

A Sermon Checklist

By Tom Westra

✓ Textual

Starting already on Monday, you put some of your best hours of the week into studying the text. You did careful exegesis, asking “What is God saying to us?” Not eisogesis: “What thoughts in this text—however minor—fit what I want to say?” You were ready to stand up with confidence and say, “This is what the Lord says.”

✓ Relevant

Your sermon bridged the text to where your listeners live and work and play and hurt. You had specific members in mind as you sought to bring the balm of Gilead to their fears and heartaches.



✓ Clear

Considering the literary form of the text, you decided on the structure of the sermon. Deductive? Inductive? Lowry loop? Paul's writings may favor one approach. A Gospel narrative another. You don't squeeze every text into the same box.

You distilled the text to one propositional statement, one unifying theme that glued the entire sermon together and made it stick in the mind of your listeners. The sermon was not a shotgun blast with a scattering of ideas—hard to follow and impossible to remember. It was a rifle shot. They will go home knowing what this sermon was about.

Following the old adage that a preacher prepares his sermon with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, you used current events as well as interactions you had observed or experienced to illustrate the main points. There were “windows to let the light in.”

✓ Law and Gospel

Identifying specific law in the text, you applied it to the lives of your hearers in such a way that they could tell you applied it to yourself first. Having preached the law, you pointed them to Jesus who did everything we failed to do and you said, “This counts for you.” You pointed them to the cross and said, “He did this for you.” You did not leave any sin addressed by the law unaddressed by the gospel.

✓ Stories

You used stories with plot and tension and suspense and surprise to help your listeners experience the truths of the text. By means of story you took abstract biblical truths and made them concrete.

✓ Effective introduction

You crafted an introduction which grabbed their attention, led them to the theme, and said, “This is where we are going this morning.” You raised a problem, told them why the sermon mattered, and assured them the next 18 minutes were going to be relevant.

Some weeks you do this with a recent news headline, some with a scene from a popular book or movie, and some with a human interest story from everyday life. “You don’t jump out from behind the same tree every week” (Haddon Robinson, quoted by Paul Scott Wilson in *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, Abingdon Press, 1999).

✓ Powerful conclusion

You restated the main points of the sermon, summarizing everything in a way that was clear and concise and could be remembered throughout the week.



Preaching Sanctification

Preaching the whole counsel of God includes urging our listeners to Christian living and good works. Paul taught both justification and sanctification:

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He gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:14).

We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Ephesians 2:10).

I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good (Titus 3:8).

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received (Ephesians 4:1).

Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

The encouragements could be very specific:

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share (1 Timothy 6:18).

Yes, it was all there. But when you said, “Amen” you had this nagging feeling something was missing. You could see it in the eyes of the congregation. They were looking for something more.

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They heard God forgives them for Jesus sake. The *past* is taken care of. They heard that heaven is now open to them. The *future* is secure. But between yesterday and tomorrow is *today*. Does the gospel have any application for living today? You gave them the “what” and the “so what.” But did you leave out the “now what”? How are they to live out the text this week? Could that be what was missing in the sermon?

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Therefore each one of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully (Ephesians 4:25).

Paul’s teaching is an excellent model for us.

At the risk of oversimplification I would suggest three sets of reading for the Lutheran preacher who wants to know how to teach sanctification. First, read Paul’s epistles. Second, read Paul’s epistles. Third, read Paul’s epistles. If the concept is still not clear, repeat steps 1 to 3 as often as necessary.... Paul’s basic method is pretty straight forward. 1) Preach the gospel. 2) Give specific concrete moral directives, relevant to the experience and station of his hearers. It does not get much more complicated than that (John Brug, “The Lutheran Doctrine of Sanctification and Its Rivals”, p. 14).

In my inner being, motivated by the gospel, I delight in God’s law and want to hear it and follow it (Romans 7:22 & 1 John 5:3).

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Because I am still burdened with a sinful nature, I need God’s law to identify the actions and attitudes which are pleasing to God.

*In order that Christians might become more and more complete in sanctified living, God wants the law proclaimed in such a way that it is always showing them, insofar as they are still flesh, how they should behave, what they should do with the spiritual power in them. God wants the Gospel proclaimed in such a way that it is giving them more and more desire and power to do all the good works to which the law directs them (August Pieper, “The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel and Its Application for Pure Teaching and Spiritual Life”, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, II, p. 69).*

Falling into Legalism

Here we must strive to present ourselves as workmen who do not need to be ashamed and who correctly handle the Word of truth. The following are ways we can fall into the trap of legalism when preaching sanctification.

- **Using the law (first use) – gospel – law (third use) approach carelessly.**

While we distinguish between law and gospel, we do not separate them, lest we separate the good works from the power which produces them. We do not preach the third use of the law without the gospel. Again, Paul’s example:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (Ephesians 5:1-2).

How masterfully Paul does this in Ephesians 5!

