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CHURCH LEADER'S PERSONAL GROWTH:

Message Preparation

The importance of this ministry:

The preaching/teaching ministry of the pastor/elder is the most significant aspect of his ministry. It is through the Word of God that he will feed his flock the inerrant (John 14:26; cf. Gal. 3:16), inspired (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21), infallible (Mat. 5:18) imperishable, living and enduring Word of God (1 Pet. 1:23). It is through this ministry that his flock will be sanctified by the Word (John 17:17) which is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword as it pierces the soul and spirit, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). This is how the pastor/elder will equip his flock (cf. Eph. 4:11-16) in the understanding of and use of the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). It is this defensive weapon, a part of the believers' spiritual armor, that is so vital in effective warfare against the evil one and his horde (Eph. 6:11-13; cf. Mat. 4:4,7,10). Being so equipped, believers will then be able to make a defense for the hope that is in them (cf. Mat. 28:19; 1 Pet. 3:15).



Paul told the young pastor Timothy, "preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2 Tim. 4:2-3). Now is the time that Paul was alluding to, for today many want their ears tickled; wanting to hear what fits their paradigm of life. They do not want to hear, "Thus says the Lord." That is why Paul told Timothy to preach the Word; reprove, rebuke and exhort, doing so with great patience and instruction. Timothy was to be ready "in season and out of season" to preach the Word. He was to preach, reprove, rebuke and exhort when the Word of God was in demand by his hearers and when it was not; just as when fruits and vegetables are in season (in demand) or out of season (not in demand). Timothy was not to preach what people wanted to hear, but what God had to say.

Because of the importance of this ministry, the preacher/teacher of the Word of God is to "be diligent to present [himself] approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The minister of the Word of God needs to understand that his teachings are a spiritual sacrifice to God (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5). He needs to remember that God is "a great King" Whose "name is feared among the nations" (Mal. 1:14). He is to be respected and honored by offering Him messages which are worthy of the seriousness and signifi-

cance of His Word, and not offering Him unacceptable sacrifices (Mal. 1:6,8). Therefore the preacher/teacher needs to make sure that he is delivering the messages that God has for His church and not presenting his own agenda. He needs to remember that he will be held accountable for his teaching one day. James spoke to this issue when he warned his readers: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment" (Jam. 3:1). God takes seriously how His Word is taught, and He expects those who preach and teach it to do likewise. He does not expect church leaders to teach "as doctrines the precepts of men" (Mat. 15:9). He does not expect them to add or take away from His Word (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Pro. 30:5-6; Rev. 22:18), forcing their own will and desires upon others as the scribes and Pharisees did who loaded the people down with unreasonable and heavy burdens (Mat. 23:1-4). This was not the example Jesus set, for He Himself said: "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Mat. 11:29-30). Therefore in the preaching/teaching ministry of church leaders, they need to be careful that they are not distorting God's Word; making people's loads heavy when they should be light for one day they will be held accountable for how they handled the Word of God.

Investing in this ministry:

If a pastor/elder desires to handle accurately the Word of truth and impact positively the lives of those inside and outside of his church, he must make an investment in this ministry. What should this investment consist of? Both time and money. To handle accurately the Word of truth, the pastor/elder needs to make this commitment. To quickly look over a passage without a detailed investigation is undeserving of the value of the text he will expound upon. It is also reckless, knowing that what he says may influence his hearers properly or improperly depending on his correct or incorrect interpretation and declaration of the Scriptures.

Money is the other investment he needs to make in order to purchase tools which will help him handle accurately the Word of truth. He ought to add to his library books which will assist him in understanding the Bible in its original languages, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, concordance, commentaries, histories, etc. This will be a costly investment, but one well worth it if he desires to do his job responsibly.

Philosophy of preaching:

When preaching and teaching the Word of God, the goal of the pastor is to present to his hearers an accurate explanation of the text. When doing so he needs to present it in its literal, historical, grammatical, contextual and dispensational context (see the article titled, "Bible Study Methods" for further information). With this information he will help his audience understand the passage as the writer meant it to be understood by his original audience. This is key to accurately teach any passage of Scripture. This is called expository preaching, which was how Ezra the scribe taught the Law to the people of Israel: "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading" (Neh. 8:8). Once this has been accomplished, the pastor may apply the passage to his modern context. This should be the goal of one's preaching as presented in Deuteronomy 31:12-13:

“Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.” The end result presented here is that the people will hear and learn to fear the Lord their God, and be careful to observe all the words of the law. This is the speaker’s job and objective!

There is debate today about which is the best way to preach and teach the Word of God. Some are adamant that it is best to preach and teach through entire books of the Bible, beginning with chapter 1, verse 1. Such people would say that teaching topical sermons (choosing a single passage or various passages on a certain topic and using them as your text) is not healthy for the church. One reason they believe this is because it is an easy way in which to misuse a passage, incorrectly taking it out of its original context, and making a point which the passage is not making. This is a valid concern.

