses, consequences, lost benefits). Don’t hesitate to use your own heart as a reference for the table/chart! Your message will resonate with authenticity as a result.ⁱ

You are to challenge people to abandon existing beliefs, values, and systems, and adopt new ones. ***In order to persuade effectively, you must begin with the presupposition that every man and woman has the defect addressed in your text, and that he or she needs this passage to overcome it.***ⁱⁱ The less biblical your listeners are, the more persuasion they will need. Utilize variety in your message, plan to pull your audience back numerous times to the truth you are unfolding. If your presentation is too smooth and unvaried, it gives the listener an excuse to drift, or tune out. *Stop and tell a biblical story, or personal story that demonstrates the truth being preached. Provide an illustration that drives your point home—showing how true to life it is. Ask a question, dramatize; insert a poignant pause.* These provide the needed variety that will extend your listener’s attention span. Charles Spurgeon often jostled his listeners out of their hypnotic ‘sermon listening mode’ by an absurd word picture. “Imagine if you will, that all the oceans of the world were made of blood. . .”

2) Personalize your sermon proposition in order to drive home the relevancy of your text. Reach into the heart of your listener by framing the sermon proposition as a form of counseling (all preaching is counseling). Ask yourself, “What problem is being solved

by means of the sermon?” “How does God intend that this truth transform your listeners?” Your job is to pull in your hearers: *“Today we will look at three critical areas of resisting temptation which God requires of every believer. The benefits of obedience are. . .”* *“When you begin to view obedience in this way, it will show you why you have been stuck.”* *“When you repent of your disobedience, and begin to follow what God commands, it will revolutionize your walk with the Lord.”* **‘Biblical self-confrontation’** is the aim; there is no repentance without it (the hearer must **confront himself** from the Scripture being preached so that he actually becomes a diagnosing physician of his own soul). The truth you are unfolding has a precise ethical responsibility annexed to it. You must design your proposition so that the obedience God requires is viewed as inseparable from the truth. ***What is the expected change in the listener?*** You must be able to answer that question, before you write your sermon. God’s truth must not be relegated to a theoretical category; to be a ‘hearer only’ is to be deceived (Jas 1:22-25).

Your introduction ought to whet the appetite of the listeners for the spiritual meal you are about to serve. The introduction resembles an appetizer that precedes that whole meal. In the introduction, you will establish the need for what you are about to preach. By the time you finish preaching your introduction and proposition, the members of your audience ought to be saying to themselves, “This sermon is exactly what I need today, right now.”ⁱⁱⁱ

3) Application must address the mind, the heart, the affections, and the will. When you preach for change, you must address the whole man; seek to reach all of his cognitive faculties. There is a logical progression: truth addressed to faith that terminates in an act of the will. Notice the facets of the inner man that are engaged prior to an act of the will: *reason, conscience, imagination, emotions*, and then the will. ***Our temptation is to “leapfrog” into the sermon or lesson without carefully laying the groundwork of how we will appeal to the mind, the heart, and then the will.***

Your listeners are far more likely to internalize the message and act upon it if you realistically lay out the demands and difficulties of obeying the truth communicated. Anticipate the inner areas of resistance to the obedience enjoined. Disarm their objections by preaching upon the temporal and eternal benefits and consequences of obedience and disobedience. ‘This is who God is,’ ‘that is why He requires this of you’ ‘but, you, of yourself can’t, and won’t do this,’ ‘but by His grace in the work of Christ and His Spirit’s enablement, you will be able to obey Him in this matter.’

