

## READING, PREPARATION, CONVERSATIONS AND PREACHING.

### 1. Preparing the preacher

I believe many of the best sermons are "discovered", not developed. In other words, great sermons often suggest themselves to you--they have a life of their own. Most preachers do virtually all of their sermon preparation--study in a completely task oriented way. That is:

They choose things to read that they believe will 'make good sermon material. They are always studying simply to find material for the next talk or sermon. And/or They do all of their study for the sermon in a formal set-aside time just a few days before the date of delivery.

Instead, there should be lots of "non-directed" study in a great a variety of areas. In particular, it is important to immerse yourself in the 'world' of the people to whom you preach. (There is more on this subject below under application.) It is as you study very broadly that unusual, creative new insights for sermons will come.

#### a. Routine ways to study:

Rapid Bible reading. Like Lloyd-Jones and John Stott, I find M'Cheyne's Reading Calendar an outstanding aid. John Stott suggests reading 3 chapters a day rapidly and studying one in depth. That is too much for most pastors. But covering the whole Bible every year or so is critical. Another example of this is the traditional course of reading the Psalms through every month or so.

Magazines across the spectrum. If you read one perspective on a subject you are naive and over-confident. If you read a second, contradictory perspective that deconstructs the first view you become cynical and discouraged. But if you read a spectrum of 4 or 5 different perspectives, you find your own view and voice and often get rather creative ideas. There isn't enough time to read lots of books across the spectrum. I suggest instead magazines--from liberal to conservative. I read the following magazines very regularly and very thoroughly: *The New Yorker* (sophisticated secular), *The Atlantic* (eclectic), *The Nation* (older, angry left-wing secular), *The Weekly Standard* (conservative but pretty slick), *The New Republic* (eclectic), *The Utne Reader* (new-Age semi-flaky), *Wired* (classic 'post-modern' if there is such a thing), *First Things* (conservative Catholic.) As I read, I imagine dialogues about Christianity with the writers. In that frame of mind, I almost never read a magazine without getting a scrap of a preaching idea.

Regular book reviews and then highly selective 'latest thing' books. If you always read *Books and Culture*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, you will be able to stay on top of the trends of thought without buying 99% of the books. And this will help you actually buy and read the occasional seminal work. Another helpful spot is the "Arts and Ideas" section of the *Saturday New York Times*. Reading these reviews helps you identify truly seminal works or works you realize you need to buy to close a gap in your own knowledge.

Church history. Read the biographies of Christian leaders and the history of revivals and missions and of other branches of Christianity. This area of study is a real "sleeper", often overlooked by preachers. But such study helps overcome cynicism (when looking at revivals), or, on the other hand, helps prevent one from being overly impressed with your own insights and ministry. Church history also helps show you which principles of ministry are trans-cultural and which are parochial.

Sermons. Lots of ministers have libraries full of commentaries and theology, but not full of sermons, meditations, spiritual theology and other practical books. The fastest way to learn to preach is to be exposed to lots of good sermons by extremely different preachers. (This avoids developing a slavish imitation.) This goes for tapes of some modern preachers. Without this kind of material your preaching will be "bony"--full of structure and teaching without illustrations and application. I have either read or listened to at least 50 sermons by the following: Robert M'Cheyne, Charles Spurgeon, George Whitefield, Charles Simeon, Alexander MacLaren, John Flavel, Jonathan Edwards, D.M. Lloyd-Jones, Dick Lucas. I've learned a lot from others, but these have been my 'staples.'

Movies, plays, novels, museum shows. This is a never ending source of material for sermons.

Pastoral counseling and personal evangelism. Rarely you can actually use a particular counseling situation as an illustration--but that should only be many years and miles away from the person. You must not divulge private information (even anonymously) in such a way that people feel they can't trust you. However, I have found myself saying things to people in counseling every single week that finds their way into the sermons. I often am able to put things 'in a nutshell' better when spontaneously trying to help someone understand Christ. You don't say, "this week I was saying to someone" but rather you simply use the basic formulation.

## **b. Personal reading that has shaped my preaching.**

### ***Fiction and more 'imaginative' reading***

First, **Tolkien.** *The Silmarillion* if you have read *Lord of the Rings* already. I've had people tell me that they have read *Lord of the Rings* 20 times, but in my case I'm sure its pretty far beyond that. Why? I actually never *stop* reading Tolkien. With whatever else I am reading, I am also reading Tolkien. I work through LOTR and then *The Silmarillion* and then (believe it or not) most of the other material JRRT never published but Christopher Tolkien put out in 13 (large!) later volumes. I owe Tolkien a debt I can't repay.

