

What's Wrong With Preaching Today?

by Albert N. Martin

The main problem with preaching today is the failure of the man who preaches and the message he communicates to be in line with the absolute standard of good preaching, as seen in the Scriptures and the lives of great preachers.

Duration: 1:06:26

Scripture: Psalm 119:11, Proverbs 4:23, Matthew 7:23, Matthew 25:41, 1 Timothy 4:16 - 5:1, 2 Timothy 3:15, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Preaching"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the power and weight of the Scriptures. He explains that the key to a powerful sermon lies in packing it with solid biblical substance, making the audience feel the presence of divine truth. The preacher also highlights the importance of audience contact and effective communication, urging preachers to be sensitive to whether their message is being understood and received. He uses personal experiences, such as a cultural reference to Mickey Mantle, to illustrate the need for clear and relatable language in preaching. Ultimately, the sermon encourages preachers to have a sense of urgency and to focus on specific application in their messages.

Transcript

First of all, I want to say that I regret the negative way in which this topic has been cast. I think most of us have enough sense of logic to reason from the topic to ourselves. What's wrong with preaching today? I am preaching today, therefore, what's wrong with my preaching? I could have wished that the title had been something a little bit more positive, perhaps hence to improve our preaching, but this is the topic that has been assigned to me, and so I should seek to move within that framework.

By way of introduction, let me say something about the sources of my observation. One would have to be omniscient to be able to make final and absolute pronouncements as to what is wrong with preaching today. It would demand, of course, that he be exposed to all preaching, and on that basis, collecting his data, make some official and very pompous pronouncements.

Well, of course, I make no claim to omniscience, and I can't even make claim to 40 years of observations, such as the esteemed Dr. Lloyd-Jones can do. So the source of my information may be rather limited, but I trust at least the observations made from that limited source will be valid. It was my privilege to spend some five years engaged full-time in an itinerant ministry, getting some understanding of the spectrum of

our evangelical life here in the United States and a little bit in Canada, and then during these past five years in the pastorate, it's been my privilege to be out a number of weeks during the year in outside ministries in a number of different denominations and fellowships.

So the sources of my observation are things I have tried to learn by observation over the past ten years as a pastor and primarily as one in an itinerant ministry. And then the standard of comparison, I think I ought to say something about this, where something is good or bad in terms of its proximity to an absolute standard. Well, of course, in the realm of what is effective, good preaching, there is no absolute standard, but I do believe we can gain from the Scriptures some measure of an absolute standard as to what good preaching is, as we read the preaching of the prophets and the apostles and of our Lord Jesus Christ, and then in the history of great preachers.

And when I use the term great preachers, I'm not thinking of men who were known for their ability to embellish the truth of God with great rhetorical effects or were known for their proficiency in the art of elocution, but men who were instruments of God to move other men Godward. And in that class, I would place such men as Whitefield, McShane, Spurgeon, Edwards, Owen, Baxter, Bunyan, the tenants in Nettleton here in the States. And so taking their sermons and the effect of their ministries as somewhat of a standard, I hope we can make some valid comparisons between their ministries, which were marked by great preaching and the great paucity of the same in our own day.

So much, then, by way of introduction. Now, how should we approach the subject? Well, all failures in preaching are basically the failure either of the man who preaches or of the message, in terms of content and manner of delivery, that he preaches. And we can't separate the two, the man and the message.

As we heard yesterday so clearly from Dr. Lloyd-Jones, a preaching involves both. You can't isolate the man from the message he communicates, for there is this fusion of the man and the message in the context of preaching. And so we're going to approach it from that standpoint and assume that it is a valid basis of approach, and consider what's wrong with preaching today, first of all in terms of the man who preaches, and then, secondly, in terms of the message he communicates.

Now, let's consider together for some time this matter of what's wrong with preaching in terms of the man who preaches. I want to state a principle, I want to see it illustrated from the Scriptures, and then I want to apply it in some specific areas. The principle is this, that unless we would degrade preaching to a mere elocutionary art, we must never forget that the soil out of which powerful preaching grows is the preacher's own life.

This is what makes the art of preaching different from all the other arts of communication. You may take a well-known actress who may be known for her moral escapades, she may live like a common harlot, and yet she can enter the theater at eight o'clock on a Wednesday night and play Joan of Arc and move you or me to tears, so that the way she lives has no direct relationship with the performance of her art. No relationship whatsoever.

You may take a man equally profligate in his own life, put him on the stage to play Martin Luther in such a way that he'll send shivers up and down your spine and mine and send us out of there determined to be better men. But there's no direct relationship with how he lived and acted and thought prior to his entrance upon the stage and his performance upon the stage. Now, granted that the Scripture teaches there are times when men have great ministerial gifts who are devoid of sanctifying grace.

Granted that that is taught, and that in the history of the Church there are men who were used sovereignly by God in the exercise of ministerial gifts who ultimately proved to be utterly devoid of sanctifying grace. We know that's true. Our Lord said in the day of judgment, there will be many who say, Did we not preach him by name? And he will profess unto them, Depart from me, I never knew you.