You must address their thinking before you attempt to direct their steps. Biblical action calls for biblical thinking. The intent and direction of the passage contains the divine logic for obedience. Don’t underestimate the value of the reasoning of the biblical

author—the biblical logic for obedience will be recalled by the listener when it comes time to obey. The *inspired logic* in the text is from the mind of Almighty God, therefore you must trace this ‘logic’ in your message. Pastor John MacArthur is a master at this; he leads the listener through the thought processes of the biblical writer. This step is an essential part of the believer’s motivation to obey. In your preparation, carefully follow the line of thought of the biblical author—notice the conjunctions, the adverbs—ask why the author uses “therefore,” “for,” “now,” “but,” etc. Without employing the logic for obedience found in the context, we are left with bare principles, the preaching of which seldom rises above “be good” sermons” (avoid the killer ‘be’s—“be this,” “be good”).

When planning application, unpack the “hot” words found in the text. For example, in Colossians 3:10 we are commanded to *put on the new self*. Unpack the ‘new self’ concept thoroughly. Not only will this enrich the sermon, but it also heightens the listener’s perception of the infallibility of Scripture. *God’s authority comes through in our preaching when we display the reasoning of the biblical authors in their precise choice of words.* “When God chose this word, this is exactly what He wanted to say to you.”

When making application, remember that man’s heart is incurably legalistic. God preempts legal working and excuses for disobedience by stressing that the believer’s acceptance before God rests solely upon Christ’s imputed righteousness. Listeners who retreat into false humility attempt to justify their lack of effort by saying that ‘they can never measure up’. What they need to hear is the message of gospel grace in Christ. Those who seek to win God’s favor by obedience also need to hear the word of justification by grace as well. For, the true believer’s life consecration rests upon, and flows out of, a status and standing before God of perfect righteousness in Christ (Rom 5:1-2). The cords of sin that hold a man are only cut once his guilt is forgiven (Heb 9:14).

4) Passion is essential in your conclusion if it is to be biblical. Our task is to reorient the mental patterns of our listeners so that they form habits of thinking biblically. The conclusion of the sermon must be as powerful and memorable as the introduction. As Al Martin notes, *the preacher must fasten the truth in the hearer’s mind like Sisera’s skull was nailed to the ground with a tent peg through both temples.* The minister’s own experience with the truth he is preaching is absolutely essential to passion. It is difficult to preach a passage passionately if you are not *a product of the product*. In other words, has the biblical text had the effect upon you that God requires? ***Bring your message as God has “wired you.” In other words, the import and intent of the text must ‘bleed out of you’, deliver your soul.*** In order to preach for change, you have to be authentic, earnest, and compelling, not witty, chatty, or contrived.

Your conclusion ought to make good use of emotion and imagery. Illustrations that

reach the heart serve as ‘emotional Velcro’ to fasten the truth to the mind of the hearer. It is a sinful disservice to unfold the truth, but withhold imparting the burden of obedience found in the text. We must preach the *burden of the text*—the *burden* is the change the text is calling for. What do you want your hearers to think? To do? To change? To consider? Remember, the purpose of knowledge is conduct. Preach for a verdict. What are they to repent of? What will the effect be upon their relationship with God if they do repent? If they don’t repent? Precisely how does God want them to change. You must clearly spell out how the required change is to take place.

In order to be faithful to what is mentioned above, there should be an appeal directed at your listeners. The appeal should be vested with the preceptive will of God for your listeners. ***In the appeal, you should make them know that they are accountable to God for what they have heard—expose false hope, excuses, unbelief, and procrastination. We preach and teach for conversion and for transformation.***

Your passion is to be in keeping with the fact that you have not preached your opinion, insights, or views, but you have expounded the Word of God. Therefore, the sermon is not for casual consideration, nor is it presenting an optional opinion. The sermon is nothing less than a divine appointment—confrontation with Almighty God. It is a crossroads or turning point in the life of the hearer. The response cannot be neutral—it is either repentance and obedience, OR stubbornness and impenitence.^{iv}

5) Exaltation of God as the Author of the truth you are preaching is indispensable; you must be *theocentric* in your preaching. Countless ministers only preach principles, and as a consequence, they stop short of giving God to their congregations. God Almighty is the “Hero” of every text. All ethical responsibility must be anchored in God and His truth. In our haste to make principles clear and compelling, we must not fail in connecting the burden of the text to the character of God—to His holy perfections. The challenge of obedience always comes back to “God’s way versus my way.” We must impress upon our listeners that they are to know and worship Him as the God who guards them, perfects them, subdues them to Himself, and who blesses them by means of His holiness imputed and imparted. This can be the difference between solely giving your listeners ‘spiritual laws and principles’ versus giving them God Himself as the source of these principles.

