

Improving Preaching (3) (1.9.1983)

by Nigel Lee

Nigel Lee emphasizes the importance of personal experience, systematic study, and clear purpose in effective preaching.

Duration: 38:32

Scripture: Psalm 119:11, Proverbs 4:7, Colossians 3:16, 1 Timothy 4:13, 2 Timothy 2:15, James 1:22, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Preaching"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares his experience of preaching in a convention in India. He initially prepared four messages but ended up finishing them all in just 25 minutes. He emphasizes the importance of daily studying and meditating on God's word to grow in knowledge and understanding. The speaker also discusses the different types of preaching, including evangelistic, doctrinal, and devotional, and highlights the need for messages to arise from a personal relationship with God.

Transcript

We're going to be talking together now about how to prepare a message. For some of you this may be the key. How to actually put together something that is going to so feed and edify the people of God that they grow towards maturity.

And may God really bless these thoughts and principles, these practical things born out of a little experience to our hearts. I have on my paper nine points. And the first is this, that any message that you preach will arise, should arise out of your own personal life with God.

Like a child, which is first born, it receives life. But then it needs discipline. Then it needs to be governed, tamed, controlled, pointed in a certain direction.

So too does a message. Now I'm going to be talking in more detail about study habits and prayer tomorrow. The habit of regular systematic Bible study is perhaps the key thing.

Perhaps the simplest help to you in the future as a preacher would be this, to have a notebook where seed thoughts can be put down and you take that notebook with you, it travels with you, it's with you when you have your time of quiet before God on a daily basis, it's with you when you go to conferences, and God sometimes gives you outlines, ideas, things to track down, insights. Do you ever find that? Sometimes you're sitting listening to someone preaching or even praying and suddenly a whole series of things come.

Well, then is the time to write them down.

Or in your morning devotions, if you have them in the morning. God will someday, as it seems, just give you something on a plate. There you are.

It may be usable months hence, but write it down. Keep it in a book. I have downstairs a sort of red book, bought it ages ago, full of all kinds of scribbles from here and there, many of which have been eventually trained, like the child I was speaking of, it's given life and then it's tamed and trained into a usable form.

I was stuck on a railway siding in Sweden, waiting for a train, a misconnection or something, just reading in Matthew's Gospel. God gave me a message for an OM summer conference, just as if he was dictating it. Point by point, and I wrote the thing down.

God will do that sometimes. But you must be ready to write when the inspiration comes. Write in your own quiet times in the morning.

Write as you study God's Word. Get those seeds. Now, a preacher is a bit like a hen, in many ways, but he will sit on his eggs for a long time.

You may learn egg, but the thing is pretty useless. You need to sit on it. You need to keep it warm for a bit.

That has tickled Stuart greatly. And Stuart sitting on something, we're just about finishing up, I think. But you ought to have at the back of your mind a number of ideas and burdens, little seed thoughts that are just ready, you know.

Because when a man stands to preach, he needs to come before people able to say, thus says the Lord. He's bringing a burden from God. This is how the prophets began.

Thus says the Lord. You remember, Habakkuk is it again? Martin Goldsmith is taking us through. The burden of the Lord.

And the word in the Hebrew literally means the load laid as may be on a camel or a donkey. Something that you have to carry. Come before God's people with something to be carried until by the end of the message you feel you have laid it down.

A weight on your own soul, on your mind, on your heart. All preachers know this in varying degrees. A book you see, an ordinary book, may well be true words, just plain words written on a page.

But a sermon is something else. It's God's spoken truth carried in a human personality, filtered through that personality. And the preacher needs to sow weight on God and think, sit on his eggs, change the metaphor, wait till things ripen in his own soul until he's got that which he feels he wants to say.

I will say that if you preach often on Scriptures you'll find that your appreciation of a book of Scripture or a chapter will change. Your sense of the burden and thrust of a particular part of Scripture will change. But we must be men who stand before God saying, look, thus says the Lord.

Secondly, right at the start of the preparation process you must ask yourself one or two questions. What kind of a message is this going to be? What is its purpose? Your sense of purpose must be quite explicit in your mind. Let me divide messages into four different types.

Christian preaching, four different kinds. It will either be evangelistic preaching where your specific aim is conversion. You want to see people illuminated and converted, their will touched and they begin to move out of darkness into light.

