

## Nine Lessons from the Preaching Ministry of Jesus

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"Lord, teach us to preach!" We wish the disciples had made such a request. We could have all benefited from some practical pointers on preaching from the Master Preacher. Yet, as we examine the life and teachings of Jesus, we discover several pointers that can revolutionize our preaching ministry.

### Preach in the power of the Holy Spirit

Jesus clearly testified that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed Him to preach (Luke 4:18). Would it be too bold to assert that we have no place preaching the Word of God until we have first been anointed by the Spirit of God? Jesus told His preaching students to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4, 5, 8). After the heavenly anointing at Pentecost, the followers of Jesus went out to preach in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A case in point is Stephen the deacon, who is described as "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5), and also as "full of faith and power" (verse 8). When Stephen preached, his hearers "were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke" (verse 10). Even Stephen's nonverbal communication was an irrefutable witness: "And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel" (verse 15). His life demonstrated that when preachers are filled with the Holy Spirit, they are full of power. You will preach with a holy boldness (Acts 4:29-31; 13:6-12).

### Bathe your sermon preparation and delivery in prayer

Jesus, the Master Preacher, devoted large amounts of time to prayer. As He prepared to preach in the synagogues throughout Galilee, Jesus rose early in the morning, departed to a solitary place, and prayed (Mark 1:35-39). Prior to preaching His strategic sermon on the bread of life, Jesus spent hours in prayer (Matt. 14:23-25). For Jesus, preaching and prayer were intricately connected.

The preaching students of Jesus realized that those who minister the Word must also devote themselves to prayer (Acts 6:4). The intense season of prayer by the followers of Jesus prior to Pentecost was not only an essential preparation for the Spirit's anointing; it was also an essential preparation for powerful preaching. The apostle Paul affirmed the importance of prayer in sermon preparation and delivery when he made the special request for intercessory prayer "that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19). He understood that without prayer he could not "speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (verse 20).

The dearth of powerful biblical preaching among us is directly related to the lack of powerful praying. Peter's denial of Jesus in the high priest's palace courtyard illustrates the troubling truth that we will have no powerful testimony about Jesus to share with others if we have been sleeping when we should have been praying. The lesson is clear. Pray for God's guidance before you begin your sermon preparation. Pray while you prepare your sermon. Pray while you preach. Learn from the example of Jesus that powerful preaching is prayed down, not worked up. Bathe your sermon preparation and delivery in prayer.

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## **Preach the Word of God, instead of human opinions**

Jesus proclaimed the Word of God, both in word and in life. He boldly declared “the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me” (John 14:24). And again, as He prayed for His disciples, Jesus testified to His Father, “I have given them Your Word” (John 17:14). The preaching students of Jesus understood the importance of sharing God’s Word, rather than their own opinions.

The apostles “spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31) and “the word of God spread” (Acts 6:7). People need to hear God’s Word, not our opinions. What God has to say is more important than what we have to say.

We hear far too many sermons today that give only a nod to the Word of God. These days biblical sermons with contemporary illustrations have become contemporary sermons with occasional biblical illustrations. The result is a lack of power in the pulpit and a lack of transformation in the church. These sermons may be entertaining, they may be interesting, but they will affect no lasting change.

## **Communicate God’s grace**

When Jesus preached, He did not simply speak about the grace of God. He actually communicated the grace of God. Luke records that in response to the preaching of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth, His hearers “marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth” (Luke 4:22). This audience feedback is a testimony not to the finesse of His oral expression, but rather is a response to the essence of His speech. Jesus was “full of grace” (John 1:14), and when He preached, He communicated the grace of God.

One of the most powerful words of grace from the preaching ministry of Jesus is found in a sermon preached at night to an audience of one: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:16, 17).

The preaching students of Jesus understood that they were sent out to communicate the grace of God. The apostle Peter began his message to the pilgrims of the dispersion with the words “Grace to you” (1 Pet. 1:2). The apostle Paul began his messages on numerous occasions with the words “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:2). He reminds us to “let your speech always be with grace” (Col. 4:6), teach and admonish one another “with grace in your hearts” (Col. 3:16), and “impart grace to the hearers” (Eph. 4:29). Every sermon should communicate a clear word of grace. It is the grace of God that brings hope. It is true that every sermon should also contain a clear word of judgment, but even the word of judgment should be communicated with grace in our hearts.

## **Be aware of your audience**

Jesus demonstrated a remarkable awareness of His audience. He understood that effective communication is dialogue, rather than mere monologue. Jesus addressed issues that were on the minds of His hearers (Matt. 24:3; Luke 10:39). He engaged His audience in interaction through the use of questions (Luke 10:36). On at least one occasion, He actually allowed someone’s rude interruption to redirect the course of His sermon (Luke 12:13-21).

Jesus was attentive to both the verbal and nonverbal feedback from His listeners. During His sermon at Nazareth, Jesus discerned the nonverbal messages of those present. The body language that accompanied the comment “Is this not Joseph’s son?” suggested a resistant spirit and a lack of faith. Responding to this audience feedback, Jesus said, “You will surely say this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal your- self!’” (Luke 4:23). He then shifted the focus of His sermon from a proclamation of the acceptable year of the Lord to the importance of faith.

