

**PREACHING GOD'S
MESSAGE**

A HAND BOOK

David Saunders

This guide covers the contents of a course for occasional preachers and other members of the congregation at Hillsborough Baptist Church in Sheffield, with some additional material. The course was developed using material in a handbook for preachers developed by the By All Means Gospel Trust, an interdenominational charity based in the West Midlands.”

David Saunders

Preaching God's message

Introduction

Church attendance is dwindling. Young people who are brought up in the Church often drift away in teenage years. Preaching doesn't seem to make much difference.

It shouldn't be like this. Paul instructed the young Timothy (1 Tim 4 v 13) to "*Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching.*" Paul in his letter to the Romans (Chapter 12 v 28) listed the speaking Ministry as second only in importance to apostleship. Preaching should be the foundation of a Church's ministry. Without effective preaching and teaching, every aspect of the Church's life suffers.

The late John Chapman, an Australian preacher, said that the most difficult time for a preacher was "*the first 50 years*". By that measure, most of us need help. This handbook covers the content of a course that was delivered to some members of the congregation at Hillsborough Baptist Church. My hope is that it will help you make best use of the gifts God has given you.

What is preaching?

Most people think of preaching as something which takes place on a Sunday from a pulpit and this handbook is written mainly with that type of Ministry in mind. But preaching can be much broader than that. John Stott defined preaching as "*to open up the inspired text of scripture with such faithfulness and sensitivity so that God's voice is heard and his people obey him.*"

According to this definition, any setting where scripture is explained could count as preaching. Sunday school classes, home groups and even one-to-one discussions with people all might count as preaching. Indeed, it may not necessarily be confined to the spoken word but can include writing, singing and even acting! The important point is whether an attempt is made to explain something from the Bible.

What is the problem with preaching? Why don't preachers deliver?

Today, there is a shortage of gifted preachers. Many smaller Churches use anyone they can get because they have difficulty in filling all their Sunday slots. This means that many sermons are poor despite the best efforts of the preacher.

Preachers must be called by God. They must have the appropriate gifts and abilities and other mature Christians can help to identify or recognise a calling in someone. Any possible calling should be accompanied by a good deal of prayer and be tested to see whether or not it is genuine. And not everyone who "feels called" should necessarily follow that calling. See 1 Corinthians 14 v 32.

Some other reasons for ineffective preaching are as follows:

- Many lay preachers have done little or no training. They fail to make best use of whatever gifts they have.
- There's a lack of good role models and not enough younger people are coming forward.
- Many preachers don't prepare sufficiently.

- There may be un-repentant sin in the preacher's life. Clean water poured into a pipe only comes out clean if the inside of the pipe is clean. It is the same with the word of God.
- Lack of love for the congregation. See 1 Corinthians 13
- Lack of commitment. Some preachers do it "as a favour" or because no-one else will.

•

Like all Christians, preachers must be close to their Lord. John 15 vs 1-8 tells us how important it is that we concentrate on our relationship with Him if we are to be effective in our service. It gives us a picture of sap rising through the "vine" Jesus), flowing through the "branches" (his servants), and creating "fruit".

To remain in the vine, we need to devote ourselves to Bible study, to prayer, and to living it out with the help of the Holy Spirit. Too many preachers have fruitless Ministries and, whilst many still occupy the pulpit, they have in effect been cut off. Fruitful branches, on the other hand, are pruned and dead or diseased parts are pruned back so the branch is healthier.

But this passage also contains a great promise. Fruitful branches can ask for anything they wish – in order that they produce more fruit. (See Chapter 15 v 7 and v 16). Note in this passage the emphasis again on love (v 9-15).

Why are some sermons not very good?

The following are amongst the most common reasons.

1. Poor content, including:

- A poor structure, too much repetition, and sermons which lack direction.
- Too much jargon making it difficult to understand.
- Too many cross-references to other parts of the Bible or too many quotations. Usually these should be kept to a minimum.
- It isn't up-to-date or linked to real life.
- The explanation of the passage is poor. Many sermons have some link with the passage but they do not deliver the message that the Lord intended.
- It has no clear message - you don't know what it was about or why the sermon was preached.

2. Poor delivery, including:

- Dull delivery. The preacher speaks in a monotonous voice, often with no variation in pace.
- Umiming and erring, stuttering stop/start delivery.
- Annoying preacher habits (scratching, not standing still...)

Poor sermons mean that people don't listen to what is being said.

Congregations regularly leave our Churches Sunday by Sunday without being challenged, helped or spiritually enlightened. The Church doesn't grow. People leave.

SO, THESE NOTES COVER THE FOLLOWING:

SECTION	SUBJECT	PAGE
1	Sermon basic: what does preaching involve? Sermon aims and application. Some initial thoughts on delivery	4
2	Bible study: how do we study the Bible and get to grips with it?	10
3	Making sure you have identified God's message.	17
4	Structuring your sermon	21
5	Developing your sermon	24

There are also some annexes with further information

ANNEX	SUBJECT	PAGE
1	Hermeneutics: how we approach the Bible	26
2	Exegesis and Eisegesis: the right and wrong ways of using the text	29
3	Apologetics	31
4	Understanding the big picture	32
5	Some other methods of Bible study	33
6	Further ideas for keeping the congregation awake	36
7	Resources for the preacher	38
8	Sermon and preaching engagement checklist	40
9	Some common difficulties and problems	42

Section 1: What does preaching involve?

Let us start with the basics.

1. What does preaching involve?

We saw in the introduction how preaching might be defined. We are now going to look at what it involves. Preaching should involve:

- Communicating a message from God. Throughout the Bible God has implanted His message, by the Holy Spirit. The first job for the preacher must be to discover what this message is, or God's message will not be given and His voice will not be heard. This is often the most difficult and neglected part of sermon preparation¹.
- Drawing people closer to God. God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit - must be exalted and glorified.
- Changing hearers in some way. Sermons should lead hearers to act or give them information to act upon when appropriate.

2. What should preaching aim to achieve?

If we are effective, we should know what we are preaching and what preaching is intended to achieve. We must think **hard** when planning our sermons, otherwise the hearers will think little about them. Dr Sangster once wrote *“So much of our preaching ends in the air. The people do not know what the preacher was after and sometimes doubt if the preacher himself knows. The sermon concludes and the congregation disperses, but with no clear idea what was to be done about the topic the preacher has discussed.”*

Which of the following aims would you say are important, and why? To:

- a. Make the congregation better informed about Christian doctrine
- b. Counter-balance atheistic worldly teaching which is usually contrary to Biblical teaching
- c. Make people happier and better able to cope with life's pressures
- d. Improve the morals of society
- e. Convert people to Christianity
- f. Help people to appreciate the part religion has played in their history and culture
- g. Get people more concerned about the social problems around us
- h. Encourage people to be 'nicer' so they can live in harmony with their family and neighbours
- i. Explain the apparent difficulties and contradictions of the Bible
- j. Lead people to love their neighbours more than they do now

All of the points mentioned are of some importance and there is no right answer to the list of priorities. But we need to deliver people –to turn passive Christians into more active disciples or bring people closer to committing their lives to Christ, for example. So those aims that prompt action would perhaps be most important.

The goal always is to emphasise the message that God has put into the passage and then prompt your listeners to act in the light of that message.

¹ This is the goal of what is called “hermeneutics.” More on this can be found in Annex 1.

3 What do I preach about?

Someone once said “*Preach about Jesus and preach about 20 minutes.*” God will do His work through His word. All you need to do it preach it to the best of your ability.

One of my previous Ministers told us about a time he had preached on a Sunday morning. After the service a woman approached him, her face like thunder. “*Who told you about me? I demand to know. Who was it?*” He replied apologetically, saying that he didn’t know who she was and couldn’t recall ever having met her. Her face went white as she realised he was telling the truth. He had simply prepared the sermon and delivered it as normal.

You would be wise to avoid controversial matters that make no difference. Airing your views on unimportant and disputable matters only creates division and doesn’t bring anyone closer to God. See Titus 3 v 9-11 and 1 Timothy 1 v 3-7.

Start off with passages that you know well, that perhaps mean something to you personally. That way your sermon will more likely to come across with passion and confidence. If you have only one commentary, pick something from the book of the Bible it covers. Start easy. Preach it to the best of your ability. God will do his work.

4 Should it be kept simple?

Many congregations say they want “*simple*” sermons. They don’t like complicated arguments which are difficult to follow. This is quite understandable and there is no doubt that some preachers get over-complicated and baffle their listeners.

The problem is that some preachers then fail to preach sermons with any depth. They never really give the congregation a better understanding about the meaning or the implications. This will not do. Samuel “*explained*” to the people the regulations concerning kingship (1 Samuel 25). The disciples asked Jesus to “*Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field*” (Matthew 13).

A simple sermon does not have to be superficial. A proper explanation does not have to be complicated. You should aim to explain the passage thoroughly and to do so in a straightforward, simple, and easy to understand way. Properly structuring and developing your sermon (see Sections 4 and 5) will help you achieve the right balance.

5 Do I start with the message or with the passage?

You start with the passage. The message that you deliver must be God’s message which you have found from studying the passage. The danger in starting with the message is that you use the passage as a “hook,” and the sermon is simply your holy thoughts which you have used the Bible to justify. Annex 2 deals with this further.

There are various types of sermons. In very broad terms they can be **text** based or **topic/theme** based.

1. The **text** based sermon is based on a text from the Bible and contains an explanation of the text and applications. The text can be anything from a single verse to a large chunk, for example a chapter of a book.
2. The **topic/theme** based sermon could be a doctrinal topic, a biographical topic or even a contemporary topic dealt with through the eyes of scripture. Verses and passages from different parts of the Bible might be referred to for each topic or theme.

It is perfectly legitimate to decide your topic or theme in advance, and then choose a relevant passage. For example, I could choose 2 Corinthians 8 v 1-15 if I wanted to preach about helping Christians in other countries who are in hard times. This is because I know that this passage is about this particular subject. The task then is to study the passage and prepare your sermon according to what you discover. But you still need to be careful and be sure that the subject of the passage is what you think it is.

6 How do I find the message? And what about the application?

Finding the message that God has planted in the passage can only come from serious Bible study (see Section 2).

