



PREACH WELL

**A SHORT GUIDE TO MAKING
EVEN THE AVERAGE SERMON
MUCH BETTER**

DARRYL DASH

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Dedication

Preach Well is dedicated to Haddon Robinson, who taught us with his life and ministry.

Introduction

As a novice 23-year-old preacher, I attended my last preaching class in seminary. Stan Fowler, the professor who'd endured our sermons, gave his final charge to the students. We were already preaching good sermons, he said. Keep focused on the basics, and we would be equipped for a lifetime of effective preaching.

The basics, according to this professor, are simple. A sermon must be accurate, clear, and practical. That's it. Preach a sermon that's accurate to the text. Make your message clear. And show how the text applies to life. If we keep doing these three things, we would preach good sermons.

I thought of Stan's advice years later when I studied under Haddon Robinson, widely regarded as one of the top preaching professors in the world. Haddon told us to stop worrying about hitting home runs in the pulpit. Just get on base, he said. If we got on base week after week with good sermons, we'd win the game.

This little book is about preaching good sermons. Not great sermons, although I have nothing against those. Most of us will never get to that level though. We can, however, learn to consistently preach good sermons.

I want to increase your joy in preaching. I want to give pointers on how to improve your preparation process and decrease your strength. I want to strengthen your confidence

that you *can* preach effectively. I want to enhance your appreciation for the charge we've been given. It matters.

God uses the faithful ministry of preachers like you to grow his church. Let's commit to preaching well.

PART I

FUNDAMENTALS

The Fundamentals of Preaching

Thirteen years after I started preaching, I was sick of hearing myself preach. I knew something was wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. My instinct was to focus on delivery, but I was wrong. I needed to refocus on the fundamentals.

Here's my belief: Get the fundamentals of preaching right, and everything else will take care of itself. If the fundamentals aren't sound, it doesn't matter what else you do. You won't have a solid sermon.

When I taught preaching, I didn't worry too much about delivery. Delivery will improve over time if a preacher is teachable. I care about the fundamentals. Get the fundamentals right, and you have a framework for an effective preaching ministry that can last a lifetime.

I don't know anyone who's done a better job of expressing the fundamentals than Chris Brauns in his book *When the Word Leads Your Pastoral Search*. According to Chris, "A sermon should be a biblical bullet fired at the life of the

listener.”¹ If you unpack this sentence you have four keys to good preaching:

- **Preach biblically.** Preach the text. Let it shape the content of your sermon and its purpose.
- **Preach a bullet.** Find the main idea or burden of the text and preach that.
- **Preach with fire.** Seek God until you have unction, boldness, and urgency.
- **Preach to the listeners.** Preach to the people in front of you. Apply the message to their lives.

That’s it. The only thing I’d add (and I think it’s implicit) is that the sermon should bring us to Christ and show us the truth of the passage in relation to him.

We can learn a lot of things about preaching, but there are only a few fundamentals. If the fundamentals are sound, delivery and everything else will develop over time. If the fundamentals aren’t in place, nothing else matters.

1. Chris Brauns, *When the Word Leads Your Pastoral Search: Biblical Principles and Practices to Guide Your Search* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2001), 121.

The Elements of Preaching

When I was young, and wondered if I ever could preach, I came across *The Elements of Preaching* by Warren Wiersbe and David Wiersbe. There are only a few books that have changed my life, and this is one of them.

The Elements of Preaching presents 26 simple lessons and 14 simple prohibitions. As the title suggests, it aims to cover the elements of the subject, “the simplest principles of a subject of study.” It is not a book on how to prepare sermons. Instead, it is a book of basics that “that the preacher must grasp before he can adequately begin to use what the other books teach.” It’s like *The Elements of Style*, except for preaching.

Here’s a sample of the simple lessons:

- Preaching is the communicating of God’s truth by God’s servant to meet the needs of people.
- Keep your preaching within the bounds of what the text says and what the people can receive.
- Preach to express, not to impress.
- Never be satisfied with your preaching.

Here's a sample of the prohibitions, "some of the sins preachers commit that we ought not commit:"

- Wasting time on long introductions to our sermons
- Basing our sermons on suppositions instead of Scripture
- Concluding sermons with vague generalities

The book concludes with a ten-point inventory for the sermon:

1. Is the message solidly based on Scripture?
2. Does it exalt the Person and work of Jesus Christ?
3. Will it meet the needs of people?
4. Is the theme a timeless truth worth talking about?
5. Is the message organized so that I can preach it clearly and the people understand it easily? Is there a concise and clear statement of purpose? Is there a clear plan of development? Is there practical application that makes the message personal?
6. Are all Scripture references and historical facts accurate?
7. Is the message real to me personally so that I may make it real to others?
8. Does this message fit into the total "preaching plan" for this church and into the context of the church's ministry at this time?
9. Does the message fit into the ministry of the Church at large and Christ's concern to save a lost world?
10. Is the message worth preaching again?¹

1. Warren Wiersbe and David Wiersbe, *The Elements of Preaching: The Art of*

I wish every sermon I've preached met these standards.

The entire book is less than 12,000 words, and you can read it in half an hour or so. Even though I've been preaching for a quarter of a century, and have taught preaching, I need the reminders outlined in this book.

The Elements of Preaching is still in print. Get it. Read it. You will enjoy it, and your congregation will thank you.

Six Keys to Poor Preaching

I'm no expert in bad preaching, but I've done my share. I've observed that there are countless ways to preach well, but there are only a few key steps you need to master if you want to preach poorly. Anyone can do them.

1. **Skip exegesis.** Preaching preparation is half exegesis and half homiletics. If you want to save time, skip the exegesis and spend all your time on the homiletical side. Your schedule will thank you. (Nobody else will.)
2. **Forget the big idea.** We've been taught that sermons should be bullets, not buckshots. It takes a lot of time and work to come up with the main burden of the text. If you want to preach poorly, forget about the big idea of the text or sermon.
3. **Come up with your own purpose for the sermon.** Sure, there is such a thing as authorial intent. And yes, in theory, our sermon's purpose should match the text's purpose as much as possible. But if you stick to the purpose of the text, you're robbing yourself of the ability to come up with all kinds of clever messages that may not be strictly biblical –

but do they ever preach! (They sell books too.)

