

Can a Sermon Be Effective? / COB / 02.08.15

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: Hirsute?]** How many of you know what hirsute means? Hairy or hair covered. So one Sunday, someone with a good vocabulary either was working hard to process the story of Jacob and Esau or perhaps was mocking the preacher. Since the card was left to make its way to me, I lean toward the latter. So I have kept it to post on my bulletin board along with the more kind offerings you have given me, because it makes me smile every time I see it.
- I would admonish you: **1 Timothy 5.17 NET: Elders who provide effective leadership must be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in speaking and teaching.**
 - So you shouldn't mock me, but I accept this with humor. And it has led to two good results. First, I cut my hair so it wouldn't look like that anymore. Second it reminded me of something I learned when teaching economics. People will drift off to daydream, sleep, pass notes, whisper, or draw pictures, if I am not effective at engaging them. And that means they will not get much out of the sermon. I have been giving that some thought.
- † I also have been reflecting and praying about whether each of you is growing spiritually. I have been here as pastor and preacher for nineteen months. Am I having an impact?
- Some of you have told me about how God has spoken to you through the sermons, and that is exciting. Others of you have not talked with me about it, but nevertheless have shown real signs of growth, and that too is exciting.
 - Others of you seem less moved. Without being hard on myself, because I know it really is up to God to work within you, I have been considering how I might be more effective for more of you.
 - **James 3.1 NET: Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly.**
 - I take this verse seriously, which is why I always am working to improve at teaching.
- † So I want to engage you better and I want to be more effective for you. And honestly, I am exhausted by this study of Jesus' last supper discourse.
- His words are so intense and so important, that studying them, reflecting on them, and preaching them has left me emotionally and cognitively drained.
 - So I want to take a break from the gospel of John this week and think about how you can get more out of my sermons and how I can be more effective at helping you.
 - Let's pray first and seek some help from above...

Going Deeper to Get All the Word

- † **[Slide 2: Cognitive]** When you study to be a teacher, one thing you learn is that your teaching should engage the student at three levels, it should engage in ways that are cognitive, affective, and behavioral. What this means is I should give you some information for your brain to process, I should lead you into caring about it, and I should guide you into what to do with it.

- † I think most churches are really good at one or another of these. What would you say was the strength in most Bible churches? usually cognitive, right? Bible churches are known for accurate Bible teaching. So people in these churches should understand the Bible very well.
- But I have met people who knew the Bible far better than I do, but had not let it change their character or life. Any of you know people like that? That's not good! We do not want a group of educated pew sitters, we want people who absorb the teachings of Jesus, take them to heart, and experience change in their character and lifestyle.
 - Other risks in these churches are a dry sense of relationship with God, a dispassionate approach to worship, an unwillingness to get hands dirty with evangelism or helping the poor, and a legalistic culture in the church. We want to protect against any of that taking root here.
 - **Titus 2.1 NET: But as for you, communicate the behavior that goes with sound teaching.**
 - It's not enough to pass on Bible knowledge; that's a valuable thing to do, but it's not enough.
- † Some churches are really effective at the affective. Any church might be, depending on its leadership, but I think especially of Charismatic and Pentecostal churches here. They often are characterized by outgoing evangelistic people, who are strongly passionate in worship and life.
- If a church is strong only in the affective, however, then people are easily deceived by mistaking their emotions for the Spirit's prompting, are easily deceived by false teachings, might even be getting fed false teachings in the church, and are not sure how to really conform to Christ beyond being passionate for him.
 - **2 Peter 2.1 NET: But false prophets arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. These false teachers will infiltrate your midst with destructive heresies, even to the point of denying the Master who bought them.**
 - There are churches that deny the divinity of Christ. Not all false teachings and deceptions are heresy, but they are destructive nonetheless. I don't want you to be dispassionate about worship, but I don't want to see you belly flopping down the aisle while barking like a dog either.
- † It really is important for a church to be strong in all three areas, in what they do and how they teach. I try to share with you what God is saying in a biblical passage and help you see how I observe that. I try to help you find reasons to care, because of your love for Christ, your desire for blessing, your sense of obedience, something. And then I try to help you see what you should do in response.
- If you are teaching a child not to touch the stove top, you don't just give the command right? I think of Noah and Robyn, two strong willed children. Half the time, the command alone will further entice the child to try touching the stove top. So, you give the command, but you explain why the child should care – because there is a risk of getting hurt – and you explain the facts the child needs to have in order to care – the stove top is hot – and then there is a chance that your child will obey.
- † LeeAnn and I grew together in a seeker-sensitive community church, which was a little weak in its Bible teaching, but super strong at the behavioral element. It got us involved and trained in ministry, it got us involved in small groups and showed us the potential for biblical community, it motivated and trained us for evangelism and missions, and in many other ways it blessed us as we grew stronger in faith and walk.