But this, I believe, would be primarily the problem of those engaged in a kind of ministry where they weren't around long enough for their lives to either add or detract from their ministry. And so limiting this to the context of pastoral preaching, I believe it is a valid rule, with some few exceptions, that powerful preaching is rooted in the soil of the preacher's own life. As has been often said, a minister's life is the life of his ministry.

If preaching is, as we heard yesterday, the communication of truth through a human instrument, that truth, thus communicated, is either augmented or reduced in its effect by the life through which it comes. The secret of the power of Whitefield and McShane, and these men I've mentioned, is not primarily in the content of their sermons or in the manner of their delivery. There have been men, if not of equal eloquence or exceeding eloquence, certainly of equal eloquence.

Men whose sermons analyzed in terms of structure, in terms of content and form, were equal to or far surpassed the sermons of McShane and Whitefield. But the secret of their power was not in these realms, but in that life that was so clothed with power and lived in vital communion with God, that truth became a living principle when it came through that vessel. And it was that anointed life that was the soil of the anointed ministry.

And particularly is this true in the pastor's life. The more you and I are known by our people, the more weighty is our influence, or the less weighty is our influence amongst them. Now, that's the principle that I set before you.

Now, I must be selective in turning to the scriptures to show this principle illustrated, and let me suggest several passages, not by way of detailed exegesis. Time will not permit, but I hope we catch the overriding impact of these passages. The Apostle Paul declared in 1 Thessalonians 1, in writing to the Thessalonian Church, which he was privileged to found in his ministry among them, Knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election, for our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance, even as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sakes.

You see, there was a direct relationship between the gospel coming in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance, and the kind of men who preached it. This is how our gospel came, even as you know this is what we were in our manner of living. You find that same thought developed in the second chapter, when he says in chapter 2 and verse 10, Ye are witnesses, and God also, how wholly, and justly, and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believed, as ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged you as the Father doth his children.

Then he says in verse 13, For this cause thank we God without ceasing, because when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God which effectually worketh also in you that believe. There's a relationship between these two things. He says, you know how we conducted ourselves, we know how you received the word.

And these two things are not to be isolated. For it's as Paul and his companions stood as living embodiments of the power of the word of God, that when they spoke that word, it came with added

authority. And he does not shrink to use the manner of his living as witness to the validity of his preaching ministry.

Now you find in Titus chapter 2, where Paul is giving some detailed instruction as to what Titus should preach and teach and encourage others to preach and teach, he says in verse 7, In all of these things showing thyself a pattern of good works. You are not only to proclaim these things by precept, you are to embody them in example. In all of these things which I told you to tell others, show thyself a pattern of good works.

Then of course that classic passage in 1 Timothy 4 verses 16 and 17, Take ye to thyself, Timothy, take ye to thyself, that's your first responsibility, and to thy teaching. Continue in them, for in doing so thou shalt save both thyself and those that hear thee. But Timothy, carelessness in your own personal life will result in some measure in shoddiness in the discharge of your responsibility to the souls over whom the Holy Ghost has made you an overseer.

Failure to take heed to yourself will in some measure result in failure to see the saving purpose of God wrought in the hearts of those to whom you minister. And I say that with equal conviction of Paul's statements of truth concerning the immutability of the purpose of God, of the surety of the salvation of all of his elect, yet we must not bleed out of that passage its obvious implication that Timothy would not be that instrument of God that he could be, unless he took heed to himself, and then to his teaching. It is interesting that in the requirement for the teaching elder to set forth in 1 Timothy 3, beginning with verse 1, and in Titus 1, beginning with verse 6, the first requirement for the teaching elder is not doctrinal, but experimental.

If a man desired the office of a bishop, he seeketh a good work. The bishop therefore must be, and what's the first word? Blameless. Blameless.

Blameless. Titus, you have the same thing. I told you to ordain elders in every city, if a man be blameless.

Later on he speaks of holding fast the faithful word, but the first requirement set out is in the realm of the minister's life. For Paul knew and lived and ministered under this conviction that the life of a man's ministry was the minister's life itself. Now I believe these passages suffice, and there are many others, to support the principle that I've enunciated.

Now let us consider together some areas in which, by personal observation of my own weakness and the weakness of my brethren in the ministry, I believe preaching today is defective because of a failure to watch these areas. First of all, the area of the personal devotional life. I said that some of these conclusions were based upon my observation, going from church to church for a number of years, and one of the most shocking things that came to me as a very young man engaged in this itinerant ministry was to find that over a period of five years, I did not find, in evangelical churches' minds, a dozen ministers who had systematic personal devotional habits.

I would have pastor after pastor admit to me, when we would meet together to pray and to begin to share each other's needs and concerns and try to take down that cursed façade of professionalism, be honest and confess our sins one to another and pray. The complaint again and again that the Word of God had ceased to be a living book of devotional relationship to Christ and had become the official manual in the administration of professional duty. Not a dozen men.

Is it no wonder that there was doctrinal imbalance? Is it no wonder that there was a cold heart? Is it no wonder that there was no close searching application of the Scripture? When the great majority of the men that I have met, when they're honest in this thing, admit that there is no systematic exposure to the Book of God for the purpose of personal illumination and sanctification. In 2 Timothy chapter 3, the passage that we love to quote when we are demonstrating the truth of the inspiration and authority of the Scripture, there's a word spoken to us as the servants of God that is most searching. The Apostle Paul says to Timothy in verse 15, that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures.