Second, **Lewis** of course. *The Great Divorce* and *The Weight of Glory*. C.S.Lewis hasn't helped me so much by his fiction. Despite some delightful passages in the Space Trilogy and lots of great sermon illustrations in Narnia and the Great Divorce--I'd says Lewis' fiction isn't terrific. It is too obvious. But his essays have been absolutely formative to my preaching in two other ways. First, he is the master illustrator. His crystal clear examples and illustrations in Mere Christianity are just too hard to beat. Second, he was of course an extremely clear thinker. Third, he was so incredibly well-read himself that he provided a model for me. **Note:** Because of Lewis' references I have read and re-read *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* by George MacDonald.

**Poetry.** George Herbert *The Complete English Poems*. I am not a broad reader of poetry. The two sources I have gone back to over and over again: a) *George Herbert*. Can't say enough about him. I don't know how I found him--through Lewis, maybe? b) Because of Tolkien's influence, I also now love Old English poetry--Beowulf, Judith, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, and so on. I find it extremely interesting to see how Christianity was "contextualized" for the Anglo-Saxons in a poem like "The Dream of the Rood." Believe it or not, this has really helped me think through how to contextualize the gospel to people here in NYC.

More '**modern**' fiction. Camus *The Plague*, *The Fall*; cf. Becker's *The Denial of Death*. I have gotten quite a lot out of twentieth century 'modern' writers like Kafka (*Metamorphoses* and *The Trial*), Camus (*The Plague* and *The Fall*), and Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman* and *After the Fall*.) They have been extremely important for helping me grasp the 'alienation' that modern people feel. Maybe it's my age, but these early and mid-twentieth century writers seemed much more serious and honest about the implications of a closed, nothing-but-naturalism universe than post-modern playful irony. These books don't 'feed the heart' like other stories and poetry, of course. When I read these I feel like I'm trapped in a long, difficult pastoral counseling case. But I couldn't preach without them.

My '**Kathy**' fiction. I am basically a voracious non-fiction reader (see below.) My wife, however, is a voracious fiction reader. I apologize for living out this gender stereotype, but there it is. Kathy intuitively knows the fiction that I should read for my own enrichment and/or preaching. It is only because of her, for example, that I have read Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi*. Or Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* or George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch* or Hugo's *Les Miserables* or Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" and other short stories, or *Jane Eyre*, Stephen Carter's *The Emperor of Ocean Park*, or all of Dorothy Sayers' "Peter Wimsey" novels, Chesterton's "Father Brown" stories, Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*, Madeline L'Engle's trilogy, most of Jane Austen, and J.K.Rowling's "Harry Potter." All of these over the years have been fed to me by my wife, and that is just the tip of the iceberg. (Kathy insists I admit that I only read about one of every five books she presses on me. She has read all of the 20 Patrick O'Brien novels four times and she can't get me to read one page.)

### **Non-fiction reading**

It is critical to 'keep up' in order to preach in New York City. In general, my audience does not trust the Bible very much, and so I need to generously document and support my points with corroborating opinions from all the books and periodicals that the professionals of New York City read. If I read what they read, then a) I can use the Bible to answer the questions that are on their minds, not my mind, b) I can show how often 'the Bible already was teaching this' long before this contemporary authority said it. Some keys to reading non-fiction:

#### A couple of comments on non-fiction categories.

1) Though I never read much philosophy in college and seminary, I read it pretty heavily now. It has been like 'lifting weights' for my brain. Related to this, I read everything on apologetics I can get my hands on.

2) I have to give a special place to Jonathan Edwards' sermons. They are in a class by themselves. They are obviously not fiction, but they are truly literary art forms, marvels of logic and imagery. The Yale edition volumes with editorial notes are invaluable. Edwards believed that the goal of the sermon was not simply to make the truth clear, but to make it *real*. His goal was to strike the 'affections.' Watching him do this has taught me more than I can say for preaching to young, experience-oriented New Yorkers.

3) It is hard to know how to classify books like Nelson Mandela's biography, or a history of the Civil Rights movement, or the latest books on terrorism, or Alan Dershowitz's *Shouting Fire*. Are these 'current events'? I try to read these often.

