

FROM THE STUDYMARCH 11, 2020 MARCH 10, 2020 DEREK J. BROWN PASTORAL MINISTRY

The Pastor's Preparation: 10 Encouragements

If you are a pastor, you should desire to preach well and consistently improve your preaching. Paul expected that Timothy's listeners should be able to recognize growth in this young pastor's ministry as he immersed himself in his work (1 Tim 4:15), and our people should be able to perceive the same progress in us.

Beyond this, we should simply want our teaching to be increasingly effective the our people's lives. While it's true that spiritual growth is *ultimately* God's work (1 Cor 3:6), it does not follow that we should therefore neglect to improve the vehicle by which God delivers the Word. Pastors who love their people should seek and pray that their mouths would be fountains of life that consistently bless the church (Prov 13:14).

When we think about how to make strides in our preaching skill, it is certainly right to consider the mechanics of delivery. Have we developed distracting habits in the pulpit that keep people from focusing on the content because they are too concerned about how many times we picked our nose or stroked our beard or played with our wedding ring. Do I speak too fast? Too slow? Do I move around too much? Am I articulating clearly or regularly misspeaking? These are all questions we should ask as we seek to improve our preaching.

But much of our improvement in preaching will come by improving our *preparation*.

Why is preparation the primary means to better preaching? Because it is in the preparation phase that we become deeply familiar with biblical text, we acquire useful knowledge for ourselves and our people, we take time to create outlines that help our people follow the argument of the message, we ponder over the most clarifying and useful choice of words, and we choose illustrations that facilitate genuine spiritual understanding and obedience. Fail to cultivate an effective pattern of preparation and you undermine your entire sermon and the very purpose for which God ordained preaching: the edification of the body and the salvation of sinners.

So, what are some practical ways to improve our preparation?

(1) Block Out Large Chunks of Undistracted Time

In his book, *Deep Work* (https://www.amazon.com/Deep-Work-Focused-Success-Distracted/dp/1455586692/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=Deep+Work&qid=1583366105&sr=8-2), author Cal Newport rightly observes that valuable work can only be produced by those who set aside sustained time to focus on their project. While scheduling large chunks of time is no guarantee that you will prepare well (you may still fritter away your time watching YouTube videos or shopping the REI clearance sale), high quality sermons cannot usually be crafted in short bursts of activity.

You might object that large chunks of time are pastoral luxuries you simply don't have due to all the other responsibilities you bear each week. While it is true that most hard working pastors will often have full schedules, the truth is that you don't have the luxury to *refuse* to establish and guard significant segments of time for your sermon preparation. While preaching is not the sum of pastoral ministry, it is a vital part and must be given adequate attention. Paul made it clear in his letters to Timothy that he was to give himself to the task of preaching and teaching (1 Tim 1:3; 3:2; 4:11, 13, 16; 6:2; 2 Tim 2:2; 2:24; 3:16; 4:2; see also Titus 1:9; 2:1, 7) which included, by necessity, the work of diligent preparation (2 Tim 2:15).

In light of the New Testament imperative to labor in our teaching preparations, it is in our congregations *best interest* to not allow our preparation time to suffer at the whim of every possible need. In God's providence, genuine emergencies do arise that may throw our schedule into disarray; but we must make sure that the events we allow to grab our attention are just that: genuine emergencies and cases of urgent need. Generally speaking, however, we need to jealously guard our preparation times; not out of selfishness and the need to "be by ourselves," but in order to create an environment in which we can craft biblically-rich sermons that will bless our people and sustain them in the day of trial.

(2) Cultivate the Ability to Concentrate for Long Periods

A related discipline we need to develop is the discipline of concentration. While I don't want to naively harken back to the good ole' days of desktop computers and landlines (or quills and candlelight), it does seem that more than ever we are a people who are unable to rivet our attention on mentally challenging work for any significant amount of time. Cell phones and social media have fed our addiction to distraction and slowly eroded our capacity to focus on our tasks—especially the hard ones—for serious amounts of time.

Pastors must lead the way in recapturing the lost discipline of concentration. It seems to be a universal truth that quality of insight is directly related to the quantity of sustained time over which we focus on a passage, illustration, or theological conundrum. I really believe that there are a lot of pastors today whose preaching would improve ten-fold within just two weeks if they simply disciplined themselves to not look at anything but their preaching text (no phone, no Instagram, no email, no Facebook, no news, no Twitter, no ESPN, no YouTube, no Home Depot) for an hour at a time over the course of the three to four hour blocks they have established for sermon preparation. Don't believe me? Try it.

(3) Write During Each Step of the Preparation Process

You may not fancy yourself a writer, and you may not have any grand plans to write a book, but if you are a preacher and teacher of God's Word, then you must become, at some level, a writer. Why? Because writing is the most effective means to think carefully over your text, form and capture insights from your study, sharpen your understanding of the truth, and develop a well-organized message. As you write, you will grow in clarity and stimulate your mind to bore deeper into the text and all its implications and applications.