Read your average marriage manual. Replete with how to’s and tools for self-analysis, aren’t they? Good tools they may well be. They provide help in analyzing what the particular problem may be, and in providing suggestions for how to solve it. But as a man who once coached at Northwestern used to say, “Ya gotta wanna.”

Now read what Paul says about husbands and wives. “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:22-25). He’s talking about an earthly relationship. Yet he refers to Christ no less than seven times in four short verses. He’s definitely providing guidance for those who are married. Yet one might almost suppose he’s talking more about Christ than about the marriage relationship. He just can’t keep Christ out of it (Paul Wendland, “How God Grows Christians – Keeping Our Gospel Motivation Strong”).

“Gospel imperatives” are only another name for legalism unless the power of the gospel to carry out the imperative is

presented alongside. Jesus said, “If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

- **Teaching sanctification as though it were a part of our justification or a cause of it.**

There is a Pharisee inside me easily tempted to look at other people’s sins as worse than mine. Recently I listened to someone speak on the topic of Christians who struggle with same sex attraction. I wondered how often in my teaching I spoke about this sin or any sin in a way that gave the impression a child of God would not give in to such a sin.

Have I implied—subtle and unintentional as it might be—that a true child of God would not give in to a certain sin or would have overcome that sin by now? Then I was suggesting that sanctification is somehow part of justification, that God will love me and forgive me only as long as I am capable of reaching a certain level of sanctification.

Ask yourself this: Do I, like Luther, “preach in such a way as to lay hold of any doubting listener and drag him out of his doubts, compelling him to believe he is a child of God and would die saved if he were to die that night?” (*Law and Gospel*, p. 461-162). Or have I preached in such a way that my hearers thought their sins—if they were truly Christians—should have gone away by now? Such preaching results in doubt rather than faith.

And then the unexpected. Sin continues to be a part of my life, stubbornly won’t allow me to eliminate it the way I expected. I must not be a believer at all. If I was, this thing would “work.” ... Broken and sad, I finally despair of ever being able to live the Christian life... (Rod Rosenblatt, “The Gospel for Those Broken by the Church,” p. 6,9).

Which brings us to:

- **Teaching sanctification in a way that it does not acknowledge the struggle between the old man and the new man, and that sanctification will never be perfect in this life.**

Paul did not deny the battle that raged inside of him. Nor did he despair because of it. Instead he rejoiced in the victory that was his in Christ (Romans 7).

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At the end of the day I do not take comfort in my effort. “At least I tried hard.” I take comfort in the fact that Jesus washed away all that I have done wrong. I face tomorrow not because I think, “Tomorrow I might get it right.” I face tomorrow knowing that Jesus has already gotten it right for me.

Christian failures are going to walk into heaven like a calf leaping out of its stall, laughing and laughing as if it's all too good to be true.... Heaven is ours because of what Jesus did outside of me, on the cross—not because of what Jesus did in me—in my Christian behavior.... People of all sorts who just believed in Jesus and His blood shed for them, for complete payment of their sin. There are going to be call girls, drug dealers.... The victorious life in Christ is knowing that his perfect life and innocent death now count for me, not in some inner power that is going to solve all my problems on this side of heaven (Rosenblatt, p. 10,11).

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Don't rehash everything in the sermon. Boring! But if the theme did its job of gluing the entire sermon together and making it stick in the mind of your listeners, now is the time to state it again—and in a way that makes it direct, personal, and compelling. Use a human interest story that touches the emotions. Here is a good place to appeal to emotions. Or return to a dominant image used in the sermon—maybe one presented in the introduction. Images are memorable! Point them to the power and the pardon that makes their new life possible.

Bring every one of your hearers this message: You are a saved child of God. You are loved by God. And in that grace, you serve him.



Finally:

- Teaching sanctification as though it is something we must work out on our own rather than something God works in every Christian through his means of grace.

While the Pharisee in me would like to take credit for my good works, Paul makes clear: *It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose* (Philippians 2:13). Don't rob God of his glory!

Here is comfort. God is not standing behind us with a club. He is smiling on us with his favor. And as he does so he himself works in us to will and to act according to his will.

Here is the bottom line question every preacher should ask at the end of each sermon: When my listeners walk out the doors of this sanctuary to perform God's will, with whom do they walk? If they march to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil with only me, myself, and I, then each parades to despair. However, if the sermon has led all persons to God's grace, then they may walk into the world with their Savior—and with fresh hope (Chapell, Christ-Centered Preaching, Baker, 2005, p. 295).

Concluding the Sermon

There will be times when we conclude with a call to action, to mission, to do a good work. But be careful not to re-burden with the law those you earlier unburdened with the gospel! In most cases, better to encourage good works earlier in the sermon, and save the conclusion for a restatement of what God has done for us. Those closing moments are, other than the text, the most important part of the sermon and what is most likely to be remembered.