4. **Prepare at the last minute.** We've all tasted food that's simmered. And we've all tasted microwaved food. If you want to preach poorly, then don't allow yourself the luxury of simmering. All it takes is a few good sermons for your people to lose their taste for microwaved sermons. We can't let that happen.
5. **Preach moralism.** Spurgeon said, "Whenever I get hold of a text, I say to myself, 'There is a road from here to Jesus Christ, and I mean to keep on His track till I get to Him.'" But really, have you seen some of these roads? If you want to preach poorly, it's far easier just to tell people they should be better and let them figure it out.
6. **Preach to everyone in general.** Don't preach to the people in front of you. Preach to some generic audience. That way your sermons will be just as bad in your next church too.

This is the best advice I can give you on how to preach poorly.

CHAPTER 4

The Big Idea

I was scared. I was about to start studying under Haddon Robinson, and was sitting in the airport working on a final assignment: to study some texts, and write a one-sentence big idea for each of them.

I didn't know what I was doing. I'd preached for more than 13 years, and had studied Haddon's book in seminary, but I had never developed the discipline of big-idea preaching. I didn't see its value, and I didn't realize how hard it is. Many preachers don't get the big idea either, and they don't know what they're missing.

WHY THE BIG IDEA IS IMPORTANT

Almost every book on preaching argues for the importance of a central idea in preaching:

A sermon should be a bullet, not a buckshot. Ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture. (Haddon Robinson)

I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. I find the

getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labour in my study. To compel oneself to fashion that sentence, to dismiss every word that is vague, ragged, ambiguous, to think oneself through a form of words which defines the theme with scrupulous exactness – this is surely one of the most vital and essential factors in the making of a sermon: and I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon. (J.H. Jowett)

Make sure every expository message so that it is crystal clear so that your people know exactly what you are saying, how you have supported it, and how it is applied to their lives. (John MacArthur)

The approach we are developing throughout this book assumes that a communicator has a destination in mind; a single idea they want to communicate; a specific thing he or she wants to accomplish. And once that point, that idea, that destination is clear, then the goal is to bend everything in the message towards that one thing. (Andy Stanley)

The 3 a.m. test requires you to imagine someone awakening you from your deepest slumber with this simple question: “What’s the sermon today about, Pastor?” If you cannot give a crisp answer, you know the sermon is probably half-baked. Thoughts you cannot gather at 3 a.m are not likely to be caught by others at 11 a.m. (Bryan Chapell)¹

Why don’t preachers do this? I know why I didn’t. First, I didn’t see the value. Second, it’s hard work. Third, I didn’t see many examples.

I can’t over-emphasize the importance of wrestling with a text until you understand the big idea. It’s a vital step in preaching.

Haddon’s book *Biblical Preaching* is a valuable guide to learning what an idea is and how to form it. Trust me, it’s harder than it seems. But it’s worth it.

1. Brauns, 102-103.

THE BIG IDEA IN THE REST OF LIFE

Thinking in terms of big ideas will also help us think clearly in general.

A friend of mine, a writer, interviewed Haddon when he was in town. She now uses big ideas in her writing.

Another friend discusses the big idea of movies with his children. Movies communicate ideas. Until we discern these ideas, we can't evaluate them.

Big ideas are essential to preaching, and will improve the clarity of your thinking in every area of life.

PART II

PLANNING

How to Prepare an Annual Preaching Plan

One of the best things you can do as a preacher is to create an annual plan for your preaching. One preacher advises:

The wise minister preaches according to a program. He makes it himself and is free to change it at will. He thinks of himself as a gardener who is appointed by the King to feed several hundred people throughout the year. The gardener keeps a succession of plants growing in the various beds. He can water them all in the time that a novice would devote to a single corner. What is more pleasing than a garden that is carefully planned as well as nurtured?¹

Planning ahead allows ideas and themes to develop over time, and it beats the weekly panic of deciding what comes next.

Planning ahead:

- allows for more intentionality and diversity;
- gives worship leaders time to prepare worship services around the sermon;

1. Andrew W. Blackwood, *Planning a Year's Pulpit Work* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942), 15.

- allows you to prepare to address difficult topics;
- is more efficient;
- reduces stress;
- allows for deeper preparation; and
- heightens creativity.

I plan my preaching from two perspectives. First, I think about the needs of the congregation. Second, I think through genres and themes in Scripture that I haven't addressed recently. I want to preach to the congregation's needs, and provide a balanced diet of preaching.

Here are some practices that I find helpful:

- Go on a retreat. I've found a few days of planning to be a wise investment of time.
- Pray.
- Think about the needs of the congregation.
- Think about providing a balance over the year: Old and New Testament, various genres (Law, Old Testament History, Wisdom & Poetry, Prophets, Gospel, Acts, Epistles, Apocalypse), and themes.
- Think about the major themes of Scripture and theology. You can't cover everything in a year, but you can cover the major themes.
- Read, listen to, and pray through entire books. Absorb all that you can.
- Break the book into sections, with one eye on the text (literary units) and one eye on the overall series length.
- Jot down preliminary big ideas of each text.
- Fill in a calendar, taking into account special days

and annual rhythms.

Planning your preaching for the year takes work, but it's worth it.

The Three-Year Preaching Cycle

It happened again. A friend of ours stopped us in the gym and told us that she's moving to Miami. We're jealous of the climate she's chosen — it's 80°F warmer there today than it is here — but we're sad to see her go.

We live in a transient culture. We've seen a parade of people come and go in the few years that we've lived in Liberty Village, Toronto. In our own building, the percentage of renters occupying units has increased, while the percentage of owners occupying units has decreased. That points to an acceleration of the trend.