4) When it comes to theology and 'Christian' books, I make a concerted effort to balance my reading among 'doctrinalist', 'pietist', and 'culturalist' emphases (to use George Marsden's famous categories.)

### **c. Preparing far ahead of time.**

There is another key to 'discovering' your sermons. Spread your formal preparation out.

First, plan your series far, far ahead. Choose your topics and series for the following year before you go on your summer vacation. Then do an in depth, daily study of the book of the Bible, using three or four good commentaries. If you do these far enough in advance of the time you expect to preach upon it, then you are able to refrain from immediately turning every study into a sermon (though sermon ideas will occur to you every day.) But without the pressure of immediate final preparation, the Biblical material can really settle into your own soul and become yours experientially, so that the truth communicated will come from your heart.

Second, if you've planned your series far enough in advance, read (a) one major theological work on a theme that is crucial to the book or series (Example, if you are preaching through John 13-17, read a classic or new work on the Holy Spirit. If preaching through Galatians, read a classic or a new work on justification.) But also (b) read one major 'secular' or 'cultural analysis' book on a theme that is crucial to the book or series. (Example: if you are preaching through 'community' read a book on racism and the civil rights movement.) If you don't read widely as this, far in advance, all your sermons will start to sound the same.

Third, spread your *formal* preparation out as well. Consider something like this:

- On Tuesday, 10 days before the preaching date, spend 3 hours writing a very rough draft of the sermon. Make believe you have to preach it that night--an emergency.
- Over the next 9 days, think about the sermon and the topic as you go through the day, read the paper, go to movies, pastor and evangelize people. Almost everyday you will think of or see something that is relevant to the sermon. Almost every day you can put clippings or notes to yourself in the folder with the rough draft.
- On Friday, two days before the preaching, spend 3-5 hours writing a full draft of the sermon. If necessary, then do the same thing Saturday.
- Why spread this preparation out like this?
  - First, it gives you a chance to really test the message out experientially yourself. Be sure to work at actually practicing the very behavior you will be urging on others. Even more importantly, look at the world through the concepts of the sermon, through the theme of the passage. Pray through it and pray it into your own heart. This way, the truths become spiritually real and vital to you--only in this way can you preach with immediacy and spiritual reality. (This is the Personal Aspect of preaching, of course.)
  - Second, when you take a sermon out after a respite of one week or more, you will find that it does not sound like you remembered it from your preparation. Why? Because

you are now more objective--you are listening to it as a receiver (to a greater degree) rather than as a sender. You will notice tangents which (before) you thought were germane to the shaft. You will notice illustrations that do not really illuminate or enhance the message. It will become far easier to prune and streamline your sermon after letting it lie in the desk for a while.

## 2. Preparing the sermon.

**a. How do you choose a specific passage to preach on?** Various factors can determine your choice: a) church year factor (seasons), b) public life factor (events in the national or community life), c) pastoral factor (spiritual needs of individuals or the corporate body), d) social factor (dealing with needs of various classes of people), e) personal factor (subjects and passages God has brought home to you in a personal way), f) comprehension factor (taking pains to cover the whole range of biblical teaching and doctrine to give your congregation a balanced diet). Be sure to take all into consideration at various times.

**b. How do you study a passage in preparation for preaching?** Here is an outline for studying a passage of Scripture in preparation for preaching.

**Flow.** Read it through several times--5 to 10. (Do this in English. Of course, it is desirable if you can read in through in the original too, but unless you are a professor, you probably won't get a sense of the 'flow' unless you read in your native, heart language. if you simply cannot read well enough for "flow", stick to English!) What is the purpose? You are seeking to "fly over" the passage, the way you fly over a region in an airplane to get the "big picture". You are to look for the main features.

- Underline anything that impresses you, and provide a brief explanation of why it does. Note anything that puzzles you and pose it as a question.
- Now, write a paraphrase of the passage in your own words. This will force you to make decisions about flow--an important exercise.
- Finally, answer this question: what is the basic purpose of the author in writing this? what is the basic point he trying to make?

**Parts.** Only now, turn to the use of lexical aids and commentaries. Why should you wait until now? To turn too quickly to the views of the experts can make it impossible for you to develop your own insights. Now that you do--turn to the technical books, use at least a half-dozen (and preferably a dozen), to avoid one-sidedness.