The application should be a logical consequence of the message. Often the application will be contained within the same passage. Your task then is to think about how to make the application relevant to your particular audience.

i) Sometimes God's message and the application are clear:

- The parable of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10 v 25- 37. The theme is 'loving our neighbour' and God's message is that anyone in need is our neighbour. The application is "*Therefore go and do likewise.*" You can probably think of plenty of ways in which we might do better at loving our neighbour, remembering that Jesus' love for us was a costly, self-sacrificial love².
- Matthew 28 v 16-25 – the Great Commission. God's message is in vs 18 – "*All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.*" The application is "*Therefore go and make disciples....*" The main task of the preacher will be to explain what is meant by "*All authority*" and the implications for people everywhere. The application for a group of single, twenty-something Christians might include a call to overseas mission. However, for a group of elderly believers in a nursing home, the appropriate response might be to be seen reading their Bibles in the lounge. You could also invite a returning missionary to talk about their work and ask your listeners to pray for or support specific missionaries. But note, the task does not stop with converts, but with making disciples (as amplified in verse 20) and the sermon should cover that aspect as well.
- If I were preaching on Matthew 8 v 28- 34 (God's message: Jesus has the power to defeat evil), amongst my points I would invite the congregation to think of ways in which we tell Jesus to go elsewhere, even if we are in a distressed state, as did the crowd in verse 34. For example, I remember talking to a man who would rather live with his severe alcohol dependency and the dreadful consequences of it than face the disruption that giving his life to Jesus would entail. And many of us would rather live with a little bit of guilt over some sin than face Jesus and ask him to help. We even let our loved ones continue to suffer if the alternative is that we have to make some change in our own lives. The application is not to send Jesus away but to let him rule over every part of our lives, which involves honest self-examination and prayer.

ii) Sometimes God's message or the application might take a little thought

- John 13: Jesus washes his disciples' feet. This is not a command to wash each other's feet. Washing feet symbolised humble service. Washing is also about cleansing, so it symbolises forgiveness. So the message is that the Son of God came to serve us by washing away our sins (v7-10). One application for non-Christians is to allow Jesus to "*wash*" their sins away (v8). Another, for those of us who are already his followers, could be that we should live as humble servants of Him and each other (vs 14, 15).
- Romans 8 v 28-39: More than conquerors. The message is that, as believers, our salvation is secure because God is on our side. The application is to take heart whenever the world or the devil throws doubts and troubles at us. The reasons why we can take heart are given in the passage.
-

² Note vs 25-28: The difficulty in fulfilling the law like this should drive us towards Jesus - see the explanation of Luke's purpose in "Section 2: Bible Study."

- Luke 16 v 19-31: the Rich man and Lazarus. God's message is that you need to make a decision about Jesus whilst you are alive. The obvious application for non-believers is to decide now. For believers, the application might be that we need to tell people before it is too late for them. And when we ourselves are dead, it's too late for us to do anything to help those who are still alive.
- iii) Sometimes God's message or the application are harder to find
- Mark 11 v 1-11. The crowd shouted "*Hosanna*" because they thought Jesus was a human king, that he would free Israel from Roman occupation. Jesus' impression of them – and particularly the chief priests and teachers – wasn't so complimentary, v 12-19. When the crowd discovered that Jesus was not going to do what they expected, they shouted "*crucify*" (Chapter 15). God's message is that Jesus doesn't promise to give us what we want in this life. His salvation is from sin and the devil. The aim of the sermon should be to get people to think about whether their expectations about Jesus are correct. The application might then be to make sure that we don't turn away when we encounter trials and disappointments. You might give some specific examples when we might be tempted to turn away and warn your audience not to do so. You could also preach this evangelistically, inviting your listeners to commit their lives to the Jesus who was going to the cross to reconcile them to God and free them from sin. (There is more on this in Chapter 3 below.)

7 How do I get my message across?

God can work through dull sermons but a lively and interesting sermon which can be understood by all is much better. Think through the following:

What are you going to write down?

Much will depend on your confidence and how well you know what you are going to say. No one way is more "spiritual" than another. The Holy Spirit works just as well through sermons written down word for word as those where the preacher can confidently speak from notes or just the headings. The Holy Spirit works as we prepare, and as we write down what we want to say, and as we speak.

Some preachers find that things come into their mind as they speak. They don't want to, as they see it, "*restrict the Holy Spirit*". This is fine, providing you are able to assess instantly whether what has come to you in the middle of a sermon is indeed a prompting of the Spirit. And introducing something unplanned might mean you need to adjust the rest of the sermon as you speak, which you may not find easy. So, do what works. 1 Corinthians 14 v 32 gives us the authority to do whatever works best.

Language:

The way we say things is different to the way we write them. If you write your sermon down, write it as you would say it. You will be more confident in it. It will be more natural. Some sermons sound like the preacher is reading an academic paper. They are dull and send people to sleep.

And the language needs to be kept simple. Billy Graham once said "*In the United States the vocabulary of the average man is 600 words, whereas the vocabulary of the average preacher is 5,000 words. So the average man in the pew doesn't know what the man in the pulpit is saying.*"

Here's a couple of exercises

Try re-writing this in plain English: *“Jesus is the propitiation for our sins.”*

Rewrite this as you would say it in a sermon. *“Participation on the kingdom of heaven, beginning with repentance, involves a humble assessment of ourselves, an internal rather than an external righteousness, obedience to the will of God, a child-like spirit of dependency on God, and a rejection of any sense of dependency on other sources. These are the initial conditions upon which a person may enter and enjoy the kingdom.”*

Illustrations, analogies and anecdotes:

Some sermons can come across as being very theoretical, somewhat detached from everyday life.

Everyday **illustrations**³ can help the sermon seem “real” and up to the moment. You should probably have no more than three or four at key points. Look at these examples.

- An illustration of how we like to think we are super important, entitled to the good things in life and that there is nothing wrong with us. *“Because you are worth it”* – From the advertisement for L’Oreal cosmetics.
- In 1 Peter 1 v 6, Peter refers to his readers suffering grief in all kinds of trials, by which he means persecutions. *“Today in India, Christians are being killed for their faith. We may not face death here in England, but we do face mockery, attempts to shut us up and so on. Peter and Hazelmary Bull refused to let a gay couple sleep in the same bed in their guest house. They have had to pay damages, lost their business and suffered death threats.”*
- False idols. I remember hearing about a Minister who loved furniture and he saved up hard and one day was able to buy an expensive sideboard, something he always wanted. A bit later he had a call, an elderly parishioner was ill and dying and could he come and pray with her? So off he drove and it started raining. All the way there all he could think about was whether he had left the window open and it was raining on his sideboard. The next day he put it up for sale; he was worshipping his sideboard more than he was worshipping Jesus.
- Of course, you need to be mindful of the relevance of your illustrations to the audience. I once was preaching at a Church in a deprived area. I had a brilliant illustration involving the Wimbledon Tennis championship but unfortunately it went over their heads because no-one was remotely interested in Tennis.

Analogies - explaining that something is like something else – can help get across a difficult point. This especially applies to sermons which are heavy in doctrine.

- Sometimes the Bible does it for us:
 - In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul says *“The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”*
 - The parable of the virgins (Matthew 25) is one long analogy. *“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins...”*
- Sometimes you might want to think of an analogy. Here are three examples:
 - 1 Thessalonians 4 v 16. *“The dead in Christ will rise first, and after that, we who are still alive will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”* **Analogy:** It will be like a great big family reunion.

³ Whilst it can be helpful to use illustrations from modern culture – the Bible after all presents God’s perspective on it - care needs to be taken to ensure that unedifying and unhelpful worldview is not unintentionally legitimised.

- Some people are better than others but we are all sinners. Analogy: Usain Bolt runs the 100m in 9.58 seconds. I run it in 9.58 minutes. If the standard for qualification is 9.50 seconds, we both fail. It is like that with sin: some come closer to perfection than others, but all fail.
- Sin is attractive. Analogy: Remember the TV advertisement for cream cakes? *“It’s immoral, it’s illegal, or it makes you fat.”* It implied that anything enjoyable always had a problem attached to it⁴

Anecdotes can also help to liven up the talk as they add personal interest. One preacher would regularly insert asides about the latest Sheffield Wednesday performance, or that of the England Cricket team. They helped to bring people back to what he was saying if their concentration was going. They are particularly useful immediately before a key point in the sermon when you want to make sure the congregation will be listening. Humour doesn’t even have to be funny! The important point with anecdotes, illustrations and analogies is to use them sparingly, but use them where they would be helpful in getting across God’s message. It is always God’s message that should shine through, not the anecdote or illustration. Don’t add them simply to be funny or clever. As Dr Martin Lloyd Jones said, *“Illustrations should illustrate something.”*

⁴ This view of course reveals a completely distorted vision of the world and of God.

Section 2: Bible Study

This second section takes you into the practical arena of Bible study, which must be at the heart of all preaching.

1. God's message

Any talk should convey the message that God wants to deliver or it is not biblical. It may be Bible based, but it is not biblical. People do not hear God speak to them unless God's message is conveyed.

2 Timothy 3 v 16 tells us that God has "*breathed*" His message into His word (See Annex 1). The preacher must therefore start by asking –**What is God's message?** This can only be found through Bible study.

2. Where do I begin?

There is no shortcut to sermon preparation. But the better you know the Bible, the more prepared you will be. It gets easier the more you do.

See 1 Corinthians 3 v 12 -13a. What are these verses telling the preacher about sermon preparation?

- It is costly. This means costly in terms of time, energy, giving up other activities to concentrate on it, and frequently money as well.
- You must immerse yourself in the Bible. You need to study what it meant to the people to whom it was written, and what it means to us now. You are going to need help, by attending Bible study courses, by reading commentaries and other books, and by listening to other preachers who do it well.
- Sadly, many preachers do not understand that it involves hard work. They fail to get really to grips with the passage and they fail to discover God's message.
- This verse says what will happen to preaching that has cost nothing. To misquote Martin Luther, "*Preaching that costs nothing, achieves nothing.*" When the fire of judgement comes, there will be nothing to show for it.

See Proverbs 2 vs 1-5. What do you think these verses are telling you about sermon preparation?

- Sermons do not just drop out of the sky into our laps. Preparation involves effort on our part. We must "*turn our ears*" to wisdom, and "*apply our hearts*" to understanding. We must want to know God's message, and be determined to communicate it effectively to our hearers.
- We will need to "*call out for insight.*" The implication is that understanding will be difficult, and we need to call out to the Lord for help. You will not get very far without prayer. We tend to call out loudest when we are getting nowhere and when we are frustrated at our inability to discover the meaning or the message. So, difficulty is what we can expect if we are going to "*apply our hearts to understanding.*"
- The message is extremely valuable ("*silver*") but we don't necessarily see it easily ("*hidden treasure*"). Imagine that you knew a secret hoard was hidden in your back garden. Imagine the huge effort you would put into finding it. You would devote yourself to digging until you found it, all other considerations (such as your prize begonia) would be disregarded. Thus it is with Bible study.
- Verse 6 promises success, if we put in the effort.

What about the Holy Spirit?

