
The Preaching Power of Words

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Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:15-17

Are you Willing to Improve Your Preaching? What About Your Words?

In preaching we usually and should proclaim God's Word from the pulpit. Did you know that the pulpit, as a Protestant, is the representation of God's throne room on earth? When we preach, and whether we use a pulpit or not, we are the "vicars" of Christ on earth—His ambassadors and representatives. In addition, we have been given the stewardship of a special call to proclaim His precepts in truth. In so doing, we are to preach in His power, in clarity, and in genuineness with passion and conviction. And, to top it off, we need to make sure our words are edifying and never condescending or evil. Because, when we preach, we are leading others to Christ.

A basic definition of preaching, as you know, is to communicate what God has communicated with further explanation. Thus, we take the particulars of a passage from its context and meaning and then tell our people what it says. Then, we tell them why it says that truth. We relate it to their daily lives and situations. In so doing, we "minister" His Word, meaning we give them the aid of His Word. We are to do it with love, grace, and tact. If you are not sure how to do this, take the Book of Colossians and read it though with the question, "how does this relate to my preaching and teaching?" This may be a half hour that will radically change your ministerial life and vastly improve your preaching!

Yes, there are times we are to raise our voices with all of the inflections and the gestures, but what I mean here is the intent and purpose of our words. Will the words that I say glorify and point to Christ, do they point back to me, or, are they condescending to the people I am called to disciple and lead?

Our words can be like weapons of destruction or hymns of healing. The same mouth can produce either one or both. What we say from the pulpit, or to a person in private, and how we say it digs in deep and long in people's lives, especially if it is negative. Our words express to the congregation or to an individual a powerful and impacting memorandum. Thus, we must be careful how we use them!

In preaching, there are some things I learned from some great men over the years, all of which I have violated at times and feel shame and regret for

doing so. These include, *never preach angry, upset, under stress, sick, or with pride; always tell the truth, and never gossip*. I had to learn and keep learning to guard my mouth and view my tongue as a servant of Christ, not an instrument of my will. My mouth is not for my anger or hurts to be pronounced when it is in inappropriate; rather, it is the oral communication tool of God's Word that I am to humbly use for His glory.

The Seven Deadly Sins of Preaching

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Proverbs 18:21

I am sure you have heard of the “seven deadly sins,” that of *Luxuria* (squandering our life, lust), *Gula* (gluttony), *Avaritia* (greed), *Acedia* (sloth), *Ira* (wrath), *Invidia* (envy), and *Superbia* (pride). But, what about the deadly sins of preaching when we are upset or prideful?

I had just started a pastoral position in a church in Southern California in the mid 90s; unknown to me, the Senior Pastor was in the midst of resigning due to a great moral failing. He had a long term *affair* with another church member and was unashamed about it. In his last sermon, he yelled at the congregation. His contention was that they were being ungrateful for his teaching and leadership for the last decade or so, and it was none of their business who he slept with. Ironically, he was a good Bible teacher for the most part, which is why I wanted to be on staff there. He was a C.S. Lewis scholar, and studied under my uncle; this was a great opportunity for me. But, instead of admitting his failing and getting help, he turned to pride and voiced contempt for his flock.

This was truly sad! All the good work he had done was quickly eroded away. His tenure there became a waste and any great teaching was flushed down the preverbal toilet, so to speak. Any once loyal and hopeful church members that had wanted him back and restored now regarded him as unfit and reprehensible. I stayed on staff for over six years after that. I was amazed how good some of his old sermons were, and at the same time how the people had great disdain for him. Not just because of the *affair*, but because of his pride and anger. The affair would have been forgiven; the anger, the unwillingness to repent, and being “in their face” was inexcusable and unforgettable. That sermon hurt them so much it stuck for years. That one sermon resounded with a theme of discord and discontentment that sent that church from over 1,100 people to 300 in less than a year. That church never recovered! And, that pastor went off to destroy another church after that. One angry sermon did more damage than a long term *affair*! (Of course having an affair is a great wrong too; just making my point and in truth too.)

I think the Medieval Catholic Church was on to something by listing these “seven deadly sins” and how they lure and tempt us to do wrong. There also are clearly sins in preaching. Let's look at those seven sins and how they relate to our preaching:

