

PREACH

the Word

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THE SERMON AS OUTREACH: PREACHING THE LAW

By Daniel Leyrer

The prospect approached the preacher. This prospect for membership was feeling pretty good about himself. If God grades on the curve, this man thought he had to be in the upper half of the class. Surely God would accept him for being a really good guy, wouldn't he? He hadn't been nearly as bad as his neighbors; in fact, he knew the Ten Commandments better than most of the church-going folks he had been around. All this prospect needed was a little affirmation from the preacher and he could go on his merry way trusting that he was okay with the "God of the pretty good."

So the preacher looked at him. And the preacher loved him. And the preacher...lowered the boom.

"Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Mark 10:21, 22).

The Loving Thing to Do

If we preachers love our prospects, if we are ready to reach the lost in our preaching, if we desire nothing more than to place the gospel on the heart of someone who has never heard it before, we must preach the law. When Jesus preached the Seventh Commandment to that rich young prospect, the law message cut to the heart. He became sad. Luther: "When the Lord wants to make us happy, he first of all makes us sad." We do our prospects no favors in our preaching if we pull punches with God's law. To do so would be unloving.

Every evangelist counts on the natural knowledge of God to be part one of a law sermon in the unchurched person's psyche. We expect that deep down where it really counts, that person knows there is a God and that he will have to stand before him one day. The Scripture tells us so (Romans 1:19,20; 2:15). Not that we need them to validate Scripture, but the Barna and Gallup polls tell us the same thing.

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The outreach preacher, overjoyed that his prospect has accepted his invitation to come to church, knows that natural knowledge is only part one. Part two is the sobering, startling message that even one misstep in our relationship with God is worthy of hellfire. Have you ever met a prospect who would not admit that he had done something wrong in his life? Maybe you have, but I haven't. Ask yourself this: have I ever met a prospect who thought God overlooks some sins, either because they are slight in severity or few in number? I would imagine you've met plenty of those people. They need to hear part two. They need to hear the ultimate consequence of even one sin against a holy God. They need to hear that "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is *guilty*" (James 2:10). Guilty before the Perfect Judge. And the sentence is eternal death. Our preaching must make them sad in this way. To neglect explicit, specific law preaching with prospects may be many things. But it is not loving.

Tough Love

We love our prospects when we take care in our sermons to be explicit about who God is. He is utterly holy. There is no trace of wrong in him. He made us. He owns us. He doesn't need our help. He demands moral perfection in everything we think, say, and do. He hates sin. Every sin. He pronounces a curse on every sin. He punishes every sin. Explicit law preaching cuts through the lie that "pretty good" is a way to earn God's favor and be with him forever. To withhold this information from our prospects would be unloving. Therefore we do not withhold it from our sermons.

We love our prospects when we take care in our sermons to be explicit about who we are apart from the gospel. Luther: "When the Lord wants to give us life, he first of all lets us die." That prospect for Christianity, Saul of Tarsus, had to die at the law's hands before he could live in Christ (Romans 7:9,10). So do the prospects for membership in our congregations. Thus, our preaching will foster no delusions. We are utterly sinful. We came into this world as God's enemies and in Satan's camp. To sin is to love ourselves before God, to say we know better than he, to insist on our independence from him, to commit a crime against him. To excuse sin won't make it go away. Bury that toxic waste in the landfill, but it's still there, and it still contaminates. It's the same with sin. These are the cold, hard facts of our prospects' sinful natures. To be less than honest about them in our sermons would be unloving.

Why the Parachute?

Several years ago actor Kirk Cameron teamed up with a pastor from New Zealand named Ray Comfort to found *The Way of the Master* evangelism ministries. Through various media Cameron and Comfort are trying to impress upon their fellow Evangelicals that non-Christians must be confronted with God's law before being confronted with Jesus. One illustration of theirs has stuck with me. It has to do with the folly and unfaithfulness of preaching Jesus to prospects without preaching sin to prospects. They say that's like handing a parachute to a man as he boards an airplane and telling him to put it on because it will make his flight

more comfortable. Even if he does strap it on, he will soon find out it's not very comfortable to sit in a tiny airline seat with a parachute on your back, and then he'll take it off. But what if that same man were told to put on the parachute because at some time during the flight he'll have to jump out of the plane at 25,000 feet? Since all he can think about is what would happen to him if he had to jump without a parachute, he gladly puts it on and keeps it on, no matter how uncomfortable it may be.

How can we preach the law to members and prospects alike to lead them to cherish Jesus as their Parachute in the coming wrath? We must first tell them that the plane of their life is going down. It's not a question of if they will have to jump, just when. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). We don't serve anybody in our sermons by proclaiming the Parachute without being honest about the *real need* for that Parachute.