To the degree that we love, revere and trust God, we will obey Him. When we call our listeners to repent of sin and to obey the Lord, we are literally exhibiting God to them; we are exhorting our listeners to love and trust God more than they do themselves. Bring everything down to a choice: the way of life, or the way of death—the narrow way, or the broad road that leads to destruction—worship of God or worship of idols. Our Creator and Redeemer is infinitely wise and caring when He sets before us His

commands, promises, and warnings. As the book of Deuteronomy reiterates, “*For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life . . .*” (Deut 32:47a). “*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him. . .*” (Deut 30:19-20a).

II. The Sermon Structure is to be consistent with the change God requires.

A. Locate the ‘burden of the text’—what is the change required by God? Hermeneutics commends outlining as the needed skill for uncovering the divine logical sequence from which the biblical author argues for the believer’s obedience. The great advantage of outlining is this: it helps us to establish the sequence of points that are in the text—it forces us to find the inspired logic in the passage. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the biblical writers formed the *burden of the text* through *inspired logic*—‘because of this; therefore this’. When you outline, it can help you see that logical sequence. For example: the following over-simplified outline from Hebrews chapter ten is still immensely helpful in uncovering that inspired logical sequence in the text:

1. The will of God from eternity (*Christ says, a body Thou hast prepared for Me; it is written in the roll of the book of Me, vv. 5-6*).

2. Christ doing the will of the Father to save (*I have come to earth to do Thy will, v. 7*).

3. The believer doing the will of God in the New Covenant (*the remainder of Heb 10*).

Simple as it is, it can be a great help in communicating the burden of the text (the inspired logic which calls for our full obedience). Then, when we preach, everything changes because we are incorporating the structure that is *already in the text* and not a structure which we have superimposed on the text. Following the structure laid down by the biblical author is like riding a horse through mountainous terrain—we faithfully follow the scriptural ‘topography’ or landscape set before us. Don’t just empty your bag of gold collected from Bible commentaries. The faithful work you need to do will make sure that your message is ‘text-driven’ instead of a devotional exercise.^v

As Bible teachers and preacher, we are God’s instruments to communicate the biblical author’s intent as accurately as possible—and that intent includes *the burden of the text*—and *the divine logic* associated with *the burden of the text*. Your listener must feel the full weight of the burden of the text. Does your passage give the arguments for obedience? Does it give you the consequences of disobedience? Does it give you the benefits of obedience? If so, be sure to include these clearly in your sermon.

B. Connect the biblical world with the world of your listener. The text cannot mean today what it did not mean to its original readers, therefore we must do the careful

interpretive work to uncover how the passage would have been understood by the original readers. This drives our interpretive process and allows us to handle the text faithfully before making a present day application. The process looks like this: locate the timeless truth found in the passage; then cycle back and forth in your message between the biblical readers and your present hearers—between the biblical world and your listener’s world (this is the kind of *contextualizing* that is faithful to the text).^{vi}

Step 1: Grasp the text in *their town*; what did the text mean to the biblical audience?

Step 2: Measure the width of the ‘river to cross’. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

Step 3: Cross the principlizing bridge; find the timeless theological principle in the text.

Step 4: Consult the biblical map. How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible? Does the NT teaching modify or qualify the principle, and if so, how?

