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## What's the Point?

*By Nathan Nass*

I have a confession to make. I once attended Joel Osteen's church. Okay, twice. I went twice. My wife and I lived in Houston, TX for a year, and we went to Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church twice. I can tell you firsthand that much of what you hear about Osteen and his messages is true. In the first sermon, Osteen didn't mention God a single time. In the second, Osteen brazenly twisted Scripture to support his prosperity gospel. Don't do that! Don't preach like Joel Osteen.

But I have another confession to make. It's been nine years since I heard them, but I can still remember each of those two sermons almost word for word. The first had the theme, "Who's Packing Your Parachute?" Osteen told the story of a U.S. Navy pilot in Vietnam whose plane was shot out of the sky. He ejected from his plane and was saved by his parachute. Years later, he unexpectedly met the man who had packed his parachute on that fateful morning. Like him, we can be eternally grateful for all the people behind the scenes who are packing our parachutes.

The second sermon had the theme, "It's Under Your Feet!" Osteen took the verse, "*He has put everything under his feet*" (1 Cor 15:27) and applied it to you and me instead of to Christ. Everything is under *your* feet! No matter what you face in life—from cancer to bad bosses to financial struggles—you can look that struggle in the eye and say, "It's under my feet!" Heresy!

*A central theme is vital for a memorable message.*

I heard each sermon over nine years ago, but I can still precisely remember each one. Why? Each message had a carefully crafted point. There was a central theme that connected the entire message

together. It stuck. No one walked away from those sermons asking, "What's the point?" I remember thinking to myself: "What if this man with such obvious public speaking gifts were to actually preach the truth of God's Word?" Can I admit I learned something from Joel Osteen? A central theme is vital for a memorable message. When you preach, ask, "What's the point?"

Compare that with some feedback I received from my first article on "Simple Preaching." I got a kind letter from a retired WELS pastor. He described his concerns about preaching in the WELS. He wrote, "I sat next to my friend at a lecture given by one of our profs a couple years ago. When he was done, I leaned over to him and said: 'I didn't get a thing out of that.' He replied: 'Neither did I.' Well, it just so happened that this past Sunday our new pastor was installed and he had a friend of his preach the sermon. My friend was sitting next to me for this event, and I said to him: 'I didn't get anything out of his sermon.' His response: 'Neither did I.'" Ouch.

"I didn't get it." Aren't those the most painful words a preacher can hear? If the retired pastor in our pews doesn't get it when we preach, how many others are asking, "What's the point?"

Let's be honest. How many times have you preached a sermon, sat back down in your chair, and wondered to yourself, "What was the point?" I have! How often have you written a sermon because you had to write a sermon? God's Word was there. True! God uses stumbling, fumbling sermons to accomplish his will. Praise be to God for that! But God's Word is not pointless. If you and I struggle to know what our point was, our people probably don't know it either.

That's a problem. Perhaps there was a time when people went to church simply to hear God's Word. They felt they needed to. That's often not the mindset today. If people are going to come, there's got to be a reason for them to be there. How many people sit in

our pews, asking, "What's the point?" How many people sit at home, asking, "What's the point?" Pointless preaching makes it seem pointless to attend. Are you willing to ask with me, "What's the point?"

### *God's Word is not pointless.*

Because God's Word isn't pointless. You know that. There is one, central theme to all of God's Word. The Bible is one, united story of God's grace to us in Jesus. Contrary to popular belief, the Bible doesn't just ramble on and on. It isn't a disconnected mishmash of stories and songs and proverbs. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). Jesus is our Savior. That's the point!

Beyond that central theme of justification, there are many other clear truths that God preaches to his people over and over again. When God speaks, he always has a point!

- "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2:24; Mt 19:5; Mk 10:7-8; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31).
- "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One" (Dt 6:4; Dt 4:35; Neh 9:6; Ps 86:10; Is 43:11; Is 44:6; Zec 14:9; Mk 12:29; 1 Cor 8:4; Eph 4:6).
- "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Ex 34:6,7; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; Ps 103:8; Ps 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).



Many biblical books have clear themes that resonate throughout the book. Luke builds his beautiful narrative of lost and found until Jesus finally declares: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10). What a point! No one who reads Galatians could possibly miss the central truth: "We ... know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:15-16). Why is Psalm 23 so beloved? It's so clear! "The LORD is my shepherd." There's no doubt about the point! God's Word is not pointless.