Some people might say that this is not relying on the Holy Spirit. That is a mistaken view. The Holy Spirit works in us as we put in the effort. He reveals to us the truth, He prompts us with our questions, He guides us in our thoughts. He works as we turn our ears, apply our hearts, call out for insight and search as for silver and hidden treasure. Providing, of course, we pray.

We should adopt the Jesus principle: Jesus was both man and God, working in harmony. His sacrifice was only able to pay for our sins because he was both.

A sermon which is all God and no man means there is nothing for the Holy Spirit to work with. What do you expect Him to do if you don't prepare properly? What could the Son of God have done if the Son of Man was unwilling to go to the cross?

Similarly, a sermon which is all man and no God risks delivering the wrong message and won't achieve much. What good would the sacrifice of the Son of Man have been if it was not the perfection of the Son of God?

Jesus was fully God and fully man. That's what our sermons need to be: human perspiration and holy inspiration.

3. How do I study the Bible?

In order to understand what God is saying to us today, we must first understand what God was saying through his word to the original audience. Especially, we need to understand what was going on at the time of the events described. What did it mean in its original setting? Once we have done that, it is easier to see what God is saying to us now. If we do not do this, we will not understand the context for His message and are more likely to misinterpret it (See Annex 2).

There are many approaches to Bible study. Suggestions, examples and illustrations are given in Annex 4 which should help you to get to grips with sermon preparation. The right method is the method that works for you. The important point is that you interrogate the text until you understand it. Imagine you are a Police Detective investigating a murder, and the passage you are looking at is the chief suspect. Don't let it out of the interrogation room until you have got every last bit of truth from it and are satisfied with its answers.

The big picture

You need to understand how any passage of scripture fits into the Bible story as a whole, from Genesis through to Revelation. This is an example of an outline.

- God as creator, creating the universe and mankind.
- The fall of man. God's creation is spoiled. The earliest hint of a Messiah.
- God's covenant promises to Noah, Abraham and the patriarchs. Abraham demonstrates righteousness through faith.
- Israel in slavery in Egypt. Israel's escape from Egypt.
- God's covenant with the Jewish people and the Old Testament law.
- Israel in the Promised Land. The period of the Judges.
- Transition from a tribal federation to a monarchy.
- The kingdom divides.
- Promises of a new covenant.
- Exile and return to the Promised Land.
- Jesus is born. His life, death and resurrection.
- The new covenant, and the sending of the Holy Spirit.
- Spread of the gospel to all nations.
- The return of the Messiah and the new heaven and new earth.

It is vitally important, for example, that you understand the difference between living in Old Testament times – even for faithful followers of Yahweh - and living in the new covenant, with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 12 v 18-24 helps here. Do you know where in the Bible the new covenant is spelt out? (See at the bottom of Annex 4 for the answer.)

Some examples: i) See Mark 12. This only makes sense if you know that the vineyard is Israel (Isaiah 5 v 7); ii) The title Jesus most often used for himself – Son of Man – has meaning in the light of Daniel 7 v 13 and Revelation 1 v 13; and iii) Isaiah 55 is full of prophecy of the New Testament era.

See Annex 4 for another example and an exercise.

Structure of the passage

You will probably find it helpful to look at the structure of the passage. This will help you analyse it and may help in deciding the headings and structure of your sermon. Sometimes it is easy – look, for example, at Mark 12 v 13-17, which can easily be broken down into three sections

- i) Jesus is asked a question , 13-15a;
- ii) Jesus shows them a coin, 15b- 16; and
- iii) Jesus gives an answer, 17.

Others are not so easy, have a look at John 10 v 1-21, or Isaiah 9 v 1-7, where the structure isn't so clear.

An Old Testament example: Ruth 1 v 1-7:

Study the passage and consider these questions before you read on.

Q: What is the context?

Q: What happens and why?

Q: What is the main thing to learn?

Context: God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and took them into the Promised Land (where he had promised “*I will be your God and you will be my people*”- see Exodus 6 v 7 and Leviticus 26 v 12). Note that, on the way, they had trouble with Moab amongst others (see Numbers 22-24 and 31) and this trouble persisted (Judges 3 v 12 for example).

The time in which Ruth was written (the period of the Judges) was a troubled time for Israel. It was characterised by idolatry, neglect of the law, and God's judgement. But God was merciful (for example by sending Judges). Famine was a punishment for idolatry (see Deuteronomy 11 v 16-17 and Chapter 28 v 20-24, for example).

What happens? Elimelech and the family leave the Promised Land and go to Moab. The writer is clearly astonished. Notice the repetition in vs 1 and 2 for emphasis. Other people obviously stayed in Judah and survived, and Elimelech and family could always have gone to another part of the Promised Land. As Ephrathites, they might have been fairly well off and influential.

Elimelech died, which was probably judgement for leaving the Promised Land. The two sons married Moabite wives: see Deuteronomy 7 v 1, which doesn't mention Moabites, but see also 1 Kings 11 v 1&2. Was it forbidden? It certainly seems unwise given the reasons that Israelites were told not to marry Canaanite women (Deut. 7 v 3). The same reasons would have applied to Moabite women in Moab. My view is that this was not in accordance with God's will and the two sons should have known. The two sons died, which looks suspiciously like judgement again.

“The LORD came to the help of his people.” Note there is no reference to the weather having changed here, although that is what probably happened. Naomi recognises that it is the LORD's doing. Naomi's faith is still intact despite her tribulations (see later, *“I went away full and came back empty”*, also references to her being *“bitter”* which probably isn't a good translation of her true feelings.) Yet she prays (Chapter 1 v 8&9) and the word *“LORD”* is Yahweh, implying a personal devotion. She still recognises the Lord's sovereignty and is committed to Him.

The main thing to learn from these early verses is not to leave God's presence and kingdom ways in times of trouble but to trust Him. The Lord will work to bring you back if you do leave but it might involve a lot of suffering.

New Testament examples Luke 18 v 18-29

Study the passage and consider these questions before you read on.

Q: What is Luke's gospel about?

Q: How is the book organised?

Q: What is the setting for Chapter 18 vs 18-29 within the book?

Q: What are the key points from the passage, bearing in mind the overall theme of Luke's account and the setting for the passage?

Themes of, and how the book is organised: Luke's gospel is the gospel of the Saviour. Have a look at the following:

- Chapter 1 v 31: *“Jesus”* means Saviour.
- Chapter 1 v 47, 67-71, use of Saviour/salvation, v 77 salvation
- Chapter 2 v 11, the angel visits the shepherds
- Chapter 2 v 29-30, Jesus presented at the temple
- Chapter 3 v 6, in the prophecy of John the Baptist's mission.

The questions then are from what are we saved, and to what are we saved? Luke has compiled an orderly account (Chapter 1 v 3) so we should expect his first recorded miracle in Chapter 4 v 31-37 to tell us something important. In it, he tells us that Jesus drives out an evil spirit. In the next miracles he heals many (from the effects of sin in the world). If we look further on to Chapter 5 v 12-16 he heals a man with leprosy, taken in those days as a sign of God's disfavour because of a person's sin. (Note, the man asked to be made *“clean”* i.e. restored to favour and sin-free. Jesus said he was willing to do this and healed his leprosy as a sign that he had been cleansed of his sin.) So Luke tells us that Jesus is saving people from sin, evil and the realm of the devil.

Note also the link with the kingdom of God (Chapter 4 v 43). This theme develops throughout Luke's gospel. See in particular Chapter 23 v 36-38, the theme of kingship, and v 42-43 with an explicit request to enter Jesus' kingdom, which Jesus grants. So Luke wants us to know that Jesus is the Saviour who saves people from the realm of sin and the devil and into the kingdom of God. That is the message of his gospel.

Setting: the section above. If we now turn to Chapter 18 v 18-29, we will look at it in the context of the section above. The section above (v15-17) gives us a principle as to who enters the kingdom of God. It is those who receive it like a little child. In other words, it is those with no status and no rights, and who recognise their dependence on those who care for them. It is those who take a present or gift without worrying about the need for repayment, or whether there is a catch.

Key points. Notice that the rich ruler – considered blessed by God – approaches him as “*Good Teacher*” and asks what he must do. Compare this with the blind beggar (v 35-43), considered cursed by God, who uses the Messianic term “*Son of David*” and asks for mercy⁵. It is clear from these passages who meets the principle set out in verses 15-17, and so it is clear why the beggar gets what he wants, whilst the rich ruler does not.

Note also what Jesus said concerning the difficulty that the rich encounter in entering the kingdom of God, and the response of those who heard. This prompts the question – what could the ruler have done next? Matthew’s account (Matthew 19) tells us he went away sad. Had he stayed and pleaded for help, Jesus might have hinted at something that after Pentecost would have made sense: that in a short while “*possible with God*” could be a reality for him. But sadly his earthly riches and position were more important to him.

In the middle of this, vs 31-34, Luke has placed a helpful reminder that the cross was still to come, and that none of this would mean much without it.

Another New Testament example: Galatians 3 v 26- Chapter 4 v 7

The big problem with this passage is in understanding properly how the context applies to us. The believers are in danger of being persuaded that the need to obey the Old Testament law, or, more accurately, the rabbinic traditions and teachings which amplified the law, and in particular, circumcision. Few of us today are in that danger.

In Chapter 4 v 1-3 Paul talks about those who were children before “*the time had fully come.*” I think here he means the whole of humanity. In verses 1 and 2 he talks about “*guardians*” and “*trustees*” by which he must mean the OT law. So the “*children*” in vs 1 and 2 must be Jews. Then in verse 3 he seems to move towards gentiles who lived under the “*basic principles of this world*” (Chapter 4 v 3), a phrase he also uses in Colossians (Chapter 2 v 8)? Does he mean the principles he sets out in Romans 1 v 23 and 25? By “*law*” (Chapter 4 v 5) is Paul here referring to the universal duty to glorify God and acknowledge the truth of God (as set out in Romans 1 v 19)?

The answers are not clear, but all of this needs to be investigated as part of your Bible study if you are to be confident that you have understood the passage properly. The overarching principle though seems to be that those who are trying to drag the Galatians back to the old ways are saying that there is something else you must do to be right with God. We can think of plenty of add-ons that today some people insist we must do, or experience, or possess, in order for us to be genuinely saved. Paul’s argument is that Jesus has set us free from adherence to rules or anything else as a means of earning God’s favour.

Paul explains that we are sons – sons, note, being held in great esteem in the culture of the day, whereas daughters had no value, as indeed sadly still is the case in some parts of the world. For this reason it is wise to stick to “*sons*” rather than speak of “*sons and daughters*”, and explain that all of us who are believers have the highest esteem. This will avoid the possibility that some people, including some women from other cultures, might think they take their perceived lack of value with them into the kingdom of God. Indeed, v 26 is the crux of the passage and the key to God’s message. We can see that this is the case by imagining a conversation with the Apostle Paul. Everything after v 26 is dependent upon v 26.