Step 5: Grasp the text in *our town*, in the 21st Century. How should individual Christians today live out this theological principle?^{vii}

C. Draw a line to the gospel. In other words, explain what God is requiring of us in the text and spell out why we cannot, and will not do it apart from the power of God in the gospel and enabling grace through the Spirit of Christ. A truly evangelical message will have these three points in some form: *what God rightfully requires of us; why we resist—why we will not and cannot do it by ourselves; what we can and should be through His grace in Christ.*^{viii}

“Christ and Him crucified” is our canon within the canon. Like the hub of a wheel, “Christ and Him crucified” is the center—all other truth radiates out like spokes from the center. If you are preaching on brotherly love, or hospitality, make sure you trace that ‘spoke’ back to its origin, “Christ and Him crucified.” As Spurgeon said, "I take my text, and make a bee-line to the cross." C. H. Spurgeon's blessed ministry was grounded in the Holy Scripture of 1st Corinthians 1:23-24 "*But we preach CHRIST CRUCIFIED, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.*"

D. Find your ‘voice’ when delivering the sermon. Your listeners need to know your pace, your use of pauses, your ability to modulate your voice to make key points. Don’t be in a hurry to get through with your material. Your listeners are hearing it for the first time. Use pauses wisely so that they have time to follow your train of thought. Let the truth be fully assimilated by them. That will mean finding several ways to say the same thing. Do not fear repetition—it is a powerful teaching tool—find ways to say the same truth in

different ways. Therefore, pick your transitions carefully (a *transition* links one point to the next). When you finish a point explain why it logically leads to the next point.^{ix}

E. Illustrate and prove each of your sermon points. In order to adequately develop each point in your outline, be sure to follow these steps—each point should ideally have each of these elements:

- Point (*from your biblical outline of the text*)
- Proof (*from Scripture passages*)
- Picture (*illustration or example*)
- Practice (*application*)

Your sermon must rise above bare concept. In other words, you must also tell your listeners what obedience looks like in their everyday lives. Therefore, carefully develop the *how to* in your message—show them *how to* remove the impediments to change.

F. Write an introduction to your sermon that exposes the area of disobedience, ignorance, error, unbelief, or rebellion answered by the text. Go the Scriptures with the biblical assumption that every text of Scripture is meant to answer some form of unbelief, ignorance, or disobedience. Your introduction is even more important than your conclusion. Your introduction establishes the need for what you will be preaching. By the time you finish your introduction, your listener should be saying to himself, “This is exactly what I need!” What problem in our Christian life is addressed decisively by the text?^x That is what your introduction will spell out. Though an over-simplification, one southern preacher summarized his approach as, “tell ‘em what you’re going to say (introduction); say it (sermon); then tell ‘em what you said (conclusion).”

G. Write your conclusion with a compelling call to action. Your conclusion is how you ‘land the plane’ so to speak. Your conclusion should present your listener with a kind of fork in the road. The conclusion ought to stir your listener so that his or her inner thought is, “Where do I sign?” Therefore find language that calls for a decision: “What will you do with what you have heard?” “Do you know what God is requiring of you now?” “We have seen how the Word removes our excuses for disobedience.” Continue to apply the burden of the text with exposure of the ‘hiding places’ where men excuse themselves from obedience.

Your conclusion ought to contain a persuasive accounting of the benefits of obedience. Your conclusion is your last chance to overcome what we call the “so what

factor.” “So what—why should I abandon my comfort and do anything differently?”

Your conclusion is a call to repent, and head in new direction of faith and obedience. Grace in Christ drives all of this. You want to avoid being a moralist preacher. The hero of every text is God in Christ—God’s plan, His Kingdom, His glory. Tell us who God is in the text and why God and the believer are mentioned in the same text.

End Notes:

ⁱ Alex Montoya, “Expository Preaching,” The Master’s Seminary

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Don McDougall, “Exegesis of 1 Corinthians,” The Master’s Seminary

^{vi} John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*

^{vii} J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, Reviewed by Tony Caffey Illinois, USA

^{viii} Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered Sermons*

^{ix} Albert Martin, *The Forgotten Fear: Where have all the God-fearers gone?*

^x Montoya