The preaching students of Jesus learned the importance of being aware of the audience. Those present on the day of Pentecost entered into dialogue with Peter as he preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. Having boldly proclaimed that “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36), Peter paused to listen to the feedback of his hearers. Their comment, “What shall we do?” did not mark the end of Peter’s sermon. Rather it was an essential part of the sermon. Remember, all effective communication is dialogue.

A preacher cannot be oblivious to feedback from the audience. Peter continued, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of

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the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). And again, Peter showed sensitivity to audience feedback. The final move of his sermon happened in the water, when about 3,000 people were baptized! That baptism was an integral part of the sermon, a visible evidence of a life-changing dialogue with God.

### **Use a simple, memorable statement**

On the day after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus preached a powerful sermon. He used a simple, memorable statement to drive home His main idea: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). We can learn several important lessons from the crafting of this main idea. First, it is a simple sentence. Second, it is stated in the positive, rather than the negative.

Unfortunately, we don’t have an audio or video recording of this watershed sermon of Jesus, but communicators agree that there are several oral interpretation skills that can be used to emphasize the main idea in a sermon. Jesus may have changed His rate of delivery when He said, “I am the bread of life.” He may have added a pause, or thoughtful silence. Doing this highlights the idea as important and provides an opportunity for hearers to reflect upon it. Jesus may also have used a variation of force, or volume, in order to flag this idea, as He did on another occasion (John 7:37).

### **Use repetition and restatement**

Jesus not only crafted a simple, memorable statement in order to drive home His main idea, but He also used repetition for added emphasis. It takes a skilled communicator to state the single dominant thought only once in a sermon and have the hearers recognize it and remember it. In the bread of life sermon, Jesus repeated His main idea at least once (John 6:35, 48). He also restated His main idea by paraphrasing it on several occasions during the sermon, saying, “I am the bread which came down from heaven” (verse 41), and “I am the living bread” (verse 51). If repetition and restatement were important to Jesus in order to drive home the main idea of His sermon, they are even more important in a day when attentive listening is rapidly becoming a lost art. We must make certain the simple, memorable statement of the sermon is clearly heard.

### **Find practical illustrations**

Jesus was a master illustrator of spiritual truth. He frequently used practical illustrations from everyday life to convey spiritual truth. On one occasion when Jesus was speaking to His disciples, He called a young child to stand in the midst of them. What a brilliant way to focus their attention! Here was a living illustration of the truth Jesus was about to convey. Then Jesus said to the disciples, “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3).

Jesus developed a reputation as a preacher who drew practical illustrations from everyday life. Matthew records that “Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them” (Matt. 13:34). He spoke about casting nets, sowing seed, and losing sheep. Jesus understood that the best illustrations are found where the speaker’s world and the listener’s world intersect. When Jesus spoke about crop yield, His agrarian audience did not have to decode His message. They were well acquainted with the problems of troublesome birds, rocks, thistles, and shallow root systems. If Jesus was teaching a class on preaching in the twenty-first century, He would undoubtedly encourage His students to draw practical illustrations from power tools, portfolios, and 20 gig hard drives.

There is no such thing as a good illustration—only a good illustration of some- thing. So we should select practical illustrations from everyday life that reinforce and shed light on the main idea of the sermon. All other anecdotes, as wonderful as they might sound, are simply extraneous noise that can do more harm than good. We are not called to entertain with a smorgasbord of interesting stories. Rather, we are called to proclaim a life-changing Word. A wise preacher will learn from the example of Jesus and use relevant, practical illustrations from everyday life to help accomplish that sacred task.

### **Call for radical life change**

Jesus spoke “as one having authority” (Matt. 7:29). He preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, sharing the Word of God rather than His own opinions, but He also called for radical life change. At the conclusion of His historic Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged His hearers to apply the truths they had heard to their

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own lives. It was a call to action, a call for radical life change. Jesus said, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt. 7:24). Conversely, “everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand” (Matt. 7:26). Preachers are commissioned not simply to convey information, but to call for obedience and transformation.

While it is certainly true that transformation is God’s work, not ours, we are called to join God in His work. When the Word of God has been faithfully proclaimed, a call for radical life change is not only a privilege—it is a responsibility. Peter made no apology when he called for radical life change at the conclusion of his sermon. The call was to repent, be baptized, and be saved from this perverse generation (Acts 2:38-40).

It seems that today some preachers are afraid to call for radical life change. They are afraid to appear arrogant or authoritarian. But truth, by its very nature, is authoritative. Truth inevitably excludes all that is error. A hearing of the truth of God’s Word necessitates a response. There is no place for manipulation, coercion, or emotional hype. However, we learn from the example of Jesus that when truth has been proclaimed, it is appropriate to call for radical life change. That call should be simple and clear. The result will be a transforming experience both for us as preachers and for our hearers.

### **About the Author**

Derek J. Morris is editor of *Ministry*, an International Journal for Pastors.