

DNA: How to Write A Sermon

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Lately I have been asked this question a lot by young leaders. It's exciting to see young men and women step up and preach in their youth groups, but preaching can be a daunting task. There is an art form and method to it, on-top of the fact you that want to make sure you are interpreting God's word correctly. However, with all that said I truly believe that anyone can preach and this is a short guide on how to preach your first sermon.

DISCLAIMER: Though I have been a pastor for 18 years I am still learning lots and this is by no means a comprehensive guide to preaching. However, I do believe this can help any young preacher get started.

GETTING STARTED

The first place to start is PRAYER. It seems a bit obvious but it's an important step. Take some time to ask God what he wants you to teach your group. Every Pastor/Preacher should always start here because it fuels everything that happens from this point forward. After you take some time to PRAY get a piece of paper and write down every thought that comes to mind. It could be ideas, passages, or any themes your kids are going through.

Once you have your BIG LIST read them over and spend some time in prayer again. What you're looking for is something to jump out at you, stick to your heart or be something you're passionate about. Whatever you choose this is where God wants you to go. Now depending on what happens you generally have two paths to take.

- **Path 1 - Specific Bible Passage:** This path is all about a particular passage. Maybe a particular chapter or a parable, basically a section of the bible you want to directly teach about. The fancy word for this is **Biblical Exegesis**, it is "*the critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially of scripture*". The goal of this path is to draw out the **BIG IDEA** from within the text itself. However, to do that you need to follow the BASIC RULES.
- **Path 2 - A Specific Theme:** This path is all about starting with a Theme/BIG Idea and connecting it with a series of passages. Basically, this is Topical Preaching and it's one of the most common forms of preaching especially when we are starting out. An example might be a series on helping hurting teens. Using that as a topic we then choose supporting verses to support the theme. The challenge of this style is that it's easy to break the BASIC RULES.

NOTE: Neither option is right or wrong. They both have their challenges and their strengths. Which path you choose will always be determined by your time in prayer.

BASIC RULES

Now that you have selected a path there are some BASIC RULES that always apply when it comes to writing a sermon. Each Path has its own strengths and challenges and I've noted them for you. Regardless of the path these RULES should always be followed.

Rule #1 - Read the surrounding text: You ALWAYS need to read the text around your key verses because helps give you context. As a rule of thumb follow this guide; 2-3 verses before and after, then the whole subsection, followed by the whole chapter. If you can you should also check the theme and content of the biblical book your verses are in. This is not always necessary but it can say a lot about how to read the verses you want. As an example, if your verses are within the Psalms then the whole chapter will give you a feeling for what the Psalmist is going through, but understanding that the book is full of songs, poems and journal entries helps you understand that it's figurative language. This in turn helps you understand and interpret the meaning of the text.

- **Caution Path 1:** There can be a LOT within a passage and you don't always have the time to cover EVERYTHING. Learning how to sum up sections of the text in a way that helps your audience not get lost is important.
- **Caution Path 2:** It's REALLY EASY to skip this step because we want the passage to say something particular based on our theme and thus violate Rule #3

Rule #2 - Use multiple translations: Generally speaking, most Evangelical Christians believe the Bible is inerrant. Which basically means that it is "without errors as originally given." But the vast majority of us do not speak or read ancient Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic. We rely on our English Translations but they differ as well. This is why I believe for our key passages we need to always look at 1 or 2 other english translations. This will help us get a better understanding of the "original" meaning of the text.

- **Caution Path 1:** Don't bounce around to different translations when your speaking. Stick to one that you're going to preach from but in your preparation look at multiple translations. This will help understand your text without losing your audience.
- **Caution Path 2:** Don't just pick the translation with the english words you like. If there is a difference in translations for particular words then tell your audience and keep moving forward.

Rule #3 - The original meaning comes first: This is the MOST IMPORTANT rule we have in preaching and one that is solved fairly easily, it just requires a bit of work. First you need to follow Rule #1 and read the surrounding text, then you should consult a commentary. These are BIG BOOKS written by professional people that in a short way will help you get to the original meaning. Often, it's not hard, the Bible is intended to be read and understood by anyone. But if you have trouble this is the easiest way to get to the heart of the text.

