

Lesson Plan & Study Guide



Preaching

Part One: Getting Started

Working with Jesus

iFOLLOW

The iFollow Discipleship Series



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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iFOLLOW

www.ifollowdiscipleship.org

Preaching, Part One: Getting Started

This is the first in a series of five units.

Learning Objectives

1. Preparation reduces fear
2. The three elements every sermon needs
3. The message belongs to God, not you
4. How to choose an Anchor Text
5. Applying focus questions to the Anchor Text

Content Outline

- A. A lesson on fear
- B. Three elements in every sermon
 1. A life question
 2. A biblical answer
 3. A life application
- C. The Spirit of God
 1. Preach God's word, not yours
 2. Let God set the agenda
 3. Learn God's message in context
- D. Choose the Anchor Text
 1. A simple point
 2. A representative portion
 3. A complete picture
- E. Applying the focus questions
 1. A simple point
 2. A representative portion



iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Working
with Jesus

Action Plan
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Notes

**Preaching
Part One:
Getting
Started**

1

3. A complete picture

Background Material for the Presenter

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1 NIV).

Local elders and other lay leaders often have to preach a sermon or even preach quite often in some congregations. This series of five units on preaching brings together the experience of pastors who have taught lay leaders to preach and seeks to provide a simple and complete presentation that is written with the amateur in mind. It draws from the best of the preaching art; the many great preachers who have written the basics of preaching. These presentations are meant for the weekend warrior, but will also prove helpful to the preaching professional.

A Lesson on Fear

(Presenter, Use your own illustration here)

For weeks, my spine sent out tremors. Why did I ever think I could do this? I knew God didn't make mistakes but a deep suspicion began to set in that this could be his first. Of course I didn't believe that but I couldn't see past the clouds either—dark clouds of fear that hung thick over my thoughts whenever that preaching appointment came to mind. It would be my first, if I lived through it.

I had fought God's call, not because I didn't want to serve but because I didn't think I could. Perhaps you have felt that tug at your own heart. If you have ever longed for revival and wished you could spark it in those around you, it might be God's Spirit urging you to take a risk, to preach. But, risk is scary.

I can still hear my shaky voice sounding in the tight quarters of my college dorm room: “God, I can't preach and I'm too young.” I had been feeling his call for weeks. I continued, “But, if you are really telling me to do this, you'll have to show me.” I then told God, in no uncertain terms, that I was tired of wrestling with the issue and wished to settle it once and for all. I said, “I'm going to open my Bible now. Please help me open to the right text.”

What followed was a moment like nothing I had experienced. Yes, I asked God to say just what he meant, and I wished he would, but I didn't expect it. I opened directly to Jeremiah 1 and my eyes fell on verses 4-7:



“The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.’ ‘Ah, Sovereign LORD,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.’ But the LORD said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a child.” You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.’” (NIV)

A chill ran through me, and then a shot of exhilaration, as my brain grappled with what just happened. God had spoken... to me.

When the rush wore off and I found myself registered for my first preaching class two months later, God’s mandate was little solace. It meant I was stuck. It also meant I would have to stand in front of real people and preach for the first time in my life. Yes, God had told me to do it but there was one problem; that meant I would have to do it.

You have to know where I was coming from. I was the type of person who got the jitters in social settings where more than two people could hear me talk. I said little in public and felt painfully shy around those I didn’t know. If you put me in front of a microphone, I felt my chest tighten, the blood pumped to my face, my vision went blurry, and dizziness set in. Not the best credentials for preaching.

So, there I was—less than twenty-four hours ‘til the moment of truth. But, I had been preparing. I had studied the power of speech, of all topics, in James 3:1-12. Through the guidance of my good professor, I learned to apply the basic skills needed to build a sermon from the text. It was flawed, sure, but I had something worth saying. I just wasn’t sure I’d have the guts to say it.