- Use these aids to find the original setting--the people the author was writing to.
- Use these aids to add to your list of "impressions" you developed.
- Then use them to answer your list of questions you have already developed.
- Now divide the passage into parts (idea units) and give each a title. The titles is just another mental discipline to help you determine the author's intent. Make the outline a detailed one if you wish.
- Next, look for connectors within the parts and especially between the parts. Here are four kinds of connectors:
  - a) contrast (e.g. "but"),
  - b) comparison (e.g. "even as"),
  - c) repetition of words or ideas,
  - d) cause and effect or explanation (e.g. "because", "for", "in order", "therefore", "if" "then").
- In the case of each connector, ask: "why did the author use this? how does it help him make a point, and what is the point?"
- Finally choose the main things (2-3) that impressed you. Now meditate on each:
  - What is the teaching?
  - What does this tell me about God or Christ that leads me to praise?
  - What does this tell me about my fallen condition that I can confess?
  - What does this tell me about how I should life, rejoice, trust, or change?

**Shaft.** Now you are ready to return to your original question. In light of all the detailed study you have just done, ask yourself: *what is the basic purpose of the author in writing this? What is the basic point of the passage?* Of course, you already answered this question once, but now use all your study to refine your previous answer.

Now write it down in a single sentence, if possible. This is what I call the "shaft" of the sermon. (Jay Adams calls it the *telos*, while Haddon Robinson calls it the "Big Idea". Others call it the "CIT"--the central interpretive theme.) A sermon must be like an arrow, streamlined and clearly driving at a single point, a single message, the theme of the passage.

### **c. Writing the Sermon.**

Now that you know the shaft of the passage, it remains to design a sermon outline or structure that preserves and promotes that shaft. Good sermon structure brings clarity. We must not be legalistic about sermon structure. I also do not intend this book to offer much detail on this subject. Let me simply propose one approach which preserves both a concern for a single, clear point and for application. This approach is based on (with just a few amendments) John Bettler's excellent chapter on "Application" in Sam Logan, ed. *The Preacher and Preaching*.

**(1) Make the Shaft into a Sermon Proposition.** Turn the "shaft", the central interpretive theme, into a practical proposition. The characteristics of the proposition are the following: a) Make it an active, declarative sentence (even with a second person pronoun, if possible). b) Make it person-oriented, "need-related". It should be oriented to a need and pointing to the satisfaction of that need. In other words, the proposition relates one central truth to the audience.

For example, suppose you have studied John 16:16-23, and determined that the shaft is: "Jesus comforts his disciples with teaching about his second coming." But it must be turned into a sermon proposition. Here is one example for John 16:16-23: "Christians, through hope, can face anything."

Here are some other examples of sermon propositions.

Concealing your sin is no security.

Regardless of your status everyone needs to be remade by the Holy Spirit.

Nothing will cast out fear except the gospel.

Communication is the key to marriage.

Men who are interested in religion as a theory often revolt from it as an experience.

### **(2) Ask the passage a question or questions about the proposition.**

Now, we are looking for more information on this central sermon proposition. We get it by asking the passage a question *about* the proposition. We want to be sure to only get what the passage tells you about this main point. Avoid all tangents and detours!

What kind of questions should you ask? Your questions should be asking: either what, or why, or how or where or what for the need or issue (addressed in the proposition) is met (resolved, embodied, satisfied) in Christ. The question could be seeking to discover a) ways the satisfaction in Christ fits the need, or b) examples of how the satisfaction in Christ works, or c) concrete effects of the satisfaction (e.g. descriptions of positive conditions that result with him and negative conditions that result without him), or d) actions that will secure the satisfaction, or e) combinations of the above. Write down all the passage tells you and arrange it in an outline. Example:

**John 16:16-23**

Shaft - Jesus comforts his disciples with teaching about his second coming.  
 Proposition - Christians, through hope, can face anything.