One reason that some do not prefer topical preaching is because when a teacher is choosing topics, many times he chooses those he wants to preach on. Possibly they are not the ones God wants the church to hear at that time. This too is a valid concern. If a pastor teaches or preaches through entire books, he then is obligated to teach the themes of the text. This will keep him from preaching and teaching on just his favorite topics. Yet, there are times when a topical message or series of topical messages are necessary for a church, depending on what a church may be experiencing at any particular point in time. Dealing directly with the issue in this manner may be very beneficial. When writing this type of message, the teacher needs to be careful that he does not take passages out of context just to make his point. He must work diligently so that he accurately handles the Word of truth, just as when he writes an expository message. Therefore it is better for a pastor to teach through books, looking at them in their literal, historical, grammatical, contextual and dispensational context.

Another issue is how many messages should be preached in the course of a church service. In some churches only one message is preached, while in others, two or even three are preached during a Sunday morning service. Is one practice better than the other? The answer to this question depends on how the service is structured. The advantage to having just one message is that at the end of the service the congregation will leave with one main thought to meditate upon. This is especially true if the music and everything else which is done in the service is aimed at presenting the one theme. In the case where more than one sermon is preached, the people may leave the church with many thoughts from the different messages; possibly having so much to think about that they leave the service with nothing concrete to ponder. Yet if two or three messages are planned, and they are all addressing the same theme and complementing each other by presenting different aspects of the same theme, the effect can be very positive. The problem with this scenario is that it is rarely the norm. If a church desires to do this, its challenge will be to get all of the speakers to accurately present the same thought, complementing one another with no contradictions week after week. To achieve this will take a lot of work on the part of each participant delivering the messages. But it can be done. Therefore, both methods can work, though one will take a lot more effort to be as effective as the other.

How sermons and Bible studies are prepared is also a crucial element because the better the information is prepared and organized both for the speaker and his audience, the better the message will be delivered. Although cultures may vary on the format of the message its recipients prefer, it is important that the information presented is logically systematized. One way to do this is to prepare the message in outline format. This puts the material in a logical order and in a pattern which will be easy for the speaker to utilize. If it is easy for him to use, then he will be able to better communicate it to his audience. Another way this process is enabled is when the teacher understands the passage he is teaching in its biblical context. To properly accomplish this he needs to diligently study his passage using the five rules of interpretation (see the chapter titled, "Bible Study Methods").

The process of preparing a sermon or Bible study:

As a result of what the teacher learns from his study, he should then be able to write a background statement summing up the pertinent information about the text. This statement will help him to keep his message and comments in their proper context. Here is an example using Matthew 6:25-34:

Background statement: This text is a portion of a sermon which Jesus preached to a large multitude in Galilee (Mat. 4:23-25). Galilee is a region in the northern part of Israel where Nazareth is located (Mat. 21:11), the city where Jesus grew up (Luke 2:39,51; 4:16; cf. Mat. 2:23; 26:71). Upon seeing the large crowd, Jesus went up on a mountain and began to teach them (Mat. 5:1). Up until this point in His message, Jesus taught the multitude about sanctified living, specifically about the characteristics of a true believer (Mat. 5:2-20), the higher standards by which a true believer should live (Mat. 5:21-48), and the practical standards by which he should live (Mat. 6:1-24). As Jesus transitioned from that context to the text which is the focus of this study (Mat. 6:25-34), He did so by stating that "no one can serve two masters" (vs. 24). This is why in verse 25 He begins by saying: "For this reason I say to you..." The phrase, "For this reason," is looking back to the previous context (vss. 19-24) which lays the foundation for this section. Therefore verses 25-34 are a continuation of Jesus' teaching on sanctified living, specifically on the practical standards by which a true believer should live. In this passage, Jesus will show that a true believer who serves just God as his one, true master does not need to worry; for if he seeks first God and His righteousness, then all his needs will be provided for.

The next step in this process which will help the teacher better understand the passage in its context is to outline the passage with main points and sub points. This is a way to diagram the passage in its logical order. When doing this, each point should be a concise phrase which summarizes the verse, portion of the verse, or verses it is curtailing. Later in this process this outline will be modified, making it personal to its audience. Here is an example of an outline which presents the facts of the passage:

Factual outline:

- I. Do not be worried about your life -- vs. 25
 - A. About what you will eat or drink
 - B. About what you will wear
 - C. About food and clothing which are less important than your life and body
- II. Consider God's provision for His creation -- vss. 26-30
 - A. The birds of the air -- vss. 26-27
 - B. The grass of the field -- vss. 28-30
- III. Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness -- vss. 31-34
 - A. Do not worry about food, drink and clothing -- vss. 31-32
 - B. Seek the things of God and you will receive what you need -- vs. 33
 - C. Do not worry about tomorrow -- vs. 34

After outlining the passage, the next step is to sum up the entire passage in one sentence. The goal of this sentence is to state the main idea of the biblical text. After his factual outline is completed, this should be done before he begins to write his message. Doing this will enable him to keep what he is about to write in focus and following the thought of the passage's main idea, as the background statement does. A goal in writing this sentence is to keep it as concise as possible so that it can be easily remembered. Therefore, the main idea of Matthew 6:25-34 is:

MAIN IDEA: Do not worry about your needs because your Heavenly Father will provide for those who seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

Or it can be summed up like this:

MAIN IDEA: Do not worry because God will provide.