When you combine the transient nature of our communities and the task of planting a church, there are some significant challenges. One of them is preaching. If you can only count on people being present for a short time in the life of your church, how can you best use that time to ground people in the basic truths of the gospel, and inculcate them into a biblical worldview, especially when people increasingly lack any understanding of any biblical truth?

One answer, I believe, is a multi-year preaching strategy. I heard about a church recently that cycles through three books over three years: Mark, Romans, and Genesis. By the

end of every three years, people attending that church are grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus, the theology of Romans, and the foundational truths of Genesis. That's not a bad idea.

You can't preach through the entire Bible in three years, but you can cover its major themes.

In communities where people lack a biblical worldview, and won't be staying very long, let's use our time to ground them in the gospel and the major themes of Scripture before they leave.

PART III

PREPARATION

How I Prepare Sermons

I enjoy hearing how others prepare to preach. We all prepare differently, and make adjustments over the years.

Here's how I prepare sermons.

My approach has been to work through a series of questions (see chapter 9). I try to discipline myself in two areas, with varying success:

- Spend enough time in the text before turning to the commentaries. This one is hard for me.
- Exegesis comes before homiletics. Understand the text before you think about how to communicate it.

Before church planting, I'd devote four mornings a week to sermon preparation. On Monday and Tuesday I'd work on exegesis. On Wednesday and Thursday I'd begin to craft a sermon from the exegesis.

Now, I block off one day for sermon preparation. Everything conspires against this, which means that preparation sometimes spills into Friday or Saturday. My goal, though, is to complete my manuscript on Thursday and then put it on the back burner until I preach.

There's one major disadvantage to saving the preparation for one day: there's less time to slow cook the sermon over

the week. My best insights have come to me outside of sermon preparation time. That doesn't happen as often when the preparation time is so concentrated.

I like to finish my manuscript a couple of days before I preach. This helps me internalize the sermon.

Right now, I use the Ulysses App to write my sermons (<http://www.ulyssesapp.com>). It's available for Mac and IOS. I've also used Scrivener, Pages, and Word. I prefer a tool that stays out of the way so that I can focus on content rather than formatting.

I'm rarely happy with my sermon when it's done. When I review my old sermons, I'm often surprised that they're not as bad as I remembered.

I was encouraged to read a tweet by Joe Thorn: "Preachers. Most of us are not pulpit giants. We don't need to be. Preach the Word plainly but with passion. God is ready to use you."¹

I'm thankful that God uses ordinary preachers who prepare sermons while facing the pressures of everyday life.

1. Joe Thorn, <https://twitter.com/joethorn/status/572021629498212353>, accessed August 24, 2016.

CHAPTER 8

The Sermon Preparation Wall

The more I preach, the more I realize how much I need a sermon preparation wall.

Every week, I sit down and begin the sermon preparation process all over again. I always feel the pressure of the coming Sunday breathing down my neck. I get into the text and I'm immediately tempted to think of how I can preach that text in just six days.

And that's just the problem.

Before I can think about preaching the text, I must understand the text. I need a wall to separate the two main stages of preparation.

THE TEXT

For the first half of preparation, I focus on the text, *not* on the congregation, by:

- reading and re-reading the text;
- meditating on the text;
- asking questions of the text;
- understanding authorial intent;

- writing the exegetical idea and supporting ideas in the text;
- consulting commentaries; and
- applying the text to my life.

I discipline myself to understand the text in its context and in relation to its original audience, not in relation to my congregation.

THE CONGREGATION

Once I understand the text, I can begin to think about my congregation by:

- writing a homiletical idea and outline that communicates the idea of the text to my audience;
- shaping the sermon to communicate and apply the text;
- filling in the sermon with illustrations and supporting material; and
- writing a manuscript.

If I rush to the second stage, I tend to shortchange exegesis. Until the text wrestles me to the ground (see chapter 12), I'm not ready to preach.

One of the best pieces of advice I would give to any preacher is to erect a wall in the process of sermon preparation. Spend some time in the text without worrying how you're going to preach it. Don't shortchange exegesis in your rush to prepare a sermon.

Ten Key Questions for Sermon Preparation

No matter how you prepare a sermon, there are ten questions that every preacher must answer. Not every answer will show up in the sermon, but every answer is important to the shape that the sermon takes.

The first four questions center on the text. The next six questions center on how to communicate the text to our audience.

FOUR QUESTIONS FOR THE TEXT

1. **What did this text mean to the original audience?** One of the biggest mistakes is to ask what the text means for us before we know what it meant for the original audience. Forget about your audience for now. Until you answer this question, you're not ready to proceed.
2. **What is the central idea of this text in relation to the original audience?** There are many ideas in the passage, but there is one central idea. Until we understand the central idea of the text, we're not

prepared to move forward.

3. **What does the passage reveal about God?** Is there an attribute revealed? What implications does the author draw from what's revealed about God?
4. **What does the passage reveal about humanity?** In particular, what does it reveal about human need? How does this passage reveal our failures (i.e. our sin) and finitude (i.e. our limits)?

Because I'm usually in such a rush to get to my listeners, I have to force myself to spend the time on these questions before I'm ready to move on to the next set.

SIX QUESTIONS FOR PREACHING THE TEXT

Once you've answered the questions for the text, begin to answer questions about how you're going to preach the text.

1. **What does all of this mean for my audience?** How does the central idea, as well as what's revealed about God and about us, intersect with our condition today?
2. **How can I express the central idea practically and memorably?** How can I express the central idea of the sermon so that people remember it, and so that it applies to people today? How can I structure the sermon so that it has one main point, with (when necessary) supporting points, rather than many different points?
3. **How can I raise the need?** Good sermons address needs. If the listener is already aware of that need, how can I hook them? If they aren't aware of the need, how can I make them aware? It's good to show sympathy in how we raise the need. It's not

their need; it's *our* need.

4. **How does the gospel answer this need?** What is there in Jesus that answers this need? How does he become more beautiful and desirable in this passage?
5. **What does this look like today?** What are the implications for how we love (desires), think (mind), and live (actions)? Don't overemphasize actions at the expense of desires and thoughts.
6. **What objections will my hearers raise?** How can I express these objections well, and answer them?