It's our joy as preachers to share that "point" with God's people. Note how Ezra's preaching is described: "They read from the Book of the Law of God, **making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read**" (Neh 8:8). Here's the result: "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and **to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them**" (Neh 8:12).

### *Contrary to the mindless chatter we hear around us, God's Word really matters.*

There is great joy in getting the point of God's Word! Contrary to the mindless chatter we hear around us, God's Word really matters. It's really written for you and me. It has a message that's truly a matter of life and death. Like Ezra, we strive to make God's Word clear and give the meaning so that God's people can understand. A clear central theme in our sermons is important for that to happen. There is a very powerful, applicable point to every section of God's Word.

Luther would agree. Here's an example from his Table Talk:

"Only a fool thinks he should say everything that occurs to him. A preacher should see to it that he sticks to the subject and performs his task in such a way that people understand what he says. Preachers who try to say everything that occurs to them remind me of the maidservant who is on her way to market. When she meets another maid she stops to chat with her for a while. Then she meets another maid and talks with her. She does the same with a third and a fourth and so gets to market very slowly. This is what preachers do who wander too far from their subject. They try to say everything all at once, but it won't do."<sup>1</sup>

Luther once simply said, "In my preaching I take pains to treat a verse [of the Scriptures], to stick to it, and so to instruct the people that they can say, 'That's what the sermon was about.'"<sup>2</sup>

Another author puts it like this:

"One common sermonic flaw is the preacher's failure clearly to define the thrust of the message. Without some definition, some clarity on the issue tackled, the sermon rambles from one idea to the next like a bumper car with an eight-year-old behind the wheel."

*“... like a bumper car with an eight-year-old behind the wheel.”*

“Try this test: If you can’t identify what you’re saying in one, clear sentence, it means that you probably aren’t clear yourself. You may say some good things, but don’t be surprised when no one seems to grasp the thrust of your message. Think about it: When you’re uncertain as to what you’re saying, you don’t know when to stop, do you? How many times have you heard a message like a plane circling the airport, trying to find a place to land? Just when you think the plane is finally making its descent, the pilot takes it back up again for some more circling. A word to the wise: Know what you want to say and say just enough for your listeners to want more.”<sup>3</sup>

I bet you get the point. People need to know, “What’s the point?” But here’s the challenge: How do you find the point?

Let’s remember this first: Having a strong central theme isn’t a matter of sermon *style*. Maybe you preach deductively. You have your theme and parts printed out in the bulletin. Good! But then you hardly mention them in the sermon. You share lots of doctrinal knowledge, but your people may still walk away saying, “What’s the point?” Maybe you preach inductively. You build suspense through the sermon. You take your hearers on a journey. Great! But then you stop before you reach a clear destination. Your people may still walk away saying, “What’s the point?”

A brother pastor put it like this: “What if the listeners come away scratching their heads? I think this is rude! ... If a deductive form or inductive form or if a narrative style or non-narrative style leaves listeners without a clear, ‘Ah! God has spoken to me today through his Word and his messenger and has drawn me closer to his love and empowered me on my path,’ then 1 Cor 13:1 and 14:8-9,16-17 come to mind.”<sup>4</sup> No matter your style, you’ve got to have a point!

So how do you find the point? I know this isn’t easy. We’re sinful, flawed preachers attempting to communicate perfect truths. God help us! He does! *Start with a prayer.* “Dear Holy Spirit, as I study your Word, lead me to see the truth that you want me and your people to hear this week.”

Then, *commit yourself to finding your central truth in the text itself.* Far too often, I’ve been guilty of deciding what my theme is before actually studying the text. What audacity! I see the assigned text. Ideas flow. This... That... It’s going to be a great sermon! Then I actually study the text. I almost always realize my initial thoughts were not what the text is about. You too? What should we do? Throw away our thoughts and preach God’s central truth *from the text!*

But what’s that truth? On the one hand, it’s reassuring to know that *each text of God’s Word contains many applications for God’s people.* As I search for the main point, I sometimes put far too much pressure on myself. “I’ve got to find just the right thing



*St. Michael slays the dragon (Rv 12:7).  
Painting by P. Zalm, located in St. Peter's Church, Jaffa, Israel*

to preach. I’ve got to phrase it in just the right way. I... I... I...” Relax. Finding a main point in a text from the Bible is *not* like finding a needle in a haystack. It’s like finding a Super Bowl trophy at Lambeau Field. They are all over the place! In a mine full of jewels, you get to ask, “Which gem is best for my people?”