Question - (If we ask the text) *Why?* (the following outline emerges)

- I. Our Hope is powerful. (v. 21 - "she forgets the anguish because of her joy")
- II. Our Hope is grounded in Christ. (v.22 - "no one will take away your joy")
- III. Our Hope is permanent. (v.23 - "you will no longer ask me anything")

Question - (If we ask the text) *How?* (the following outline emerges)

- I. By remembering Christ's timing. (v.20 -"you will weep while the world rejoices")
- II. By seeking Christ's face. (v.22 -"I will see you again and you will rejoice")
- III. By reflecting on Christ's triumph. (v.17 -"Because I go to the Father"; v. 23 - "In that day you will no longer ask me anything")

**(3) Consider different arrangements.** Many authors provide categories of sermon outlines. Here are just three types that are common and helpful.

**Faceting** - The central subject is looked at in different aspects.

**Luke 8:16-18**

- I. A witness must be properly placed.  
(v.16 - "on a stand")
- II. A witness will be a threat to some.  
(v.17 - "brought out in the open")
- III. A witness must be informed.  
(v.18 - "consider how you listen")

**Mark 1:17**

- I. The Duty of discipleship ("follow me")
- II. The Promise of discipleship ("I will make you")
- III. The Test of discipleship ("fishers of men")

**Contrasting** - The central subject is looked at in terms of opposites: good/bad, right/wrong, temporal/eternal, divine/human.

**Matthew 25** - "Waiting for Jesus"

- I. The foolish maidens: are you one of them?
- II. The wise maidens: are you one of these?

**Exposing** - This outline begins by posing a question or presenting a problem or a controversial assumption. Then answer or solution is unfolded in stages.

**Luke 11:1-13** - "The Problem of Prayer"

- I. The Problem of Prayer (v.1 "teach us")
- II. Prayers must be balanced (v.2-4)
- III. Prayers must be persistent. (v.5-10)
- IV. Prayers must be believing. (v.11-13)

**(4) Amass and attach supporting materials.** Now that you have an outline, you have the "bones" or skeleton of the sermon. "Flesh out" the points with supporting materials which you have amassed through reading and your own experience. Attach them to appropriate points. Here are some types of supporting material.

(1.) *Illuminating/persuading materials:*

- analogy-illustrations (which explain abstract concepts through concrete comparisons),

- example-illustration (showing how principles are fleshed out in practice),
- statistics and other "objective" evidence, and
- testimony (from experts, peers, or others that the audience give weight to).

(2.) Application materials. (See below).

Now, if possible, put the sermon away for at least a week before you revise it for the final time. (See above for the rationale for this.)

**Summary for preparing a message that expounds a text:**

1. Read for the flow.
2. Study the parts.
3. Crystallize the shaft.
  
4. Write the sermon proposition.
5. Ask it a question or questions.
6. Arrange the answers into an outline.
  
7. Attach supporting material.
8. Live with the sermon.

## **II. PROVIDE A BALANCED DIET OF APPLICATION.**

It is extremely easy for preachers to ride application 'hobby-horses.' We all tend to identify certain problems as the major ones in peoples' lives or in the church. So we tend to find our favorite applications in texts so regularly that it becomes repetitious and boring. After a while people 'tune it out.' Application is like a diet—our people need a balanced diet of all the different food-groups. Obviously, if you keep a balance in application of the 'three perspectives'—doctrinalist, pietist, culturalist—this will help. But there's more to do to give your people a balanced diet of Biblical application.

### **A. Keep track of where you've been over the last year or two.**

I have a number of 'gospel themes' that I try to provide for my people. I try to devote a sermon to one every year or two. I try to keep track of whether or not I've hit on the theme recently or not. If not, I sometimes choose parts of a text or book in order to cover a theme that I haven't given the congregation in a while. (In a highly mobile church, repetition is important.) What are the themes? I have 25-30. Some include: The glory of God, the holiness of God, sin, the incarnation, the cross, idolatry, the kingdom, the church, the Word, the City, prayer, worship, community, justice, witness, forgiveness, money, family, sexuality, work, discipleship, spiritual growth, friendship, contentment, humility, self-control, suffering, racial unity, integrity, guidance.

### **B. Vary the genres and parts of the Bible you cover.**

I try to get through all the different parts of the Bible over a 10 year period. This way the basic themes will always be coming with a different metaphor, perspective, nuance, aspect. Make sure you don't always preach epistles or even always gospels! Hit the wisdom literature, the Old Testament narratives, the law, the prophets, and so on. It helps long-time auditors to grow deeper in their understanding of Biblical truths. They do not get bored!

