

MY PROCESS FOR SERMON DEVELOPMENT

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Someone asked me recently about my process for developing sermons. I'm sure every preacher uses his own unique procedure, but mine was developed during my time of study at Southwestern Baptist Theology Seminary...

Dr. Jesse Northcutt was my major professor in seminary. I think I had him for the basic sermon class required for all divinity students, and for four or five advanced preaching labs. In addition to being a scholar and a gentleman, Dr. Northcutt was a man of God committed to preparing new generations of preachers. Along with two other seminary preaching professors, he co-authored a basic preaching text- "Steps to the Sermon." Both in his book and his lectures, Dr. Northcutt stressed the integrity and responsibility required of one who would stand before others to proclaim "thus saith the Lord."

Here's the process I go through each week as I prepare to share God's Word on Sunday:

1. **Prayer.** Whether the scripture reference or topic is based on some of my devotional reading or on something God has specially laid on my heart, it is finally arrived at through prayer. Sometimes the sermon is so ready to be preached that I come in Monday morning with a clear sense of where I believe God is leading me. Other times, however, it is late in the week before I have the confidence that what is in my heart is from God. But the fact is, God has a unique Word for each unique congregation every Lord's Day. It is the preacher's responsibility to discern that message and proclaim it with integrity and accuracy. This normally involves several hours over several days.
2. **Preliminary Reading.** I read the text which I feel that God has led me to, and begin to make my first notes. What's the flow of the passage? What's the context? Are there repeated themes, specific commands, or other words or phrases that stand out? At this point I begin making my first draft of an outline for the scripture being read. During this stage it is not unusual for me to read it from several different English version of the Bible. This stage can take anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours.
3. **Original Language Study.** I took one year of Hebrew in seminary, and two years of Greek. While I've been able to maintain a basic proficiency with Greek, my skills in biblical Hebrew are rudimentary at best. I have some excellent study tools which I use extensively- analytical concordances, Greek and Hebrew dictionaries, exhaustive original language word study volumes, interlinear texts, and a wonderfully powerful biblical study software tool called Bibleworks. It's often a long and painful process, but I go to the Hebrew Old Testament or Greek New Testament and make my own translation from the original languages. Important nuances come to light through the discovery of tense, voice, mood, and unique words. At this point, I take what I've discovered in the original languages and begin adjust my original outline draft as needed to remain faithful to scripture. This step can take anywhere from 2 to 6 hours.
4. **Formal Outline.** With the knowledge gleaned from my translation of the biblical passage, I try and build my formal outline. For instance if the apostle Paul, in writing to one of the churches, fires off several imperatives to the church or its leaders, those imperatives become the main points in the outline I build. I spend time trying to build parallelism and consistency in the points of the outline, even though I'm not much into alliteration. Having constructed an outline, I then attempt to build my thesis statement for the message- in one concise sentence, what is the main point the Bible writer is making in the passage under consideration? Once the thesis statement is developed and tweaked (If I am unable to say what the passage means, how can I expect my congregation to understand what I'm trying to convey?), using it and the main points of the message, I then select a topic or title for the sermon. All throughout this process, I make notes in

the margin about additional questions which have come to mind during my study, possible illustrations I might use to help the congregation grasp a particular truth, and parallel biblical passages or other verses which could reinforce or illuminate the sermon. This may take 2-5 hours.

5. Commentary Study. After I've been able to arrive at what I believe God's Word has said to me, only then do I open my biblical commentaries to see how well-known biblical scholars have interpreted the same verses. In some cases, I find that my interpretation is in line with those held by these eminent scholars. In others, I find that I have missed an important point or two. Depending on the resources available to me, I will read the appropriate sections from 3 to 8 biblical commentaries. At the conclusion of this step, I make any corrections which may be necessary to my outline. I allow 4-6 hours for this stage.

6. Study Sheet. About eight years ago I started developing "study sheets" for use with my sermons. I include the passage under consideration that morning, notes (if appropriate) relating to the context or other special points, and then 3 to 8 "life lessons" or take-aways which the people can take from the scripture and apply to their life. I put these life lessons in "fill-in-the-blank" form-not because applying the Bible to life is as easy as filling in a blank, but because it helps keep the congregation involved. I try to word these life truths in the present tense so they can be more easily related to by the hearers. As I build the study sheet, I give special focus to the selection of illustrations which might best help the hearers begin to process the scriptural truths in terms of what it means for their lives. I try not to use an abundance of historical or literary illustrations, but rather personal illustrations. I don't do this because my life is so interesting, but to try and model through my own experiences how I have come to see God at work in my life. My hope is that in hearing how I discover God at work in my life, members of my congregation may be challenged to begin to look for God at work in their own life. This final stage normally takes only an hour or two.

All total, I probably average between 15-25 hours in sermon preparation each week. That's 15-25 hours per sermon. And for a congregation expecting to come to God's house each week to hear a fresh message from God's Word, this seems like a reasonable investment of time for the preacher.