Or it will be doctrinal preaching where among ourselves as evangelical believers we make certain assumptions about the Bible and we are aiming at doctrinal understanding, illumination. It may well, should have practical effects. But our real goal is to produce understanding, clarity of mind.

Evangelistic, doctrinal. Thirdly, devotional. Some preaching is not doctrinal or evangelistic.

It aims to warm the heart with some fresh glimpse here on earth of our Saviour. And the whole process of reading the Bible to preach one or other of these kinds of message is actually quite different. I spend some of my time as an evangelist, as I've already said, and sometimes in Bible teaching.

And I find actually the discipline of reading the Bible is quite different for the different kind of message that you're going to produce. It's an interesting thing. I will have to, coming back from these conferences and gearing up to evangelism back in Britain, actually change gear in the way I think about God's Word.

The kind of things I get from it. So evangelistic, doctrinal, devotional or ethical. You're aiming to persuade folk of new behaviour.

Now obviously any message may be a combination of both. Often the doctrinal and the ethical will go together. Or the doctrinal and the devotional.

People can be converted through messages that are quite other than evangelistic messages. But I don't know whether you ever read Rousseau, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's recipe for a love letter. He said this, to write a good love letter you will begin without knowing what you are going to say and end without knowing what you have said.

Well, in preaching that's a disaster, absolute disaster. The little ditty, I shot an arrow in the air, it fell to earth, I know not where. That does describe a lot of preaching and it's a waste of time.

What are you going to do? Why are you there? What are you going to persuade people of? What do you want them to understand? Go. Peter? The question has been asked. We often get invited along to perhaps represent OM and to talk about the work in a church meeting and it doesn't fall into any of these categories.

It's a report or a recruiting kind of message. How does this fit into my categories? Well, if we just do that, I would hardly take that to be preaching at all. I, over the years, have become increasingly frustrated and fed up with doing that and I would rather preach the word of God because I believe that people will be recruited, drawn to what they sense is the presence of God in the word, in the fellowship, as it comes out.

Now, the making concrete what OM life is can come out in the message as you illustrate, very often from your OM experience. But if it's just a sort of 20 minute introduce the ship in the course of a church service because the ship is going to come in six months' time and this is part of the build-up process. You obviously can't pinch the preacher's slots and begin with scripture.

I think you've got to forget these and just do your stuff. If you're invited along to represent OM for a whole evening's meeting in a church and you are the preacher, I would urge you to preach the word, one or other

of these approaches and bring in OM, not as the most important thing. I want to preach Christ and Him crucified.

I want to preach the word and let people ask me questions afterwards, let me illustrate about OM and so on. Now, does that make life more difficult for you? Yes. Bring a report about the work if it illustrates a point that you want to preach to the people.

Very often we would want to preach something about world evangelism or prayer or the body of Christ or something using the ship and the work and OM, the summer crusades and so on as illustrative of God's word and God's divine precepts and scripture and so on. The question is, to what extent do I use notes? I will deal with that on number eight. We'll get there eventually.

But underlying all four of these types of categories I've suggested to you, you have one common aim. It is the, you are aiming at a manifestation of God in the souls of the people that are listening to you. Let me talk of evangelism.

People will come in, who knows what they've been doing, they sit down, they're not particularly interested, one of their friends has dragged them and you notice almost a moment in the message where they suddenly begin to be gripped by what you're saying. It is as if God starts speaking to them. They're hearing something of his authority, seeing something of his grace and forgiveness.

Suddenly becoming aware of a crossroads and the Lord himself there. Or, as you're speaking devotionally, suddenly people get a sense of God there to meet your real need that perhaps you hadn't even understood was there until the man started speaking to you. But Christ has come to meet that need which you perceive to be your own.

And that sense of God in the soul, that is what you're aiming at. Because our hearts grow cold, don't they? You remember Revelation 2? I know your works, I know your toil, I know your labour, I know your patience. I know how you've been plodding on, some of you in OM, for a long time, but I have this against you.

Your love for one person in this universe stopped being as important as it used to be. In fact, it's gone cold. And because that happens, it happens in my life as yours, we need to be aiming at folks, as I put it, seeing God, hearing him, sensing his presence, responding to him in their hearts.

And they will be converted if that happens, they will be moved doctrinally or ethically if that happens. I don't think I ever begin preaching without aiming that that should be so. And you should aim to leave people different.