Once this sentence has been written, the passage's outline can be personalized based upon the main idea. Here is an example:

Personalized outline:

- I. We as believers are not to worry about life -- vs. 25
 - A. About what we eat and drink
 - B. About what we will wear
 - C. About those things which are necessary for life
- II. Reasons why we as believers are not to worry -- vss. 26-30
 - A. God takes care of the birds of the air -- vs. 26
 - B. God determines the length of our life -- vs. 27
 - C. God clothes the grass of the field -- vss. 28-30
- III. How we as believers are to view life -- vss. 31-34
 - A. We are not to worry about food, drink and clothing -- vss. 31-32
 - B. We are to seek God's kingdom and righteousness -- vs. 33
 - C. We are not to worry about tomorrow -- vs. 34

Once this is completed, the teacher can then more thoroughly study the passage and write the body of his message, including illustrations and applications. When he completes this process, then he can write the message's conclusion followed by its introduction. The introduction should be written last so that by then he completely understands the biblical text and can introduce his passage properly within its context. Below is an example of a message format based upon this process:

Matthew 6:25-34

Main idea: Do not worry about your needs because your Heavenly Father will provide for those who seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

Introduction: People today worry about many things...

Background statement: This text is a portion of a sermon which Jesus preached to a large multitude in Galilee (Mat. 4:23-25)...

- I. We as believers are not to worry about life -- vs. 25
 - A. About what we eat and drink
 - B. About what we will wear
 - C. About those things which are necessary for life

- II. Reasons why we as believers are not to worry -- vss. 26-30
 - A. God takes care of the birds of the air -- vs. 26
 - B. God determines the length of our life -- vs. 27
 - C. God clothes the grass of the field -- vss. 28-30

- III. How we as believers are to view life -- vss. 31-34
 - A. We are not to worry about food, drink and clothing -- vss. 31-32
 - B. We are to seek God's kingdom and righteousness -- vs. 33
 - C. We are not to worry about tomorrow -- vs. 34

Conclusion: Jesus taught this to the multitude of His day, and to us as well, that...

Properly studying and teaching the Word of God takes a lot of work. But doing so is profitable, both for the one preparing the message and for his audience as well. This is what God expects of church leaders -- that they will work hard at preaching and teaching. Those who do this are to receive double honor (1 Tim. 5:17).



APPLICATION QUESTIONS FOR CHURCH LEADERS, CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES AND CHURCH PLANTERS:

1. How would you rate your preaching ministry in comparison to your other ministries? Is it your most important ministry, or is another ministry more important? Please explain.
2. How many hours do you spend each week in preparation for a half hour message? Do you feel that you spend enough time in preparation, or is more time needed? What fruit do you see as a result of your preaching ministry? Is your church growing spiritually and/or numerically?
3. Do you feel it is necessary to spend many hours each week in preparation of a sermon? Or do you feel that preparation is not as important because the Holy Spirit will assist you when you preach a message in which you have invested little or no time? Explain your answer below after considering 2 Timothy 2:15 and James 3:1.
4. Have you invested money in books to help you prepare good, biblically-based messages? If you have not, would you like to be able to do this? What types of books would you like to purchase?
5. When you ask others to preach, are they asked far enough in advance giving them adequate time to prepare, or are they asked just before the service starts? Is such a practice wise? Do you need to change how and when you choose men to preach in the future?
6. How do you determine what you should preach each week? Do you find that oftentimes you preach on a specific theme (e.g., holiness, evangelism, prophecy, etc.)? If so, is this beneficial or would it be better to preach the whole of Scripture?

7. What kind of messages do you normally preach -- topical or expository (through entire books of the Bible)? Which do you feel are more profitable? Would it be beneficial to make a change in the way you preach?

8. How many sermons are preached during one service in your church? If more than one is preached, are they all on different themes or do they focus on the same theme? How do you think you can improve on this situation if they are all on different themes?

9. Did the example given on how to outline and prepare a message make sense to you? Did you find it helpful? Would you use a format like this if you do not already do so?

10. Have you ever considered asking two or three people to take notes on your sermon during a church service in order to give you feedback on how well you delivered your message? You could ask them whether they felt it was biblically accurate, what the main idea was, what the main points were, if it was applicable, and if it was interesting. Would you be willing to do this?