He's addressing his remarks to Timothy. From a child you've known the Holy Scriptures, and this is their first function, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. Timothy, the Scriptures have performed their first and primary intention in your life.

They have led you to faith in Jesus Christ and unto the salvation that is in him. But Timothy, that is not the only function of the Scripture. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine or teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

Now notice verse 17, that not the people of God in general, but that the man of God in particular might be perfect or mature, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. He's speaking of the inspiration, the authority, and the function of the Holy Scriptures with a primary reference to that function in the preacher. Then in chapter 4 he speaks of the Scriptures in their function as the basis of his preachments.

Preach the word, reprove, rebuke, exhort. But the latter part of this chapter says that the word of God is to do its profitable work of instruction, reproof, correction, with this end in view, that the man of God, that particular term that he uses for Timothy, but thou, O man of God, flee these things, lay hold on eternal life, that the man of God may be perfect. This has to do with his life furnished unto good works.

I am not furnished to preach simply by an analysis of the text and by the ability to lay it out. If that word has not, first of all, been the instrument of my own personal indoctrination and instruction and sanctification, I am not fit to declare it to others. This is its function in my life, and this function must always be primary, for I am, first of all, a Christian, and secondly, a Christian minister.

And that order must never be reversed. I am to take heed to myself and to my doctrine. I am to save myself and those that hear Jeremiah said, Thy words were found, and I did keep them, and thy words were unto me the joy and the rejoicing of my heart.

Too often we must make the confession, Thy words were found, and I did examine them, and thy words were unto me the form and substance of the sermon in my head. But Jeremiah said, Thy words were found, and I did assimilate them to myself personally. I experienced their exhilarating power in my own life.

That's what Paul's telling Timothy. Let that word teach you. Get your doctrinal instruction on your knees with an open book, so that they come not as icy propositions merely resting on the surface of the mind, but become as warm, sentient, living truth burned into the fibers of the heart.

Let it teach you, Timothy. Let it reprove you. Strong word.

Whip. Mastigas. Let it whip you.

Let it correct you. Let it instruct you in the way of holiness, that you may be thoroughly furnished unto good works. My own heart is smitten again and again when I think of our Lord's word to the Church at Ephesus.

He gives the word of commendation, I know thy works, speaks of their doctrinal correctness and of their administration of discipline. Thou has tried those that say they are apostles and are not, and has found them false, and put them out of their midst, and then they say you have had patience and you have borne for my name's sake. Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come and remove thy candlestick out of its place. You see, the head was correct, and the hands were busy, but the heart had become cold, and the Lord Jesus said that just as surely as the maintenance of correct doctrine in the head, and God-directed activity in the hands are necessary to be an effective witness, so is the maintenance of the burning heart. Nothing had been defective in the head or the hands, but in the heart, and the Lord Jesus spoke to that issue, and said unless this is corrected, I will remove thy candlestick out of its place.

In the area of our own personal devotional life, the word of God, dear brethren, must be to us first of all that book that we relish, because here we see the face of the God whom we love, who has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ. We long to know his will, we long to be worshipers, we long to have our service, and all that we do and are shaped and molded by the living words of the living God. And this is equally true of the matter of secret prayer.

I shall break all the rules and read from a book. In this most excellent and helpful book, Spurgeon's Lectures to His Students, a book that I try to read periodically, in it he says in the chapter on the preacher's private prayer, it may scarcely be needful to commend to you the sweet uses of private devotion, yet I cannot forbear. To you as the ambassadors of God, the mercy seat has a virtue beyond all estimate.

The more familiar you are with the court of heaven, the better shall you discharge your heavenly trust. Among all the formative influences which go to make up a man honored of God in the ministry, I know of none more mighty than his familiarity of all the influences, think of them, intellectual, social, genetic, what God put into him when he made him. All of these, he said, I know of none, none more influential than familiarity with the mercy seat.

All that a college course can do for a student is coarse and external, compared with the spiritual and delicate refinement obtained by communion with God. While the unformed minister is revolving upon the wheel of preparation, prayer is the tool of the great potter by which he molds the vessel. All our libraries, and this man had one, and he used it and knew what was in them, and our studies are mere emptiness compared with our closets.

We grow, we wax mighty when we prevail in prayer. Prayer will singularly assist you in the delivery of your sermon. In fact, nothing can so gloriously fit you to preach as descending fresh from the mount of communion with God to speak with men.

None are so able to plead with men as those who have been wrestling with God on their behalf. It is said of Joseph Ilion, he poured out his very heart in prayer and preaching. His supplications and exhortations were so affectionate, so full of holy zeal, life, and vigor, that they quite overcame his hearers.

He melted them so that he thawed and mollified and sometimes dissolved the hardest of hearts. Prayer may not make you eloquent after the human mold, but it will make you so truly eloquent, for you will speak out of the heart. And isn't that the meaning of the word eloquence? It will bring fire from hell.