Keenly sensing the approach of “zero hour,” I mustered up enough courage to speak with my professor. It was hard enough just to spit out a few words to him. “Uh, Dr. Morris, I’ve never preached in my life and I’m scheduled to preach in class tomorrow.”

He must have understood my unspoken message: “Help!” Dr. Derek Morris is one of the great masters of teaching and he knew just what I needed. He was encouraging. “You have written a powerful sermon. Just preach it!”

“Just preach it!” Well, that made sense. I did have something to say. What was I so nervous about? I’d like to say I preached the perfect sermon that day and wowed the class with my skills and brilliance but it was just a beginner’s sermon.

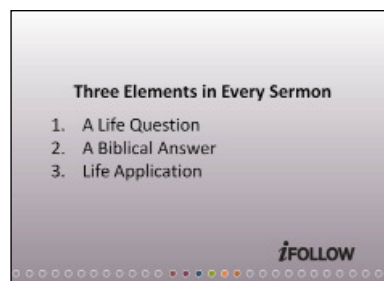
Nonetheless, it was a turning point for me. I learned a lesson that shaped the way I think of preaching in the years since: Good preparation makes a world of difference. When you know you have a solid message to preach, you can beat the nerves.

Three Elements in Every Sermon

Books on preaching have multiplied in recent years as more people realize that the

ancient art of preaching can still change lives. For the beginner, this mountain of material is staggering. But, there is good news. The many books and classes offered have a simple core runs through it all. Preaching theories are as scattered as the stars but they all owe a debt to the core. If you master the core and lean heavily on God's Spirit, you can master the art of preaching.

Before you get lost in the details, cement in your brain three core elements. They are structural ingredients found in every effective sermon. We will explain and expand these elements but, for now, just catch the concept of each.



1. A Life Question

Preaching is the act of helping God's word speak to the life of the listener. The preacher's job is showing how a given part of Scripture speaks to real life. The first element of every sermon, then, is a guiding life question. This is a question your listener is already asking. Whether you pose the question outright or imply it, every good sermon has a guiding question.

Questions might be raised by events or they may be universal question marks that hang in every mind. One example of a guiding question arises from tragedy: "Where is God when bad things happen?" The clarity and relevance of the question you ask the listener will inspire their level of attention.

2. A Biblical Answer

The second element of every sermon, then, must be a biblical answer. Do you see how this begins to fulfill the purpose of preaching (helping God's word speak to the life of the listener)?

You have begun with a life question. Put another way, you have begun in the listener's world. Now, as you explain the biblical answer, you show how God's word relates to them. You introduce their world to the biblical world.

To the question, "Where is God when bad things happen?" the answer might be, "God is there to comfort the hurting." Your task here is not done until you have answered the life question with biblical truth.

3. Life Application

The third element of every sermon, then, is life application. If you miss this step, the listener may go home impressed with truth but it won't change their life. Especially in

today's world, where people take little time for quiet reflection, you must tell them how the answer can change their life.

Tell them what to do. With the question, "Where is God when bad things happen?" and the answer "God is there to comfort the hurting," the application might be, "When disaster brings pain, pray for God's comfort." Your sermon doesn't succeed or fail in the pulpit but later, when your listener faces that life question in her own world.

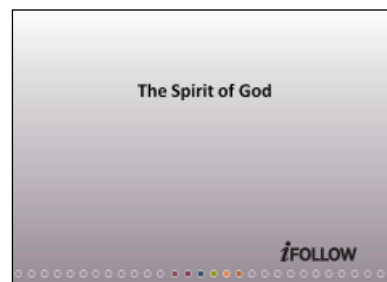
These three elements are the sermon in a nutshell. If your sermon has nothing but these three elements, people will listen. And, when these elements are clear in your own mind, your confidence will soar with the knowledge that you have something to say. In time, you won't be a jittering mouse begging for hearers but rather a steady lion that commands attention.

The Spirit of God

And, yet, that's not quite all. However diligent God wants you to be in preparation, never forget that only God can change hearts and only God can give you just the right message. Isaiah understood preaching when he said,

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1 NIV).