| Vice | Virtue |
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| Lust (normally seen as our excessive sexual appetites. But in preaching, it can be indulgence to stray from God's Word, chase bad trends; and be worldly, thinking this will attract people.) | Chastity (which is the purity of soul; in preaching, it means to be real and authentic. Build your faith to lead others into the faith by the Fruit of the Spirit and in all things, love.) |
| Gluttony (normally seen as over-indulgence. But, in preaching it can be seeking recognition and respect to pat our ego or low self-esteem.) | Temperance (which means self-restraint; in preaching, it is remembering and practicing humbleness and servant leadership.) |
| Greed (normally seen as avarice or materialism; in preaching, it is when we seek to exaggerate or make things up, be dishonest, or manipulate others to get our way) | Charity (which is giving; in preaching, it is being in Christ and His character so our character is contagious and uplifting. It is also making sure we are being good and kind, by first giving ourselves to our Lord.) |
| Sloth (normally seen as idleness; in preaching, it means we are not properly preparing. Our message is not right from His Word or well thought out. We become sloppy and uncaring of our responsibility to lead, manage, and train the people He gives us. Or, we allow busyness to overtake godly priorities.) | Diligence (which is seen as zeal and integrity; in preaching, it means we take our call and position seriously and do all we can to be the best we can be. Not perfect, we are to pursue excellence and put our best out for His glory. We are not to allow the tyranny of people and time rule our words or call.) |
| Wrath (normally seen as anger; in preaching, it is doing so in anger. Never, ever preach in anger. It is better to have "dead air" than a dead church from our misplaced words, whether we are in the right or not. This is also harboring our hurts and not forgiving others.) | Forgiveness (which is seen as composure; in preaching, it means the same. We are to control our anger and emotions and not use the pulpit as a weapon to voice our discontent or to bully our way. And of course forgive those...) |

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| <p>Envy (normally seen as jealousy; in preaching, it is the temptation to compare ourselves with other churches or pastors or to put others down.)</p> | <p>Kindness (which is seen as admiration; in preaching, it means just that, to be kind and be meek—strength and power under control in how we are with our words and illustrations.)</p> |
| <p>Pride (normally seen as vanity; in preaching, it is the most horrendous thing we can do as a preacher. If you want to kick dirt in God’s face and elevate yourself above Him and others....well I advise you not to!)</p> | <p>Humility (which is seen as humbleness; in preaching, it is the same. If God Himself, when He walked this earth, was humble, what excuse to we have to be otherwise?)</p> |

Our preaching contains and communicates a vast amount of power to our congregation, whether you see it or not. We have a “bully pulpit” at our disposal and thus, very powerful opportunities for temptation! So, to put this in another short and simple list: Never, never, never, ever...

1. NEVER preach if you are going to stray from God’s Word, be worldly, or chase bad trends!
2. NEVER preach when you are seeking respect or recognition!
3. NEVER preach when you are exaggerating or lying!
4. NEVER preach when you are not properly prepared and/or when losing a battle with any sin!
5. NEVER preach when you are angry, and be very cautious when you are negatively motivated!
6. NEVER preach when you are going to compare yourselves with others!
7. NEVER preach when you are filled with pride or contempt!

In addition—to make it an even Top Ten...

8. NEVER preach when you are being fearful or anxious!
9. NEVER preach when you are feeling inauthentic or inadequate!
10. NEVER preach when you are seeking to manipulate or gossip!

Why? We never want to be an obstacle to grace; rather, we want to point others, by words and example, to Grace! In addition, never compare yourself to another pastor, church, or ministry or be envious of someone or something. If you must chastise those who teach falsely (and we should), do so without elevating yourself. It is also best not to use names, but rather point out the damaging teaching, then what the Bible says, and then the correct thinking. Of course, remember grace and love, and do not divide over trivial and nonessential matters. It is always best to do as Jesus did and taught. Even He said, *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.* Look this up and see the context (Luke 14:7-11). Remember humility!

When we preach, we carry a great responsibility we should never take lightly! We need to see that our words have the power to uplift, encourage, teach, and lead people to the depths of our Lord's life and teaching. Our words can also destroy all the work we have done or could do. If the above mentioned pastor had asked his congregation to forgive him during his last sermon and had not used anger, the church would perhaps still be a growing, thriving, vital ministry pointing to God's glory! Instead, it is dead! That was not the only reason that church died, but it was the final, fatal shot.

What We Can Do to be Better with Our Words

To put all of this into action, we must make a commitment to remember to pray and think before we speak so we are careful not to say things that could hurt someone or cause a fight or an argument. We will strive to not let bad influences and questionable activities enter into our lives, as they will manipulate us and pour garbage in our minds so garbage comes out of our words and deeds and will flow into our church. We must make the commitment to not let our words or body language discourage others. We will know that showing respect to authority is right and biblical. At the same time, we have to be willing to stand up for what is right. This translates to not ever gossiping or talking negatively about others at work, home, church, or anywhere in the universe—period—if we claim Christ as Lord!

People will make major life assessments and decisions from our attitude and words! Thus, we must be willing and able to check our words before we preach; if this is a problem, then we must manuscript our sermon and have a trusted elder or another pastor to check it. Those words must be examined before they leave our lips, and we must think in good terms before we speak. We have to see the destruction that can come by inflicting anger and frustration, and the resulting low self-esteem, loneliness, and despair. Our words are indeed powerful, and a great responsibility. They can create success or they can create failure. We all have been positively and negatively motivated by a person in authority, their words uttered purposefully or a slip of the tongue, a mistake and hurt, as they cause anger, frustration, low self-esteem, and feelings of emptiness, loneliness, emotional withdrawal, depression, and pain. And, if you think you are not vulnerable—think again. Or, if you like to use words as weapons, consider this: words have a boomerang affect. That means, *what you throw out will come back to hit you*. If you think you can duck them, you cannot. Once you release those hurtful words, you cannot put them back any more than you can put the toothpaste back into the tube; it is out, and it is out for good.