- **Caution Path 1:** There will be a lot of information that is helpful and a lot that can be let go of especially with a commentary. Be careful not to get lost in all the details. Your job is to learn and take it all in, but refine and simplify it for your audience.
- **Caution Path 2:** You cannot connect a THEME to a passage that is not about that THEME. People try to do it all the time, we call it verse "cherry picking" and it's the worst way to preach.

Rule #4 - Application matters but be careful: In both paths application matters a lot. We are taking all the information we have learnt and bringing it down into a practical application for the people sitting in the chairs in front of you. It is here where we can stray from the meaning of the text to the modern application. For example, the Bible doesn't say a single thing about "Screen Time" but it does say a lot about Sabbath. We are called to focus on God one day a week and spend time with him. But we can't do that if we are glued to our screens. See we can stay within the original meaning; Sabbath = Rest but extend the application to Sabbath = unplugged time with God.

- **Caution Path 1:** If your Bible Passage doesn't have an application then it's no good to anyone
- **Caution Path 2:** If your theme doesn't have an application then it's no good to anyone.

Rule #5 - Don't forget about the Holy Spirit: At every step of this process you will question yourself. You will wonder if you interpreted the text right. You will wonder if your application will make any sense. You will wonder if they will even pay attention... you will have a million wonders, but there is one thing to never forget. The Holy Spirit is always working. Paul reminds us and Timothy that *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17)"*. It's a promise that God's word is alive and well working in the hearts of people, but that you are also equipped by God to preach that very same word.

- **Caution Path 1:** It's easy to forget that the Holy Spirit makes God's word come alive in people.
- **Caution Path 2:** It's easy to forget that the Holy Spirit makes God's word come alive in your life as well.

START WRITTING

In light of these BASIC RULES it's now time to write your sermon. The following is a guide you can follow regardless of the Path you chose to take. Where important I made Path specific notes.

- **Step #1 - Pick a Path:** Decide if your sermon will be a Specific Bible Passage or a Theme
- **Step #2 - What is your BIG IDEA:** This comes in the form of a simple question, "What does God want people to know?". Write it out in a paragraph or two. This is often your introduction
- **Step #3 - Do your Research:** Work through the BASIC RULES and write everything down. You will use it to build the body of your text.
- **Step #4 - Build the Body:** This is where the two paths start to separate.
 - **Path 1** – Using a specific passage work your way through it step-by-step. Deal with a verse or two at a time and talk about what you discovered in your research. This is called "Systematic Theology" and basically it means systematically breaking down the verses. Each step along the way you're helping people understand what the original author intended it to say.

- **Path 2** - Based on your theme and passage talk about your BIG IDEA. Walk people through the theme and verses and constantly come back to and reinforce your BIG IDEA.
- **EXTRA:** Personal story is definitely appropriate in this section. You always want to show people that you have learnt or wrestled with the text yourself. It makes you and the sermon more approachable.
- **Step #5 - Application:** This is where you move from “Original Context” to Personal Application. You need to practically connect the body of your sermon with your BIG IDEA. Your audience should walk away with at least one practical application.

NOTE: How you put this all together is 100% up to you. Every single Pastor has their own way of writing a sermon. Some like short form notes and bullet points, while others do full manuscripts. No matter how you put it together make sure it's a way that you are comfortable with. I would also recommend having a physical copy of your sermon with you. Tech is great and wonderful but if it fails the rookie nature of your experience will make it harder to bounce back.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE

The final step in this whole process is to PRACTICE. But that activity implies a few things, the biggest of which is that you are done writing your sermon with enough time to practice. My personal rule of thumb is to have it done at least two days BEFORE you need to speak. Also, most of the time you will have a time limit. Practice will help you know how you fit into the timing you have been given, but remember that you will often speak faster in person especially if it's your first time speaking.

FINAL NOTE

My hope and prayer is that this will be the start of a much larger journey for you. One of the great mysteries of the Christian Faith is that God CHOOSES to partner with us to further His Kingdom. He doesn't have to but he chooses to and the day you step up never forget you are not alone. The God of the universe who put the stars in place if not only guiding you but he is standing right next to you as you speak. Trust that and know he will be faithful.