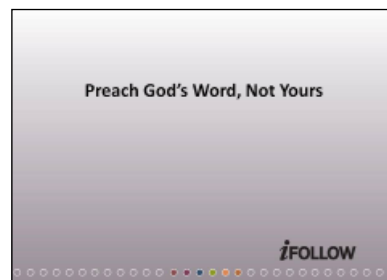
God's Spirit will empower you to give the world's questions godly answers. Always keep that in mind as you work through the details of any sermon.



Preach God's Word, Not Yours

The first step in any sermon is to choose a Bible text as the foundation and key focus. A sermon is a proclamation of God's word. That is serious business. When you stand in the pulpit and deliver a sermon, you are speaking for God. Accepting the invitation to preach is vaguely like stepping up to deliver a speech for the President of the United States. "I'm sorry; the President couldn't be here, so I will share his thoughts with you."

You wouldn't think of passing off your own thoughts as his. When you stand to preach, you are saying, "I'm sorry, God couldn't preach directly, so I will share his thoughts with you."



Scared yet? Good. It's a sobering task. But don't run. The answer is not avoidance. God calls you to preach. Paul told Timothy, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage— with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2 NIV).

The call is simple: "preach the Word," not your own opinions. When I ask someone to preach, I often hear, "I don't have anything to say." They don't realize that it's best to start that way. The ideas you should convey are written for you in the Scripture.

Let God Set the Agenda

Your task is to study until you understand it and then tell the people how it can change their lives. "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword." (Hebrews 4:12, KJV) Can you say the same for your own thoughts? Me neither.

How can you make sure the thoughts you share are truly God's? I recently watched the U.S. president deliver his State of the Union address. A few weeks later, I saw it playing on a friend's computer, so I leaned in to watch the familiar speech. But, it wasn't familiar.

It looked the same and the words that matched his lips sounded like his voice but the message was changed. The remixed speech used the president's words, phrases, and even whole paragraphs but it wasn't his message. It was a comic spoof.

Far too many sermons bear this stamp, and usually not by intention. It's easy to string verses together to make your point. But, please don't forget that a sermon should never make your point. You are speaking for Someone else.



Learn God's Message in Context

Before you presume to speak for God, you must know what he means to say. If you go to the text with a message in mind, you are in grave danger of passing off your own ideas as God's. If your message is preconceived, it is you who sets the agenda—not God. Approach the text with an open mind.

Resolve that you will never preach until, through careful Bible study, you have learned something new. Be taught by God, and then teach others. This statement hints at a philosophy of approach but, first, a couple of questions....

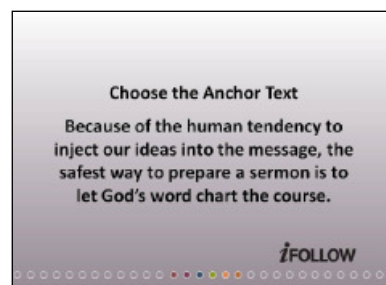


If you plan to include, say, eight verses in your sermon, which is better—eight verses that you place together or eight verses that God placed together? And, if you are digging to know the meaning of a text, will the verses around it or verses from somewhere else best explain it? Before you answer, remember the president’s speech.

Choose the Anchor Text

Because of the human tendency to inject our own ideas into the message, the safest way to prepare a sermon is to let God’s word chart the course. That’s why the first phase of sermon development is to choose an anchor text.

By selecting a passage of sufficient length, you can allow God’s word to set the direction of your sermon. Your sermon structure, the marks in your line of reasoning and even some creative aspects can emerge from the text itself. This makes your job easier but it also makes your sermon more biblical. For reference purposes, I call this process the text-led sermon.