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the

right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. 2 Corinthians 6:3-10

What do Your Words Reflect of You?

If you criticize others, then you will be criticized, too. If you lie to others, then you will be lied to, also. If you gossip about others, then others will gossip about you. If you cheat others, then others will cheat you. Do you see a pattern? It is a simple pattern; what you give out, you will soon get back. We have to realize deep down in our hearts and minds how powerful our words are as they shape and form us and others around us. Words have power to destroy people's lives, just as a spark can destroy an entire forest (James 3:1-12). Words also have the power to determine the direction of our lives as well as that of others, just as a small rudder can move a large ship, and as a small bit can guide a horse. Words can make and shape us either for God's glory or Satan's plans. To show you how important this is, James uses the word *poison*, as in deadly cobra venom, the most powerful illustration that could be made in his time!

The issue of words is:

1. Do you truly know the power your words have?
2. How are words from your mouth being used?
3. How are words guiding you?
4. How are your words touching others?

Your words will reflect your true character! Your words have the power to change someone else's life for the better. The greatest gift you have is the ability to communicate; the greatest responsibility we have as pastors is using our ability to communicate with character and distinction within the parameters of God's call to us. The greatest message you will ever utter is the one that impacts others for our Lord. It is the power to communicate the gospel and love to those with whom you come in contact. To impact people's lives from your tongue and character is an awesome privilege and responsibility. Your character is the gospel that most people will read! Thus, your words will either help draw them to Christ or repel them away from Him. And, from my research and experience, this is far more important than the content of our words. How we say our message is just as important, if not more so, than what we say!

What do Your Words Reflect of Christ?

Words are the trust of our pastoral communication. But, words are not the only means of our communication. Most experts in the field of communication say that 55% of our communication is from our body language, 38% is from our tone, and only 7% from our words. Our words reflect our body and tone, so, make sure you are aware of you when those words come out! The words and

how we use them will make us either abusers or people who cherish others!

When you start to be careful with what you say and how you say it, and are willing to change, then you will see your relationship with your church blossom. Your life will change and others' lives will, too! How to do this? Well, it is really simple. Just as your mom or grade school teacher must have said, *think before you speak*. When we think first and speak later, we will be able to make positive affirmations and create happiness in and for others. When those words boomerang back to us, we will experience success in our life and, most importantly, God will be glorified. Plan ahead for what you will say, so you will have a clear idea of the words you will use. At the same time, be in prayer, asking God to help you say words that encourage and impact, and do not tear down or cause gossip or distraction to Christ-like character. If you do not have encouraging words to say, then do not say anything. It is always best to say less and listen more. We have to guard what we are *not* to say as much as what we *do* say!

Here are some practical ideas on how we can make just minor changes to our words and reap much greater relationships and preaching skills. You will be able to help create connections and confidence in your congregation as well as yourself. You will be building people up and not tearing them down; you will be glorifying our Lord and not taking an axe to "His" church.

Here are some simple plans to put good words that are edifying in action by just watching how you use your words.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12:17-18

Here are some replacement words you can use to create a better environment at church and home.

| Substitute Negative Words | With | Positive Words |
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| "I can't" and "I won't" | With | "I haven't yet." |
| "I don't know" | With | "I will find out for you." |
| "If I" | With | "When I." |
| "That will be a problem" | With | "That's going to be a challenge." |
| "I will try" | With | "I will do" |

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| "You are...or, I am...a failure" | With | "We are a success because we learned something." |
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How many more can you think of?

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. 1 Peter 3:13-15

The ups and downs of pastoral ministry may get us down, and the arguments, tension, disagreements, gossip, treachery, betrayal, financial disasters, stress, and false accusations may take their toll on us. When life seems to rise up and wage war against us, our character can grow stronger and our church and family relationships can improve. We can become even better, stronger, and more loving—even more content. The choice is ours! On the other hand, these tough times can also produce despair, confusion, anger, bitterness, and loneliness that we will turn into *WMDs*—weapons of mass destruction to our friends, families, and church members. This will translate into how we use our words, and can escalate the problems into a revolving cycle of despair and chaos. If all that we see is failure and self-pity, cynicism will be produced rather than a pastor of character that God calls us to be. The same crushed grape will produce a good wine or sour vinegar. It all depends on how it is cared for and crafted. You are in control of your care and crafting and how you care and craft others; when you keep your eyes on His care, His crafting will enable you to produce the character of fine wine, not sour vinegar.

Some passages to mediate on: Deuteronomy 5:20; 6:4; Psalm 12:2; 32:2; Proverbs 5:16-19; 6: 16; 12: 2, 17-22; 13:5; 14:5; 18:21; 19:5

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