As fresh springs of thought will frequently break during preparation and answer to prayer, so will it be in the delivery of the sermon. Most preachers who depend upon God's Spirit will tell you that their freshest and best thoughts are not those which were premeditated, but ideas which came to them flying as on the wings of angels, unexpected treasures brought by a sudden celestial hand, seeds of the flowers of paradise wafted from the mountains of myrrh. That's what the doctor was talking about yesterday.

When that divine afraidness comes upon the servant of God, and all his mental faculties seem augmented in his powers of expression and his capacity to feel for the truth of God and the God of truth and the people to whom he speaks, he becomes another man when clothed by the Spirit. That Spirit, who in a way that is mysterious to me in his operations and mighty anointings, is precipitated in answer to prayer. For the promise of our Lord has never been negated.

He gives the Spirit to those who ask him. As Paul declared in Philippians 1, this shall turn to my salvation or deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It's in the context of secret prayer that eternal verities which we give assent to become living realities.

I find, and this is somewhat of a confession as well as an exhortation, I find my own words mock me too often when I preach, when I can say the word hell and not feel the horror of it, when I can speak of heaven and not be warned by the Holy Ghost that this is the place my Lord is preparing for me, and I find no answer to that problem but to do as I often do, to get on my knees and take the passages that speak of hell before I go to the pulpit to preach and read them over and ask God the Holy Ghost to burn into my heart that people that I look at, they're going to hear those words depart from me, people whose voices will say to me at the door, thank you for the sermon, pastor, are voices that will one day be unending those cries and groans of the damned. God, help me to believe it, help me to preach to them so that they'll know I believe it. And the truth that burned on Sunday can be icy cold by Monday.

Truth received in the crucible of waiting upon God can only be maintained in their warmth in that same context. And if I read or write the biographies of the great men of God, I find that this is their unanimous testimony, Whitefield, Spurgeon, McShane, all with one accord declare that if there was any secret to their ministries, it was this. It was the man.

And therefore I submit to you the proposition that as we consider what's wrong with preaching today, this is the root of the problem. How can men teach some of the things they teach in the name of orthodoxy, who are on their knees pouring over the scriptures? No, they're not on their knees pouring over the scriptures. They're simply parroting what their peers have said.

How can we who say we believe the biblical doctrines speak of them in such a perfunctory way? If we're receiving those truths on our knees, we shall speak of them with the glow and the fire of heaven upon our souls. And so the problem with preaching today lies in the man who preaches specifically in the area of the personal devotional life, secondly in the area of practical piety. And again I refer to what I observed in the itinerant ministry.

Many a church in its pulpit ministry is being terribly hampered by the absence of practical piety in the life of the teaching elder. It's interesting that 1 Timothy 3, having mentioned that the man must be blameless, immediately moves to a specific area, and you know what it is and so do I, his home life. If any man be blameless, the husband of one wife, having children not accused of riot or unruly, for if a man rule not his own house, how shall he rule the house of God? And I say not censoriously, but with a, I trust, a true concern that many a time I realized that the pulpit ministry of some precious servants of God was negated

by the failure of practical piety in the realm of the home life.

I know of a situation that came to my attention recently where a minister was actually asked to resign by his church because of the wagging tongue of his wife. The problem was not basically the man, his message, or his ministry, but his failure to rule his own house, and even to bring his wife into line in the area of her wagging tongue. How can we call upon others, brethren, to be obedient to the word of God if we are disobedient when God so clearly says that to qualify for the teaching elder's position, our own houses must be ruled well? It does not say perfectly, it does not say that we have power to infuse grace into the souls of our children, but if we do not have sufficient principle and our own lives are not sufficiently weighted by their own godly example as to rule our houses, how can we rule the house of God? That's the question.

It's my own personal conviction that if a man fails to meet that requirement, he has no more right to remain in the ministry than if he fails on one of the other requirements where it says not accused of riot or unruly. Brethren, I do not pronounce in individual cases for God alone is the Lord of the conscience, but certainly it cannot be of God that in church after church there is no proven power because the light is so shoddy in the area of practical piety, specifically in the home life. In the realm of our speech, a dear servant of God once said to me, and I shall never forget it, he said, you cannot be a clown and a prophet both.

You've got to make your choice. I hope I've made the right choice. This does not mean we'll not be truly human and that we shall feel there is something sinful in the natural ability and exhilaration that comes from a hearty laugh, but this study, stakeholder fact, to always be funny amongst our people, they somehow can't make the transition from the clown to the prophet.

If seriousness, not fleshly somberness, but true seriousness is not the mark of our lives in life amongst our people, let us not expect that when we ascend the pulpit some kind of magical process will immediately make them sit trembling before the words of God. They'll rather think that we are play actors. If they never see us serious regarding the issues of eternity in their presence individually, we shall not experience the power and the sobriety of these issues when we meet together.

The problem with our preaching, brethren, so often is the shoddiness of our lives in the realm of practical piety, our home life, our speech, and let me mention another area, the use of our time. Let your people suspect you of laziness, and you can have all-night prayer meetings praying for power and it won't be there. Let your people suspect you of laziness.