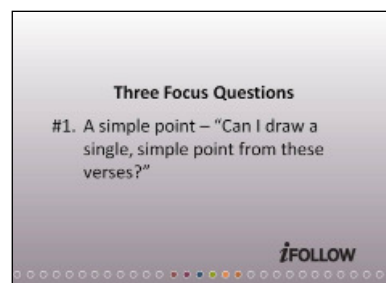


There are three focus questions to help you set the parameters of your anchor text. They help answer the larger question, “How much should I cover?” The twin errors, of course, are choosing too small a text to be sure what it means or too large a text to cover clearly.

In the case of a parable or simple story, the start and end are obvious. But, it is not always so easy to lift a passage from Paul’s extended arguments or the collected sayings of Jesus. The three focus questions help clear your thinking about parameters.

1. A Simple Point

The first and most essential focus question is, “Can I draw a single, simple point from these verses?” The answer has room for preference. For example, you may choose to draw that simple point from the broad life-story of Joseph or you might choose to draw on a different lesson from just one phase of his story—his resistance to Potiphar’s wife or his preparation for famine, perhaps.

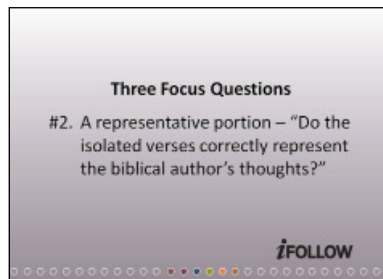


Both options are valid. The fundamental issue is whether you can bring the simple point to the surface of the text in a thirty-minute sermon. Your judgment improves with practice but your natural instincts will probably bring you close.

2. A Representative Portion

The second focus question appeals for integrity: “Do the isolated verses correctly represent the biblical author’s thoughts?” Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind when he charged his young protégé, Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15 NKJV). This Greek word for “dividing” means “to cut a straight line.” It’s a picture of meticulous care. No sloppy work.

An example that shows the need for care is Romans 8:31. There we find the rousing words, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” These words have emerged to rouse courage in a soldier’s heart or comfort a woman struggling with her boss. Although they warm the heart, these applications have nothing to do with the text.

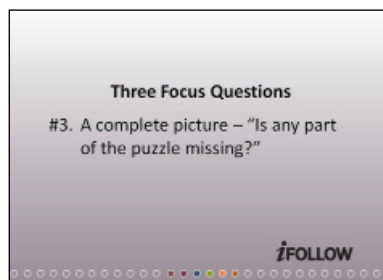


The idea might seem true and good but that doesn’t make it textual. In fact, the verses that precede these inspiring words show that Paul speaks of God’s incredible fight to save us from sin. No sloppy work, please. The truth is more inspiring anyway.

3. A Complete Picture

The third focus question asks, “Is any part of the puzzle missing?” This requires that you understand the broader argument that your text is part of. To cite a simple case, in 1 John 2:13, three groups are mentioned—fathers, young men, and little children. Each one represents an aspect of John’s message.

It wouldn’t be fair to John’s message if you preached on only two of these groups and skipped the other. It might be fair to explore just one group and leave the rest for later but, as soon as you pretend to explain his larger argument, which is comprised of three parts, you must include all the pieces.



Another example of the same principle is the parable of the wheat and weeds. Jesus tells the parable early in Matthew 24 but leaves the explanation for later in the chapter. It wouldn’t do to preach a sermon on the parable and never study Jesus’ own explanation of it.

You could draw creative deductions from its symbols that would impress your audience but they might not be the truth. Make sure no piece of the puzzle is missing, so the picture is as crisp as possible. Remember the president's speech?

Applying the Focus Questions

This questioning process reminds me of a childhood sleuthing game kids play at Christmas time. When mom's back was turned, the kids inspect the colorful shapes beneath the tree.

First, they check for size. This usually crosses out a couple of items from their request lists. Then there are weight and the shake-test, which narrow the options further. And, of course, a quick check for paper-tears or loose seams that might give a peek. Soon, they have a fair guess what is in them. It's like this with defining the parameters of your anchor text. Each question brings you closer to that perfect balance between too much and too little.