- All their sermons were application oriented. So you could learn five ways to more effective prayer or five ways to be a better spouse. But there were some problems to their teaching approach. For one thing, they often were guilty of taking verses out of context. We need to learn what God is saying in scripture, not make his words fit what we want to say. These are two big mistakes in many churches: taking scripture out of context so as to lose its true meaning, and – even worse – purposely manipulating God’s Word to say what we want it to say, which is bad even if what we want to say seems good, like five ways to better parenting.
- Paul wrote that Timothy should **“Preach the word” [2 Timothy 4.2]**, not “preach human wisdom,” “preach popular psychology,” “preach feel good positive thinking.”
- Another problem we had was the sermons stayed at a very shallow level. At first, this probably helped us. We could understand every statement in the sermon and how it all fit together. But after three years, we had heard all they had to say. With shallow sermons and untrained small group leaders, it was common in that church to grow fast and then stutter into a slow decline, because we were not continuing to get fed from God’s Word.
- Because the teachings were shallow, we never learned the deeper things of God. We never learned how the Bible all fits together, what its running themes are. We never learned the details of what salvation does for us, what God’s vision and methods are for growing believers to maturity, what God’s plan is for the end times, or even much about the nature of God himself. When I went to seminary, I was astounded at how much I did not know, after nine years in that church!
- And there is one more problem with their approach. If we teach you all the things you should do to be a better Christian, but we never teach you about God, we never teach you the theology, then we really are asking you to change in your own power. And you can only go so far with that. If the Holy Spirit cannot interact in you with the deep theology of God’s revelation, to renew your mind and transform your character, then eventually you are going to stagnate and decline.

† **[Slide 3: gospel]** If you read Paul’s letters in the New Testament, you will find he almost always includes the gospel, even though he is writing to believers. I’m sure part of his motivation was to ensure they had the gospel correct in those churches, but I think there was another reason too.

- All the commands Paul wanted to give those churches were derived from correct theology and all the theology was derived from the gospel. The gospel leads to correct theology which leads to knowing how to live.
- So knowing the gospel of Christ coming to die to offer sinners grace, Paul can write the theology in **Romans 3.23-24 NET: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**
- And that in turn is the basis for commands such as **“Do not be proud” [Romans 12.16 NIV]**, why? because you have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; or **“Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer” [Romans 12.12]**, why? because you know you are justified and redeemed by grace through Christ.
- Paul would not make the mistake of giving commands without providing the theological reasons behind them. He knew that would not be very effective for two reasons: he had to convince them to care about the commands and they had to understand why God gave those commands if they were going to experience transformation by the Holy Spirit.

- † I have not preached to you through one of Paul’s letters, but we had one sermon on 2 Timothy, and we have gone verse by verse through 1 Peter, Ruth, some Psalms, and much of the gospel of John.
- You will find, if you go back and look, that those biblical books connect the commands to the theology which ultimately comes back to the truths about who God is and what he wants to do for us. So as I preach, I try to give you application, but only after I have connected these dots for you. This is true even in topical sermons: I try to show you why, not just what you should do.

Issues to Overcome

- † **[Slide 4: chart]** Well if I am such a great preacher, why are some of you not benefiting as much as we both would like? I have a few thoughts on that which might help me become a better preacher and you become a better listener.
- † I would ask you to realize that I am preaching to dozens of people who range from non-believer to mature spiritual leader and from middle-school student to intellectual adult.
- When I taught in a community college, I had students who could have gone to the best colleges in the country, I had students who should not have graduated from middle school, and most were in between somewhere. I had to try to make economics interesting and relevant for all of them. I think I did well at that, but obviously the smarter students often already knew what I was saying and the more challenged students sometimes did not understand the deeper things I said. I think that is ok, so long as they all got something out of each class.
 - Here, we have the range in intellects and the range in spirituality to consider. Colby & Josh are in seventh grade and in their first year of adult church. I could preach so that they could understand everything I say, but then each of you eventually would get too smart and too spiritually mature to benefit from the sermons.
 - I could aim my teachings only at the top or maybe only at the average believer, but there are drawbacks there too. So my approach is to teach what the passage says, knowing that some of you already know the basics and others of you will not yet grasp all the deeper things; and I think that is ok.
 - The problem arises when you get bored or frustrated and so you tune me out; maybe even draw pictures of me. I want you to understand it is ok if you sometimes are bored, it is ok if you sometimes are frustrated or confused. I hope this understanding will help you persevere to get something out of the teaching instead of tuning me out.
 - Those of you who are young in understanding should grasp the basics of each teaching and trust you will grow to understand the deeper things later. You also could ask me or your small group leader to explain what you don’t understand in the sermon. We would be happy to do so!
 - As Peter wrote, you should **“yearn like newborn infants for pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow...” [1 Peter 2.2 NET]**. Don’t give up when something goes over your head. Keep yearning for the spiritual milk coming later in the message, stay attentive to what I am saying.
 - Those of you who are mature should realize that it never hurts to go over the basics again. This week in the Christian Service Brigade, we had a deputy sheriff who teaches martial arts come in to show us some basic self-defense moves as a symbol of the spiritual warfare we are teaching. He said no matter how many fancy things you learn, when you are in a crisis, it is the basics, the

