

Pastor: Preach the Text!

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I had the privilege of preaching at an early age, mostly due to the needs of our church, and thanks to the vision of our senior pastor in that small work in Hull, Québec, back in the mid-seventies. I was 18 years old when I was asked to preach my first sermon, which consisted basically of a summary of a book I read shortly before on the topic of Jesus' resurrection. That first sermon was mostly a lecture, summarizing the argument from different chapters, followed by encouragements to announce the resurrection of Jesus. As I now look back to that first venture into preaching, this sermon was more a lecture than a sermon.

My second sermon was an unsuccessful attempt to preach a text from the book of Acts, but I was so unprepared and ill-equipped that it took me a few years to feel comfortable addressing our congregation again. One of my problems was that I tried to simply imitate our senior pastor who had a life-time of personal experiences to draw from, whereas I was not even twenty! Needless to say, my search for content had to look somewhere else rather than from the small pool of my own limited experience. What was needed

was to learn how to read and study Scriptures and transfer that knowledge into something coherent, understandable, and applicable.

Fortunately, our church was relatively small, and people were quite young and thus were patient with new workers, so that errors and small beginnings in preaching were easily forgiven. It was only a few years down the road that I finally had a homiletics class, which helped me to better read and preach Scriptures. If I could write a book entitled *Homiletical Fallacies*, there would be no need to look very far to find examples of poor preaching; my own record would suffice.

All this to say that the one writing these lines is no expert in homiletics, and still has much to learn. However, after listening to hundreds of sermons, and through having preached on a regular basis, experience and discernment slowly made their way, with the result that I come with fear and trembling to share a few lessons learned throughout these past years.¹

¹Among the books I found the most helpful on the topic of preaching is Haddow W. Robinson's *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, 2001).

The Centrality of Scripture in Preaching

Preaching is the most visible ministry of the church. People nowadays attend church or choose a church based on no small part on the quality and relevance of the pulpit ministry. The people of God feed upon the Word of God and, all things being equal, healthy Christians are the result of a good spiritual diet.

Ministers of the Word of God realize that many things can be achieved through preaching. When we preach, we not only call upon the intellect, but we also appeal to the emotions and the will, all of these at the same time. We encourage, comfort, and call to serve. We seek to bring people to understand, worship, and obey. As we preach, we do some vision-casting, we communicate priorities. We bring people to understand, we equip to obey and to serve, to worship and to change their lives and priorities in order to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. We denounce sin and encourage holiness.

In all these things, preachers are reminded that the Word of God is to remain central. After all, the reason why nearly half the time of our services is devoted to preaching, is because we believe that “all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3.16), and that by teaching and preaching the Word of God, God will fulfill His purposes in the lives of His children.

As we regularly communicate the Word of God, we realize that preaching is both an art and a science. Needless to say, good preaching requires preparation, prayerful study, quiet time spent with the Word of God and in intimacy with the God of the Word. We also realize that preaching also involves our individual personality, as we ourselves struggle against temptation and

sin in our own lives. We recognize that churches too have their own collective personality. A sermon outline that we come up with, or found in a book, or even downloaded from the internet will end up being preached differently by different pastors, and sometimes preached differently even by the same person. Those of us involved in multiple services on Sunday or over the weekend know all too well that a sermon is seldom preached twice exactly the same way, unless it is simply read from notes.

Our focus today is less on the *art* and more on the *science* of preaching. The title of today’s session, *Pastor, Preach the Text*, is a reminder that we are called to preach the Word of God, the entire will or counsel of God (cf. Acts 20.27), in a way that will produce fruit in the lives of listeners, fruit which will last more than the few minutes or hours people spend together at church on any given Sunday.

Preaching: More than Lecturing

As said earlier, preaching preparation involves a number of elements, from careful study of words and texts to careful study of the needs of congregations, so that when, as pastors, we are addressing the family of God, the body of Christ is built up, equipped and motivated to worship God and to serve Christ in the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

More specifically, preaching involves teaching, motivating, correcting, guiding, leading the people of God to serve Him with joy and thankfulness, with the intention of bringing glory to the only One worthy of any glory. Paul wrote: “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4.6).