Let's take a practice text and apply the focus questions. This passage will also serve as a test case for the other phases of sermon development, which will appear later. Using the same text throughout allows you to follow an anchor text through the whole process from text to sermon. Let's start with—James 3:1-12.

By citing the verses, you know that I have already settled on the parameters of the text. But, let's step through the process that led to that decision. When we finish here and you understand the process fully, choose a text of your own and apply the focus questions to it.

Be sure to choose a text you want to spend some serious time with, so you can use it as your own test case for each principle you learn throughout this unit. If you are careful to follow each step as you learn it, you will have written your own sermon by the end of the seminar.

Start by reading the broader section of Scripture that contains your text of interest. By general skills of observation, you will begin to notice the major divisions of thought, like when the subject changes and what is being said about each subject.

Imagine that you are reading the third chapter of James in your morning devotions and you are so impressed with something it said that you have decided to study it more, so you can preach on it. Find a Bible and read it now, to get familiar with the text. Be sure to read a chapter or two on either side of it, to establish good practice. Focus on the broad flow of the text, without getting lost in the details.

Done? Good. Your initial observation will quickly tell you that the subject of the tongue begins in James 3:1 and ends in verse 12. Before this, in chapter 2, he writes of the relationship between faith and works. And, later in chapter 3, he writes about wisdom from above.

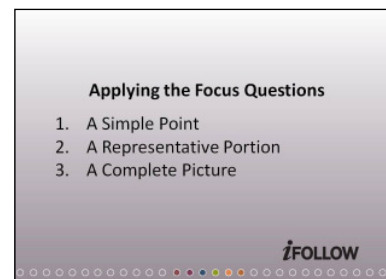
Although it will help to explore the relationship between James' thoughts on the tongue and the subjects surrounding it, that can be left for the next phase of sermon preparation. You know enough from initial observation to set tentative parameters: James 3:1-12. Now you are ready to apply the focus questions and test these tentative parameters.

1. A Simple Point

First, "Can I draw a single, simple point from these verses?" To answer this, it helps to reread the selected verses. On second reading, you will start to notice the separate points marshaled in an explanation of the larger subject. As the question suggests, you must decide if you can address all that the author says about the subject or just one of his sub-points. In this case, everything he says supports the simple idea that words are powerful. That's preachable.

2. A Representative Portion

Second, ask, "Do the isolated verses correctly represent the biblical author's thoughts?" Since we have not chosen one of the sub-points, this question is easier to answer "yes" to. By contrast, if we chose to speak only from verse 2, about perfection through speech, we might be in danger of building a whole theology of perfection from something James only meant to illustrate his larger point— that words are powerful. But, since we have taken the entire discourse on speech as our anchor text, we have taken the safe route.



3. A Complete Picture

Third, ask the clean-up question: "Is any part of the puzzle missing?" This, too, is easier to answer when we've chosen to address the entire discourse. If we chose only verse 6, that the tongue is set on fire by hell, we might be compelled to conclude that good Christians don't speak.

I suppose the idea might inspire someone but it's awfully hard to preach a sermon on that without sounding hypocritical. Besides, it's not the biblical message. James does leave us with a little hint of hope at the end. Similarly, if we chose to preach from the rousing words on the power of speech in verses 3-5, we might highlight the potential of words without sounding the proper warnings.

So today we have learned that preparation reduces fear, we've looked at the three elements every sermon needs, we've discovered that the message belongs to God, not us,

and we've applied focus questions to the Anchor text. We're on our way to becoming great preachers.