⁵ Son of David is of course also a nationalistic term and Jesus’ question to him asking him what he wanted in verse 41 was designed to ensure that he was approaching him as Son of God rather than as a human ruler.

Paul: *"You are all sons of God"*
 Q: *"How is that possible, Paul?"*
 Paul: *"Through faith in Christ Jesus."*
 Q: *"Why is faith important in making us sons, Paul?"*
 Paul: *"Because all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ."*
 Q: *"But what about that lot at Number 47? They go to a very peculiar Church, and have you seen that girl's hairstyle? Are they sons of God as well?"*
 Paul: *"There is neither.....all one in Christ Jesus."*
 Q: *"Why has God made us his sons?"*
 Paul: *"If you belong.....promise."*
 Q: *"Weren't we sons before?"*
 Paul: *"What I am saying.....principles of the world."*
 Q: *"What difference did Jesus make to our status as sons?"*
 Paul: *"But when.....rights of sons."*
 Q: *"How can I be confident that I am his son?"*
 Paul: *"Because.....Abba, Father."*
 Q: *"So what does all this add up to?"*
 Paul: *"So you.....an heir."*

The implications of being sons of God are obvious. Firstly, we are secure. Most parents love their children unconditionally. Nothing stops a parent from being one, and the child is always its child, however old it is and whatever it does. Secondly, we are heirs of the kingdom of God (and co-heirs with Christ, Romans 8 v 17).

God's message is therefore that all believers have equal status in the kingdom of God. You can think of various applications, they need not be confined to whether we are from a Jewish or gentile background. Note that equality is about our value as God's children: it does not legitimise sinful behaviour, not does it say everyone is equally gifted or has the same function.

There are many challenges with this passage. Some have been mentioned above. You will also need to investigate carefully Paul's argument about *"Abraham's seed"* (v 29) and what *"promise"* he means. These are not easy issues, but if you are to do justice to the passage and be confident that you have understood it properly, you need to investigate thoroughly. Commentaries and word search engines for the Bible (see below) will help but even then you may still only reach tentative conclusions. Sometimes, that has to suffice. As Peter wrote, Paul's letters *"....contain some things that are hard to understand."* (2 Peter 3 v 16). But that doesn't mean we are excused from trying. We just have to work harder at it.

4. Is the application always obvious?

We have already seen in Section 1 some examples where God's message and the application can be found in the same passage. Having found the application point, you need to decide how to relate it to your particular congregation by asking *"How could/might we do this?"* There are times when you will be quite specific, whilst at others you will leave it quite general. The examples in Section 1 give some illustrations and ideas about how the application can be related to specific audiences. However, sometimes it is necessary or helpful to refer to other passages in the Bible. In all cases, though, there should be a clear and obvious link between the passages. The application should not come from somewhere unrelated in the Bible nor should it have some artificial link created with the passage to justify it. An example of an appropriate link with another passage is given in Section 3 below.

5. What resources are available?

Good Bible commentaries help preachers to understand the context for a passage as well as guiding you through difficult points in the Bible. In doing so, they help us to see what God's word is for us today. You need to be selective as there are both good ones and bad ones. (See Annex 7 for further information.)

Read other books on doctrinal topics, biographies and so on. But try not to use large chunks of other people's messages and sermons. It is far more satisfying and challenging to write your own sermons. You will learn more and develop your own gifts better. And filtering God's word through other people can lead to repeating their errors. Use their thoughts to help you, but don't rely on them.

6. What are the outcomes from Bible study?

At the end of any study, it is essential that you:

- Know how the book fits into the story that scripture unfolds, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation.
- Know how the passage fits into the book as a whole. Especially, look at the opening section of the book and the sections just above and below the passage. But you do need to have an awareness of the whole book.
- Understand what the message was to the original audience and what was happening in the original setting (i.e. the exegesis).
- Know what God's message is.
- Know what the application is for your audience.

Remember: There is no shortcut.

Skimpy preparation results in skimpy sermons.

Sermonettes result in Christianettes.

Sermons with empty content result in Churches with empty pews.

Section 3: Making sure you have found God's message

1. Introduction

This section looks in more detail at this issue. It is often the biggest challenge in sermon preparation, and the one that most often preachers get wrong.

2. The main point

Every passage has a main point. Indeed, every verse has a purpose and many individual verses have a main point. The tricky bit is identifying the main point. God's message stems from it. It is not always easy. Possibly the most common mistake amongst many devoted preachers is that they do not see the wood for the trees and end up preaching the wrong message from a particular passage. Here are some handy tips to help you identify the main point.

- Pray
- Read the text carefully
- Be convinced there is a main point
- Avoid the dangers

Dangers

There are a number of dangers, and the following are amongst the common ones.

- Hobby horses. We all have them. It is sometimes easy to attach our pet subject to a passage even though it isn't the point of the passage at all.
- Super spiritualising. I once heard someone say "*The Lord has given me a message, and that message is that revival is coming.*" Actually, what he said was nonsense, but "*The Lord has given me a message*" cuts off any disagreement. Sermon content should always be an honest interpretation and exposition of the Bible – but we are fallible human beings and we need to be humble enough to accept that sometimes we make an honest mistake.
- Over-allegorising. Some commentators, and preachers, fall into this danger. (See Annex 2 for an example from 2 Kings 6.)
- Intellectual pride. The message is simple. You don't have to try to improve it – and if you try, you will fail. Nor should you show off your intellect. If the message is simple – and it usually is – deliver it simply.
- Not trusting the power of the word. Remember, 1 Corinthians 2 v 1-5. The fact that people have heard it before doesn't mean we must say something new; nor do we have to justify God's behaviour, nor should we fall into the trap of undermining it because it isn't acceptable to people. Mere words are enough, we do not need to use excessive fear or bribery or flattery. The world is crying out for the word to be preached clearly. See Colossians 4 v 4.

3. Here are some examples of how to identify God's message and the appropriate application⁶:

- From the text itself
 - 1 Corinthians 15 v 1-11. The main point is the gospel message, set out in vs 3-8: Christ died for our sins and was risen from the dead. God's message in this passage is that we should remember the gospel message ("*... I want to remind you...*" v1). The application is to "*hold firmly*" v2 so that we do not believe "*in vain*".

⁶ Of course, in these cases you would then want to think about developing the application so it relates to the particular congregation. The question to ask is "*How might/could/should we apply the application in our own lives?*"

- Identifying the context of the passage within the book as a whole:
 - 1 Thessalonians 5 v 1-11. The main point is the Lord's return, and God's message therefore is that He is returning! The application is "*encourage one another.*"
 - Colossians 1 v 15-20: The main point is the supremacy of Christ. So God's message is that Jesus is above all things. The application is provided in v 20: if God's purpose was to reconcile to himself all things, then surely the application is "*be reconciled*" – or, for believers, to encourage non-believers to be reconciled to God.
- From repetitions within the text
 - 1 John 4 v 7-12: The subject is loving one another. God's message is that loving one another is the mark of a true believer. The application is "*love one another*" in v 7 and v 11/12. There might be an application which is specific to the congregation or it could be left as a general exhortation.
- But the main point is not always the most emphasised point.
 - Titus 3 v 1-8: The main point is in verses 1 and 2. God's message is that, in light of our salvation, we should "*do what is good*" (v1 and v8) which seems to be a general principle that Paul sets out here. Verses 1 and 2 thus amplify and illustrate the general principle of "*doing what is good*".
 - V 3-8 are the justification for the main message. Paul is reminding Titus what people were ("*foolish*" etc v3), and what they are now (e.g. "*saved*", "*heirs*" vs 6 and 7) and this is why the people should "*do what is good.*" Salvation should affect the way we treat others.
 - He says Chapter 2 v 1 this is amongst the things that Titus should teach.
- Note that, sometimes, it might be necessary for the application to come from another passage – but there should always be a clear and obvious link between the two passages.
 - If I were preaching on Ephesians 4 v 20-24, I might well go to Philippians 2 v 5-11 as being an appropriate application. The attitude of our minds (v 23) - is a clear and obvious link between the two passages. 1 Peter 4 v 1-6 would also be a possibility.
 -

4. Looking at a passage within the context of the book and surrounding verses.

In these two exercises, we see how misinterpreting a passage by not looking at it in context can lead to incorrect understanding and application.

a) Look at Matthew 18 v 10.

Q: What is the purpose?

Q: What is the theme?

Q: Who are the lost sheep?

Q: What is the difference between these sheep and the lost sheep in Luke 15?

Purpose of Matthew's gospel

If we start at Matthew 1, we see it contains the genealogy of Jesus. Genealogies are very important to Jews but mean much less to most gentiles. This should give us a clue as to who it is for.

Throughout his gospel, Matthew also shows how Jesus fulfilled OT prophecies. Just look at the many references to OT prophecies. *“All this was to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet..”* Chapter 1 v 22 is one of many.

The text also contains a lot of arguments about the law and the traditions, the gospel describes in detail how Jesus looks for something beyond the written law and the traditions. We see it for example in many references to *“You have heard that it was said...But I tell you...”*

Thus it is primarily a gospel for God’s people. It is about the kingdom of God, and Matthew’s intention is to portray Jesus as the king.

Theme of this section

It is vital to understand the immediate context for any passage. Look at the Chapters surrounding the Chapter in question. What is their subject? Commentaries can be invaluable here. Different commentators will break down books in different ways – for example, we can argue about whether this section starts at Chapter 17 or Chapter 18, but that doesn’t matter. The point is that you need to be aware of the immediate context: the subject matter, to whom they are addressed and so on. Chapters 17- 22 are about relationships in the Church, that is, amongst believers.

So, who are the lost sheep?

The lost sheep in Chapter 18 v 10 are God’s people who have wandered off on their own, away from the sheep that are still in the safety of the fold. The obvious application is that we are to keep an eye on other members of the congregation and if we notice that someone has stopped coming to Church, find out why.

What is the difference between the lost sheep here and the lost sheep in Luke 15? Luke’s gospel is the gospel of the Saviour. The sections before Chapter 15 are about making a choice about following Jesus. Chapter 15 contains three parables about someone who finds something lost: firstly a sheep, secondly a coin, and thirdly a son. The first two explicitly tell us that this is like the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. So the lost sheep in Luke are people who need to be found by the Saviour.

b) Look at Matthew 18 v 20.

This verse is regularly misused: in fact it is more often misused than used properly. Consider these questions before moving on.

Q: Explain the context of verse 20 in the passage (verses 15-20)?

Q: How is this verse to be properly understood? Explain it.

Q: What is the common misunderstanding that people make about this verse?