Moreover, when we preach, we do more than lecture or communicate content. We equip, motivate, encourage peo-

ple to act upon what they hear. We bring the family of God to worship Christ and be transformed unto His image.

Where I would like to call our attention even more, though, is on the fact that as we preach the word of God, we also, though indirectly, teach *how* to read Scripture, *how* to interpret and apply Scripture. By listening to their pastor, members of the family of God are taught how to approach the Bible. If what they hear is allegorical interpretation, then they will interpret Scripture allegorically. If what they hear are jokes, illustrations and stories, then they will approach Scripture in a similar fashion. However, if congregations are exposed to a preaching ministry that explains and applies the *text* of Scripture, and not morality or systematic theology, then they will not only learn *what* the Bible says but they will also learn *how* to read and interpret Scripture. When we keep as central in our sermon what is central in the biblical text, then people slowly learn by example *how* to read, interpret and apply Scripture in their own lives.

We will speak more about this later, but let me briefly illustrate in a negative way that we can teach our congregations, albeit inadvertently, some common errors.

1. When we restrain our preaching ministry to the New Testament, people come to believe that only the New Testament pertains to the Christian life, and thus neglect 75% of God's revelation in the Scriptures.

2. If the only way we refer to the Old Testament is when using characters as examples to emulate or villains to avoid, people learn to dip occasionally in the Old Testament for moral lessons, and little more. Redemptive history, with all its richness and whose roots are deep in the Old Testament, remains a

mystery to most people in our congregations.

3. When mostly focusing our attention on the apostles or the disciples in the Gospels, instead of focusing our attention on the main character, that is the Lord Jesus, we unfortunately teach people to center their attention on peripheral matters. Apostles, disciples, Jesus' antagonists all together, have their place in the Gospel narratives only as they relate to Jesus Christ.

By the *way* we preach and teach, then, we also teach people *how* to read, interpret and apply Scripture.

Preaching the Text: On the Necessity of Reading the Text in Context

All preachers have heard about the necessity of reading a biblical text in context. What is referred to as *context* is normally understood as the historical and "grammatical" context. Evangelicals believe there is already meaning in a text, and not that we, as readers, merely import our own meaning in the text.²

For the sake of clarity, I would like to propose three different contexts which are essential for an appropriate understanding of the text: the historical context, the literary context, and the canonical context (more on this later).

Preaching the Text: Keeping Central What Is Central

² On this topic, see the important work by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

We all acknowledge that Scripture is central to preaching. But this is more easily said than done. When faced with the challenge of faithfully expounding Scripture in a manner that feeds the flock and which remains in line with the Lord's initial intention when He spoke His Word, the tendency to remain with familiar ways is all too common.

Let us note that not everything called "expository preaching" can be said to be expository. By expository preaching, many preachers nowadays think it simply refers to preaching the truths of Scripture, often using the categories of systematic theology. For example, our fondness for the doctrines of grace (or any other set of doctrines, for that matter) naturally leads us to preach in a systematic way, that is, using the categories of doctrinal systems. These systems of thought might be true (it is here hoped that they are!), but the question to ask ourselves is the following: What is the main point of the text, namely, of *this* text, I am to preach? Not only are we to be satisfied to teach and preach truths from Scripture, but we are also called to teach and preach the text we have before our own eyes. In the vast majority of our sermons, we are not preaching things which are untrue; our problem is that we are not preaching *this* text. If we are familiar enough with Scripture, any sermon will contain truthful elements, but the question is whether or not we are keeping the text before us as central to the sermon.

The diversity of genres found in the Bible makes the task even more daunting. Exposing the Word of God as it came to us in narrative and in parables as these are found in the Gospels or in the narrative sections of Scripture, preaching logical arguments found in the epistles, teachings proverbs and songs (let alone prophecies and predictions) and so on requires thoughtful preparation and solid training.

Nevertheless, we are called to preach the text of Scripture; not our own ideas, not our doctrinal systems, not thematic outlines, but Scripture.

Students to whom I teach second and third year Greek at Toronto Baptist Seminary and Bible College gradually learn how to read, parse, and phrase the Greek text. Not only are they taught to recognize forms, but a heavy dose of grammar and syntax forces them to understand the text according to its syntactical structure, gradually moving from phrasing to discourse analysis and to sermon outline.³

Different authors use different outlining systems, some much more complex than others.⁴ For the sake of simplicity, I find phrasing the most useful method.