Writing, therefore, should not only be the final step in your process; it should attend each stage of preparation, from exegesis, to research, to final manuscript. I am afraid that much time is wasted and much insight lost because we don't write nearly as much as we should during our sermon preparations. We enter the pulpit in an intellectual fog because we didn't persevere into a state clarity the week before or we deliver to our people only a fraction of what the Spirit taught us during our study, all because we didn't discipline to write as we studied.

(4) Go Deep into the Word of God

Sadly, there are sermons that are being preached on Sundays that lack effectiveness because they lack biblical depth. While that's true (and grievous), I'm not taking aim at those who avoid depth for the sake of numerical growth. Rather, I want to challenge those who already believe that Scripture should be expounded in all its richness and depth to make the text of Scripture the place where you spend the most time.

I am grateful for the many teachers God has given the church whose wisdom I can access through commentaries and books. I owe much of my spiritual from what I've learned through these resources, and I will continue to seek their help and wisdom daily. Nevertheless, in light of the massive number of books available today, it is important to observe that the mere multiplication of resources does not necessarily lead to greater clarity or confidence with the text. In fact, too much time spent in secondary resources can actually hinder communication because the teacher, having been drawn away by a 100 opinions, is no longer confident in what the text is actually teaching.

Now, I'm not making any rules about how many secondary resources we should consult in our weekly study—we need to know ourselves and recognize when we are actually frustrating our learning rather than facilitating it—but I am saying that we need to make the text of Scripture our primary workplace.

Let's face it. We only have a limited amount of time each week, even if our church allows us many hours with which to prepare our sermons. While it is simply arrogant to not utilize secondary sources to aid our study and safeguard our the interpretive process, we also need invest our time and energy into the place the promises the greatest payout. Digging into a passage, spending time making observations, asking penetrating questions, and drawing out as much knowledge as we can from that particular text will promote intellectual clarity and enable you to offer your people powerful insight from the Word of God because you've grappled with it first-hand.

(5) Work Hard on the Shape and Structure of the Message

There some well-trained pastors out there who are putting in the time to carefully exegete their passage and conduct the research required to understand the meaning of Scripture. Unfortunately, those same pastors often bring mediocre messages because they mistakenly think that *research* is the only necessary component of effective sermon preparation. As a result, their sermons, though full of biblical, theological, and historical content, are often lacking in illuminating illustration, trenchant application, and pedagogically effective points and sub-points.

For those of us who enjoy studying Scripture and learning more and more of God and his Word, we will likely find the research phase of sermon preparation especially enjoyable; it just isn't real difficult to dive headlong into Scripture and a pile of books with the goal to gleaning as much for our minds and hearts as we can.

But if we are not careful, we may neglect to put in the same amount of time and effort into crafting the actual sermon—introduction, argument, illustrations, applications, conclusion—because that part of the preparation isn't as fun as the research part. We might even deceive ourselves into thinking that such effort isn't necessary because the content is what matters; delivery is secondary.

But the sermon isn't a mere data dump. As we see in Jesus' messages, effective sermons are well-crafted and brimming with rich illustration and relevant application. Paul told Timothy to “preach the word” which included the necessary work of rebuking and correcting and teaching (2 Tim 4:2). Pastors must labor over the actual sermon itself as much as they do the biblical content they hope to communicate.

(6) Use the Time that You do Have

Having encouraged you to mark out blocks of time for sermon preparation and study, I want to offer a balancing word. While it should be your general pattern to carve out time for sustained study, there may be weeks where you are afforded less time than usual. When this is the case, you may be tempted to throw your hands in the air and simply anticipate that this week's sermon is going to be weak and underdeveloped. Fight that temptation.

The hidden danger in having a consistent blocks of undistracted time each week is that we are tempted to fail to use smaller amounts of time profitably. “It takes me at least an hour to get things humming in my study,” you protest. “This extra fifteen minutes I just got because this meeting ended early is better spent scrolling Twitter.”

I agree that longer amounts of time are ideal when it comes to study and sermon preparation. But Paul's admonition to redeem the time didn't come with the caveat: “When that time is sixty minutes or more” (Eph 5:15). Got an extra few minutes? Pull out your Bible and your [Field Notes](https://www.amazon.com/Field-Notes-Kraft-Ruled-3-Pack/dp/B0034KDEMO/ref=sr_1_4?crid=1600XDR11LR4I&keywords=field+notes&qid=1583535045&srefix=Field+Notes%2Caps%2C331&sr=8-4) (https://www.amazon.com/Field-Notes-Kraft-Ruled-3-Pack/dp/B0034KDEMO/ref=sr_1_4?crid=1600XDR11LR4I&keywords=field+notes&qid=1583535045&srefix=Field+Notes%2Caps%2C331&sr=8-4) and write down some insights from or questions about your passage. Waiting for your child at the dentist? Start thinking over your outline. Going on a run? Listen to a sermon on your text. Whatever you do, make the most of the time you do have each week and don't let your preparation get derailed when your schedule does.