Context of verse 20

We have seen that this section is relationships in the Church, amongst God’s people. Verses 15 -17 describe a situation where two of God’s people have a dispute. Verses 18-19 provide an astonishing promise from God to endorse the Church’s decision concerning the matter and provide what is considered necessary to resolve the conflict.

Explanation of this verse

In light of this, the obvious interpretation of Chapter 18 vs 20 is that the *“two or three”* are a brother who has sinned and another brother who has been sinned against.

The third might be an independent arbitrator or Church elder. Indeed, whilst verse 19 is about prayer, verse 20 is about meeting together to sort out the problem. The Lord promises his presence and help to those with goodwill and good intentions.

Common misunderstanding of this verse

A common trap that people fall into is that people think it applies to any sort of prayer meeting of two or more people and frequently use it to open their meeting. (This

begs the question as to whether He is with us when we pray alone.) But verse 19 relates to the circumstances in vs 15-18. It is only in this context that the verse should be used. Of course the Lord is with us when we pray on other occasions. But that isn't what this verse is about.

5. Further exercises

a) Look at 2 Corinthians 5 v10

- Who are the “we” in verse 10? Have a look at the surrounding passages, starting at Chapter 2 v 12 and going on to Chapter 6 v 13. The answer is given in Annex 5.

b) Read Hebrews 12 v 14-29.

- What is the main point of the passage? The answer is given in Annex 5.
- Write a summary of this passage in two or three short paragraphs, spelling out what points the writer is trying to make in each section. In your explanation, make it clear how our understanding of this passage requires an understanding of its context within scripture as a whole.

c) Look at 1 Peter 2 v 4 – 8

Notice the repetition of the word ‘stone’. Consider these questions.

- What does Peter mean? Why does he use the phrase “*living stone*”?
- Why does Peter refer to us as a “*spiritual house*?” Where else in the New Testament is the same point made in a different way?
- If you were to refer back to a relevant passage in the Old Testament, which passage would you select and why?

Section 4: Structuring your sermon

1. Sermon preparation

There is a witty poster that you may have seen saying “*If you don’t know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else.*” Some preachers give the impression that they have no clear idea where their sermon is going, so they end up getting lost, and taking their congregations with them.

Outlines help to avoid sermons lacking direction. They give the ‘bones’ of the sermon. Working at an outline makes us think hard about our points, i.e. what to put in and what to leave out. Too often we put together a sermon with too much flesh and not enough bones and the whole thing falls down flat.

Have a look back at recent sermons you have heard. What structure did they have? Did it work? What made them memorable? Make a note of the structure of the next sermons you hear.

2. General principles

Since we need to present the results of our Bible study in easily understandable form, we must work hard at our sermon outlines. This handbook makes a few suggestions. However, as Dr Parker wrote “*Every man must have his (or her) own way of making plans of sermons. There is no best way.*”

In your Bible study, you may well already have discovered the **structure of the passage**, spotting what each section is about. If so, that should have helped you decide the headings for your talk. If you are preaching on a topic or theme, your headings might be determined for example by the passages you are covering, or the key issues to be covered in the topic.

Usually you want no more than three or four headings. More than that, and the sermon might become difficult to follow. If you find yourself with lots of headings, see if you can amalgamate some of them. If this is difficult, it might suggest that you are covering too much ground. Simplify it, or perhaps cover the subject in more than one sermon or talk.

For each heading or key point you will probably want to set forth the appropriate application. For example, I recently preached on Matthew 20 v 20-34. I had three application points: i) that we should serve those who needed us to serve them, as Jesus served us; ii) serve them in the way they needed us to serve them, as Jesus served us; and iii) serve others because we have first been served by Jesus. Application probably took a quarter to a third of the total time.

Once you have an outline, there are some sensible principles against which to judge your outline.

- Does it enable you to explain the passage – to do justice to it?
- Does it make sense within the overall context of the book?
- Does it enable you to get God’s message from the passage out clearly? (This assumes you know what God’s message is at this stage. Your headings may need to be tentative until you are confident about the overall message.)
- Are the headings easy to understand and remember?

3. Some examples

Here's a few examples to give you some ideas. Firstly, from John's gospel:

Purpose of John's gospel and content

John tells us his purpose in writing his gospel account in Chapter 20 v 31. When John talks of "*these*" in v 31, he is talking about seven miracles (or signs) that he has included in his gospel.

Write down what these seven signs are, and why each one was a sign that Jesus was the Son of God.

The other stand-out feature of John's gospel is the seven "*I am*" statements by Jesus. Several of these statements refer back to specific Old Testament promises by God that he himself would help his people.

Which ones are they? For this you need to know the Old Testament or have access to a good commentary on John's gospel. By claiming that he was the fulfilment of the prophecies, Jesus was claiming to be God. "*I am*" is the divine name (see Exodus 3:14) and in effect Jesus was saying "*I am the God who is...*"

Examples of sermon structure

a) Look at John 9 v 25

Let's look at two different example outlines by well-known preachers.

- a) First outline
 - i. He had assurance – "*I know*"
 - ii. He had personal assurance - "*I know*"
 - iii. He had simple personal assurance – "**One thing I know**"
- b) Second outline
 - i. the query – what he didn't know
 - ii. the confidence – that he did know something
 - iii. the confession – what he did know

By way of application, you might invite your listeners to:

- i) think about what Jesus has done for them individually;
- ii) think how they know it to be true from their own lives; and
- iii) identify the key thing that Jesus has done for them that they could tell others about.

b) Now have a look at John 5 v 1-15

This miraculous healing of the lame man is the third of the signs that point to Jesus as being the divine Son of God. This is one way of looking at how the passage is constructed.

- a) V 1-9a are the first meeting with the man
- b) V 9b – 13 the man is questioned by the religious authorities
- c) V 14-15 is the second encounter with Jesus, and the aftermath

Here are two possible outlines:

- a) First outline:
 - i. An act of grace;
 - ii. A question of religion;
 - iii. A word of advice.
- b) Second outline:
 - i. The sign is given
 - ii. The sign is ignored;
 - iii. The choice the sign offers.

Now think of one of your own for this passage. Also, identify possible application points. Remember John's overall purpose in writing his account as you think this through.

c) Now let's look at Romans 5 v 1-11.

This is a very theological book which has sometimes been described as Paul's "*manifesto*" of freedom through Jesus Christ. The outline looks like this:

- a) Verse 1 is the crux of this passage and contains God's message ("*We have peace with God*").
- b) Verses 2-5 set out our joyous response and its effect in our current life ("*rejoice*" v 2, 3: "*hope*" v 2,5). Indeed, "*rejoice*" is the application – see also "*rejoice*" in verse 11).
- c) Verses 6-8 set out what Jesus did ("*Christ died*" v 6,8).
- d) Verses 9-11 set out why we need not fear ("*justified*" v 9, "*saved*" 9,10, "*reconciled*" v 10, 10, 11)

So possible headings are:

- a. Peace with God v 1-5
- b. Love of God v 6-8
- c. Judgement from God v 9-11

How might the application – "*rejoice*" – be applied by your own Church family?

Exercises.

- a. Have a go at developing an outline for John 3:16
- b. Then try Ephesians 2 v 11-22

Section 5: Development of the sermon

Now you have an outline, and you have studied the passage carefully. Here is a suggested way forward for finishing your sermon. Note, it is only a suggestion!

1. A summary:

Write down a summary of the sermon along the following lines:

Sermon Title Try to make it memorable

Theme What is the sermon about? Try to sum it up in one sentence.

God's message? Remember, this means digging for the gold – finding the single most important thing that God wants to tell us through the text. God's message will relate directly to the theme.

Application What action or response do you expect? It is the "Therefore" or "So what?" that arises from the message.

2. Structuring the sermon:

One famous preacher (I can't remember who) said "I tells 'em what I's going to tell 'em. Then I tells 'em. Then I tells 'em what I's told 'em." Not everyone uses this approach but I find it has a lot of merit.

- a) **Opening.** Usually my openings take three or four minutes. They often consist of:
- Introduction. THINK. Catch people's attention. Perhaps pose a question, relate an interesting fact, quote from yesterday's newspaper headline. What are people likely to have on their minds when they come to Church?
 - Your passage. You might want to explain why we are looking at this passage and how it links to the issue raised in the introduction. This may be no more than a sentence or two. You might introduce God's message here.
 - Context: You will usually want to give some sort of explanation about the historical background or context to the passage so your listeners can properly understand it. You need to say enough so your listeners can understand the circumstances but also to keep it as short as you can so you can get onto the passage proper.
- b) **The body of the sermon.** This will take around fifteen to twenty minutes.
- Your headings. After the introduction, I say what the headings are. That means the congregation has milestones or signposts so they know where we are and where we are going.
The task here is to flesh out each heading with explanation (i.e. exposition). The detail will depend on such things as your audience, the time you have, and the issues raised in the passage.
You need to ensure that your audience can understand what the passage is about. Some people find it helpful to brainstorm, developing lengthy drafts, and then prune them down on the basis that it is easier to remove material than try to develop more. You may find yourself moving text around quite a lot from one place to another and back again. Anecdotes and illustrations come in and out.
Often preachers will try to make the key words in the passage as memorable as possible so people remember those rather than anecdotes or illustrations. Some preachers support each heading with a key word or phrase which hearers can remember.

You will also want to make sure you have application points inserted where appropriate. Application should be linked to each key point of explanation (exegesis) or perhaps each key word or phrase in the text. Probably you will want no more than three or four application points. Don't forget, the application should come from the passage itself or have a direct and clear link with it, and not be plucked from an unrelated passage.

As you develop it, ask yourself – is what I am saying relevant to my hearers? How can I get the sermon to 'connect' with them and their lives? Does what I say explain the passage properly? Will it keep them awake?

As you speak, expect to announce each heading as you proceed. You will probably want to say which part of the passage the heading relates to, and may well read or make reference to the relevant verses at appropriate points.

It is a good idea to warn people as you are coming towards the end. I always tell them that the final heading is "*My final heading*" and I tend give one further warning as well. This stops the sermon hitting the conclusion like a train hitting the buffers.

c) **Summary and conclusion.** Think out your final words carefully. Make them challenging. Don't let the whole thing fizzle out. Allow one or two minutes.

- Including a reminder will help people focus on God's message. For example: *"We have learned that Jesus died for our sins; that he was raised from the dead; that God made him Lord of all; and that he will come again in judgement. Therefore, repent - and be saved!"*
- You might want to refer back to the introduction. The sermon will probably have answered any question you posed at the beginning, or provided God's perspective on your newspaper headline.
- You may want to finish with a prayer, when people are invited to make their own response quietly to God. If so, tell them what the prayer is going to be and what sort response you are going to invite them to make. Allow a minute.

•

3. **Casting a final eye over it**

Ask yourself the following questions before you stop working on it.