Let me share briefly the method and the rationale for this kind of work. After being exposed to different kinds of literature in the New Testament (portions of the Gospels, and passages from the epistles), students build notebooks on different portions of the New Testament. Second year students go through Galatians during the second semester, while third year students make their way through Philippians and 2 Corinthians. Not only does this method expose them to Greek texts, with increasing difficulty levels as we go, but it also helps them to integrate a method of outlining the text that I hope will stay with them

³ A brief description of discourse analysis can be found in Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed., *Biblical Languages: Greek 2* (Sheffield, JSOT, 1994), 298-307.

⁴ Most useful is William Mounce's discussion about phrasing in the introduction pages of his *Graded Reader of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). Also useful is Gordon Fee's *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3d ed (Louisville: Westminster John Know, 2002). Much more detailed is Jay E. Smith's "Sentence Diagramming, Clausal Layouts, and Exegetical Outlining: Tracing the Argument," in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 73-134.

for years of studying and preaching in the ministry.

When students are done with Greek, they have a few years of exegetical work they can use in their first few years of ministry, while at the same time continue (it is hoped) to work on other books of Scripture. This way, they can stay about six months to a year ahead in their exegesis preparation. They can then prepare for the coming Sunday, based upon exegetical work done months prior to any specific Sunday, and feel less pressure as they do not have to wonder what they need to preach on or exegete in a rush for the coming week.

Keeping Central What Is Central in Different Genres of Literature

Let us look at a few examples on how to keep central in a sermon what is central in the biblical text. We will begin with phrasing smaller portions, and then move to larger blocks of material.

Example 1: Preaching From a Paragraph

When working on the outline of a sermon, I find it most useful to build the outline directly from the grammatical and semantic structure of the Greek text. While the main idea does not always flow from the main clauses in sentences, often it does. Diagramming and phrasing the Greek text helps in keeping central in the sermon what is central in the biblical text.

Here is an example taken from Philippians 1.9-11, for a sermon entitled “Praying for the progress of the Gospel.”⁵

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of this passage, see D. A. Carson, “Overcoming the Hurdles (Philippians 1:9-11),” chapter in *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids : Baker, 1992), 123-43. As an encouragement to consult this work for the benefit of sermon preparation, let me specify that chapters from this book were originally presented orally as sermons,

Let us begin with a comparison from two different English translations, the NIV and the ESV:

PHILIPPIANS 1.9-11

NIV

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until (TNIV : for) the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

ESV

9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

These two versions are almost identical, except for a few differences in wording (use of synonyms) here and there. However, the most significant differences appear on the level of connecting words, that is, words expressing relationships between parts of the sentence.

In Phil 1.9, the prepositions introducing the words “knowledge” are not the same in the NIV and in the ESV. The NIV’s “in” (knowledge) refers to the *content* of the love which Paul prays to abound more and more, whereas the ESV’S “with” (knowledge) means something which will *accompany* this abounding love. How can we know which one of these meanings is the most probable one? A little brush-up of

and modified to suit the printed page.

the Greek we learned in seminary will be useful.

The Greek preposition ἐν (the most common preposition in the New Testament) is notoriously broad in meaning, and can express location, time, state or condition, extension (into), association, instrumentality, agency, circumstance or condition, object or content, cause or reason, manner, and finally substance.⁶ Which one does Paul mean? The answer to this question cannot be found simply by looking up the word in a lexicon, but by studying the entire phrase (including its combination with the verb περισσεύω). However, this issue, albeit important for exegesis, needs not concern us too much for the purpose of our present exercise.⁷ What is essential to note is that the answer to that question will impact on how we preach this passage.

More important to our analysis is the relationship between the different clauses. Commentators (and translations) differ slightly at this point. To analyze this passage, we will proceed in three steps.

First, let us copy the Greek text from Phil 1.9-11:

Phil 1 ⁹ Καὶ τοῦτο προσεύχομαι, ἵνα ἡ ἀγάπη ὑμῶν ἔτι μᾶλλον καὶ μᾶλλον περισσεύῃ ἐν ἐπιγνώσει καὶ πάσῃ αἰσθήσει ¹⁰ εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τὰ διαφέροντα, ἵνα ἦτε εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ, ¹¹ πεπληρωμένοι καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης τὸν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ εἰς δόξαν καὶ ἔπαινον θεοῦ.