Handouts in this Package

1. Three Essential Elements
2. Do It Yourself
3. Applying the Focus Questions



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Additional Resources

- Bresee, W. Floyd (1997). *Successful Lay Preaching*. Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
- Cox, Sherman (2007). *You Can Preach: Seven Simple Steps to an Effective Sermon*. Open Source Books: www.archive.org/details/youcanpreach07
- Craddock, Fred B. (1990). *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Erdman, Chris (2007). *Countdown to Sunday: A Daily Guide for Those Who Preach*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Jones, R. Clifford (2005). *Preaching With Power: Black Preachers Share Secrets for Effective Preaching*. Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
- Lowry, Eugene L. (2001). *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Robinson, Haddon W. (2001). *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, 2nd Edition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Wibberding, James Richard (2006). *Learn to Preach Before Next Weekend*. Telford, PA: Big Fish Publishing, Inc.
- Willimon, William H. (1994). *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Willimon, William H. (1992). *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Discussion Questions

1. Are you afraid of preaching? Why or why not? Are you afraid of obeying God in general?
2. In what ways is or is not a preacher a mouthpiece for God?
3. How can one know for sure that God is calling him or her to preach?
4. Is it essential that every sermon address a life question the listeners already have? Why or why not?
5. It could be truly said that preachers are learning about their own life questions by preaching about them. What are some of the questions you would like to learn more about in your preaching?
6. Have you heard sermons that did not seem to be exploring, but simply laying out pre-fabricated answers? How do those sermons affect you?

Group Exercise

Purpose: This exercise has a two-fold purpose. It will give practice in the points in the unit on choosing a text and applying the focus questions to it. It will also give practice in being succinct and to the point.

Preparation: Each participant will need writing materials and a place to write, whether table or desk. Each may also have a copy of Handout 1, or you may put the three focus questions on a board or flipchart. You will need a timer.

Assignment: Begin with prayer. Although this is only an exercise, it's still the word and work of God. Each person will choose a text, apply the focus questions to it, and give a three minute sermonette.

Time: Be strict about the time in this exercise. Give them ten minutes to choose a text and prepare it by asking the three focus questions and making basic notes. This will be the Anchor Text they'll be practicing with for the entire five sessions, but encourage them not to obsess about finding "the Right One" or "the Best One". Almost any text will do, so long as there is a lesson to be had from it. Then, each person has just three minutes – one minute on each point, though that can vary. But when the three minutes are up, they're up. Try to make this fun, not frustrating. If you know in advance you have only three minutes, then it's up to you to find something worth saying and get it said in a clear, concise, and appealing way in those three minutes, with no wasted words.

Debrief: Ask each one how they think they did and also let them critique each other kindly. Discuss what was fun and interesting, what was frustrating, whether it was possible to say something God would want said in such a short time, what else you wished you could have said. If you did it again would you say or leave out different things? (If you have few enough people and time enough, go ahead and do that, on the same texts and prep.)

There will be plenty of times you will get up to preach a 30 minute sermon and find yourself with ten minutes instead. You'll have to think on your feet – do you spend those ten minutes on one of the points? Do you abbreviate all three? Answers will vary depending on circumstances and what text you've chosen, who is there to listen, etc. Start now practicing how to discern what God wants you to do in that kind of pinch.

Handout 1

Three Essential Elements

Before you get lost in the details, cement in your brain three core elements. They are structural ingredients found in every effective sermon.

1. A LIFE QUESTION

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2. A BIBLICAL ANSWER

The second element of every sermon, then, must be a biblical answer. Do you see how this begins to fulfill the purpose of preaching (helping God's word speak to the life of the listener)?

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3. LIFE APPLICATION

The third element of every sermon, then, is life application. If you miss this step, the listener may go home impressed with truth but it won't change their life. Especially in today's world, where people take little time for quiet reflection, you must tell them how the answer can change their life.

Tell them what to do. With the question, “Where is God when bad things happen?” and the answer “God is there to comfort the hurting,” the application might be, “When disaster brings pain, pray for God’s comfort.” Your sermon doesn’t succeed or fail in the pulpit but later, when your listener faces that life question in her own world.