You know, you're not just giving an essay or a lecture, you want people to be different. And they go out of hearing you, their behaviour, their standards, the way they're going to treat one another, their prayer life or whatever, is to be different. Otherwise why bother? A waste of time.

So the will must be touched. Okay? Your goal, your sense of purpose. Never, never speak to people without a sense of real purpose.

I am aiming this session at every one of you getting something practical that illuminates you as I say it and will help you in your practical preparation for the future. I don't know how that fits into my four categories. I haven't thought long enough about that.

But I want you to go out with something practical that's going to help you as a habit of life. Thirdly, let it be said that there is a variety of technique the way people prepare messages. Now Spurgeon used to pick his topic and he used to give his secretary his text or his subject and she would go into the library in his house and she would bring him the files on that that he'd been amassing over the years or any relevant books and he would, in his study, begin to prepare.

Moody kept masses of ideas, quotations, scripts and scraps in a number of envelopes, big baggy envelopes and he used to pick out the relevant envelope and then begin to work, to prepare from material that he'd been amassing over the years. A man called Henry Ward Beecher who was a great preacher in America in the last century his total preparation, he said was to spend half an hour undisturbed in his study on a Sunday morning. I do know of preachers who spend less.

John Stott, in his book, will tell you that you need to spend one hour in preparation for every five minutes that you propose to speak and for a beginner he suggests that any message will need between nine and twelve hours of preparation for that message. Now, John Wesley was in the habit of getting up at four in the morning prayer, preparation. Billy Graham dictates his sermon notes for the evening early in the morning.

He gets up around six and by about seven thirty he's dictated his notes for the evening message before breakfast. People have completely different ways of preparing. I have seen an O.M. leader on his knees in the leader's prayer meeting before the evening meeting say I've got the message I just need the verse to hang it on.

Others who will spend hours in careful crafting and study. Now, you have to find the way that suits you best. I cannot say that there is just one particular way.

Spurgeon is no more right than Wesley. Moody and John Stott and Billy Graham and Festo Cavengery and these men around the world who have moved multitudes have simply been honest with God. They've grown in their characters.

They have found their own way. And therefore there's no one particularly right technique. Therefore, if I say anything that's helpful, take it.

If I don't, forget it. But I want to suggest to you what I do and I feel it's good for you to think about some of these disciplines. You're going to have to begin with Scripture, aren't you? And my next point, number four is that you're going to have to work hard at Scripture.

Chewing over a passage. Trying to grasp the dominant thought in a paragraph or a chapter. And your message, I have used the picture already of training up a child.

It's got some life, but it's young, it's untamed. Has to be trained up. Let me use another picture.

Your message will have to be like in a blacksmith's fire and come out and you beat it on the anvil a bit and you put it back in the fire again and you take it out and you beat it a bit more. Hard work at your Bible. The key, perhaps, to your entire ministry any ministry, even if you're not a preacher will be your Bible study.

Working at your Bible because Bible will release in you every gift. Not just the preacher's gift. And there's really no substitute for regular, disciplined study of God's Word not study to preach.

Study to study God. Terrible to simply study to get sermons because then it just stays in you however long it was before you had to preach and it's gone. And if the wine doesn't stay in the barrel very long if it's in one day and out the next it doesn't leave very much flavour in the barrel.

And the business of preparing the night before and then preaching it and then you forget it and next week it's something different. It doesn't change you very much. John Stock, again has committed himself to print in saying that Sunday's text should, at the latest be chosen by the preceding Monday so that it's got at least a week to ripen and to be thought over.

As you take a... Yes? Now we've got some questions coming. As I was coming to church, God told me to speak. Well, there was a preacher who was like that.

He used to be openly proud of this that he would get his message on Sunday morning walking from the manse, the vicarage to the church. It was a distance of about five minutes' walk. And do you know what his elders did? They bought him a new house five miles away.

Longer to walk. Now, the question at the back. The amount of Bible reading that I'm recommending is impossible.

Well, I'm quoting to you John Stock who is a professional minister. My own experience of learning to preach was within OM. I hadn't done very much before I left college.

Yeah. Well, I'm just about to give you the example of how I managed. Because Boba sent me down to Kerala to preach.

Dear George, he said, I want you to preach. I hadn't done any preaching. So I went down south of India and I was due to preach in these conventions, these enormous big conventions.

I prepared four messages. I thought I'd live off that for a week. I was so bad.

