

How Gospel Centered Preaching Can Go Wrong

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of expounding the whole Bible in preaching, focusing on the foundational role of Christ's crucifixion in every sermon. It challenges the common notion of making a beeline from every text to the cross, instead urging a deep, thorough exploration of the text's words and meanings, with Christ's sacrifice as the underlying basis for all biblical truths and benefits offered to God's people.

Duration: 49:54

Scripture: Romans 8:32, 1 Corinthians 2:2, Galatians 6:14, 1 Peter 2:24, 2 Timothy 3:16

Topics: "Biblical Exposition", "The Centrality of the Cross"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray together. Father, my heart's desire now is that Your Word would be honored, Your name would be magnified, Christ would be exalted through the preaching of Your Word, not just in this moment, but in the way I talk about preaching. Would You make preaching more faithful to Your Word, more magnifying to Jesus, more purifying to Your church, more powerful in the world? Lord, these are days of extraordinary need in the midst of a corona virus, and preaching is crucial, it will always be crucial, and so I am so eager to do what I can to be a part of making preaching in our pulpits now, and as long as You tarry, as powerful as it can be for the glory of Jesus, and I ask this in His name now, amen.

So the title I was given for this message was Preaching the Gospel as Expounding the Whole Bible. It wasn't my title, it was given to me, I was happy to take it, so let me try to tell you what I think it means. It assumes, I think, that we should, in our preaching as pastors, expound the whole Bible.

Now that's a good assumption, because Paul says all Scripture is profitable, all of it, everywhere in the Bible, anything you draw out truly is beneficial for God's people, 2nd Timothy 3.16. Then, what, four verses later, 2nd Timothy 4.2, preach the word, and I take the flow of thought there to mean the word that

was just spoken of, namely, all Scripture is inspired by God. Preach the word. So the first part of my assignment is in a title, Expound the Whole Bible.

Great assumption. It doesn't mean, I assume, preach every verse of the Bible, open every verse of the Bible. You can't do that, you can't do that in a lifetime, not if you take exposition seriously.

Like, I'm gonna really open what this verse says. It can't be done. So what does it mean? What does preach the whole Bible mean? I think it means, in the 40 or 50 years that you're ministering in the You crisscross the whole Bible, taking text from anywhere and everywhere as the Spirit leads, and as the times demand, and as your people need, because it's all inspired, it's all profitable.

The exposition of the whole Bible for the profit of your people is a hundred times more significant than any ideas you might come up with to make your own private commentary on religion or politics or culture. So ransack the Bible and preach God's Word from everywhere in the Bible. That's the first half of my title.

Or the second half. What about the other half, the first half of the title? It says, Preaching the Gospel. And then it's connected, the two halves are connected with as.

Preaching the Gospel as expounding the whole Bible. Which I assume means, as you expound every text in the Bible from anywhere, you should be preaching the Gospel. I think that's what they wanted me to talk about.

How, in expounding every text, do you preach the Gospel? Now I've got a problem with that assignment, and this whole message is built around my trying to solve the problem. I don't think that way about preaching. Week in and week out, when I stood in this pulpit, and this is the one I stood in for 22 years because this building here was built in 1991, and I came in 1980, so for 22 years in this pulpit and 11 years in the other one, that's just not the way I prepared my sermons.

It's not the way I thought about preaching. My mindset was not, as I came to my text or as I came to the pulpit, how can I preach the Gospel from this text? I just didn't think that way. I don't think that way now about preaching.

My controlling thought was, what do the words and phrases and clauses and sentences and connecting links and logic of this text, the flow of this flow, what does that mean in this text? Or to be more precise, my controlling thought was, what reality did this inspired writer intend to communicate to his readers through the words, through the phrases, the sentences, the logical flow of the thought? What reality did he want me to see? What did he want me to think? What did he want me to feel? What did he want me to do in response to the reality he was revealing through the particular words that he wrote? So my first and controlling thought as I come to a text in this book or as I come to the pulpit is not, how can I preach the Gospel from this text? Rather, I'm driven by the question, how can I see what this author sees? What glimpse of divine and human reality might he have for me if I linger? If I look and look and look at his text with earnest prayer that God would help me to see what's really there, and with heartfelt renunciation of every sin in me that might distort what is there in the text, or mute it, or misuse it in some way. And then I come to the people, and week after week in preaching I try to show them the amazing things that I saw, looking at words and phrases and sentences and logical flow and connecting links. What realities did I see? What amazing glories did I see in the text? I want to show them, and then I want to show them how I saw it.