These questions take quite a bit of thought. At this point, you haven't even begun to write a manuscript. If we answer them, though, we'll be ready to prepare a sermon that's biblical and that connects with our people.

Questions for the Text

We often start with the wrong questions when we open the Bible. As a result, we often miss the message of the passage. Even more, we miss the central themes of Scripture, and end up with something sub-biblical.

That's why I appreciate people who give us questions that we can ask the text. Here are three sets of questions. All are excellent. Use them often.

Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*

1. What is the vision of God in this particular text?
2. Where precisely do I find that in the passage?
3. What is the function of this vision of God? What implications for belief or behavior did the author draw from the image?
4. What is the significance of that picture of God for me and for others?¹

Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*

1. What does the text mean?

1. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 64.

2. How do I know what the text means?
3. What concerns caused the text to be written?
4. What do we share in common with those to (or about) whom the text was written and/ or the one by whom the text was written?
5. How should people now respond to the truths of the text?
6. What is the most effective way I can communicate the meaning of the text?²

Zack Eswine, *The Imperfect Pastor*

- What does this passage show me about the loveliness of God? Or, put another way, what is it about God in this passage that calls for my love for him?
- What does this passage show me about people and about what love requires of me on their behalf?
- As one who has been shown mercy and love from God, what empowerment from him do I need to overcome my obstacles to love? What about the love of God in Jesus gives me hope and provision for my own lovelessness?³

2. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), Kindle Locations 1940-1953.

3. Zack Eswine, *The Imperfect Pastor: Discovering Joy in Our Limitations through a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 110.

Why I'm Back to Writing Sermon Manuscripts

When I finished as pastor of an established church in January 2012, I changed how I prepared sermons. Until then, I always wrote a sermon manuscript before I preached. I didn't preach from the manuscript, but writing one helped me untangle my thoughts.

When I began to plant a new church, I first spoke as an itinerant preacher, and often repeated the same message. In late 2013 I began to preach in our new church. I truncated my sermon preparation and prepared an extended outline to save time.

It didn't last long. My friend Paul Martin, pastor of Grace Fellowship Church Toronto, said, "A church will never be better than its preaching." Because of this, I'm back to writing manuscripts.

We face a tension. Tim Keller says, "If you put in too much time in your study on your sermon you put in too little time being out with people as a shepherd and a leader. Ironically, this will make you a poorer preacher."¹

1. "Tim Keller Answers: How Much Prep Time for a Sermon?" Jesus Creed, accessed August 24, 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2016/05/16/tim-keller-answers-how-much-prep-time-for-a-sermon/>.

At the same time, I've found that if I don't write a manuscript, I'm not capable of preaching sermons that are congruent with the kind of church that we want to be. Maybe others can preach without writing a manuscript, but not me.

"A church will never be better than its preaching." That's not an excuse to devote an inordinate amount of time to sermon preparation. It is a reminder that every preacher has to figure out what they need to be able to preach a message that sets the tone for the church. For me, that means writing a manuscript.

Wrestling the Text

I don't know how many times it's happened. I pick a text as the basis for a sermon. I think I know what the text is going to say, but as I study I find out that the text isn't interested in conforming to my ideas. The wrestling match begins.

There are three possible outcomes to this wrestling match.

First, I can try to pin the text down and control it.

This never works. The text is too powerful, and I'm always overmatched. (Some preachers manage to preach what the text didn't say, but they didn't conquer the text. They never wrestled with it. You can tell.)

Second, I can look for a new text. I've done this, but the new text confronts me with the same problem. I just end up in a new wrestling match, but with less time. You can spend the entire week looking for a text you can control, and still end up in the fight of your life.

Third, the text wins. I'll wrestle the text. I'll stick with it long enough and maybe even think I'm winning. Eventually, the text will overpower me and pin me down. I'll stand up and preach that Sunday a bit battered, as one who has been conquered by the text.

The third outcome is the only one that produces sermons worth preaching, or sermons worth hearing. We must be conquered by the text.

My prayer every week is this: Let the text win.

Preparing Well in Less Time

“I don’t believe you should spend a lot of time preparing your sermon, when you’re a younger minister,” advises Tim Keller. The reason, according to Keller, is that we’ll be tempted to spend too much time in sermon preparation, and our people will feel neglected. “The only way you’re going to be a better preacher is if you preach often. For the first 200 sermons, no matter what you do, your first 200 sermons are going to be terrible.”¹ Keller exaggerates, but there’s some truth to what he says.

It’s the first time that I’d heard a great preacher tell other preachers to reduce the time spent in sermon preparation. For some of us, this may be good advice.

WHAT I’M NOT SAYING

Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying that we should slap sermons together. I believe in the importance of study, and that we need to invest the time necessary to craft a good sermon.

Frankly, many of us need to spend *more* time preparing sermons, not less.

But some of us should be spending less time preparing

1. “Tim Keller Answers: How Much Prep Time for a Sermon?” Jesus Creed.

sermons, and some of us (like those in bivocational ministry) have no choice.

I'm also not talking about sacrificing the quality of preaching. Instead, I'm talking about approaching preparation so that we're maximizing our time.

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS

Here are some ways that we can prepare good sermons in less time:

- **Plan ahead.** It's much easier to prepare with less time when we have a plan. Taking a couple of days to plan out a series, and to get a sense of the biblical content, can save hours of preparation time later.
- **Start early.** I find that sermons come together much better when I start the preparation process early in the week. Some of my best thinking takes place when I'm walking or washing dishes. I'll generally prepare a sermon in less time when I start on Monday or Tuesday than if I wait until Thursday or Friday.
- **Think "less is more."** I try to consult fewer commentaries, but make them the best commentaries I can find. I make fewer points, and stick closer to my main point. I spend fewer hours on sermon preparation, but try to be more focused during those hours.
- **Draw on past knowledge.** I rarely preach an old sermon again. The best preaching is fresh, and comes out of the preacher's interaction with the text in the days leading up to the sermon. But it helps to develop a greater knowledge of Scripture

over time, and to have preached on a passage before.