The second step consists in dividing the Greek text according to semantic units, that is, dividing up the paragraph into its main components. This is normally done by dividing the paragraphs into different sentences.

For Phil 1.9-11, we have only one main sentence. So our divisions will need to go one step further, meaning that we will need to identify its main clause and any subordinate clause(s). The main clause is normally made of a subject (if expressed) and a verb in the INDICATIVE mood or in the IMPERATIVE.

Subordinate clauses normally can be identified by PARTICIPLES, INFINITIVES, SUBJUNCTIVES or even OPTATIVES (though these are much less used in the New Testament). Other division markers for subordinate clauses are CONJUNCTIONS of subordination, RELATIVE PRONOUNS, and PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES (phrases introduced by prepositions), and ADVERBS.

Our text in Phil 1.9-11 can thus be divided according to its main clause and subordinate clauses in this way. For the sake of clarity, verbs have been put in bold and enlarged.

⁹ καὶ τοῦτο **προσεύχομαι**,
ἵνα ἡ ἀγάπη ὑμῶν ἔτι μᾶλλον καὶ μᾶλλον
περισσεύῃ
ἐν ἐπιγνώσει καὶ πάσῃ αἰσθήσει
¹⁰ εἰς τὸ **δοκιμάζειν** ὑμᾶς τὰ
διαφέροντα,
ἵνα **ἦτε** εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι
εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ,
¹¹ **πεπληρωμένοι** καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης
τὸν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
εἰς δόξαν καὶ ἔπαινον θεοῦ.

Note that we did not indent any clause or phrase yet. The main point at this stage is to identify the units of thought.

The third step consists in indenting subordinate clauses while keeping the main clause on the left margin, in order to represent visually the main clause and any subordinate elements. This level of work requires more proficiency in Greek, but it is the most rewarding one, for it can help structure an entire sermon.

⁶ BDAG, pp. 326-330.

⁷ For options and careful analysis, see Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 74-76.

Phil 1.9-11 contains one main clause, and three subordinate clauses, themselves being modified by prepositional phrases or substantival articles.

Καὶ τοῦτο προσεύχομαι,

ἵνα ἡ ἀγάπη ὑμῶν ἔτι μᾶλλον καὶ μᾶλλον περισσεύῃ
 ἐν ἐπιγνώσει καὶ πάσῃ αἰσθήσει
 εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τὰ
 διαφέροντα,
 ἵνα ἦτε εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι
 εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ,
 πεπληρωμένοι καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης
 τὸν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
 εἰς δόξαν καὶ ἔπαινον θεοῦ.

The central idea is the fact that Paul prays for the Philippians. What follows this mention of prayer is actually the *content* of his prayer. The three subordinate clauses are the three main points of his prayer for the Philippians.

Each of these clauses expressing content are themselves modified by sub-subordinate clauses. The meaning of those clauses can be found by studying the meaning of the Greek constructions (including the prepositions), or simply by the meaning of the words contained therein.

A visual presentation of Phil 1.9-11 with all structural markers looks like the following:

Praying for the Progress of the Gospel

Phil 1:9-11

Phil 1 ⁹ καὶ τοῦτο προσεύχομαι, ἵνα ἡ ἀγάπη ὑμῶν ἔτι μᾶλλον καὶ μᾶλλον περισσεύῃ ἐν ἐπιγνώσει καὶ πάσῃ αἰσθήσει ¹⁰ εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τὰ διαφέροντα, ἵνα ἦτε εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ, ¹¹ πεπληρωμένοι καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης τὸν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς δόξαν καὶ ἔπαινον θεοῦ.