How can we preach the law to members and prospects alike to lead them to cherish Jesus as their Parachute in the coming wrath?

The Real Need

We preach the real need for Jesus to our prospects when we mention specific sins more than sin in general in our sermons. We sometimes refer to law/gospel preaching as "afflicting the comfortable in order to comfort the afflicted." To afflict the comfortable means attacking specific comfort zones in sinners. That means naming specific sins. If our law preaching is limited to stock phrases like "We all are sinners" or "We all were born in sin," we feint and jab with the truth. Sure, jabs can do their damage. But a haymaker will really get the sinner's attention. Why speak of sin in general when, for instance, Jesus' words in Matthew 5:28 cry out for the haymaker of dabbling in pornography and Paul's words in Colossians 3:5 cry out for the haymaker of idolatrous, stingy stewardship? Related to this need to preach specific sins rather than sin in general is the need to preach sins that are common to us right now and right here where we live. We are not being honest to our prospects when we say that the heathen bent of the Hollywood lifestyle is bad but then fail to mention that our emulating and idolizing that same lifestyle is just as bad. Is it sinful to sell your body via prostitution downtown in order to feed your cocaine addiction? Yes, but most of us could preach that sin while being fairly certain none of our hearers are actually committing it. It's just as much a sin to get together in our groups in the suburbs and gossip or worship at the altar of materialism. The outreach preacher adapts his law preaching to address the real need for Jesus within his prospects.

Do we find ourselves softening God's law by changing personal sins from rebellions against a holy God to a disappointing of oneself? We are not helping our prospects see the real need for Jesus if envy is only preached as a silly sapping of your strength and cursing is only preached as a poor reflection on you.

What Joseph realized our prospects must realize: to do a wicked thing is to “sin *against God*” (Genesis 39:9). Our prospects live in a culture where the worst offense a person can commit is to not fulfill his or her potential. Faithful preachers love their prospects when they lay it on the line. Every sin offends somebody outside of yourself – and that Somebody is God.

Please allow one final encouragement in preaching the law for outreach. Preach the law. Don't preach about the law. Be God's mouthpiece. In your preaching make the threats that God makes in his law. Don't just describe the threats. The law portions of our sermons should not be analyses of the way the law makes us feel, they should be proclamations that simply make us feel. Preach the law. Don't prop it up in the pulpit and talk about the law. We preachers, who constantly study the distinction between law and gospel, are tempted to make sermons into lessons on that

distinction rather than a preaching of law and gospel. We love our prospects when we let our pulpits remain pulpits rather than turning them into dogmatics classrooms.

When I was in college I once attended church with my friend, a prospect for membership in my congregation. The preacher that Sunday was my father. I was eager to get my friend's take on Dad's sermon after the service. “Well, for a while there I really felt like a dirtball,” my friend the prospect said. Mission accomplished, outreach preacher. Luther: “When the Lord wants to make us rich, he first of all makes us poor.” We love our prospects when we rob them of their own righteousness so that they long for the righteousness of the one who truly makes them rich. We love our prospects when we preach the law to them.

PREACHING FROM THE SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY

In our previous article we noted the predicament of a pastor deciding what to preach to the saints next Sunday by comparing the lectionaries in CW and CWS and just picking his preference.

That method won't trip you when it comes to the Gospels for the Sundays in the two lectionaries. With few exceptions, they're identical. You can get into trouble, though, if you treat the CW and CWS Old Testament and Epistle lessons as a smorgasbord from which to take whatever looks tastiest, without planning in advance.

Repetition

One reason is repetition. Take several upcoming examples from CWS second lessons. CWS often provides alternates for those in CW to fit the main theme of the day's other two lessons.

For Lent 1C (February 21, 2010) CWS appoints Hebrews 4:14-16 as the Epistle. Be aware as you plan: CWS also tabs Hebrews 4:14-16 and 5:7-9 as the Epistle for Good Friday A (April 22, 2011).

Likewise, on Pentecost 5C (June 27, 2010), CWS, just like CW, offers Hebrews 11:24-26 as the Epistle. If you're going to preach CWS second lessons, you might want to know that Hebrews 11:24-28 comes up in CWS for Pentecost 14B (September 2, 2012).

In both these instances, you probably wouldn't choose to preach nearly the same text a year or two later, planning carefully.

Tighter Connections, Less Duplication

Conversely, consider Epiphany 5C (February 7, 2010). CW appoints Isaiah 6:1-8, Isaiah's call, and Luke 5:1-11, Jesus' call to Peter and his companions. The CW Epistle for Epiphany 5C, though, doesn't highlight God's call to public ministry or our gospel outreach. It's 1 Corinthians 14:12b-20, a lesson about speaking in tongues, and the need to be able to understand what goes on in God's house.