- **Don't aim for perfection.** We should aim to be helpful, not perfect. I am satisfied if my heart is prepared, my sermon is helpful, and it's fairly polished. Getting a sermon to 90% polished is often twice the work that it takes to get it to 80%. The sermon should be clear, biblical, practical, and Christ-centered, but it doesn't have to be perfect.

Feedback can keep us honest. If trusted people detect that the quality of our preaching has declined, then it's time to revisit our practices.

I never want to argue for sloppy sermon preparation, but there's a place for thinking about how to prepare good sermons in less time.

Slow Cooked Sermons

I used to leave sermon preparation to the end of the week.

The pressure was a good motivator. Deadlines are like that. But my sermons suffered as a result. You can't rush the sermon preparation process.

It's like the difference between microwaving a steak and using a slow cooker. The tenderest steak will get tough in the microwave. The toughest steak will become tender in the slow cooker.

One of the most significant steps a preacher can take to improve is to begin the preparation process sooner. Generally speaking, a sermon that's been slow cooked is better than a sermon that's been microwaved.

PART IV

APPLICATION

Deeper Application

Application is one of the hardest parts of preaching. Haddon Robinson says, “More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis.”¹

Practical preaching can lead to application fatigue. If we give five practical applications a week, we’ll give over 200 applications a year. Most listeners won’t manage to apply more than a handful of these applications. Our preaching can end up giving people more law, and leave people feeling overwhelmed and guilty.

The answer isn’t to ditch application. Instead, we need deeper application, consisting of three elements: human need, God’s provision, and the implications for how we live.

HUMAN NEED

Until we uncover a need, we’re not ready to make an application.

Need fall under two broad categories: our finitude and our sin.

Sometimes our need rises out of our finitude. We get tired;

1. Haddon Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” *Leadership Journal* 18 (Fall 1997), 21.

we don't know the future; we don't have much power; we are dust.

Often, our need rises out of our sinfulness. George Whitefield did a good job of raising this need in one of his sermons "Before you can speak peace to your hearts, you must be made to see, made to feel, made to weep over, made to bewail, your actual transgressions against the law of God," he preached.

Until we raise our need, we're not ready to move to application.

GOD'S PROVISION

Our need is met by God's provision.

God meets the needs that arise out of our finitude. He never gets tired; he knows everything; he is omniscient; he rules over everything. All our limits are met in God's limitless character.

God also meets the needs that arise out of our sinfulness. We are sinful, but he is gracious. We deserve punishment, but have instead received grace through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Until we raise our need, and show how this need is met in the character and grace of God, we're not ready to move to application.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Once we've shown people our need and God's provision, we can describe the implications. Application fails if you begin here, but it's powerful if you end here.

Deep applications identifies our need, describes God's provision, and shows the implications of God's provision for how we live.

CHAPTER 16

Preaching to Transform

I sometimes hear people complain, “I can’t remember most of the sermons I’ve heard.” Me either. I can’t even remember my own sermons. If this is the measure of a successful sermon, then preaching is not worth it.

But the goal of preaching *isn’t* to remember content.

There are two types of preaching. We need less of the first, and more of the second.

PREACHING TO INFORM

Some preaching aims only to communicate and apply a text. This isn’t bad. It’s just not enough.

If you preach to inform, retention is important.

This type of preaching is common, but it’s not the type of preaching we need.

PREACHING TO TRANSFORM

The best preaching aims not only to inform and apply, but to change how people see the world. It helps people encounter God.

In his brilliant essay “The Danger of Practical Preaching” Lee Eclov writes:

The Bible spends much more time on shaping the spiritual mind than commanding particular behavior. We need far more training in the ways of grace, of spiritual perceptions, and of what God is really like, than we do in how to communicate with our spouse. Understanding the glory of Christ is far more practical than our listeners imagine. Properly preached, every sermon based on a passage of Scripture is fundamentally practical.¹

We need content, but we also need to see the world differently. Darrell Johnson describes this in his book *The Glory of Preaching*:

Through text after text, sermon after sermon, the risen Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, causes a shift in worldview. He causes a shift out of any frame of reference with the self or humanity at the center to a frame of reference with the risen and ascended Jesus at the center. He causes a shift to a Christocentric vision of the cosmos, “wherein Christ is the ontological, epistemological, and soteriological focus of all human thought and experience.” Oh, Lord, may it be so.²

The question shifts from “Can you remember my sermon?” to “Do you see the world differently?” This kind of preaching seems impractical, but it’s more practical. It still focuses on content, but the content has a bigger purpose.

Tim Keller talks about preaching that changes people in their seats:

I have to see Jesus to change me. When you see Jesus in a new way or sense his salvation this will change you on the spot...

1. Lee Eclov, “The Danger of Practical Preaching” in *Preaching Today Journal* (Wheaton: Christianity Today, Inc., 2001), website: www.preachingtoday.com.
2. Darrell W. Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God's Transformation of the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 71.

In the sermon there is an act of worship. God takes the word of the preacher and gives a person a vision of Jesus that shapes the heart on the spot. We are looking for a divine supernatural light. You can know honey is sweet without tasting it. But we need the sense of the sweetness – give them a taste of Jesus and you will see them change on the spot.³

If you've experienced this kind of preaching, you won't forget it, even if you forget the content.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says:

Much more important than the words is the Spirit, the life; in Christ we are being taught, and built up in Him. So that in a sense, though you may forget the words, you will have received the life, and you go out aware of the life of God, as it were, pulsating within you.

The first and primary object of preaching is not only to give information. It is, as Edwards says, to produce an impression. It is the impression at the time that matters, even more than what you can remember subsequently. In this respect Edwards is, in a sense, critical of what was a prominent Puritan custom and practice. The Puritan father would catechize and question the children as to what the preacher had said. Edwards, in my opinion, has the true notion of preaching. It is not primarily to impart information; and while you are writing your notes you may be missing something of the impact of the Spirit. As preachers we must not forget this. We are not merely imparters of information.⁴

Content is important, but it's not enough. Our goal in preaching is to help people encounter the living God, and to see the world differently as a result.