⁹Καὶ τοῦτο προσεύχομαι,

And this I pray,

1st Content ἵνα ἡ ἀγάπη ὑμῶν

(A) that your love may abound

Extent

ἔτι μᾶλλον καὶ μᾶλλον

(1) still more and more

περισσεύῃ

Sphere

ἐν ἐπιγνώσει καὶ πάσῃ αἰσθήσει

(2) in knowledge and all insight

Purpose ¹⁰

εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τὰ διαφέροντα,

(3) in order that you may discern what is best,

2nd Content

ἵνα ἦτε εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι (B) that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,

Purpose

εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ,

for the day of Christ,

3rd Content ¹¹πεπληρωμένοι καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης,

(C) (that you may be) filled with (the) fruit of righteousness

Description / source

τὸν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

(1) which is by Jesus Christ

Purpose

εἰς δόξαν καὶ ἔπαινον θεοῦ.

(2) to the glory and praise of God.

A number of exegetical decisions have been taken in order to arrive at this outline, namely (1) the meaning of the second ἵνα-clause (v. 10) as expressing the second part of the *content* of Paul's prayer; (2) the meaning of the participle πεπληρωμένοι (v. 12) as expressing the third part of the *content* of Paul's prayer for the Philippians.⁸

Let us repeat that, for our purposes, what concerns us here is not whether we all agree on these exegetical decisions, but that we ask ourselves these questions *before* we come to the final outline of our sermon. Following the NIV or the ESV without referring to the Greek text will make us preach that passage according to the decisions of the translators of these versions, missing the opportunity to ask ourselves deeper questions pertaining to meaning and, ultimately, on *what* and *how* we preach this prayer from Paul.

Moreover, the way we structure this text will inevitably influence the way we structure the outline of the sermon. Is Paul praying for

- one main thing (i.e., that their love may abound)?
- two things (i.e., that their love may abound [vv. 9-10], and that they be filled with the fruit of righteousness)?
- or even three different things (i.e., that their love may abound [vv. 9-10a], that they be pure and blame-

⁸ O'Brien (*Philippians*, 78-79) interprets the participle πεπληρωμένοι in v. 12 as referring to content, but sees the ἵνα-clause in v. 10 as denoting a second *purpose* for which their love might abound (v. 9). Carson (*Priorities from Paul*, 133), somewhat differently, attaches the ἵνα-clause in v. 10 to the whole of vv. 9-10a, with the result that this clause expresses a "fresh purpose" towards which points everything preceding it. Instead of a "fresh purpose," I rather see this clause as expressing the second part of the *content* of Paul's prayer, parallel to the first ἵνα-clause in v. 9.

less [v. 10b], and that they be filled with the fruit of righteousness [v. 11])?

The answer to this question will produce a different sermon outline.

If we were, for the sake of the argument, to adopt the proposed phrasing and outline presented above, we can then identify the main thrust of this passage, namely the fact that Paul mentions he prays for them. The sermon outline for this passage can then be modeled directly on the syntactical structure of the passage, along the following lines:

A Prayer for the progress of the Gospel Phil 1.9-11

1. A Prayer for Abounding Love (1.9-10a)
 - The extent of such a love: still more and more (1.9a-b)
 - The sphere of such a love: in all knowledge and insight (1.9c)
 - The purpose for such a love: in order that you may discern what is best (1.10a)
2. A Prayer for Purity and Blamelessness (1.10b)
 - The nature of "purity and blamelessness" (1.10a)
 - The end goal: with a view for the day of Christ (1.10b)
3. A Prayer for Being Filled with Practical Righteousness (1.11)
 - The source (or means) of such a righteous life: Jesus Christ (1.11a-b)
 - The ultimate goal of such a righteous life: to the glory and praise of God (1.11c)

A word of caution is needed here. What matters most is *not* that all of us come with exactly the same outline. As noted above, a number of exegetical decisions precede the structuring of such a sermon

outline. Even the best commentaries differ on how they subdivide main clauses. What *is* important, however, is that we include such an exercise in our sermon preparation *if we are to preach the text!* Inevitably, the actual flesh and bone of the sermon, how we teach and apply this text, will depend in no insignificant way on the life and needs of our congregations; but if we desire to preach the text, let us keep central what is central, and peripheral what is peripheral.

Example 2: Preaching From a Series of Paragraph

How does this apply to more than a few verses or a short paragraph? How does this apply to different literary genres? Let us consider an example taken from a series of paragraphs from Matthew 8–9.