Because I think the authority of Scripture hangs on your people seeing how you saw what you saw. Otherwise, you're the authority and not the Bible. I think that's really important for the sake of honoring God's Word, to show the very reality that you saw and how you saw it in the words of Scripture.

Pastor, where are you getting your ideas? I hear your ideas, show me how you're getting those ideas from these words. I'm looking down, I'm looking up, they're not matching. I don't see it.

I like your ideas, I just don't see them. Where you're getting them. There is a kind of preaching that floats above the text, just above the text, and doesn't land often enough in the very words of text for the people to see where the ideas of the preacher are coming from.

So I don't think that the controlling question, how can I preach the gospel from this text, has, over the last 40 years or so, produced the kind of preaching that makes for strong, Bible-saturated, doctrinally rich, mature, stable, countercultural churches with a passion for radical obedience to God's Word. I don't think it has served us well. So I'm gonna offer you an alternative to those who think that preaching Christ, or preaching the gospel from every text, means dealing in some general comments about what the text says, hovering just above the text, seldom explaining the very words and phrases, and then moving on to the real concern of making a gospel crescendo with Christ and his atonement and the forgiveness of sin, so everybody can walk out relieved.

I think that kind of preaching tends to dull the expectations of the people that they might actually see fresh, new, beautiful, tough, deep, scary, wonderful things in the text. I think it tends to treat the actual words and phrases and logic of the inspired text as having minor significance by giving the impression that they don't need to be treated with any particular rigor or care, they're just preparations for the main thing that's coming. I think it tends to train people in bad habits of how to read their Bibles by diminishing the rigor and earnestness of meditating on the words of God day and night.

I think it tends to weaken the seriousness of practical biblical imperatives on how to live the Christian life in all holiness and purity and love by inserting, inserting the substitutionary atonement at critical moments when the emphasis should be falling on the urgency of obedience, because that's the urgency of the text. So, I want to commend to you an alternative to making every text a pathway to the gospel, to having the driving question in your sermon preparation be, how can I preach the gospel from this text? I want to wave a yellow flag in front of the saying that is so often attributed to Spurgeon, take your text and make a beeline to the cross. Nobody knows if Spurgeon said that, at least I can't find any Spurgeon scholars who can show that he did, but that doesn't matter, it's not the point.

Here's the point. Instead of taking your text and making a beeline to the cross, I think you should take the cross and make a beeline to your text. Instead of building your sermon toward the cross, build your sermon on the cross.

Instead of preaching biblical imperatives as pointers to Christ's perfection and imputed righteousness, I think we should preach imputed righteousness as the power to obey biblical imperatives, or to put it another way, standing on the power and the promises bought for God's elect by the blood of Jesus, wrestle, wrestle with the words and phrases and sentences and flow of thought in the text, wrestle with them until you see the reality that's really there in those words, and then show it to your people, and show them how you saw it, and then offer it to them. Offer it to them as a blood-bought gift, urging them with all your might to see it, and understand it, and embrace it, and be glad in it, and obey it, and share it. Let the reality of the text be the crescendo of the sermon.

So how did I come to that conclusion? Let me try to show you from Scripture how I got here. Let's start here. When I gave my full attention years ago, and the Lord gave me some wonderful teachers to push my nose into the text, thank God.

When I gave my full attention and vigorous effort to try to see the reality a biblical author wanted me to see through the words that he was writing and the way he wrote them, I realized I could not see the reality the way he wanted me to see it and the way he wanted me to share it. I couldn't see that reality if I didn't know more of what was in his mind than what was in the text. For example, Paul says in Romans 12 13, just a list of short commands, pursue hospitality.

Now I may have an idea about the meaning of the word hospitality, I might have an idea about the meaning of the word pursue, but there are a dozen ways that I could pursue hospitality that are defective and that Paul would disapprove of. Right? I could pursue hospitality for fear of what others would think if I don't. Or I could pursue hospitality because I hope to be invited back.