Let them suspect me of laziness, and the respect that is a part of pulpit power will be gone. Then let me mention a third area briefly. In the realm of the man, not only should we be concerned about our personal devotional lives if we would see our preaching power augmented, the realm of practical piety, but in the area of the purity of our motivation.

How often, when I've gone into churches, have pastors come, but very apologetically, because I think they realized their slip was showing when they said it, and they'd come to meet together to pray, and they would say, Brother, I'm so glad you're here this week, and there are a couple of situations that if the Lord gives you liberty, I'd love to have you just touch on this, and maybe touch on that, and maybe you could say this, and we've got some young people who sit in the back row and fool around, and I've just never said anything to them, maybe you might be able, and all in all they go cowering before their people. Oh brethren, how we need purity of motivation if we would experience power in the pulpit. Let me suggest three areas of that motivation.

First and primary, the fear of God. The best definition I know of the fear of God is found in John Brown's commentary of 1 Peter, where he has 18 pages on the little phrase, fear God, in that setting in chapter 2, God honor the king, 18 pages on the fear of God. And he summarizes it in this way, the fear of God is that attitude, walking in that attitude and disposition in which we regard the smile of God as our greatest delight, our primary aim, and we regard the frown of God as the greatest thing to be granted.

You see, a man who walks in the fear of God walks amongst men as a servant of men, but with an eye single to the smile of the frown of God. God said to Jeremiah, and Jeremiah won a passage that brings great comfort, one that I had to sweat through this morning to get any measure of confidence to approach you men today, be not afraid of their faces, lest I confound thee before them. They shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee, for I am with thee, saith the Lord to deliver thee.

Ah, but I am a child, who in God's name am I to stand before many of my fathers in the faith, in experience, in knowledge? And God said to Jeremiah, say not, I am a child, for to whomsoever I shall send thee, thou shalt go, and whatsoever I command thee, thou shalt speak. Jeremiah, this is not a matter of your experience, your age, but I want a vessel that will be where I put him, and will say what I tell him. Will you be that? And Jeremiah said, yes.

That's what God wants, a vessel that will go where God sends him, and will say what God tells him. And he says, don't look at their faces. If you do, I'll confound you.

That's one verse I don't want to prove experimentally. What would it be to have God confound me? I want to take that verse by faith. I believe it's true, but I don't want to prove it in experience.

The Apostle Paul declared a very clear way, 2 Corinthians 4, 1. Then again, 2 Corinthians 2, 17, speaking as of God, in the sight of God, we speak in Christ. 1 Thessalonians 2, 3, as we were allowed of God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who trieth our hearts. The fear of man bringeth a snare.

One of the elements of powerful preaching is preaching from a vessel that's liberated. Liberated from what? From the ensnaring effects of the fear of man. I am never free to bless men unless I'm freed from their smiles and their frowns.

You see, people know when you can be bought by their smiles, and bought by their frowns. But it doesn't take them long to discern whether or not you're a man who's not affected either by their smiles or their frowns. That's a free man in Christ.

The fear of man bringeth a snare. It'll snare your tongue. And when those flashes of light come in the pulpit, and there are applications that you know may sting and wound some choice member of the church, you see, if your eye is to the fear of God and to the fear of men, you stumble, you fumble, you can't give orders to that which you know you ought to.

But when you're free from your people, now you're at liberty to bless, but only them. And so I submit that if there's to be an increased power in the pulpit, there must be a return to purity of motivation, the fear of God. Secondly, the love of the truth.

The love of the truth, we are called upon to declare the whole counsel of God. Acts 20 and verse 26, and Paul says, only as he did was he pure from the blood of all men. He declared the whole spectrum of divine revelation.

There's only one reason why we preach that men are lost, bound in their sins under the condemnation of God. God declares it, and we love his truth. Whether it's palatable or unpalatable truth, our love of the truth is such that we want the whole world to know all that God has revealed.

And the third area in this matter of motivation, love to men. I'm convinced, brethren, that this is what will drive us to applicatory preaching. Such a love for men that we can't stand to see them slumber in our ministries.

Such a love that will enable us to be faithful to them. McShane said, the man who loves you most is the man who tells you the most truth about yourself. Second Corinthians 7, Paul says, am I sorry that I made you sorry? No, sir.

He said, I'm glad I made you sorry, because your sorrow led to your salvation. In another place he said, Am I loved the less because I tell you the truth? He said, I'm sorry, but I'm going to love you anyway and continue to tell you truth, even if you don't love me. You see, what hinders us in being faithful to men is really a form of self-love.

We love our own feelings so much, and we want to preserve them. We're not going to run the risk of offending somebody and getting them mad at us. Or they may go to hell, but that's all right, just so long as they perish loving us.

I've heard people say, well, boy, that fellow preached in such a furious way. It ought to be said of every true preacher of the gospel, because his love to men is such that he's willing to communicate the truth that they may not relish, but which is for their good and for their salvation. What's wrong with preaching today? Some of the failure, I'm convinced, is in the realm of impurity of motivation.

And now let's, for the time remaining, consider something of the message, for there is a direct relationship between the man and the message. Will you try to picture with me a rather grotesque situation? Here's Mickey Mantle with all his aches and pains, but still his tremendous ability. The Yanks are behind, three runs, last of the ninth, bases loaded, and up comes Mickey Mantle.