3. "Preach to Change Them In Their Seats – Tim Keller," Adrain Warnock, accessed August 24, 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/adrianwarnock/2009/03/preach-to-change-them-in-their-seats/>.
4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance of Revival." Lecture delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conference (1976).

Questions for Application

David Fitch, author of *The Great Giveaway*, argues that preaching should not focus on providing application points:

“The applications” of the sermons accumulate like an ever-growing stack of self-help books and tapes we can never hope to get to. After many months of this, because we cannot possibly put into practice all of the applications, preaching becomes nothing more than a scroll we wear on our foreheads that comforts us in the knowledge that we are the ones who are serious about studying Scripture...

Let us move from the first goal of preaching as the production of a set of application points to the goal of unfurling a reality we could not see apart from being engulfed in the story of God from creation to redemption.¹

How do we do this? Fitch offers some questions that focus on responses of faith, confession, obedience, and submission:

- How am I to respond to this God?
- In light of who God is, in light of what he has done, in light of what he has said, what step in my life should I be taking in obedience?
- How should I be seeing a current situation in my

1. David Fitch, *The Great Giveaway* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 142-143.

life?

- What sin should I confess?
- What attitude should I repent of?
- How should I see myself before God?
- What am I not acknowledging about God?
- How should I celebrate this in my own life?
- How am I to respond in worship?

The most powerful application comes from a fresh vision of God, not from a set of propositions and applications.

When Application Isn't Enough

It's tempting for preachers to think that people just need more information.

Of course, information is important. Without truth, we have nothing to preach. But true information isn't enough.

In *The Imperfect Pastor*, Zack Eswine argues that we sometimes “believe that another is choosing a course of action because he or she simply isn't clear on what is right.” The solution, we think, is to give them more information, but that's not enough:

While our first step should always include making sure things have been made clear, most of us know from our own lives that often it is not a lack of clarity that troubles us. Often we already know the right thing to do, and we will still choose otherwise...

The Bible simply does not teach that if we say the right words, right things will follow. Jesus taught us that the self-centered heart is tamed not by human will but by God's intervention. No one was more plain, reasonable, and clear than Jesus, and they crucified him.¹

The implications for preaching are profound.

1. Eswine, 92.

First, pursue clarity, but don't think that information alone will change people.

Second, pray that the truth of Scripture isn't just clear in our preaching, but beautiful. Pray for the Spirit to awaken hearts to the truth.

Finally, recognize your limits as a preacher. We will never be wise or clever enough to change people. When we understand this, we'll grow in our humility and in our confidence in the gospel.

PART V

DELIVERY

CHAPTER 19

Two Rules for Delivery

This is a short book on preaching, and this section on delivery is especially short.

Delivery is important, but we sometimes make it too important. If you prepare clear, biblical messages, and work hard, then your delivery will improve. It just takes time.

I rarely hear sermons that are poorly delivered. Even when I do, I still get a lot out of them if they're biblical.

Out of all the rules for sermon delivery, two matter most.

BE YOURSELF

“Be yourself — your *best* self — and let the Holy Spirit put the imprint on your life and message,” write Warren and David Wiersbe.¹

This is why it's hard to create many rules for delivery. Everyone's unique. Don't mimic someone else. Just be you.

DON'T BE DISTRACTING

All of us have verbal tics and mannerisms that get in the way

1. Wiersbe and Wiersbe, 49.

of preaching. If you ask for feedback, and people are honest, you'll discover what yours are.

This rule also applies to other areas of preaching, like deciding what to wear or how to phrase an idea. If it distracts from the message, get rid of it.

If you are yourself, and you work on eliminating distractions, you're 80% there. The rest will come with experience.

Preaching Without Notes

Haddon Robinson encouraged us to preach without notes. We complained, but he insisted. Some of us grew to appreciate his advice and have ditched the notes permanently.

A preacher with over two decades of experience said this after learning to preach without notes:

By making me preach without notes you have totally transformed my preaching. Now the sermon comes from “inside me” and I connect with my people in completely different ways. I can never go back to where I was.¹

Notes aren't inherently wrong, but they can create a barrier between you and the congregation.

The alternative to a manuscript isn't memorization. Memorized sermons are stilted, and they're also a barrier between you and the congregation.

The alternative to preaching from a manuscript is preparation. Preaching without notes requires more, not less, preparation. Here are some tips on how to prepare:

- Above all, pursue clarity. If the big idea of the text,

1. Preaching without notes, Michael Quicke, accessed August 24, 2016, <http://michaelquicke.blogspot.ca/2012/03/preaching-without-notes.html>.

the flow of the text, and your goals (to explain, prove, and/or apply) are clear in your mind, you won't need notes.

- Write a manuscript. Ironically, the best way to prepare to preach without notes is write a full manuscript and then not use it.
- Internalize, don't memorize.
- Feel free to take a page with you to the pulpit with Scripture references and quotes.

The main obstacle to preaching without notes is fear. In particular, we face two fears:

- The fear of freezing up. This happens less than you would expect, and with practice, you will not experience this.
- The fear of forgetting something. However, if you preach your big idea and main points, then it doesn't matter if you forget supporting material.

The other obstacle is that it takes practice. This obstacle is easy to solve: just practice. Everything that's hard to do and is worth doing well takes practice.

Preaching without notes has three main benefits:

- It forces you to get clear in your preparation.
- It removes a potential barrier between you and the congregation.
- It helps enhance authenticity.

If you've never preached without notes, try it. You'll feel uncomfortable at first, but it may improve your preaching.

PART VI

FINAL THOUGHTS

Plagiarism

I don't know how many pastors plagiarize, although I occasionally get an email from someone who discovers that their pastor has stolen one of my sermons.

If plagiarism is becoming more common, I blame the following:

- a diminished view of preaching;
- availability of sermons on the Internet;
- competition from other pastors; and
- pragmatism.

Good preaching requires rigorous thought and soul work. Many preachers take the easy route and decide to preach other people's sermons instead.