- Is God's message clear?
- Is the application clear?
- Does it look like you would say it?
- Are the sections balanced in terms of timing and importance?
- Do you need to add any more illustrations or analogies anywhere to help your audience understand difficult points or see the relevance more easily?

Think over what you have written and edit if necessary.

4. **Checklist**

A sermon checklist to help you is given at Annex 8, together with a suggested checklist for your engagement.

Hermeneutics: how we interpret the Bible

What is hermeneutics about?

Hermeneutics is about the way we study the Bible.

We need to make sure we properly interpret the various types of literature found in the Bible. For example, a psalm should often be interpreted differently from a prophecy. A proverb should be understood and applied differently from a law. This is the purpose of biblical hermeneutics—to help us to know how to interpret, understand, and apply the Bible.

Literal interpretation

The most important law of biblical hermeneutics is that the Bible should be interpreted literally. This means we try to understand the Bible in its normal or plain meaning. The Bible says what it means and means what it says. The objective is to try to understand what the author meant based upon what he said.

Many people make the mistake of trying to read between the lines and come up with meanings for Scriptures that are not truly in the text. Thus some people insist that the Axe-Head in 2 Kings 6 is an allegory of man, the stick is Jesus, and the water is hell or sin. This interpretation is nonsense. Anyone who interprets the passage in this way will not succeed in delivering God's message.

Of course there are some spiritual truths behind the plain meanings of Scripture. But that does not mean that every Scripture has a hidden spiritual truth, or that it should be our goal to find all such spiritual truths. Biblical hermeneutics keeps us faithful to the intended meaning of Scripture and away from allegorizing and symbolizing Bible verses and passages that should be understood literally.

That is not to say that everything must be taken literally. For example:

- Matthew 5:29 *"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you"* is not meant to be taken literally;
- When Jesus said *"As long as it is day we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no-one can work"* (John 9 v 4) he was speaking figuratively;
- We are not intended to see the lake of burning sulphur in Revelation 20:10 in a literal sense, it is imagery.

At times the Bible uses figures of speech, poetic forms of speech like hyperbole to get a point across, whereas the literal interpretation would not be what the author intended.

The ultimate goal

When we speak, we give a message. Our words have meaning. So when God *"breathed"* scripture (2 Tim 3 v16), he spoke a message through those who wrote the original scriptures. His words meant something specific.

God promised that his message would be preserved, and so it has been. In Isaiah 40 v 8, he promised *"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of God stands for ever."* Jesus echoed this when he promised his disciples *"Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will by no means pass away"* (Matthew 24 v 35). God trusted various people to pass on the word as he originally meant it (see Romans 3 v 2). The passage of responsibility passed from Moses, through the Levites, then the Kings (see Deut. 17 v 18-19 for example) and the scribes. In the New Testament era it passed to the Masorites from whom we have the Masoretic text. It is from this text that most modern Bible translations arise.

Concerning the New Testament, there are thousands of fragments of manuscripts dating back to around AD 130. There is little difference across these thousands of fragments, and modern Bibles are based on these fragments.

So God's message has been preserved as it was passed on. The message does not change any more than the original texts change. So there will be no new word, no new message.

Timothy was charged by Paul "*What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching*" (2 Tim 1 v 13). Paul told Titus to appoint as overseers people who "*hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught*" (Titus 1 v 9). Certainly we need to explain its relevance for us today and perhaps to reveal it in a new way. But we are not to invent some new meaning from our own imagination, or to think that the Holy Spirit changes the message across the years. Our task is to "*correctly handle the word of truth*" (2 Tim 2 v 7). And the ultimate goal is to "*set forward the truth plainly*" (2 Cor 4 v 2).

Context

Following on from this is a second crucial law of biblical hermeneutics. This is that a verse or passage must be interpreted historically, grammatically, and contextually if we are to find the message and the meaning.

- Historical interpretation refers to understanding the culture, background, and situation which prompted the text. How did the story or parable or letter fit with the times in which it was set?
- Grammatical interpretation is recognizing the rules of grammar and nuances of the Hebrew and Greek languages and applying those principles to the understanding of a passage. What did it mean to the people who originally heard it or read it?
- Contextual interpretation involves always taking the surrounding context of a verse/passage into consideration when trying to determine the meaning. What part does it play in the message of the Bible as a whole; in the individual book of the Bible; and how does it fit with the surrounding passages?

So, we need to understand what the writer was getting at, at the time he wrote the passage, in the place he wrote the passage, and for the people to whom he wrote the passage. Only by doing this can we understand what it means, and what the message is that God has given.

Preconceptions and biases

One of the difficulties in properly understanding the meaning of a text is that we bring pre-conceptions and biases to the study. We are sinful human beings, with our own pre-suppositions and biases. We come with our own backgrounds, experiences, hopes, dreams, and so on. All these things have the potential to affect how we interpret the Bible. We must be aware of these if we are to interpret the Bible properly.

For example:

- There may be middle class ways of interpreting the Bible. Why is gambling a bad idea, yet investing in the stock market is OK?
- There may be a male (or a female) way of interpreting the Bible. Why is it OK for some Churches to allow women to lead children's classes or women's Bible study groups, yet the same Churches will not allow them in the pulpit?
- Western Christians tend to emphasise some aspects of the Bible whilst African or Eastern Christians will emphasise something completely different; and
- The way we look at the Bible in the year 2015 would be different to that of another era.

Whoever you are, your interpretation is going to be influenced by your own personality, life, and background. My way will probably be different to your way. This can lead to even genuine believers having very different views on all sorts of issues, including controversial ones like sexuality, the ordination of women, evolution and the age of the world. Prayer is therefore very important, asking God to help you set aside your pre-conceptions and biases, and seeking his help to see him afresh as you study his word.

Scripture

Of paramount importance though is the key issue of scripture itself. If you believe it is the infallible word of God, relevant for all time, for all people, in all places, you will seek to have your views shaped by what God is saying through it. If you believe it is an interesting historical book, a religious text even, with limited relevance, your analysis will be different, and badly flawed.

The Holy Spirit

Some mistakenly view biblical hermeneutics as limiting our ability to learn new truths from God's Word or stifling the Holy Spirit's ability to reveal to us the meaning of God's Word. This is not the case. The goal of biblical hermeneutics is to point us to the correct interpretation which the Holy Spirit has already inspired into the text. And we pray that He will reveal His truth to us as we study His word. The purpose of biblical hermeneutics is to protect us from improperly applying a Scripture to a particular situation. Biblical hermeneutics points us to the true meaning and application of Scripture.

The right and wrong ways of using the text

There are two different approaches to using the text to develop our sermons, exegesis and eisegesis.

Exegesis

Exegesis is the first part of the Bible interpretation process. It tries to see what God says through the text. That means that the interpreter is led to his conclusions by studying the text.

In order to understand the word of God for our modern context, we must first understand the word of God for its ancient context. Exegesis tries to answer the question: "*What was God trying to say to the original hearers of a particular text?*" (This is the second crucial law of hermeneutics – see above in Annex 1). This means we have to undertake a grammatical, historical and cultural study of a passage of the Bible to try to determine its meaning to the original audience. Once we have done that, it is easier to see what God is saying to us now.

Eisegesis

Too often though we start by asking what a text means to me. This is eisegesis, and is the opposite of exegesis. It is a subjective way to read the Scriptures and has the potential to severely misinterpret a passage.

The interpreter puts his or her own ideas and thoughts into the text. It often starts with the preacher deciding what he wants to say, then finding a text to justify his thoughts. God doesn't speak, the preacher speaks. There is far too much of this sort of preaching. Sometimes it is deliberate, sometimes it is because the preacher doesn't know any better or hasn't studied the passage properly.

What does each method lead to?

An honest student of the Bible will be an exegete, allowing the text to speak for itself. Eisegesis easily lends itself to error, as the would-be interpreter attempts to align the text with his own preconceived notions.

Exegesis allows us to agree with the Bible; eisegesis seeks to force the Bible to agree with us.

What does each method involve?

The **process of exegesis** involves 1) observation: what does the passage say? 2) interpretation: what does the passage mean? 3) correlation: how does the passage relate to the rest of the Bible? and 4) application: how should this passage affect my life? The Bible study methods suggested below should help you get there.

Eisegesis, on the other hand, involves 1) imagination: what do I want to say? 2) exploration: what Scripture passage seems to fit with my message? and 3) application: what does my message mean? Notice that, in eisegesis, there is no examination of the words of the text or their relationship to each other, no cross-referencing with related passages, and no real desire to understand the actual meaning. Scripture serves only as a prop to the preacher's views.

To illustrate, let's look at 2 Chronicles 27:1-2 using both approaches

EISEGESIS

First, the interpreter decides on a topic. Today, it's "The Importance of Church Attendance." The interpreter reads 2 Chronicles 27:1-2 and sees that King Jotham was a good king, just like his father Uzziah had been, except for one thing: he didn't go to the temple! This passage seems to fit his purpose, so he uses it.

The resulting sermon deals with the need for passing on godly values from one generation to the next. Just because King Uzziah went to the temple every week didn't mean that his son would continue the practice. In the same way, many young people today tragically turn from their parents' training, and Church attendance drops off. The sermon ends with a question: "How many blessings did Jotham fail to receive, simply because he neglected Church?"

Certainly, there is nothing wrong with preaching about Church attendance or the transmission of values. And a cursory reading of the 2 Chronicles passage seems to support that passage as an apt illustration. However, the above interpretation is totally wrong. For Jotham not to go to the temple was not wrong; in fact, it was very good, as the proper approach to the passage will show.

EXEGESIS

First, the interpreter reads the passage and, to fully understand the context, he reads the histories of both Uzziah and Jotham (2 Chronicles 26-17; 2 Kings 15: 1-6, 32-38). In his observation, he discovers that King Uzziah was a good king who nevertheless disobeyed the Lord when he went to the temple and offered incense on the altar—something only a priest had the right to do (2 Chronicles 26: 16-20). Uzziah's pride and his contamination of the temple resulted in his having "*leprosy until the day he died*" (2 Chronicles 26:21).

Needing to know why Uzziah spent the rest of his life in isolation, the interpreter studies Leviticus 13:46 and does some research on leprosy. Then he compares the use of illness as a punishment in other passages, such as 2 Kings 5:27; 2 Chronicles 16:12 and 21:12-15.

By this time, the analyst understands something important: when the passage says Jotham "*did not enter the temple of the LORD,*" it means he did not repeat his father's mistake. Uzziah had usurped the priest's office; Jotham was more obedient.

The resulting sermon might deal with the Lord's discipline of His children, with the blessing of total obedience, or with our need to learn from the mistakes of the past rather than repeat them.