I could pursue hospitality because I'm so legalistic I got to try and to gain my right standing with God by being hospitable because the Bible said I should. And Paul would shake his head and say, I didn't mean that. He would consider every one of those defective, but you can only know that.

You can only know what he intends, what he wants to happen. In those two words, if you know something from elsewhere in Paul about what's in his head, as he says, practice hospitality. You got to know something about the cross and about grace and about the Holy Spirit and about faith and sin and the glory of God.

The reality that Paul has in his mind that he wants us to know and embrace and obey, pursue hospitality is more than can be put into those two words. So now what? I asked what aspects of Paul's mental world, what aspects of Paul's mental world, his all-encompassing reality, what aspects of it must I see so that I won't mishandle what he says in particular sentences and clauses? So I posed the question, are there truths, realities, in an author's worldview, Paul in particular here, are there particular realities that are so pervasive, so all-encompassing, that they are relevant to everything he says? Are there truths in his worldview that if we ignore them, will always cause us to mishandle what particular sentences mean? Are there such sweeping realities in an author's mind that if we ignore them, we will not be able to respond to particular text the way he intends for us to respond? And my answer is yes. Let me name three of them.

I think these are the three most important, the ones that should guide all preaching. I'll only deal with one of them, but I'll mention the others. When Paul says in 1st Corinthians 10:31, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God, backed up by dozens and dozens of biblical passages that make clear God does everything for his own glory, when you see that, then you realize every text that Paul wrote, indeed all the biblical writers wrote, I would argue, were written ultimately to the end that God would be seen and savored as glorious, shown to be glorious.

That's one of the pervasive truths. Whether you eat or drink or write a biblical text or preach a sermon, do all, do all to the glory of God. If you don't pay attention to and bring every text into connection with that truth, the biblical writers would say, you didn't get all my intention here.

But to defend that would require another message. Here's the second sweeping, all-encompassing truth that I think we have to know in order not to misuse Paul's text, indeed all texts. Romans 14:23 says, whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Hebrews 11.6 says, without faith it is impossible to please God. So I infer that this truth is one of those pervasive truths, those all-encompassing realities for Paul, for the writer of the Hebrews, I think we could argue for all the biblical writers. Which means that if you're going to handle a biblical text in a way that accords with the overall intention of the writer, which of course is always that God be pleased and that we not sin, then you have to bring every text somehow into relationship to faith.

No faith, everything is sin. Without faith, no pleasing of God. Every sermon would abort if it didn't deal with faith.

And that would take another sermon to defend. But here's the one I want to talk about because it's totally fixed and relevant on my assignment. Does Paul tell us that there is something about the cross, something about Christ crucified that is so sweeping, so all-encompassing, that every benefit in every sermon offered to God's people must be related to it? Should we aim to preach the gospel from every text is one way to ask that question.

I don't think it's the most helpful one. So I want to ask, does Paul say anything about the death of Christ, about the atonement for sin, in relation to everything he preaches? And the answer is yes, in two places he does, at least. 1st Corinthians chapter 2 verse 1, When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Nothing among you. I decided to know nothing, nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Or Galatians 6 14, Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus. I'm not going to boast in anything except the cross of the Lord Jesus. So, taken at face value, those two passages say Paul doesn't preach anything.

He says, I don't know anything except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And Paul doesn't boast in anything except the cross of the Lord Jesus. What does that mean? What does it mean for our preaching? Somebody might say, well, don't over apply that, because he's probably just addressing a particular Corinthian situation and a particular Galatian situation, and so you can't generalize about that statement.

I don't think that's right for two reasons. Number one, even in the Corinthian situation, you've got the problem, right? He says, I don't intend to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and then he proceeds to talk about church divisions and church discipline and sexual immorality and lawsuits and marriage and singleness and food offered to idols and head coverings and spiritual gifts and more. You don't have to say, oh yeah, but today we have to talk about marriage.

Paul spoke about marriage right after saying, I only talk about Christ crucified. Or, if you go to Galatians and say, that's a special situation, that won't work, because it's not a special situation the way he expresses it. He says in chapter 6 verse 14, far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus.