fundamental moves, that save your life. So if you are bored because I am teaching the basics, you can think about how you would teach these things differently or to a different audience, because those of you who are mature enough to get bored should be teachers in the church.

- **Hebrews 5.12 NET: For though you should in fact be teachers by this time, you need someone to teach you the beginning elements of God's utterances. You have gone back to needing milk, not solid food.**
- If you tune out when I am preaching the basics, you risk not developing into an effective teacher for God, precisely because you never master the basics of theology and Bible interpretation.

† **[Slide 5: think]** Ok, switching gears... I have talked with some of you who are struggling to see the application in some of my messages, so let me speak to that too.

- First, sometimes the application is to change the way you think, not to go do something, but to allow God's truth to change your ideas and perspectives. If we learn a deep theological thing about God, you would benefit by going home and reflecting on that truth every day that week, so that you do experience renewal of your mind by the Holy Spirit interacting with that truth.
- For example, when we started the gospel of John, the big teachings were on the triune nature of God and the dual nature of Christ. Those are tremendously important theological concepts, and you need not only to understand them, but to be able to teach them. So the application those weeks was simply to reflect on this revelation and allow it to renew your mind. Trust me, over time, if you come to know God better and understand his theology better, it will change you.
- When LeeAnn and I first met, I thought it was ok to get right up in her face and argue forcefully, so I did. She changed my thinking on that, by telling me I frightened her and hurt her, and by frightening and hurting me by poking me forcefully in the throat. Her actions spoke louder than my words! She changed my thinking, and that changed my behavior. I argue with her now from the opposite side of the kitchen island, and I try to be on the side with the knives. If you change the way you think, that will change the way you live.

† **[Slide 6: pray]** Second, there are some applications that continue to arise in sermon after sermon, because God invests them into passage after passage, so you need to realize these are fundamental to your health and you need to do them. In self defense, you will get nothing out of the class until you master the basics. You also will not get much out of church until you do take some steps to apply these things.

- I am talking about having daily Bible study, having daily intentional quiet times of prayer, committing to submit to Christ in all things, trying to walk on the top line by faith and obedience instead of remaining in the world, engaging in biblical fellowship, learning to worship God's way, sharing God's truth with other people, stuff like that. If you are not doing those things, you probably will be frustrated with your spiritual health and growth no matter how I preach.
- **1 Corinthians 3.2-3 NET: I fed you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready. In fact, you are still not ready, for you are still influenced by the flesh. For since there is still jealousy and dissension among you, are you not influenced by the flesh and behaving like unregenerate people?**
- Your problem might not be jealousy and dissension, but if you are not committed to submit, are not walking on the top line in any area of life, it is the same problem. How are you going to grow if you will not apply the basics?

- Colby, in baseball do you ever stop taking batting practice, even when you get to the major leagues? No, you always take batting practice. Do you ever stop fielding grounders in practice? No, you constantly practice the basics. When you see a guy on tv make a miraculous stab of a ground ball in the gap, reverse pirouette, and fling it underhand, off balance, to make the out, he can only do that because he takes a thousand ground balls a week, so he mastered the basics and on that play his instincts could use that fundamental knowledge. If you don't master the fundamentals, then you have nothing when faced with a crisis in spiritual battle.

- † **[Slide 7: reflect]** Third, if you really listen well to me and I use good illustrations and graphics, you might remember 10% of what I say. But if you reflect on what I say every day the following week, then your retention can go up to 90% of the important concepts. That's why I invest hours into providing the devotions for you, so you can reflect not only on the important truths of the passage, but also on how to apply them to your thinking and your life.