You wouldn't believe it. I stood up. Frank Dietz was due to be preaching the same night.

I preached all four messages and gave my testimony and I was done in about 25 minutes. But the discipline of teaching the team every day for an hour or so after lunch, not exactly a prepared message for all souls, lang and place. But, you know, if you get up, I used to get up early, good early time, and have a couple of hours in the word in the morning.

And you will begin to live off your growing knowledge of God's word as time goes by. I think it's unwise to be overburdened with preaching when you are too young. Spurgeon is an exception.

Preaching sort of Sunday by Sunday at the age of 19. It's good for a young man to bear the yoke in his youth, but don't over-preach yourself out while young. Christ begins his preaching ministry older than many of you.

First, get into the habit of regular disciplined Bible study. Let me come back to all that question when we talk about the preparation of the preacher. The preparation of the message itself, you cannot get away from time in the word.

And if you don't get very much time in the word, then don't preach too much. That's a good discipline. But you're going to have to wrestle with the Bible.

What did it mean to the writer? How is a New Testament writer drawing on the Old Testament? You're going to have to read, and think, and question what is its application today. Turn to 2 Timothy, chapter 2, verse 7. Paul says to young Timothy, now you consider what I say. You go over it.

You think about it. You ponder what it's really getting at. And the Lord will give the understanding in all things.

He was inviting Timothy to be someone who gave time to thinking, wrestling with what he, the apostle, had been saying. I know of a church in, well, one or two churches now, in my own country, Britain, where a group of people share the preaching. And they study together, and then one of them will preach.

They meet on a Monday. They will spend perhaps a couple of hours in study, hard work Bible study. One of them will preach then the following Sunday.

The beginning of the next Monday's session is an evaluation of how he got on on Sunday. That can be quite crucifying if the little group is telling you how you did and if you made a mess of it and if the illustrations got out of control and were too long and if you missed the crucial point. But they will actually be gentle because maybe next week they're going to have to preach and now you're sitting in the group doing the evaluating.

But that sort of group preparation, the cut and thrust of study and argument and what does it really mean and how can that be buttressed from the rest of Scripture is very important because it takes away from the preacher the solo performance dimension, you know. People stand up and this is my goal. And look at me.

If you can get into a team of people. I think we ought to do a lot more talking about the Bible together and preparing to preach together. I've got in my own home church now some new developments along these lines.

The entire church has been divided up into small Bible study groups. I don't get time to go to the groups very often but I take the leaders regularly at least once a fortnight and we will have two, between two and three hours of Bible study every fortnight and they will then go and teach what they have been learning in the debate, the argument, the Bible study together. And then when we come back we will share how we're getting on.

I have another young man in the church who wants to learn to preach and I've told him that Scripture says let not many be teachers but he still seems to want to do it. So sometimes when I've got to prepare a message to go somewhere or he has, we will do some of the preliminary grafting work together. That has certain advantages.

It means that it broadens the scope of your material possibly. It will force you to be clear in your thinking. It will perhaps help you to be simple in your style.

Don't be afraid of using other people in your preparation. I sometimes, I mean even within recent days I've started to draw Peter into things like this. I ask him, I say look I've got to preach in such and such what would you say? And he'll give me a few ideas and then I might ask him one or two questions back and if we've got time we could go deeper into it.

Don't, get away from this thing of me being the sole prophet when I stand up alone to preach. Use friends because the act of preparation may be valuable with them. Of course you're going to have to do your own

praying.

You're going to have to wait on God so that the thing can sink into your heart and reach that rightness so that you can bring it. But on a team as you get on in the work look for team preparation. I have no doubt at all in my mind that as Paul travelled with Timothy and Titus Epaphroditus they used to talk about scriptures together get things ready together and these younger men would learn from the older.

I have a co-worker in Britain. He wants to come and work alongside with me. We commit ourselves to meeting together to study.

Last year it was John's Gospel as regularly as we can. And we're actually preaching John's Gospel but we're sharpening up each other's messages with our sharing the insights. Very, very valuable.

So if you find someone else on your team who's got a burden for a bit of study like that and a bit of, maybe you both like to preach work with them. Get away from this notion that you've got to go and be the prophet go away off into the desert and get the message and come back all blazed up. Work together.

Now there was a question, a hand floating. Yes, I've not been very successful. The question is am I going to be touching on evaluation, getting evaluation from others self-evaluation.