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Working
with Jesus

HANDOUT

**Preaching
Part One:
Getting
Started**

Handout 2

Do It Yourself

Now it's your turn. Take that first step on the path from text to sermon: choose your anchor text. In the following sessions, you will spend plenty of time with this anchor text. But, your task of the moment is simply to choose it. Don't fret too long over the choice. Almost any text can make for a powerful sermon if you determine to make it a text led sermon.

To get you started:

Pray

What are some life questions you've been having lately? Use a concordance to find a passage that speaks to one of them.

Is there a particular Old Testament story, perhaps one about the leading of God or how he speaks to people, that appeals to where you are in your life right now?

Pray

Does one of Jesus' miracle stories speak to your present circumstances?

Does one of Jesus' parables tug at your heart?

Does a certain epistle, or a certain piece of advice in one of them appeal to your present difficulties?

Pray

If a text speaks to your heart, it will speak to their hearts. They won't feel so much like you're "preaching at them," but instead that you are learning along with them.

Note: For now, heavy passages such as major prophecies are probably not the best choice, unless the lesson you want to draw from the text is a spiritual one—what does this text teach us about God and a relationship with him, not what does this text teach us about the timing of the Second Coming, for instance.

Oh, yes, and. . . pray!

Handout 3

Applying the Focus Questions

Let's take a practice text and apply the focus questions. Let's use—James 3:1-12.

Start by reading the broader section of Scripture that contains your text of interest. By general skills of observation, you will begin to notice the major divisions of thought, like when the subject changes and what is being said about each subject.

Imagine that you are reading the third chapter of James in your morning devotions and you are so impressed with something it said that you have decided to study it more, so you can preach on it. Find a Bible and read it now, to get familiar with the text. Be sure to read a chapter or two on either side of it, to establish good practice. Focus on the broad flow of the text, without getting lost in the details.

Done? Good. Your initial observation will quickly tell you that the subject of the tongue begins in James 3:1 and ends in verse 12. Before this, in chapter 2, he writes of the relationship between faith and works. And, later in chapter 3, he writes about wisdom from above.

Although it will help to explore the relationship between James' thoughts on the tongue and the subjects surrounding it, that can be left for the next phase of sermon preparation. You know enough from initial observation to set tentative parameters: James 3:1-12. Now you are ready to apply the focus questions and test these tentative parameters.

1. A simple point

First, "Can I draw a single, simple point from these verses?" To answer this, it helps to reread the selected verses. On second reading, you will start to notice the separate points marshaled in explanation of the larger subject. As the question suggests, you must decide if you can address all that the author says about the subject or just one of his sub-points. In this case, everything he says supports the simple idea that words are powerful. That's preachable.

2. A representative portion

Second, ask, "Do the isolated verses correctly represent the biblical author's thoughts?" Since we have not chosen one of the sub-points, this question is easier to answer "yes" to. By contrast, if we chose to speak only from verse 2, about perfection

through speech, we might be in danger of building a whole theology of perfection from something James only meant to illustrate his larger point— that words are powerful. But, since we have taken the entire discourse on speech as our anchor text, we have taken the safe route.

3. A complete picture

Third, ask the clean-up question: “Is any part of the puzzle missing?” This, too, is easier to answer when we’ve chosen to address the entire discourse. If we chose only verse 6, that the tongue is set on fire by hell, we might be compelled to conclude that good Christians don’t speak.

I suppose the idea might inspire someone but it’s awfully hard to preach a sermon on that without sounding hypocritical. Besides, it’s not the biblical message. James does leave us with a little hint of hope at the end. Similarly, if we chose to preach from the rousing words on the power of speech in verses 3-5, we might highlight the potential of words without sounding the proper warnings.

Do It Yourself

Now it’s your turn. You have been reading about it long enough already. Take that first step on the path from text to sermon: choose your anchor text. In the following sessions, you will spend plenty of time with this anchor text. But, your task of the moment is simply to choose it. Don’t fret too long over the choice. Almost any text can make for a powerful sermon if you determine to make it a text-led sermon.

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