- † There is another reason I recommend using the sermon based devotions. I think of the sermon and the devotion as a coordinated teaching. So I structure each differently, so they work well together.
 - Sometimes in the sermon, I give minimal application, because I want you first to dwell on the theological truths of the passage, but then I give more application ideas and reflection questions in the devotions. So if you don't do the devotions, then you miss out on those application oriented thoughts.
 - Even if you are doing a different devotion or Bible study, you should make time to reflect on what you read and prayerfully consider how to apply it. If you have only ten minutes, spend five reading a passage and then five reflecting on it, so you can apply it. That change in approach will make a big difference in how you understand the Bible and how you use it.
 - **Psalm 1.1-2 NET: How blessed is the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand in the pathway with sinners, or sit in the assembly of scoffers! Instead he finds pleasure in obeying the LORD's commands; he meditates [reflects] on his commands day and night.**
 - Jenn, if you went to class but never studied, never even thought about those concepts after that class, would you excel on the test? would you remember much of the material six months later? No, not likely. Josh has started a new job recently. Josh, if you were shown a complicated technique once, but never did it, never practiced it, never even saw it again for a year, would you then be confident you could get it exactly right? Not likely. Time in reflection will pay off for you, I guarantee it!

- † **[Slide 8: preaching]** Two more thoughts, more about me than you. First, I never before had to preach every week and I never have been a full time pastor. I confess to you that I have struggled with both changes over the past nineteen months.
 - I have struggled with periodic bouts of exhaustion, frustration, self-doubt, and depression. I have at times been crazy stressed about honoring my commitments to you and Christ but having twice as much to do as I can accomplish that week.
 - One by product of all that sometimes has been that the affective or behavioral aspect of the teaching have suffered. Sometimes I cannot generate the creative energy to insert external facts, quotations, illustrations, humor, and other elements that can make the sermon more enjoyable and more absorbable. And sometimes I get tired out before giving a lot of thought to application beyond changing the way you think.

- **2 Timothy 2.15 NET: Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who does not need to be ashamed, teaching the message of truth accurately.**

- So I take comfort in knowing I have been accurate, but I still strive to be more effective too,

† **[Slide 9: homeless]** Even when I am feeling healthy, I am a minimalist when it comes to application.

- Again, I mention that we have a room full of diverse people. If I suggest an application step in detail, it might only impact or appeal to some of you.
- For example, the general application of a message might be to help the poor. I could further explain with examples, like volunteer at the Point or give to the food bank, but what I want is for you to think to yourself, “How could I help the poor?” You might not like the suggestions I would give, but you might come up with something that appeals to yourself, like carrying around care packages in your car for the homeless people you encounter, teaching at the Bridge Academy instead of the Point, being an advocate at the PCCO, tutoring through the three programs offered in this area, or something else I could never have imagined.
- Even the apostles sometimes were vague in application. For example, Paul says, **Philippians 2.4 NET: “Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well.”**
- He could have elaborated by saying you freshman girls should wash the pastor’s camel every month; others of you should offer to shovel Donna’s driveway, or you should bring a meal to Jack and Hilma, but he didn’t. He said be concerned about the interests of one another, and that allows the Spirit to prompt each of us in how we should fulfill this command.
- So sometimes I am vague in my application thoughts, so that you can individualize what they look like in your life. Or course, if you don’t take time to reflect on the sermon with the devotions or otherwise, then you will not ever come up with those individual ideas.

Conclusion

† **[Slide 10: blank]** So I think there are some adjustments I can make to be a better preacher. But I think nothing I do is going to help you unless you make some adjustments too. Let me reiterate the application steps we have discussed today. Maybe you need to focus on one or more of these. This is where you can fill in the blanks on the handout, if you are interested.

1. Try to understand the Bible knowledge and care about it as the first step to applying it. Try to understand and appreciate why, not just what. Let the teaching change the way you think!
2. If you get bored, stay tuned in to what I am saying, to see if something more interesting comes up and remember that all time spent in God’s Word is valuable, even if it covers things you know well.
3. If you get confused, don’t worry about it; the teaching is designed to stretch and challenge all different types of people. Write your questions down to ask someone later, and meantime stay attentive so you get something else from the passage.
4. Start applying what you already know about the basics: you need to have daily time in Bible study and reflection, daily intentional times of prayer, at the least; there are other basics, but start here, and begin to find your own ways of applying to your life what you learn from God.

5. In your daily quiet times, take time to reflect on scripture, to prayerfully think about what it says and what you should do with it, how you should change the way you think or the way you live.
6. I suggest you make the sermon based devotions part of your weekly study, so you can reflect daily on what God is teaching us each week, including individualized application ideas.
7. Beyond reflecting, you can talk with friends and family about the ideas, to solidify them in your mind; ask questions, try to explain the concepts, and discuss application thoughts.
8. When I give a general application idea or specific application examples, use those to think up a bunch of your own. You don't necessarily need to do everything you think up, but brainstorm as many application ideas as you can, maybe together with friends or family, and then select the ones God is leading you to try. Share these with me; maybe more of us should do them.
9. Don't be shy about sharing with me your feedback on what is working and what is not. The last two weeks, one lady told me why the sermon did work for her, and another told me why it did not. I really value that input and will continue trying to become a better teacher for you.