Matt 8.1–9.34 is a series of ten paragraphs presenting miracles and teachings of Jesus. It begins with a first series of three miracles: the healing of a man with leprosy (8.1-4) the healing of the centurion’s servant (8.5-13), and the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law joined to a summary of Jesus’ healing ministry (8.14-17). This is followed by a short paragraph depicting Jesus’ teaching on the cost of following him (8.18-22). Then come a second series of three miracles: Jesus calming a storm (8.23-27), exorcising two demon-possessed men (8.28-34), and healing and forgiving the sins of a paralytic carried by “some men” (9.1-8). Between this second series of three miracles and a third series of three miracles, Jesus calls Matthew to follow him, which leads to a controversy about Jesus’ fellowship with sinners (9.9-13) and fasting habits (or lack thereof) (9.14-17). Next comes the last series of three miracles—the double miracle of raising from the dead a sick girl, and healing a

woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (9.18-26), the healing of two blind (9.27-31), and finally the casting out of a mute demon, stirring up another controversy with the Pharisees (9.32-34).⁹

These paragraphs can be visually presented in the following way:

Ref.	Content
8.1-4	Healing of man with leprosy
8.5-13	Healing of centurion’s servant
8.14-17	Healing of Peter’s mother-in-law and summary of healing ministry
8.18-22	Teaching : the cost of following Jesus
8.23-27	Calming of the storm
8.28-34	Exorcism of two demon-possessed men
9.1-8	Healing and forgiving sins to a paralytic
9.9-13	Jesus’ call to Matthew to follow and controversy about fellowship with sinners
9.14-17	Controversy about fasting habits
9.18-26	Double miracle : raising from the dead a sick girl, and healing of bleeding woman
9.27-31	Healing of two blind men
9.32-34	Casting out of a mute demon and controversy about Jesus’ healing power

Here the preacher has many options. One could decide to teach each of those ten paragraphs individually, thus ending up with a series of ten sermons. One could also present a sermon covering series of three miracles (8.1-17, 8.23–9.8, and 9.18-34), interspersed with Jesus’ teaching about following him (8.18-22 and 9.14-17), this time leading up to anything from four to six sermons.

Or one could be brave enough and tackle the entire span of ten paragraphs in a single sermon (8.1–9.34). Inevitably, the question comes to mind: how can one preach such a block of material, composed

⁹ A useful tool for broadening our perspective and identifying the links between the diverse pericopes in the Gospels, see Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids / Leicester: Baker / Apollos, 2002).

of such diverse elements, in one single sermon? My experience in these matters has taught me that this is not impossible or as difficult as it might appear in the first place. The difficulty is to identify the thread that weaves together all ten paragraphs. Such a difficulty fortunately can be overcome in this passage, thanks to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount which immediately precedes this entire section. We read in Matt 7.28-29, concluding the Sermon on the Mount, “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” Granted that Jesus’ authority is a running theme throughout the Gospel of Matthew, but it comes to the forefront especially in Matt 8.1–9.34. The entire section can be read, appreciated, and taught under the theme of Jesus’ authority over illnesses, every kind of disease, nature, demons, sin, and even death!

When we preach this section of Matthew as a unit, even within the constraints of a single sermon, not only are we faced with the challenge of keeping an overall perspective (unless we have the luxury of preaching many hours, seldom found in the North-American context), but we are given an opportunity to teach our congregations how these paragraphs fit together and that they were not lined up by the Evangelist haphazardly, but with the purpose of presenting a single unifying thought. And our congregations will eventually thank us for not spending two years on a single Gospel, but as we move on at a reasonable pace, for being exposed to different parts and teachings of Scripture.

Example 3: Preaching an Entire Book from a Single Passage

Let us consider the possibility of surveying an entire book from a single passage. Can this be said to “Preach the text”? I believe it can, provided that we first identify the main thrust of an entire book and find an appropriate passage which can serve as a summary.