It's always helpful if people do tell you things so long as they're kind. A good wife. My wife can really help me.

Telling me that I'm doing things that are unhelpful which I'm quite oblivious of. I mean I get carried away by my personality and she says, gently that wasn't very good dear. Pssshhh.

I once came down off the platform after I'd been carrying on for about half an hour this was really hard to take, she said you used to be so good up behind the microphone. I think she was a bit angry with me for one or two other things and she was using the occasion to get at me but normally she's much more constructive and helpful. Marry a good wife I'll talk maybe a little bit more about that tomorrow.

But you see with itinerant ministry preaching in different places it's much more difficult to get evaluation because you're there once or there's just a weekend, then you go. If you're regularly in a church John Stoddigan talks about this in his book he picked two or three men whom he asked to help him because they were seeing the fruits of their own help and they were always there. John? What struggles does one go through when talking to the people? There are all kinds of off-putting things.

I had I was with Peter once we were working together in a college doing a mission and there was a very strange couple who it seemed to me had some unusual even dark evil connections because as I was trying to explain the gospel to this crowd in the lecture theatre if ever my eyes locked with theirs I lost concentration. It was like a television set being jammed and I did finish the week believing that they were being used by the evil one to try and hinder the work of the week. And so I simply blocked off in my looking around that segment of the room and I just never looked in that corner.

I looked at everyone else but I never looked up there so that my eyes never locked with them. And it was interesting Peter was speaking in the same place a year later or two years later just three months ago and one of them was there again and the same impression. You can get problems like that.

The funniest experience I ever had of this kind of thing was standing in India preaching through a translator some man that the church had provided because my own translator within OM was late but he wasn't very late he arrived about five minutes after we started and he came and sat in the middle of the front row. And I kept looking at his face and he was like this and I didn't know what was going on. I was preaching about three different kinds of hearts a very simple sort of evangelistic message and I couldn't understand a word of the language you see it was Malayalam.

I discovered afterwards that the chap beside me paid not a shred of attention to my message he preached his own about politics and things like that. And when I stopped he stopped that was all. And the translator of course knew that there was no connection at all between what I was saying and what this chap was saying.

Well that was quite off-putting. I find people yawning and looking sleepy I find it a challenge I try to conquer it I usually try to get more lively sometimes to use humour if I'm not going to get through then I usually wind up quickly I give up. You know, bash on for a while and if it's evident that we're not getting very far if they're sleepy because it's been a night of prayer or some other factor try and be merciful to them.

I remember Winky Prattney came to an OM conference some years ago he'd flown in from the States somewhere we were all terribly tired it was after the night of prayer we'd gone, I don't know till three o'clock in the morning people were pretty exhausted he was also exhausted he was going to have the meeting George introduced him he spoke for two minutes and then stopped and then said well I'm tired, you're tired why don't we go to bed? and the place broke out in rapturous applause and everybody went to bed and the word went round that this man is fresh he's original he's not scared of George and was there with expectancy the next night which was tremendous you see original other problems I mean no quite often when I have felt so it's been so bad I wanted to flee and the ground opened up I have on a number of occasions come off feeling God I'm not going to preach ever again you're going to have a job persuading me ever to preach again and then the stories have come of the blessing I mean it happened this summer I preached and I felt that was the worst message that an OM conference has ever had to endure I said that was excruciating and Peter Maiden came up to me and said oh that was powerful you ought to have made an appeal and got everyone to stand up I said I don't believe you my apprehension of it was quite wrong and I must confess I've had occasions when I thought oh I got them then didn't I and my wife comes to me with criticism and I've miscommunicated with someone else and it hasn't worked and I've said stupid things not aware of it I once in St Andrews University in full floods in evangelism said to become a Christian you don't have to be a nun and live in a monastery you see I didn't know what I was saying and people were sort of sniggering all over the place the thought of this nun living in a monastery I just didn't you know you sometimes come out of things there are all sorts of struggles but your your sense of whether you're getting through or not can be quite unreliable there are times when I've known and they've known that God has been doing something unusual touches of real revival in the meeting you know and I've almost been shaking times when you feel almost like a king raining from the pulpit I love them but they're rare much more often you preach as best you can the message that you feel God gave you and you commit it to him and you know that there are going to be good and bad reactions and it doesn't matter anyway because you did your best that is very very common

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