He's speaking about a fundamental conviction that he has about reality, and you can see that by the way he grounds verse 14 in verse 15, which is why paying attention to the text is so absolutely crucial. He says, because neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation, that's the ground for saying, I only boast in Jesus. That's not a situationally limited ground.

Yet, Paul uses that same word for boast when he says this, we boast in the hope of the glory of God, Romans 5 too. We boast in our tribulations, Romans 5 3. We most gladly boast about our weaknesses, 2nd Corinthians 12 9. Who is our boast except you, the fellow Christians? And so he says, I only boast in the cross. And then he boasts in the church, and he boasts in tribulations, and he boasts in hope, and in God.

So here's what we have. 1st Corinthians 2 verse 2, Paul says that he intends to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And then he speaks in detail about eight other issues.

And in Galatians 6 14, he says, I don't boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then elsewhere, he boasts in the glory of God, and tribulations, and weaknesses, and fellow believers. So what does he mean? Paul's not confused.

What does he mean when he says, I only know the crucified, I only boast in the cross? I think he means this. In everything else that I know and preach, I know it and I preach it on the basis of the crucified one, on the foundation of the crucified one. Everything else in which I boast, I boast on the basis of the cross, on the foundation of the cross.

Now the application for our preaching would be every biblical topic, every text that we take up and worshipfully explain and offer to our people for their profit is based on the cross, the crucified one. It's underneath it. It's holding it up.

It could never be true without it. What's the basis for saying that? Romans 8 32 is the basis. He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not then also with him graciously give us all things? I think that's just about the most important sentence in the Bible.

So important for life, so important for preaching. This is the glorious link between the Father's sacrifice of Jesus and all things that come to God's people forever and now. This is the link.

The logic goes like this. If God did the hardest thing, not sparing his own Son, but giving him for us, then he will not fail to do the easier thing. Namely, give us everything forever.

That's the logic. So what does all things include? Christ dies. The Father doesn't spare his Son.

Result on that foundation, everything comes to us. What does that include? It's not prosperity preaching. And we know that because four verses later, that was verse 32 of Romans 8, four verses later, Paul is listing the all things.

And they include this, we are being killed all day long. But no, we are not being separated by death from his love. We are more than conquerors.

So the all things that is purchased by the blood of Jesus in the Father not sacrificing his Son is death and triumph through death with Christ forever, more than conquerors over death. So, the meaning of Romans 8 32 is this. For God's elect, the predestined, the called, the justified, Romans 8 30, for God's elect, every good thing and every bad thing that God turns for good was secured for us by the cross of Christ.

Every heaven-bound breath that a believer takes was bought by the blood of Christ. John Flavel, Mark Deverell will like this, he wrote a book about this. John Flavel, I don't even know if I'm pronouncing it right.

Flavel? I think it's Flavel. I like Flavel. John Flavel, the British Puritan 300 years ago, called the sweet dropper, commented on Romans 8 32 with these beautiful words, and they are so right.

Surely, he said, surely if God would not spare his own son one stroke, one tear, one groan, one sigh, one circumstance of misery, it can never be imagined that he should after this deny or withhold from his people for whose sake all this was suffered any mercies, any comforts, any privilege, spiritual or temporal, which is good for us. Does anybody wonder why we love the Puritans? It's absolutely right. And here's the implication for preaching.

There simply can be no benefits offered to us as God's dear children apart from the cross of Christ. None. But every sermon offers a benefit to God's children, doesn't it? Every sermon.

All Scripture is inspired and is profitable, beneficial. Every sermon is a gift, is a benefit, is profit for God's people. And the only way that anything profitable or beneficial can come to fallen, sinful, hell-deserving elect is Christ crucified.

That's the only hope that anything helpful might come to sinners like us. Therefore, every profit, every benefit, every blessing, every gift, every promise in the Bible, every gracious warning, every precious teaching, every solid doctrine, every transforming glimpse of the glory of God, in every sermon is blood bought. No exceptions.

Therefore, the cross, Christ crucified, is the foundation, the basis of every biblical sermon. Jesus died to purchase the miracle of obedience to texts. He paid his blood to purchase faithful exposition to texts.