(7) Go from Manuscript to Outline

I understand that the kind of notes we bring to the pulpit is an aspect of preaching that is clearly a matter of preference. Nevertheless, I want to make the case for why a preacher should prepare a full manuscript then take only an outline into the pulpit.

First, writing a manuscript forces you to think carefully over the sermon's structure, argument, illustrations, and word choice. Writing out your whole sermon helps you form sharp, penetrating sentences, transitional statements, introductions, and conclusions. As I noted above, these are vital components to the sermon. But given these wonderful advantages to writing out a full manuscript, taking that manuscript into the pulpit can constantly pull your attention away from the *people* in the congregation onto the *pages* in the pulpit.

It's usually apparent when a man is preaching from a manuscript: he is often looking down for several seconds and reading long portions of text from his notes. This practice, in my judgment, hinders the pastor's connection with his people and makes me wonder *what about this sermon would have been different had his people just read it in a book?* Indeed, there *must* be something unique about the preaching event that sets it apart from the practice of reading or we could save ourselves forty-five minutes each Sunday and just hand out printed copies of our sermons after singing, giving, and the Lord's Supper.

My preference is to write out my sermon in full but then to create a two-page outline to take into the pulpit. I only go with two pages because I want to be able to see the whole sermon structure from beginning to end as I preach. This outline usually consists of all my major points plus sentences or paragraphs I want to make sure I say exactly as they are written. Nevertheless, having already read the manuscript several times, I have become intimately familiar with the content of the message and much of the wording. The outline, however, frees me to regularly look at the people as I am preaching.

(8) Prayerfully Absorb the Material as You Prepare

A pastor who is not affected by what he preaches will find that his preaching will lack spiritual effectiveness, and he will likely not last long in the ministry. Truth is best transferred through a sanctified conduit, and when we spend hours in biblical study but fail to prayerfully embrace the truth by faith, our hearts will experience a hardening and dullness and the manner of our communication will reflect these internal deficiencies. Even if we can fake it for a season, our spiritual anemia will eventually become apparent to our people by our unholy and unloving conduct.

The weekly study of Scripture should be for the pastor a time of worship, conviction, encouragement, and personal spiritual growth in God's Word. The best preachers are not those with the most dynamic personalities or superior natural speaking talents; they are men who have met with the living God, learned deeply from his Word, and are now sharing with his people what he has gleaned from his devotionally rigorous study the week prior. Let's carefully heed John Owen's comments at this point:

A man preacheth that sermon only well unto others which preacheth itself in his own soul. And he that doth not feed on and thrive in the digestion of the food which he provides for others will scarce make it savoury unto them; yea, he knows not but the food he hath provided may be poison, unless he have really tasted of it himself. If the word do not dwell with power *in* us, it will not pass with power *from* us."

Works of John Owen, Vol. 16:76.

(9) Trim Your Hobbies

Praise God that he provides us with opportunities to pursue and enjoy wholesome recreation and hobbies. But how many hobbies can a man sustain when he has a family and a church to serve? When spread too thin over hobbies and obligations, the pastor must start trimming, and the trimming begins with the hobbies, not the obligations. If you fear that you may miss out on the good things of life if you don't "take some time for yourself," remember that you are headed (<https://fromthestudy.com/2016/04/15/say-goodbye-to-your-bucket-list/>), to a new earth that will be

bursting with sanctified recreation, exploration, and discovery. Let me assure you that you will not regret giving yourself to your church and to your family in this life, even if it means that your friends on Facebook are going on more international ski trips than you are. Yes, enjoy recreation to the glory of God, but pursue hobbies that refresh you and prepare you to get back to work, and don't make them the centerpiece of your life.

(10) Walk in Holiness

Finally, we end with the exhortation to seek a life of holiness. I don't mention this point last because it is the least important, but because I want you to remember it after you finish this article.

Everything I've just said about our preparation procedure will bear little fruit if we are not seeking, just as diligently, to walk in faith and obedience with Jesus Christ. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that our failure to pursue holiness will inevitably dilute our teaching ability. Unchecked pride skews our interpretational judgment (John 5:39-44); a love of money darkens our spiritual sight (Matt 6:22-23); bitterness toward our wives hinders our prayers (1 Pet 3:7); lust wages war against our souls (1 Pet 2:11). We can spend 50 hours a week in diligent study and preparation, but if we don't have not love, and our efforts will end in nothing (1 Cor 13:1-3).

If we desire for our preparation efforts to bear the fruit of better preaching, our pulpit ministry must be coupled with an authentic life of devotion to Christ. Without this, we best stay out of the pulpit altogether.

Conclusion

So, brothers, make some intentional plans today to improve your sermon preparation. If you expend genuine, Spirit-wrought effort here, God will bless your work and your people will enjoy the fruit of well-crafted, deeply biblical, penetrating sermons (Prov 16:3). You will find your own soul affected as you bore into Scripture week after week, and your ministry will likely be again endued with joy and passion.

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