Of course, exegesis takes more time than eisegesis. But if we are to be those unashamed workmen "*who correctly handle the word of truth,*" (2 Tim 2:15) then we must take the time to truly understand the text. Exegesis is the only way.

Apologetics

The word "*apologetics*" comes from the Greek word "*apologia*." It means, "*a verbal defence*."

It is used eight times in the New Testament: Acts 22:1; 25:16; 1 Cor. 9:3; 2 Cor. 10:5-6; Phil. 1:7; 2 Tim. 4:16, and 1 Pet. 3:15. But it is the last verse that is most commonly associated with Christian apologetics.

"...but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defence to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence," (1 Pet. 3:15).

So, apologetics is the work of convincing people to change their views. For the preacher, it means persuading the listener to change his or her beliefs and life to conform to biblical truth.

Concerning beliefs, it means explaining and arguing for the foundations of the Christian faith. For example, you will need to explain the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. You will need to explain why the explanation given in the Bible is the only one that makes any sense. (A good book to help is "Who Moved the Stone?" Frank Morison. Another two are "The case for Easter" and "The Case for the Resurrection" both by Lee Strobel.) This is just one of many doctrinal issues that you will need to learn how to defend.

Concerning contemporary issues, it means being able to explain why the Bible encourages a certain lifestyle, especially for Christians (i.e "holiness"). For example, you will need to explain where in the Bible it says that two people must be married if they are going to have a sexual relationship. You will need to know where it says that they cannot just live together. And having understood the Biblical position, you then need to find evidence to support the Biblical viewpoint. Many people say that it makes no difference if you are married or not. Do you know where you would go to find evidence that marriage works better than just living together? This is just one of many contemporary issues that you would need to understand from a Christian perspective.

All preachers need to be able to defend basic Christian doctrine. For example, that we are all sinners, and the need for repentance leading to eternal life. However, as time progresses, your need to know how to defend wider aspects of Christian doctrine and views on contemporary issues will grow.

Bible Study: The Big Picture

An example: Jonah: Not just a nice story about a fish.

The story of Jonah includes a wide range of themes and obvious links to other parts of the Bible. The table below includes some examples. Add some of your own at the bottom.

Jonah theme	Examples of links to other parts of the Bible
God using creation * the fish, weather, sailors	God the creator – Genesis Chapter 1 The supremacy of Christ – Colossians 1: 15-20 The creation spoiled: Genesis 2, Romans 8 v19-23 The new heaven and new earth – Revelation 21
God's concern for the world (Nineveh), not just Israel.	Lots of references and prophecies, eg: Naaman the Syrian Jesus and the Canaanite woman The spread of the gospel in Acts
God using ordinary people – Jonah, Sailors.	Look at the background of Hannah in 1 Samuel with that of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in Luke 1. Plenty of others. Remember also you and I are his servants!
God's love for sinners. Sent Jonah to Nineveh. An OT illustration of a new testament truth.	John 3:16 for example. He sends us to tell others (Matthew 28 v 16-20, for example).
Jonah spends three days in the fish before being spat onto dry land.	Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus raising the dead, eg Lazarus God's ability to raise us from the dead (1 Cor 15) – and thence to the great multitude in Revelation.
Salvation: Nineveh saved by Jonah's preaching	Add links to other parts of the Bible.
Add another theme from the story of Jonah	Add links to other parts of the Bible.

Q: Where in the Bible is the new covenant spelt out? **A:** Jeremiah 31 v 31-33

Some other methods of Bible study**Method 1:**

Ask the text the following questions. Try this with Mark 7 vs 1 -13 and record your findings.

- What does the passage mean?
- What did it mean for the person for whom it was originally said?
- Why did the passage say this?
- Is it completely true or only partly true?
- Is it always true or are there occasions when there is a different answer?
- Does it mean the same for me today?
- What would it imply if I accept what the passage teaches?
- What principles or duties does the passage wish to involve me in?
- Is there anything to be said on the other side of the argument?
- What must I do to make the message real or true in my own life?
- How can I illustrate today what the passage teaches?
- How best can I drive home the main message when I preach it so it is clear?

Method 2:

This is particularly useful for single verse studies.

- pray first
- state the verse reference of your study
- identify the content in two or three sentences, ie the surrounding verses
- re-write the verse in your own words
- state briefly the main truth of the verse
- how would you apply it to yourself?
 - be practical
 - be personal
 - be precise (ie specific)

Method 3:

The Kipling method. Rudyard Kipling looked at a text and asked

- *WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? HOW? WHY? WHO?*

WC Lincoln added a further question “So *WHAT?*”

Method 4: At various times the Navigators have recommended a number of excellent approaches to Bible study. One approach is to look to see what the passage says about

- our faith and belief
- attitudes and opinions we must change
- things we must start to do, or change
- sins we have to confess
- examples we could follow or not follow
- challenges we must face
- things God has promised

Method 5: Courtesy of Watchman Nee, the Chinese Christian. Look at this with Romans 7 vs 1-6 for example.

- Separate the text and explanation. Try putting the explanation in brackets, thus isolating the main thoughts. This helps us to see the principle truths in a passage.
- Rewrite the text or main thought in your own words, ie prepare a careful paraphrase.

Method 6: Dr James Black's method. When he fixed his mind on a text he put a series of questions to it and tried to make the text answer them. His questions went like this.

- What do you mean?
- What did you mean for the person for whom it was originally said?
- Why did you say this?
- Are you completely true or are you only partly true?
- Are you always true or are there occasions when there is a different answer?
- Do you mean the same for me today?
- What would it imply if I accept what you teach?
- What principles or duties do you wish to involve me in?
- Is there anything to be said on the other side of the argument?
- What must I do to make your message real or true in my own life?
- How can I illustrate today what you teach, for myself and others?
- How best can I drive home the main message when I preach it so it is clear?

Method 7:

Try this with 1 Peter 1 and 2

- Write down what the passage tells you about God, Jesus, The Holy Spirit, and Man
- Does the passage give me an instruction, a command, a warning, or a word of censure?
- Is there a good example for me to follow?
- What useful cross-references can I find?
- What action ought I to take in order to apply the truth of the passage?

Method 8: Jim Downing said *"For every New Testament truth an Old Testament example can be found to illustrate it."* Examples:

- Luke 16 v 15:
 - 1 Samuel 15: The Lord rejects Saul as King
 - Isaiah 3 v 13-26: The Lord's judgement on the people
 - Find another
- 1 Corinthians 1 v 26-29:
 - 1 Samuel 16: David was the youngest in his family, a shepherd.
 - Deuteronomy 7 v 7: God's choice of Israel
 - Find another
- Try it with
 - Luke 18 v 14b; and
 - 2 Corinthians 10 v 18

Section 3: Making the main point the main point: Answers to further exercises

- **2 Corinthians 5 v 10.**

The “we” in this verse are believers. It is not the whole of humanity. Have a look at the preceding sections where “we” clearly means believers. Indeed, in Chapter 6v4 Paul explicitly spells out that “we” are “*servants of God.*”

Of course it is true that everyone will face God one day. (See, for example Matthew 25, especially the parable of the Sheep and the Goats with the conclusion in verse 46). But 2 Corinthians 5 v 10 is talking about believers as the context makes clear.

- **Hebrews 12 v 14-29.**

The main point is to encourage us to place our trust in God and encourage us towards a proper response with our lives. The message is that we should put our trust in Him in light of what He has done, and the promise of what awaits us if we do.

The passage breaks down as follows: Verses 14-17 are about making sure we do not miss the grace of God (i.e salvation). Vs 18-24 are the explanation, or justification. Vs 25-28 are the consequences of not heeding this advice. And vv 28-29 are the conclusion, or summary. Indeed, v 28 and 29 are a summary of the whole section.

Some further ideas for keeping the congregation awake.

Most people find it difficult to concentrate on the preacher. Much of the time they are thinking about shopping, football, all sorts of things. The preacher's message is barely heard. In part this is because many sermons are poorly constructed and there is no clear message. But often it is because of poor, lifeless delivery. Some people are more naturally gifted speakers, and others have to work doubly hard to make best use of more limited gifts in this area.

Here are some ideas to keep the congregation attentive to what you are saying.

1. Don't be afraid to act. Use your body, especially your arms. In that way you are using sight as well as sound to deliver your sermon, and two senses are likely to be better than one. Sight is used in the Bible to get across a message on countless occasions. (For example, Ezekiel was told to act out a lesson to Israel (Ezekiel 4); and Jesus commanded the Pharisees and Herodians to bring him a denarius in Mark 12).

Here are a few examples.

- a. John 9 v 23 "...and they threw him out." Throw something imaginary away when saying this.
- b. Acts 1 v 10 "They were looking intently up into the sky.." Look upwards very intently.
- c. "Jesus rose from the dead" – make a lifting motion with both hands.

Have a look at Acts 7 vs 57 and come up with some ideas of your own.

2. OPEN YOUR MOUTH WHEN YOU SPEAK. Too many preachers barely let the words escape from between their lips.
3. LOOK UP so your words head towards the congregation, rather than into the floor. Look round at different people.
4. Make sure you speak clearly throughout. In a 20 minute sermon, the tendency is to allow your voice to drop and go quiet as time goes on. Use microphones if available.
5. Use intonation; vary pitch and loudness in keeping with the text. Speak slowly when the text merits emphasis. Emphasise words to add dramatic effect. Practice by picking a couple of passages and speak them out loud as if you were acting the scene in a Theatre.
6. Ask Questions, they can be rhetorical or genuine. It makes the congregation think of the answer.
 - a. "Would you do this?"
 - b. "What do you think he did next?"
 - c. "Do you remember what you did last weekend?"
 - d. "This is a lot, isn't it?"
 - e. "Does Jesus really rule your life, or is he just a passenger?"
 - f. "What do you think Jesus means here?"
7. We are programmed to think in threes so speak in threes. Remember Tony Blair's policy for the 2001 election?: "*Education, Education, Education.*" Or say the same thing three different ways. For example: "*Jesus rose from the dead, he came back to life, up from the grave.*"

8. Leave gaps for a few seconds' silence at appropriate places. For example, after questions, so people think of the answers for themselves. And at break points – after a heading for example, to increase suspense.
9. Deliberately misread the Bible. Misread it in places where it might get the congregation to think more deeply about the message. For example:
 - a) You could misread Luke 5 vs 12 -13 as follows: *“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me well. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing”, he said. Be well!”*

You could then say *“But he didn't say that, did he? He said “Be clean.”*
And then you could explain why.

- b) Matthew 7 v 24. *“Everyone who hears these words of mine is like a wise man...”*
*“Is that what your Bible says? No, it's not what my Bible says either. My Bible says Everyone who hears these words of mine and **puts these words into practice** is like a wise man..”*
- c) 1 Tim 6:10 *“The love of money is the root of all evil.”*
Actually the verse is *“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil”*

Resources for the preacher

Reading

Preachers must read. If you are to make best use of your gifts, it is pretty much essential that you begin to build up a stock of books to help you get really deeply into the Bible.