Some people think, "Why waste your time preparing messages when you have a church to build?" Ironically, some of these same people love artisan bread bakers, composers, and writers who invest time in improving their craft.

In his book *The Drama of Doctrine*, Kevin Vanhoozer gives one of the most convincing reasons why preaching other people's sermons is ineffective. He pictures doctrine as a script, the pastor as a director, and the local church as a

company of performers who improvise to perform that script. Because the pastor directs people to perform faithfully through preaching, the sermon must be local. He writes:

The sermon, not some leadership philosophy or management scheme, remains the prime means of pastoral direction and hence the pastor's paramount responsibility. The good sermon contains both script analysis and situation analysis. It is in the sermon that the pastor weaves together theo-dramatic truth and local knowledge. The sermon is the best frontal assault on imaginations held captive by secular stories that promise other ways to the good life. Most important, the sermon envisions ways for the local congregation to become a parable of the kingdom of God. It is the pastor's/director's vocation to help congregations hear (understand) and do (perform) God's word in and for the present.¹

Preaching is both local and important. Vanhoozer quotes Herman Melville's image of the pulpit as a ship's prow that leads the way through uncharted waters: "The pulpit leads the world."²

Plagiarizing sermons isn't just ethically wrong. It devalues preaching, and results in preaching that doesn't fit our context, and therefore isn't helpful to our people.

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 456.

2. Vanhoozer, 449.

Four Preaching Mistakes

You've probably heard of TED talks. They are short (18 minute or less) talks covering all kinds of topics. To find out more, check out ted.com.

A sermon isn't a TED talk, but that doesn't mean we can't learn some lessons from them.

Chris Anderson, the head of TED, has written *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*. Chapter 3¹ of *TED Talks* lists four common mistakes to avoid:

The Sales Pitch — “Sometimes speakers get it exactly wrong. They plan to take, not give.” Self-promotion has no place in the pulpit. Our preaching must focus on the glory of God and the good of the people, not on how the congregation can fit into our agenda.

The Ramble — “So if you're going to gift people with a wondrous idea, you first have to spend some preparation time. Rambling is not an option.”

The Org Bore — “An organization is fascinating to those who work for it— and deeply boring to almost everyone else...Everything changes, though, when you focus on the nature of the work that you're doing, and the power of the ideas that infuse it, not on the org itself or its products.” Keep

1. Chris J. Anderson, *TED TALKS: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (HarperCollins Canada), Kindle Locations 550-663.

the focus on the glory of God and the big picture of gospel ministry rather than on the nuts and bolts of ministry.

The Inspiration Performance — “The intense appeal of the standing ovation can lead aspiring speakers to do bad things.” Aim to be helpful rather than to be impressive.

The goal of great preaching is to glorify God and to help people. The enemy of great preaching is laziness and ego.

Not Many Good Preachers?

I sometimes hear that there aren't many good preachers. If they mean that not many are exceptional preachers, I agree. Most of us, by definition, are average.

When I think about the sermons I've heard, though, I can't remember many bad ones. Preaching isn't always polished or perfect, but it's often real, biblical, and contextual. Every person I've heard has taught me something and made me want to preach better.

Good preachers don't think they're great. They just love God, and care about their own people. They preach out of a love for the people they're called to serve. I like what I read on one church website:

The messages shared on Sunday mornings are specific to this church community. They reflect our stories in a particular moment in the life of our church. The value and significance of these talks can change as they are dispersed to a wider community; therefore we provide temporary access for those who missed a particular Sunday.

The best preaching is local. It doesn't take place in conferences, but in the local church, pastor to people.

There are more good preachers than we think, and God is using them.

Discouragement and Preaching

I was in a room alone with Haddon Robinson, author of *Biblical Preaching*, and another examiner. They had read through my Doctor of Ministry thesis. Haddon is kind, but he's not afraid to tell it like it is.

I don't remember a lot of his comments, but I remember one. My thesis was on God-centered preaching, which I argued is less discouraging than human-centered preaching. "One of the reasons for discouragement in preaching may be that an anthropocentric approach is unsatisfying, whereas a theocentric approach brings us to the only source of eternal satisfaction and joy," I wrote.

"I don't agree with that," Haddon said. He explained that discouragement is part of ministry no matter how you preach.

I'm grateful for Haddon's correction. I don't get discouraged often, but when I do I remind myself that it's part of ministry.

I changed the paragraph:

Discouragement is part of the assignment of preaching, but a theocentric approach reminds us that our sufficiency is not

found in ourselves. God, not the preacher, is the only source of eternal satisfaction and joy.

Haddon approved.

If you get discouraged sometimes, it's normal. It's part of what it means to be a preacher.

Preaching Out of Season

When I told my friend that I was taking a Doctor of Ministry in preaching, he responded by asking “Isn’t preaching sort of...” with an emoticon of a wilted flower.

He believed that preaching has seen better days, like a dead flower in a vase that should have been thrown out last week.

I understand. Some preaching is therapeutic and moralistic, like a Christian version of Anthony Robbins. Sometimes it even seems that good preaching doesn’t change a church people quickly.

So why is preaching important?

One answer is that we’re called to preach even when preaching is out of season (2 Timothy 4:2). Another reason is found in Ephesians 4:11: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.”

Paul describes Jesus as a victorious king who has triumphed over Satan, and brings gifts for his people. His gifts are Christian leaders who teach and apply the gospel. In other words, preachers are Jesus’ gift to the church.

A prayer by John Stott reminds me of the kind of preacher we need when preaching is out of season:

■ I pray earnestly that God will raise up today a new

generation of Christian apologists or Christian communicators, who will combine an absolute loyalty to the biblical gospel and an unwavering confidence in the power of the Spirit with a deep and sensitive understanding of the contemporary alternatives to the gospel; who will relate the one to the other with freshness, authority, and relevance; and who will use their minds to reach other minds for Christ.¹

I hope you'll pray this prayer too.