### **C. Discipline who you talk to.**

#### **1. Your people-context always shapes your sermons.**

When we study the Bible, we only extract answers to the questions that we implicitly or explicitly have on our hearts as we read it. If all revelation is covenantal, and we don't understand a passage of the Scripture unless we know how to "use" it (see Session 1-B), then there is no such thing as a "view from nowhere". We have certain questions, problems, and issues on our mind, and as we read the Bible, we mainly "hear" what it teaches us about those questions, problems, and issues.

Therefore, there is a "vicious" cycle in preaching. You will tend to preach to the people you listen to most during the week. Why? The people you are most engaged with fill your mind with their questions, which act as something of a "grid" as you read the Bible. Their issues will on your mind as you read and you will especially notice Biblical truth that speaks to them. Thus your sermons will tend to aim at the people who you are already have most on your heart. They will then be the people that are most interested and satisfied by your preaching. They will come and bring others like themselves. Because they are coming, you will meet more of them, speak more to them, and thus (semi-consciously) tailor your sermons more to them. The more you listen to them, the more they pull the sermon toward them--the more you direct the sermon to them, the more they come to church--the more they come to church, the more you listen to them.

At the very worst, evangelical preachers read and engage other evangelical preachers and writers. They read (and speak to) almost exclusively those thinkers that support their own views. Then the sermons are really only helpful for other seminary students and graduates (of your particular stripe!) It is not really true that some sermons are too academic and thus lack application. Rather, the preacher is applying the text to the people's questions that he most understands--other academics.

At the best, evangelical preachers read and engage other evangelical Christians. Then their sermons are really only helpful for other Christians. Christians may love the messages and feel they are being "fed", but they know instinctively that they cannot bring non-Christian friends to church. They never think, "I wish my non-Christian neighbor could be here to hear this."

There is then no abstract, academic way to preach relevant, applicatory sermons. They will arise from who will listen to. If you spend most of your time reading, instead of out with people, you will apply the Bible text to the authors of the books you read. If you spend most of your time in Christian meetings or in the evangelical sub-culture, your sermons will apply the Bible text to the needs of evangelicals. The only way out of this is to deliberately diversify your people context.

## **2. Deliberately diversify your people-context.**

How? The first approach is easiest--vary what you read. Read lots of material by people who differ wildly from you theologically. The fastest way to do this is not to read books, but magazines. For happily middle class liberal/New Age culture, read *The Utne Reader*. For angry liberal/atheistic culture, read *The Nation*. For sophisticated, upscale liberal culture read *The New Yorker*. For cutting edge GenX liberal culture, try *Wired*. There are quite a few other periodicals that would do just as well. This is just an idea.

The second approach is harder--vary who to talk to. Pastors find this difficult, because most people won't be themselves with us. Nevertheless, through being very careful with your appointment schedule, and through being creative with your community and neighborhood involvement, be sure to spend time with people from a variety of spiritual conditions. Here is a partial list. Be sure that you do not find you only spend time with one kind of person.

### **D. Discipline who you 'picture'.**

Now when you both read the Bible text and write the sermon, think especially of individuals you know with various spiritual conditions (non-Christian, weak Christian, strong Christian), with various besetting sins (pride, lust, worry, greed, prejudice, resentment, self-consciousness, depression, fear, guilt), and in various circumstances (loneliness, persecution, weariness, grief, sickness, failure, indecision, confusion, physical handicaps, old age, disillusionment, boredom). Now, remembering specific faces, look at the Biblical truth you are applying and ask: "how would this text apply to this or that person?" Imagine yourself personally counseling the person with the text. Write down what you would say. The effect of this exercise is to be sure that your application is specific, practical, and personal.

#### **1. Quick-Lists.**

At the very least, ask yourself: "What does this text say to a) Mature Christians, b) non-Christians, c) newer or very immature Christians?"

A second list to keep in your head easily is to ask yourself: "What does this text say to the 'four soils', the four groups of the Mark 4 parable?" a) Conscious skeptics and rejecters of the faith, b) Nominal Christians whose commitment is extremely shallow, c) Christians who are divided in their loyalties and messed up in their priorities, d) Mature, committed Christians.

#### **2. Warning Will Robinson!**

Important safety tip. If the person(s) you are visualizing are actually going to be in the audience which hears the sermon you are preparing, be sure not to use details that would make it appear that you are using the pulpit to publicly rebuke an individual. That is an unBiblical thing to do! (Matthew 18 and 5 tell us to go to a person privately if we have something against them.) You want your sermon to apply to large numbers of people, not just one. Use the thought of individuals to stimulate specific applications, but don't write them out in such a way to cause the audience to play a "guessing game" about the parties you are referring to.