He moves up to the plate, and he's got a lead pencil in his hands for a bat. Well, you see, how in the world is he ever going to knock it out of the ballpark with a lead pencil in his hand? You see, the problem's not with the man, but the problem's with the thing with which he's trying to deliver. It just, it just doesn't have it.

And it's possible that there can be the measure of personal piety and purity of motivation and practical godliness and devotional warmth that a man may know and experience, but he may be trying to deliver the goods with a lead pencil. You see, what you say has some great measure of importance in terms of the effect and the result attained. And the Apostle mentions that, puts the two together in 2 Corinthians 4, 1 and 2. He says, And seeing as we have received this ministry, we faint not, but having renounced the hidden things of darkness, personal piety, not walking in craftiness, there's the realm of motivation, not being sneaky about this.

Then he goes on to say, nor handling the word of God deceitfully, there comes the manner, the content of his preaching, but by the manifestation of the truth, the full display of the truth, commending ourselves, there's the man again, to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And you see those two things woven together. He vindicates, he says, my motives were pure, my attitudes, my light, and my message, and he joins the two in those two very weighty verses.

Now, in the area of the matter of our preaching, what's wrong with preaching today? Well, much of it, of course, I trust this doesn't apply to us as much as it does to men who would be found concentrated, perhaps, other than at a Reformed ministers' fellowship, is that much of the preaching of our day lacks real Biblical content. One of the unique things about the ministry of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, regardless of what you may feel about it, is this. You are gripped by the sheer weight and power of the Scriptures.

Now, I have a number of his sermons on tape, and some of them I've listened to over and over again. As I've tried to analyze it, I said, now look, he doesn't even use metaphorical language. Very few similes, very few metaphors, very few illustrations, and many times not even a very clearly discernible outline.

Well, what is it that gives it its power? Here's the element. It is packed full of solid Biblical substance, so that you feel standing between you and that preacher is a ball of divine truth, and the issue is not with you and that man, but with you and the Word of God and the God of the Word. That's what men ought to sense when they hear us.

And, of course, much of the problem of preaching today is it lacks Biblical content, because men are defective in their own devotional life, their minds and souls are not saturated with the Scriptures, so that the Holy Spirit can't bring to remembrance something out of a vacuum. It's as the mind and soul are steeped in the Word of God devotionally, that in the context of exposition and preaching, there is something to be drawn up so that an illusion, an illustration, as much as possible, comes in a Biblical setting and in the very words of Holy Scripture. Much preaching today in terms of matter lacks any real doctrinal substance.

Again, I say I trust this is not as true of us by the grace of God as it may be true of other fellowships, other circles, and then in the third area that I think may be more true of us, much preaching today lacks in practical application. There may be solid Biblical content, solid doctrinal substance, but so little practical application, so that men know how to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things. Now, as sort of a subheading of that, may I suggest three areas in which, if I've observed it all correctly, we are most weak in our Reformed circles, those of us who hold without embarrassment to the system of doctrine set forth in the great creeds that came out of the Reformation.

Our preaching is weak because of its failure, first of all, to spell out the necessity and the nature of evangelical repentance. In our reaction against some kind of a works of salvation, and in our reaction against Arminian activism, I think some of us have fallen under the philosophical pinch of thinking, how can I preach man's responsibility when I know he has no ability to do this? Well, this problem didn't bother the Apostle Paul. He spoke clearly of man's inability to do anything spiritually good, and yet he spoke most clearly of man's responsibility to repent.

And when he reviews his ministry to the Ephesian elders, he says in Acts 20.21, I testify to you publicly and from house to house that men should repent and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. In Acts 26 and verse 20, he says the same thing, that at Damascus and Judea and to all the Gentiles, he preached that men should repent and turn to God and do works meet for repentance. Now, I make this conclusion because I've had the unhappy experience and very embarrassing experience to be in churches that have repentance on the creed and in the Confession and in the Catechisms.

But when I would preach a three or four message series on the subject and simply doing what a Bible school student could do, taking the concordance, finding all the references, trying to organize them under some system, and preach on the soil of repentance, the grace of God, the roots of repentance, conviction

of sin, and the revelation of the cross of Christ, the substance of repentance, a change of mind to sin, to God, to righteousness, the fruits of repentance, holiness, obedience, to have people sit there and then come up afterward and say, now, it isn't that they didn't hear the word repentance. Sure, they heard it. But it was not spelled out so that the necessity and the nature of evangelical repentance hit them and they were convinced, unless I repent and I bring forth the fruits of repentance, I shall perish, even though my head may be packed full of objective and correct orthodoxy.

It has been the mark, again, of the men whom God has used, those names I've mentioned earlier, that they all, without exception, spelled out the necessity, the nature, and the fruits of evangelical repentance. Secondly, in this matter of our content, there should be a clear presentation of the whole Christ to the whole man. I fear that we have returned to a Romish concept of faith in our circles.