Obviously the Bible should be studied a great deal and a stock of good commentaries is essential. Good Bible commentaries help preachers to understand the context for a passage as well as guiding you through difficult points in the Bible. I have studied most of the Bible using commentaries and frequently refer to them when preparing a sermon. Good commentaries are: 'Bible Speaks Today' 'Focus on' 'Tyndale'

There are plenty of others, some quite obscure, but there is also plenty of rubbish. So be selective.

People doing children's talks might be able to find books that tell Bible stories and explain them simply in age-appropriate way, yet still identify the key message.

Preaching aides are also important. There are plenty available. Proclamation Trust provides a lot of good resources, and especially to be recommended are their periodic Bible Training Weekends which are specifically designed for those involved in lay ministry. There are plenty of good preaching resources on the Proclamation Trust website.

A book which I have found very instructive is *Preaching the Living Word* (various) from Christian Focus Publications - ISBN 185792312-X. It is quite old but still available (eg through Amazon) and thoroughly recommended. Other good books are also available through ICM Books on the web.

Websites and concordances

Use of a Bible search engine or concordance can help you to see where else a particular word or phrase is used and what it is used for. Bible search engines can be found at various websites such as www.Biblegateway.com, www.crosswalk.com and www.Biblestudytools.com. (Other useful Bible sites are www.e-sword.com, www.throughtheword.com, and www.Bible.com.) (As an example, have a look and see how the word "freedom" is used throughout the Bible; or "gifts" in the new testament, or compare "day" in one of the gospels with the same word in Genesis.) Sometimes that can help to give you new insights into what a particular passage means. Some of them provide links to commentaries. For example, on crosswalk.com, once you have gone to a particular passage, you can link to the explanation in several commentaries and reference books. (I sometimes use the link to Matthew Henry's commentary, which is available in complete and concise versions.)

You can listen to sermons on the web but be careful about your source. I frequently listen to sermons of my previous Church (www.fulwoodchurch.co.uk). Sermonaudio.com is also recommended.

Other reading

As preachers you will want to engage in CPD – “Continuous Preacher Development”! This resource list contains things that I have found, and continue to find, helpful to me. The resources described are generally inexpensive or free.

Technique and preparation are essential but equally so is holiness. We are like pipes transmitting water. Clean pipes transmit clean water, dirty pipes turn good water into muck.

- *Celebration of Discipline* (Richard Foster) sometimes makes for an uncomfortable read, and is all the better for doing so.
ISBN 0-340-73521-X
- *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Hughes) is a fair alternative, but I found *Celebration* to have a bit more of a cutting edge.
ISBN- 13: 978-1-58134-758-6
ISBN- 10: 1-58134-758-8

In addition, general reading is a must. Here are some examples.

- The battleground today is on sexual and medical ethics. In the past I have received two periodicals from Christian Medical Fellowship: Nucleus, which is aimed at medical students and Triple Helix which is aimed at qualified medics. Both provide good reading on very human issues, not just medical ethics. I am not a medic but that doesn't matter and the cost is very low. There are also periodic, free, papers (called CMF Files) on specific subjects which were very helpful. These can also be downloaded from the CMF website (<http://www.cmf.org.uk>).
- Jubilee Centre (<http://www.jubilee-centre.org/>) is a Christian think-tank which produces some excellent leaflets and books, although their Cambridge Papers cover some fairly unusual subjects. Much is downloadable free of charge. They send out a weekly e-bulletin which keeps you up to date with what they are doing. I could read myself silly with their stuff.
- I am also on the e-mailing list of the Christian Institute, which is a campaigning organisation (<http://www.christian.org.uk>). There is nothing wrong in that, but its material has to be seen in that light and the best sermon material from them is information about what is happening in the world. Preachers shouldn't use the views of the Christian Institute (or anyone else) on, for example, ethical issues, as a short cut around their own study.

Other: Testimonies, biographies and autobiographies of notable Christians, sermons by other preachers and so on are also helpful. But it is equally important to read what you like. If you like slushy romantic novels, Agatha Christie whodunits or sci-fi, then read that. As you read them, stuff will come to you which will help you preach.

1. A checklist for your sermon

	Issue	Can I answer “yes” to all points?
The passage	Do I know how the story/letter fits into the Bible story from Genesis to Revelation?	
	Do I know how the passage fits into the rest of the particular book of the Bible and the surrounding passages?	
	Am I sure I understand the passage properly from start to finish? Do I know what it meant at the time it was written/said, to the people it was written/said and in the place it was written/said?	
God’s message	Am I confident I know God’s message? Am I confident it is God’s message and not just something from the passage I would like to speak about?	
The structure	Do I have a clear structure with easy to remember headings?	
	Is the structure relevant to the passage?	
	Are the sections of my talk balanced in terms of timing and importance?	
Opening remarks and introduction	Will my opening remarks engage the congregation?	
	Does my introduction explain the setting/context for the passage?	
	Will I state my headings at the start? What are they?	
Exegesis	Am I explaining the passage? Am I confident that I am not forcing the text to agree with me at any point?	
Application	Do I have application points in the right place, for example supporting the main points in the passage?	
	Does the application come from the passage or at least have a clear and obvious link to it?	
Conclusion	Have I written a challenging conclusion?	
Delivery	Have I written down what I want to write down? Have I written prompts or headings for other things I want to say?	
	Do I know how to read the passage with the emphases in the right place?	
	Is my meaning and language clear throughout?	
	Do I have illustrations or analogies to help explain difficult points?	
	Can I speak for the right length of time? (Normally about 20 minutes.)	

2. A suggested checklist for your preaching engagement

Item	Notes
Remember Bible and sermon notes!	
Which Bible version is in use? Is there any point where my talk will be unclear because different versions are in use?	
Does the person reading the passage know how to read it properly – the right emphasis in right place, pronunciation of difficult names and so on?	
Familiarise self with the pulpit before the service.	
Where's the clock? I will need to keep an eye on the time.	
Check microphones are working. Assume some in the congregation are hard of hearing.	
Glass of water?	
Pray before starting.	
Don't forget to announce the page number at the start.	
What happens after I have finished speaking? Who does what?	
Does the final hymn reinforce the message and/or the application?	

Some common difficulties and problems

1. I never seem to be sure what to preach about.
 - Pick a book or epistle from the Bible and work through it.
 - Spend more time looking over a passage and considering its context. Be patient. Don't expect a sermon to leap off the page for you. You will have to work hard at it to dig out the jewels and develop the sermon.
 - Someone once calculated that there are 39,000 promises in the Bible. That should keep you going for a while! Or select a Bible character.
 - Always have a pencil handy. Ideas will come at strange times, for example during your personal quiet time.
 - Have you thought about using a Church lectionary as a basis for planning your sermons? Lectionaries give suggested readings for each Sunday of the year. The Church of England lectionary is on the Church of England website.
 - You may also think that God has called you to have a particular emphasis in your preaching: evangelism/salvation, the uniqueness of Christ, contemporary issues, heaven and hell.

2. My sermons seem so dry and I have difficulty finding interesting illustrations
 - Start collecting interesting stories and illustrations. Read widely. (C H Spurgeon had a library of thousands of books.) Read the Bible for illustrations, there are plenty of them contained in scripture. Read biographies.
 - Pay attention to significant events in the news. If your sermon makes reference to any current events it helps to demonstrate the gospel's relevance to everyday life.
 - Don't be afraid to use illustrations from your own life at home, shopping, work, and so on; with family, friends, neighbours and others. You will be amazed at how many illustrations can be found from ordinary, everyday life.
 - Keep a record of your finds. Keep clippings in a scrap book. Getting a store of illustrations is not difficult, but it is time consuming.
 - Have a look at Annex 6. It contains some tips for keeping the congregation awake.

3. I never seem to be able to plan interesting outlines for my sermons.
 - This probably means back to the Bible study. Look at the passage in context first. Look for a word or words that appear several times; look to see who the different characters are and their roles in the passage; look to see if there are different doctrinal points.
 - Think about the purpose of the book or letter in context. For example, any passage on Luke might have headings all of which are about the Saviour. And if you know God's message from a passage, the headings could relate directly to the message.
 - Listen to other preachers and learn from them.
 - Study the outlines of great preachers. Practice writing outlines in the form of short headings and sub-headings. Write the good ones down in the margins of your Bible. Have plenty of outlines ready to be turned into good sermons.

4. I never have enough time

- Start earlier. Getting the sermon done and done properly must be a priority above all else.
- Plan your sermons well in advance of your engagements. If the bulk of the work is finished a week or so in advance, then this leaves you with time to find that important fact, look for one last illustration, or – as is not infrequently the case – rewrite it when the Lord tells you he wants it to look rather different to how it currently looks.
- Clear the decks, lock yourself away, get rid of distractions, and get down to hard work. You must have some good stretches of uninterrupted study and word-crafting to get the sermon done. Lots of small bits of time are hopeless.
- Are you doing too many jobs in Church? Remember Acts 6:1 to 47
- If you cannot make time to do it, however long it takes, then you shouldn't be preaching.

5. Someone once told me not to read books about the Bible, only the Bible itself. One should rely on the Holy Spirit alone.

- If you don't read commentaries and other helpful books you are going to find it difficult to properly understand the Bible in its context – the history, customs and culture of the time and so on. Remember 1 Corinthians 3:12. The Holy Spirit is unlikely to miraculously give us encyclopaedic knowledge of background information and facts.
- Be careful what you read though. Stick to reliable commentaries and other books. And don't make other reading a substitute for Bible study.

6. I am not sure what impression I make when I preach.

- Learn to speak clearly. Assume your congregation is hard of hearing. Always use microphones if they are provided. Remember your voice level will drop as you progress through the sermon. Open your mouth when you speak – it is amazing how many people talk with their mouths almost shut, with the words unable to escape.
- Look up and smile. Engage with individual members of the congregation. Get a friend to sit in next time you preach, and ask for honest feedback. Did you 'um' and 'err'? Could you be heard clearly throughout? Do you have any unhelpful mannerisms – many novice preachers sway like a sapling in a heavy breeze. Did you maintain eye contact with your hearers? The answers may be painful, but we need to correct them if we are to be effective.
- Do voice exercises. These help you to form your words clearly. Tape record yourself and listen back.

7. I just feel so inadequate when I preach.

- J Alexander Clapperton once wrote
Who is sufficient for these things? 'It is not by my might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts.' You must pray much and give yourself to honest soul searching, and the Spirit of Christ will fill your heart and you will be able to preach for HIM."