On the other hand, *we guard against making a text say what we want it to say.* As you study, ask what question the text is addressing and what answer God is giving. Often, Jesus’ teachings—like the writings of the prophets and apostles—were in response to very specific situations. There was a very specific point. Sometimes that main point is salvation by faith in Jesus. Sometimes it’s God’s truth about marriage, money, or Christian living. While every sermon will contain law and gospel, justification won’t be the main point of every sermon, because not every text focuses on justification. As you constantly point people to the big picture truth of salvation in Jesus, let the main point of the sermon be the main point of the text.

Do you still do text studies in the original languages? *Use your Greek and Hebrew skills.* Distinguish between main clauses and subordinate clauses, indicative verbs and supporting participles. Greek and Hebrew grammar often highlights the main point in



The prophet Nathan confronts King David.

ways that aren't reflected in English translations. Let the Spirit-given languages guide you to the central truth.

This is why *sermon prep* is so important. When I feel rushed in my sermon preparation, it's tempting to begin writing before I know where I'm going. That leads to a stressful writing process and a meandering sermon that loses my hearers along the way. God's truths don't come intuitively to us. They are gifts of God's Spirit through the Word. We often miss a lot on our first glance at a text. It takes time to understand God's truth and what it means for us.

Once you decide on the point of your text, express it in two different ways. First, write a *one-sentence proposition statement* that captures your central truth. Then think of a *short, memorable theme* that can help your hearers remember God's message. Here's a simple example:

#### Luke 1:46-55

**Proposition Statement:** While I foolishly magnify myself and other people, Mary found joy in magnifying the great things her God had done for her.

**Theme:** "My Soul Magnifies the Lord"

I know this all takes time, but it's worth it! Haddon Robinson remarked, "Someone suffers every time you preach. Either you suffer in preparing it or the listener suffers in hearing it."<sup>5</sup>

This is something I appreciated about the chance to do *children's devotions* in my previous congregation. You talk about honing in on the point! There were Sundays when I lamented, "It's too hard to condense my sermon into something kids can understand." Huh. That's a problem, isn't it? It was good to learn to share my sermon in a concise way with little kids.

When you've arrived at your central truth from God's Word, here's my last bit of advice: *Use it!* I've seen sermon themes listed in the bulletin but never actually mentioned in the sermon itself. If the Spirit has convinced you of the central truth of your text, say it. Repeat it. Preach that truth into your people's hearts. A member recently had an interesting request. He said, "When you have a sermon theme, could you repeat it more than once during the sermon? Sometimes I miss it." This is what John does over and over again, isn't it? He comes back to the same themes. In easy Greek. So we can remember them. *The Word. I am....* I guess Jesus preached like that!

I'm thankful for it. I'm thankful for every preacher who has pointedly preached God's Word into my heart. One spring at the Seminary, Professor Brug preached a sermon on Annunciation Day. I could still tell it all back to you, after just hearing it one time. The theme was, "When did the devil know it was over?" The devil knew it was over when the Son of God became the Son of Man inside Mary's womb. That was the dagger for the devil! That's when he knew it was over. I walked into chapel that day wondering why we were having a special service for Annunciation Day. What's the point? I walked out rejoicing in our victory through our God made flesh.

One Ash Wednesday at the Seminary, Professor Cherney preached about David's sin with Bathsheba. He looked us in the eye and said, "You are the man! Let's be honest, the reason you and I haven't committed adultery like David did was because nobody's wanted to commit adultery with us." That cut. Then he healed us with God's grace. Nobody walked out saying, "What's the point?" I walked into that service focused on classes and deadlines. I walked out convicted and restored by God's grace. I was blessed. Because God's Word has a point.

<sup>1</sup> LW 54:428.

<sup>2</sup> LW 54:160.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, Graham. *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first-Century Listeners*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> Pastor James Huebner posted this comment in an online class, "Preaching in a Postmodern World."

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 172.