Remember the great issue that the Reformers brought into focus, that faith was something more than a census, a mere nodding of the head to the body of truth presented by the Church as the faith. They brought back into focus that faith was fiducia, there was trust, there was commitment, there was involvement of the whole man with the truth that was believed, and with Christ, who is the focus of that truth. And I believe we need to spell this out clearly in categorical statements so that people realize that a mere nodding of a head to the doctrines that they are exposed to is not the essence of saving faith, but that saving faith involves the commitment of the whole man to the Christ, the whole Christ, prophet, priest, and king who is set forth in the gospel.

Then we shall not see people talking about believing but not surrendering, knowing Christ as Savior but not as Lord. All that will disappear if there is a clear preachment of the whole Christ to the whole man. And then there is a third area that is a very sensitive area, and yet I am convinced a very necessary area and one which I have observed.

We are weak in Reformed circles, that is, a setting forth of the distinguishing traits of a true believer. And involved in that is setting out the difference between the grounds of salvation and the assurance of salvation. I have found in my brief experience of moving in these circles that the moment a few people begin to do some scriptural self-examination, they just begin to obey 2 Corinthians 13.5, examine yourself, prove yourself whether you have been to faith, and somebody hears about it, why, you think it was the next thing to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

People look upon doubts as the most terrible thing in the world. Somebody is doubting, somebody is troubled, somebody is searching his heart. All that in the terrible thing might be the best thing that ever happened.

For as I have said on other occasions in the hearing of some of you, doubts will never damn a man, but presumption will. And as long as the Scripture says again and again, let no man deceive you, let no man deceive himself, be not deceived, what are those exhortations for? If self-deception is not a very real possibility and an actuality, then why is the Bible filled with exhortations, be not deceived? I mean, all of this becomes meaningless gibberish if it's merely talking about a hypothetical possibility. And if people can come in to the pale of the external church and be deceived under the ministry of the apostles so that they felt it necessary to say, brethren, make your calling and your election sure.

We've got a few deceived people coming in under our pea-shooting. And that we need to echo out again, let us make our calling and election sure, and then spell out and set before them the scriptural distinction between a true believer and the spurious. I have found in my own experience that this never harms the

true child of God.

The most searching, applicatory preaching in this area will serve to bring the true child of God to a more solid assurance. And I've found it again and again and again. There's only one thing that stands to be harmed by close examination.

That's the counterfeit. If I had two twenty-dollar bills--I don't, but if I did--and I went to my bank and I said, now I want to deposit these in my checking account, and the teller takes them, he says, hey, wait a minute, Mr. Martin, I think there might be a counterfeit here. Now, if those bills are genuine, they stand to lose nothing by close scrutiny.

In fact, they gain something. If he takes them back and puts them under a magnifying glass and takes a genuine twenty and compares them, if they're genuine, if ever I was confident that they're the real thing, when he comes back and says, Mr. Martin, I've put them under the magnifying glass, I've examined them closely, they're the real thing, sorry I disturbed you, if ever I had two twenty-dollar bills that I'm sure are the real thing, these two I am sure because they have undergone close scrutiny, and they've come away bearing the marks of the genuine. The only thing that stands to lose anything, and it ought to lose something, is the counterfeit.

And this is true in this kind of preaching. The only one that stands to lose anything under a scriptural setting forth of the distinguishing traits of a true believer is the spurious believer. And he ought to be disturbed now while the day of salvation is still upon us.

Now, if we make unscriptural distinctions, and I have said repeatedly that this was one of the problems of second-generation Puritanism, where you make all fine distinctions that are not found in the Bible, a plague on that, but brethren, where the Bible gives us explicit statements, they who are my sheep hear my voice and they follow me, let us not fear to tell our people, if you're not hearing and following, you have no grounds to claim you're his sheep. Though you may know all about the fact that he had his sheep upon his heart from eternity in the covenant of redemption, though you may know all the facts of how he died for his sheep with a particular intent in his death, and how the Holy Spirit effectually calls his sheep, you may know all of that, but if you're hearing his voice, are you following? Press that issue. Press the issues of 1 John.

These things are written that ye may know. What things hereby do we know if we love the brethren, if we keep his commandments and all of those tests? What's wrong with our preaching? People are being lulled to sleep. The conscience needs to be wounded and stabbed.

If men might ask the question, am I truly in the faith? And now in the five minutes that remain, I want to touch briefly on the matter of the manner of the message, and I'll give you the three things I had hoped to expand but time will not permit. Urgency, orderliness, and directness. Genuine urgency is the mother of true eloquence.

You're over there in the dormitory, and some fellow at two o'clock in the morning starts walking down the hall saying, hey, fellas, I think maybe this place might be on fire, and we ought to do something about it. You kind of wake up and say, what'd that guy say? Oh, he's walking in his sleep and mumbling something about the place might be on fire. Now, you're not going to do much.

You let someone who's convinced the place is on fire and wants to get you out of there start moving down the hall at two o'clock, and the urgency of the reality of the danger will move him to a native eloquence. He may be very quiet, very retiring, very diffident by nature, but he's going to go down that hall banging on doors, brethren, brethren, this place is on fire. Get up and get out, and you wake up from your sleep, and you hear him and say, hey.

Now, the urgency in some, because of personality, because of temperament, because of inbuilt microphones, may come out loud. In others, it may come out softly, but it'll have those overtones. When you've made a wonderful discovery, you don't say, you know, I found a nice thing today sometime at your convenience.