#### **3. Longer Lists (to get you thinking)**

Here are the kind of different people you may be speaking to. Does the text speak to any of them? Use the 'pastoral diagnostic' list we spoke of in the pastoral syllabus.

#### **Non-Christians**

- Conscious Unbeliever -Aware he is not a Christian.
  - Immoral pagan -Living a blatantly immoral/illegal lifestyle.
  - Intellectual pagan -Claiming the faith is untenable or unreasonable.
    - Imitative pagan -Is fashionably skeptical, but not profound.
    - Genuine thinker -Has serious, well-conceived objections.
  - Religious Non-Christian -Belonging to organized religions, cults, or denominations with seriously mistaken doctrine.
- Non-churched Nominal Christian -Has belief in basic Christian doctrines, but with no or remote church connection.
- Churched Nominal Christian -Participates in church but is not regenerated.

- Semi-active moralist -Respectably moral whose religion is without assurance and is all a matter of duty.
- Active self-righteous -Very committed and involved in the church, with assurance of salvation based on good works.
- Awakened Sinner -Stirred and convicted over his sin but without gospel peace yet.
  - Curious -Stirred up mainly in an intellectual way, full of questions and diligent in study.
  - Convicted with false peace -Without understanding the gospel, has been told that by walking an aisle, praying a prayer, or doing something, he is now right with God.
  - Comfortless -Extremely aware of sins but not accepting or understanding the gospel of grace.
- Apostate -Once active in the church but who has repudiated the faith without regrets.

### **Christians**

- New Believer -Recently converted.
  - Doubtful -Has many fears and hesitations about his new faith.
  - Eager -Beginning with joy and confidence and a zeal to learn and serve.
  - Overzealous -Has become somewhat proud and judgmental of others, and is overconfident of his own abilities.
- Mature/growing -Passes through nearly all of the basic conditions named below, but progresses through them because he responds quickly to pastoral treatment or he knows how to treat himself.
- Afflicted -Lives under a burden or trouble that saps spiritual strength. (Generally, we call a person afflicted who has not brought the trouble on himself.)
  - Physically afflicted -Experiencing bodily decay
    - the sick
    - the elderly
    - the disabled
  - Dying
  - Bereaved -Has lost a loved one or experienced some other major loss (a home through a fire, etc.)
  - Lonely
  - Persecuted/Abused
  - Poor/economic troubles
  - Desertion -Spiritually dry through the action of God who removes a sense of his nearness despite the use of the means of grace.
- Tempted -Struggling with a sin or sins which are remaining attractive and strong.
  - Overtaken -Tempted largely in the realm of the thoughts and desires.
  - Taken over -A sin has become addictive behavior.
- Immature -A spiritual baby, who should be growing, but who is not.
  - Undisciplined -Simply lazy in using the means of grace and in using gifts for ministry
  - Self-satisfied -Pride has choked growth, complacency and he has become perhaps cynical and scornful of many other Christians.
  - Unbalanced -Has had either the intellectual, the emotional, or the volitional aspect of his faith become overemphasized.
  - Devotees of eccentric doctrines -Has become absorbed in a distorted teaching that hurts spiritual growth.
- Depressed -is not only experiencing negative feelings, but is also shirking Christian duties and being disobedient. (Note: If a person is a new believer, or tempted, or afflicted, or immature, and does not get proper treatment, he will become spiritually depressed. Besides these conditions, the following problems can lead to depression.)
  - Anxious -Through worry or fear handled improperly is depressed.
  - Weary -Has become listless and dry through overwork.
  - Angry -Through bitterness or uncontrolled anger handled improperly is depressed.
  - Introspective -Dwells on failures and feelings and lacks assurance.
  - Guilty -A conscience which is wounded and repentance has not been reached.

- *Backslidden* -Has gone beyond depression to a withdrawal from fellowship with God and with the church.
- *Tender* -Is still easily convicted of his sins, and susceptible to calls for repentance.
- *Hardening* -Has become cynical, scornful, and difficult to convict.