He went to the cross to turn texts into Christ-exalting, beautiful holiness. Anything that minimizes the obedience, the exposition, the holiness, in the name of preaching the gospel from every text is contrary to the will of God. Consider an example.

1 Peter chapter 4, verses 7-9. 1 Peter 4, 7-9. The end of all things is at hand.

Therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Now, what should be the driving question as you come to this text? Will you make a few general comments about self-control and sober-mindedness and loving others and showing hospitality and without grumbling? Will you hover just above the text so that you never get down into the nitty-gritty of, what is self-control? I thought we were supposed to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. What's this self stuff? Help me, Pastor. I thought that sober-mindedness had to do with something, but now it has to do with prayer.

What might endless entertainment in my house have to do with the undoing of sober-mindedness in my prayer? Help me, Pastor. Come down here with me into these nitty-gritty questions. How exactly is my love supposed to cover her sin? And if it covers her sin, should she be rebuked? And if she's rebuked, won't that uncover the sin? Help me, Pastor.

These are complicated, difficult things that are being said here. And what about how to get rid of my grumbling spirit? And then having just floated above all those questions and never gotten into the nitty-gritty, time-consuming, hard, exegetical, practical, beautiful labor of helping people with all those kinds of questions in the particularities of the text. Do you then pass on? Do you then pass on to the great

crescendo? Behold Christ, the perfect incarnation of self-control on the way to Calvary.

Behold Christ, sober in prayer in Gethsemane, sweating blood. Behold Christ in His love by which He covered a multitude of sins. Behold Christ outstretched arms with cosmic hospitality on the cross.

Not a word of grumbling on the way to Golgotha. That's not exposition. That's imposition.

That's not a declaration of God's Word. It's a diminishing, perhaps a silencing of God's Word. That's not a faithful dealing.

With the beauty of holiness in this text, it's a distraction from the very beauty Jesus died to make possible. Yes, it is possible to inadvertently use Jesus to obscure what he died to obtain. Christ died so that we would make a beeline from the cross to the text.

That we would spend hours and hours wrestling with the questions, perplexities, sacrifices, beauties of self-control and sober-mindedness and prayer and love and the covering of sin and the sweetness and courage of hospitality and the miracle of life free from grumbling. He died so that He and His cross would come up under like a mighty wave carrying the beauties of all that obedience into the world for the glory of His name. He died for that.

He died for this text to be seen and known and loved and obeyed and shown to the world. You make a beeline from the cross to the text, and the crescendo is the beauty of holiness. What did Peter say? What did Peter say? In chapter 2 verse 24, he said, Christ Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

He died for self-control. He died for sober-mindedness. He died for prayer.

He died for our love covering our friends and families' sin. He died for hospitality. He died for deliverance from grumbling.

Peter says God is making, God is making a beeline from the cross to the text, from the cross to prayer, from the cross to love, from the cross to covering sins, from the cross to hospitality, from the cross to being free from grumbling. God is making that line. He's flying from cross to the beauty of holiness, not the other way around.

Don't tell your people that the beauty of the flower of righteousness is really the bloody root. That's not what flowers are for. So where do we stand now as we close? Where do we stand in regard to the title of this message? Preaching the gospel as expounding the whole Bible, or the implicit question, how do I preach the gospel from every text? Or the catchy way of asking it, how can I make a beeline from this text, every text, to the cross? And my response is, don't think that way.

Don't make that your controlling question as you come to the text and prepare your message. Instead, rivet the attention of your whole soul on the words and phrases and clauses and sentences and connections in your text. Push on them.

Pull on them. Squeeze them. Luther said, bang your head against them if you must, until you have wrung from them all the beauty that they contain.

And then, show your people what you've seen. Show them how you saw it, and how precious it must be if Christ would die to make people beautiful like that. Let's pray.

Father, we want to honor your Word. It is all God-breathed. Forbid that we would ever misuse the Word of God for some homiletical commitment that does not find in the text what you have put there.

Grant, I pray that Jesus Christ would be exalted, crucified, and risen, not as the crescendo of every sermon, but as the foundation of every sermon, producing a kind of church that in the world makes Jesus look beautiful. I ask this in his name, amen.

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