Isn't there a connection between this lesson, and the CW Old Testament and Gospel lessons? Yes, but it's loose. The connection in CWS is tighter, with the alternate first and second lessons of Judges 13:6-24 (the promise to Manoah and his wife of Samson) and Romans 10:13-17.

That Judges lesson doesn't appear as a CW pericope. It's a good example of CWS's aim to include fewer prophetic lessons and more narrative lessons from the Old Testament.

Here you can also see CWS wisely avoiding duplication. Isaiah 6:1-8 is the CW lesson for both Holy Trinity B and Epiphany 5C. God gave us a big Old Testament, so it makes sense not to repeat OT stories within the three-year lectionary.

What about Romans 10:13-17? Those verses are not in the CW lectionary for Sundays; they make another fine alternative. CW does appoint Romans 10:5-17 for the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession (June 25). Romans 10:8-15 is also the Epistle for Home Missions, and 10:10-18 is the Epistle for St. Andrew's day (November 30).

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CW or CWS

If every CWS Sunday were like Epiphany 5C, your planning would be simple. You could decide you want to use the CWS pericopes instead of CW. Then you could use them for a year or more, each Lord's day. (If you make the switch, consider three years in a row – even six or nine years, if our Lord carries.)

Potential drawbacks of such a plan:

- You would not be able to preach a sermon series based on a *lectio continua* Epistle, as CW allows.
- You would run into more duplicate lessons than in CW's lectionary.

This second potential drawback requires more background and explanation.

Besides stories from one Gospel that are nearly identical to stories in other Gospels, CWS's duplicate lessons fall into two categories:

- Services with the same lessons every year, similar to CW.
- Other duplicates, different from CW.

Examples of the first category include Christmas Day, Epiphany, Palm Sunday and Pentecost. Your congregation may not celebrate all of these annually, so reading Isaiah 60:1-6 every Epiphany in both CW and CWS may not bother you. And you may look forward, like I do, to reading the same second lesson every Pentecost (Acts 1:1-21) and the same Gospel every Christmas (John 1:1-14; here, curiously, CWS has 1:1-14 in A and B, and 1:1-18 in C).

On the other hand, you may have wished in the past for alternate first and second lessons on Palm Sunday, for which CW appoints Zechariah 9:9-10 and Philippians 2:5-11 annually.¹ For Palm Sunday, CWS gives alternates in year C: Isaiah 45:22-25 and Hebrews 12:1-3. Years A and B, though, have the familiar CW first and second lessons. You may like this hybrid system, or you may prefer to find still other alternates in year B.

Choosing sermon texts "freelance" from both CW and CWS may lead to inadvertent duplications, so consult the lectionary index in *Christian Worship: Manual* and an index of CWS first and second lessons in biblical order (newly available online at the Worship Connect site).

Now consider other duplicates, different from CW. By my count, besides duplicates on special days like Christmas and Good Friday, CW has six instances of first lessons duplicating partially or fully and seven instances of second lessons duplicating.

By contrast, the CWS lectionary has 19 instances of first lessons duplicating, and 24 instances of second lessons duplicating.

These matches, or near matches, usually happen between two years, such as 1 John 2:15-17 appearing on both Pentecost 6A and Pentecost 23C. In some cases the same lesson, or nearly the same lesson, shows up all three years. Romans 12:9-21 appears in both Epiphany 7A and Pentecost 8C, and Romans 12:14-21 in Epiphany 7C. (Admittedly, Epiphany 7 occurs rarely when Easter is late. The same is true of Pentecost 23C, which only occurs when Easter comes early. We won't reach it in 2010.)

Again, anticipate. As part of your planning, you may benefit from scanning the online biblical-order index of the first and second lessons in CWS.

Two closing encouragements about repetition in our preaching.

1. "As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Proverbs 26:11). Foolishly, we all keep sinning in weakness. Keep exposing sin as you preach, then. Don't fear that you're becoming too repetitive by focusing week-in and week-out on rebellion's curse and on grace in Christ. "Keep reminding them of these things" (2 Timothy 2:14).
2. Don't skimp on study. Pray over Sunday's text. Ask God to show you what is unique in it and uniquely appropriate to the day and place you'll proclaim it. The best antidote to numbing sameness in our preaching? Prayerful, careful text study.

¹ This arrangement ties to the Roman and Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship three-year lectionaries from which the CW lectionary largely sprang. Roman Catholic and ELCA congregations tend not to have mid-week Lenten services reading through the sufferings and death of our Lord, so many of them designate Palm Sunday as Sunday of the Passion. That day they read the whole passion account from the year's Gospel. This takes time, especially after a reading about the first Palm Sunday during a procession with palms. So they generally read only brief first and second lessons from Isaiah 50:4-7 and Philippians 2:6-11.

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