Should we use Paul’s epistle to the Philippians once again, a careful analysis of the epistle leads to the conclusion that the central idea in this letter is *not* joy (even though this word-group appears more than twenty-five times). This epistle contains an unusual number of expressions containing the word “gospel.” Paul uses the word “gospel” with the following expressions:

- The Philippians’ partnership in the gospel (1.5)
- His own ministry as defending and confirmation of the gospel (1.7)
- His own imprisonment as serving to advance the gospel (1.12)
- Once again his own ministry as the defence of the gospel (1.16)
- He exhorts his readers to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel (1.27)
- He describes their own perseverance as striving together for the faith of the gospel (1.27b)
- Timothy’s work is predicated as serving with Paul in the work of the gospel (2.22)
- Both Euodia and Syntyche are said to have contended in the cause of the gospel (4.3)

- Finally, Paul speaks of the early days of their acquaintance with the gospel (4.15)

What causes Paul to rejoice, why he praises the Lord for the Philippians, what makes him rejoice even as some preach Christ with evil motives, his central exhortation to the Philippians, Christ's incarnation, death and exaltation, Paul's example along Timothy's and Epaphroditus', warnings against dangers found within the church and dangers coming from the outside, Paul's own perseverance, his exhortation to imitate him, his call to stand firm, his thankfulness for the Philippians' financial support, all these and more find their common element in some aspect of the gospel.

Not exceptionally, Paul introduces the central idea of his letter in the opening section, namely in his thanksgiving and prayer for his readers. One could summarize the epistle to the Philippians from Phil 1.3-5, where Paul thanks God for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel. The remainder of the epistle instructs us as to *how* the Philippians took part in the gospel:

1. they prayed for Paul (cf. 1.19);
2. they supported Paul financially (cf. 2.25, 4.10-20);
3. they demonstrated their belonging to Christ through suffering (cf. 1.29-30);
4. they proclaimed the gospel to their own people (cf. 2.15).

No surprise, then, that they are called to obey the Lord (2.1-4) and show this obedience through their perseverance (cf.

1.27-30, 4.1), that they are warned against internal and external foes to the gospel message and to the gospel mission.

The entire epistle to the Philippians could thus be preached in one sermon: "Being partners in the gospel," with four main points as mentioned above:

- Being partners of the gospel through our prayers
- Being partners of the gospel through our financial support
- Being partners of the gospel through our own sufferings
- Being partners of the gospel through our own obedience

No doubt this could be structured differently, or adjusted substantially. Again, the important point here is that we can preach an entire epistle (in a survey manner), provided we find the main thrust of the book and a passage summarizing this main idea.

Example 4: Preaching a Series of Book from a Single Passage

In conclusion for this presentation, let me encourage you to consider preaching even many books in a single sermon. Obviously, this is even more summarized than when preaching an entire book. This requires not only to read Scripture in its *historical* setting, not only interpreting Scripture in its *literary* setting, but it necessitates to read and interpret Scripture in its *canonical* setting.

One example should suffice. It is possible to preach a survey of the Pentateuch in a single sermon, using as the interpretive grid of these five books God's promise to

Abraham (Gen 12.1-3, 13.14-16, 15.1-6, and 17.1-8). Once the elements of the Lord's promise to Abraham and covenant with him are presented, one can then show how the different components of this promise and covenant are fulfilled in the Pentateuch (one could even include the book of Joshua as well!).

Needless to say, this kind of survey has to be prepared weeks (if not months) in advance, and no pastor can keep up that pace for too long. Probably once or twice a year would be quite an accomplishment.

Of course, this requires a good dose of biblical theology, but I personally think this is one of the most useful perspective and outlook on Scripture we can provide to our congregations.¹⁰

Conclusion

As a final word of encouragement, this kind of preaching can be successfully done, under the condition that one plans

ahead of time. Our congregations will always have needs to answer, urgent matters to address, yearly topics to be reminded of, special occasions to remember. But fundamentally, we as preachers need to "Preach the text!" This can be accomplished on various levels: a single verse, a paragraph, a series of paragraph, an entire book, even many books all together. The pace and depth of preaching will inevitably change, and variety should be looked for.

But at the source of our exhortations, teachings, encouragements, vision casting, corrections, calls to serve, attempts to bring god's people to understand, worship, and obey, as we communicate priorities and bring people to understand, as we equip to obey and to serve, to worship and to change lives and priorities in order to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, as we denounce sin and encourage holiness, what we preach is the Word of God.

¹⁰ An indispensable tool is the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), especially the preliminary articles (pp. 1-112).