## **E. Weave application throughout the sermon.**

### **1. Use both "running" and "collected" application.**

Application is not appended to the end of a sermon--it runs throughout. Nevertheless, a sermon as it progresses, should move to more and more direct and specific application. "Running application" refers to the fact that the every Biblical principle must be stated immediately in its "practical bearings". But as the sermon winds to a close, it is important for the preacher to "collect" the applications, recap them, and then drive it home by moving at least one step deeper in specificity.

### **2. Ask direct questions.**

The best preachers speak to each listener very personally. That can be done by posing *direct questions* to the audience, posing inquiries which call for a response in the heart. Ask, "how many of you know that this past week you twisted the truth or omitted part of the truth in order to look good?" and follow it with a pause. This is far more personal and attention-riveting than a mere statement, "many people twist the truth or tell half-truths to reach their own ends." Talk to the people; ask direct questions. Be ready for the occasional person who really will answer you back! But the goal is to have the people answer in their minds/hearts--carrying on a dialogue with you.

### **3. Anticipate objections and questions.**

If you know the people to whom you speak, you will know the kind of objections or questions they will be posing in their hearts in response to your points. So identify those questions and express them. This keeps up the personal dialogue and lends great power to the sermon. For example:

"Now some of you are likely saying, 'Yes, that's great for you, but you have faith. I wish I could believe in God, I have tried, but I just can't develop the faith!' But friend, your real problem is not that you can't believe in God, but that you are refusing to doubt yourself. You are committed to the "doctrine" of your own competence to run your life. And you believe in it against all the evidence! Come! Admit what you know down deep, that you are not wise and able enough to run your own life. Doubt yourself, and you will begin to move toward faith in God."

Look at the Puritans for models of this. They were excellent at posing "common objections" and answering them within the body of the sermon.

### **4. Provide tests for self-examination.**

Do not underestimate the sinner's ability to avoid conviction of sin! Every heart has scores of time-tested subterfuges and excuses by which it can somehow rationalize away any direct confrontation with its own wickedness. As you preach, these are the kinds of thoughts going on in the minds of the listeners:

"Well, that's easy to say--you don't have my husband!"

"I suppose that may be true of others, but not of me."

"I sure wish Sally was here to hear this--she really needs that."

Therefore, it is important to provide brief "tests" for the listeners. For example:

"Well, perhaps you agree with me--you agree that pride is bad and humility is good, but you think 'but I don't have much of a problem with pride.' Well look at yourself. Are you too shy to witness? Are you too self-conscious to tell people the truth? What is that, but a kind of pride, a fear of looking bad?"

The "tests" of course, are simply "example illustrations", of the sort that John the Baptist gave his audience in Luke 3.

**5. Don't pass by the "pliable" moment.**

Often there come points in the sermon when it is evident that the audience's attention is riveted and they are getting something of what Adams calls an "experience" of the truth. Often you can sense that people are coming under conviction. One sign is usually the lack of fidgeting, foot shuffling, and throat clearing. The audience gets more silent and still.

This is a "pliable" or a teachable moment. Don't let it go past! Don't be so tied to your outline or notes that you fail to take time to drive home the truth directly and specifically. Perhaps you could pause, and look the people in the eye as they swallow the food you have just fed them.

**6. Be affectionate as well as forceful.**

Be sure, when you deal very specifically with the behavior and thoughts of people, that you combine an evident love for them with your straight talk about sin. Be both warm and forceful when dealing with personal questions--never ridiculing! If you ridicule a listener for a question he or she has just posed (perhaps) in the heart, you will make yourself appear haughty and unapproachable (and maybe you are!)

**7. Use a balance of the many forms of application.**

Application includes, at least, a) warning and admonishing, b) encouraging and renewing, c) comforting and soothing, d) urging, pleading, and "stirring up". There is a dangerous tendency for a preacher to specialize in just one of these. Often this comes because of a bent in the temperament or personality. That is, some preachers are temperamentally gentle and reserved, others are light-hearted and optimistic, while others are serious and intense. These temperaments can distort our application of the Biblical truth so that we are always majoring in one kind. But over the long haul, that weakens our persuasiveness. People get used to same tone or tenor of voice. It is far more effective when a speaker can move from sweetness and sunshine to clouds and thunder! Let the Biblical text control you, not your temperament. "Loud" truth should be communicated as loud, "hard" truth should be communicated as hard, "sweet" truth should be communicated sweetly.