Maybe you'd like to come see it. No. Oh, you've got to come with me.

Show us something beautiful. You say, maybe that's worth going. Now, this is what I'm talking about, urgency.

This is what'll make us work at this matter of audience contact. We haven't come just to deliver our oration. We've come to communicate truth with people.

And if we see we don't have somebody, somebody's looking around. Spurgeon said this, when he'd see a little fellow on the front row who wasn't listening, it bothered him. So he'd drop out a little something special for little boys until he got his eyes again.

Why? He was urgent. He believed what he had to say was a matter of life and death for his hearers. And so he would do anything legitimate to make sure he had their ears.

He couldn't make the truth go to the heart. Only the Holy Ghost could do that. But his job was to get it into their ears.

And if he didn't have their ears, he did everything to get their ears. That's my job, get their ears. God alone can get it into the heart.

Peter did that. Harken, brethren! Yes, sir. And he preached.

Then it says, the Holy Ghost stabbed him to the heart. But if they hadn't hearkened, they wouldn't have been stabbed. And so that sense of urgency will make us work on audience contact.

It will make us work in the area of communication. We use a word and people give us that long-ago and far-away look. We know it hasn't registered.

We'll be sensitive to this. We'll use a different word. I remember my experience in England a few months ago.

It was traumatic. I didn't realize how much I used, oh, like just this matter of Mickey Mantle in the bat. That would mean nothing to an Englishman.

You don't even have strikes or outs in cricket. And I said something about a situation where you got two strikes against you. And I got this blank stare.

Well, you see, recognizing that, I had to change my figure, my metaphor, my analogy. But you see, if there's the sense of urgency, you're sensitive to whether or not you're communicating in the area of contact, in the area of understanding, and in the area of specific application. I'm convinced, brethren, this is what will drive us to work at applicatory preaching.

If you were a doctor, you went into a community, and because of what you knew as a doctor, you were convinced that that whole community was suffering from a certain disease that six months from now would kill them all, but the symptoms were not such that they knew it, you wouldn't just go in and make a general pronouncement, you're all going to die in six months, you've got a bad disease, they look at you and say, this poor guy's nuts. What's wrong with him? We're not sick. But if you're convinced of it, you will then set out to set before them the symptoms of this disease, to convince them.

You just won't make a general pronouncement and go your way and hope a few of them will catch on. You'll work at this matter until they are convinced and know what you know and what you're convinced of. This is what will make us work at application.

Then, this matter of reasonable orderliness, the mind I like to look at as the figure of a sponge if you want to. I don't know what figure you want to use, but there they are sitting before me with this capacity to embrace certain truths. What I want to do is to drive a couple of sharp stakes into that sponge and then hang some loops of truth on those stakes, so that when they go home, a stake there, a stake here, and some truth hanging on there, you see.

That's the necessity of some form of orderliness. The mind can't receive truth in some kind of a big glob. It's got to come with some reasonable orderliness.

Mr. Adams dealt with some of this. And then last of all, the matter of directness. And at this point, I want to close reading a quotation.

I have many other quotations I wanted to read, but I have problems with the clock. In Bridges' book, which, by the way, is being reprinted again by the Banner of Truth, and if you don't have it, I commend it for your reading, Charles Bridges, the Christian ministry, the section on preaching the gospel is excellent. He says this in the area of directness.

For this end, we must show them, from first to last, that we are not merely saying good things in their presence, but directing what we say to them personally as a matter which concerns them beyond expression. And then you read, in the great sermons of the great preachers, how there was this directness. You feel, even now, hundreds of years after the sermons were preached and written, when you read them, you feel as though that sermon is boxing you up in the corner to where you've got to do something with the truth that you're confronting.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones mentioned the use of questions. Joseph Ilion's Alarm to the Unconverted is a classic illustration of this, where he backs the sinner against the wall, as it were, with questions, causing him to reflect upon his own way, upon his own state before God. Are you at peace? Show me upon what ground your peace is maintained.

Is it scripture peace? Can you show the distinguishing marks of a sound believer? Can you evidence you've something more than any hypocrite in the world ever had? If not, fear this peace more than any trouble, and know that a carnal peace commonly proves the most mortal enemy of the soul, and whilst it

kisses and smiles fairly, it fatally smites, as it were, under the fifth rib. Now, conscience, do your work. Speak out.

And then he goes on to press the issue in directness to his hearers. May God deliver us from simply saying good things in the presence of some people, and enable us to so preach that men know we're saying weighty things to them personally. What's wrong with preaching today? Well, I'm sure many of the faults are exemplified in my life and ministry as much as in others, but I suggest that together we consider the problem of preaching today is a problem of the man.

In the area of personal devotional experience, in the realm of practical piety, in the purity of motivation, what's wrong with preaching today? Some of the problems in the message, the matter that is being preached, and in the manner in which it is being communicated. May God grant that where any of these things legitimately apply to us, that we may suffer the word of exhortation, and by the grace of God, be more effective communicators of the truth of the scripture.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/17/SID17255.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/albert-n-martin/whats-wrong-with-preaching-today/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net