1. John Stott, *Your Mind Matters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 52.

The Weight of Words

One day I looked at the number of posts in my blog. At the time, I'd written 5,398 posts over 15 years. That includes 689 sermons preached over 25 years.

It reminds me of John Ames, the preacher in the novel *Gilead*, who keeps a box of sermons in his attic. One day he figures out that he's filled 67,600 pages with his sermons, the equivalent of 225 books. He wrote, "There is not a word in any of those sermons I didn't mean when I wrote it. If I had the time, I could read my way through fifty years of my innermost life. What a terrible thought."¹

I don't have a box in my attic. Instead, I have a 40.9MB backup file on my hard drive.

Over the years, the words we write and preach add up to something that's both light and heavy at the same time.

THE LIGHTNESS OF WORDS

Our words, even when they add up, don't amount to much. Whether they sit in a box, on a computer, or are lost to time, they are humble. Ames recognized this:

■ I had a dream once that I was preaching to Jesus Himself,

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead: An Novel* (New York: Picador, 2004), 46.

saying any foolish thing I could think of, and He was sitting there in His white, white robe looking patient and sad and amazed. That's what it felt like.

Well, perhaps I can get a box of them down here somehow and do a little sorting. It would put my mind at ease to feel I was leaving a better impression. So often I have known, right here in the pulpit, even as I read these words, how far they fell short of any hopes I had for them. And they were the major work of my life, from a certain point of view. I have to wonder how I have lived with that.²

Our best words are inadequate. Apart from God, they will fail. It's good to remember this.

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS

Our words may be light, but they are also weighty. Jesus told us that we would give account for every careless word (Matthew 12:36-37). Paul reminded Timothy of what's at stake: the very salvation of our listeners (1 Timothy 4:16). James warned us that teachers will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1).

Writers, teachers, and preachers wield power. In particular, preachers and teachers have a responsibility to clearly and accurately teach the Word. This is especially true given what James says next: "For we all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). Our words matter, but we often stumble when we speak.

Nelson Mandela said, "It is never my custom to use words lightly. If 27 years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die." Words matter.

2. Robinson, 80.

LET US PRAY

Because of the lightness and weight of our words, let's pray:

- that God would take our inadequate words and use them;
- that God would empower us to preach in a way that's helpful to others; and
- that God would give us grace for the times we haven't preached well.

God speaks through our inadequate words, and gives grace for the times we've failed.

Remember This

Preachers can always use encouragement. I want to leave you with these reminders.

- God promises to use his Word (Isaiah 55:11). When God speaks, things happen. No matter how feebly preached, God honors the proclamation of his Word.
- Our weakness displays God's glory (2 Corinthians 4:7). Our weakness doesn't diminish God's glory. It provides greater contrast between us and the surpassing power of the God we serve.
- God uses the "things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:28). If you and your church don't look like much, you are just the type of person and church that God loves to use.
- Your position is secure (Romans 8). There is no sermon that you could preach that would make you more acceptable to God. There is no sermon, however bad, that can remove you from the love of God.

- Our imperfect churches display the manifold wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10). When God wants to display his wisdom to angelic beings, he points to the church. The fact that church exists despite our failings causes angels to marvel and to glorify God.
- Your work is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). Even when we don't see results, our work isn't wasted.

Things may be tough. We may not see much progress. But God is at work.

God uses ordinary, faithful preachers. There's every reason to be encouraged.

A Sense of God

I'll leave you with these words from Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this. It is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence...I can forgive a man for a bad sermon, I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though he is inadequate himself, he is handling something which is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and glory of God, the love of Christ my Savior, and the magnificence of the Gospel. If he does that I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him. Preaching is the most amazing, and the most thrilling activity that one can ever be engaged in, because of all that it holds out for all of us in the present, and because of the glorious endless possibilities in an eternal future.¹

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 110-111.

Recommended Resources

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Preachers and Preaching, 40th Anniversary Edition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. Third edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014.

Wiersbe, Warren, and David Wiersbe. *The Elements of Preaching: The Art of Biblical Preaching — Clearly and Simply Presented*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1986.

See also Tim Keller's lectures at Gordon-Conwell Seminary on "Preaching to the Heart." Contact Gordon-Conwell for the recording.

About Darryl



Darryl Dash is author of [*8 Habits for Growth: A Simple Guide to Becoming More Like Christ*](#) and [*How to Grow: Applying the Gospel to All of Life*](#). He is also cofounder of [*Gospel for Life*](#), a ministry that helps churches to make disciples.

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Other Books by Darryl

8 HABITS FOR GROWTH: A SIMPLE GUIDE TO BECOMING MORE LIKE CHRIST



Don't just do the right actions. Build habits—and watch your life be transformed.

Many books try to help you do the right actions. But the real key to life transformation—for yourself and then for others—is building habits that become part of your life. Because habits don't just dictate what you do. They reflect

who you are.

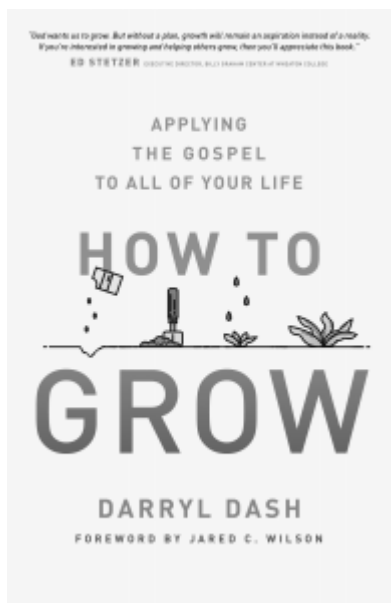
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- Make time
- Rest
- Read or listen to the Bible
- Pray
- Pursue worship and community in a church
- Care for your body
- Simplify your spiritual life
- Build a rule of life

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Join Darryl as he unpacks the gospel, shows how it applies to every area of your life, and helps you evaluate your current stage of growth so you know what steps to take next. You'll

learn why habits are important, how to build them, and which ones to focus on first. Plus, you'll discover the roles that joy and desire play in our spiritual growth journey.

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