

Preparing A Short Bible Talk

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The Prayer Book places the preaching of God's word at the heart of each service. There may be times, for example when the minister is away or unwell, where you are asked to give a short bible talk during a service. This is both a great privilege and a significant responsibility. It is hard work and will take a lot of time if you are to do it well. It may also be a terrifying prospect. But remember, no one expects you to speak like a trained preacher. You just need to be yourself, be faithful to God's word, keep it simple, and trust the Holy Spirit to take care of the rest. I don't how many times someone has come to me after a sermon to thank me for what I said and to comment on the part that was most significant for them, only to discover that the point they picked up on was not one I thought I was making. God's Spirit makes sure his people hear what they need to hear. We might be speaking, but God is doing the talking. We can trust him to get it right.

1. Pray

Having been asked to speak, the first thing we should do is pray about it. We must bring ourselves before God in humble submission, asking for his guidance and wisdom as we prepare and that he take control and speak through us so that our words become his words to his people. Preaching is a partnership between God and us, so we need to work together on it from the very start.

2. Prepare

a. Select a passage

You may be given the passage to speak on as part of an ongoing sermon series. Alternatively, you might choose one of the Lectionary readings for the day. It doesn't have to be the Gospel reading. If the talk is a one-off, you could choose a passage or topic that particularly interests you, however, this is not good practice for regular preaching. If all we do is preach on the passages that interest us, we make the preaching all about us. Instead, we should strive to preach on the whole word of God, giving equal weight to the Old Testament, the Epistles, and the Gospels. If we approach the selection of the passage prayerfully and with a heart and mind that is open to God's leading, the right passage will present itself.

b. Understand the passage

We cannot speak with clarity or conviction about something we don't understand. What does the passage mean? Are there any words or concepts in the passage that you don't understand? Look them up in a commentary or bible dictionary. What are the key ideas and arguments?

Remember that context creates meaning. The meaning of a passage is always shaped by what comes before it and what follows it. The passage may be answering a question raised in an earlier passage or building on concepts and ideas from earlier sections. We need to know what they are. It may be laying the foundations for something that will happen later. Again, it's helpful to know what that is, so read more widely in the bible.

c. Identify the main point

Identify the main point of the passage and write it down as a simple, clear statement. This is the big idea we want to communicate, and it needs to be at the forefront of our thinking as we prepare the talk. While we might have lots of great material, anything that doesn't contribute to the big idea, no matter how interesting, is ultimately a distraction and unhelpful for clear communication.

A passage may have several possible main points. If so, choose one. If we attempt to address them all, our message will be too long, unfocussed, and have too much content for our listeners to process. Be disciplined. Simpler is always better. A good talk is determined as much by what we choose to leave out as by what we keep in.

d. Develop an outline

A talk has three main parts: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Let the passage shape the body of the talk. Go back to those key ideas that specifically contribute to the big idea. These can become our points. A short talk will need no more than one or two points although a longer sermon will probably have more.

3. Writing the talk

a. Introduction and conclusion

Leave writing the introduction and conclusion until the end, when the body of the talk has been prepared and you know what you are going to say. The introduction needs to tell people where you are heading and why they should listen. It needs to capture their interest. Ask a question, make a shocking

statement, quote some statistics, appeal to a known need, tell a story, anything that will help people engage with the big idea.

It's equally important to end well. As the conclusion is the last thing people will hear, it should succinctly restate the main point and any actions that are required of your listeners in response.

b. A helpful model

The late evangelist and preacher, John Chapman, had a five-step model that can be used for each point in a talk or sermon.¹

1. **State the point** - Keep this brief and memorable. It should be something people can remember afterwards.
2. **Show it in the bible** - Show your listeners where the idea is found in the bible. You may wish to read the appropriate verses again or direct people to printed or projected text.
3. **Explain the point** - Use short, simple sentences. Re-state your point.
4. **Illustrate the point** - A good illustration will clarify and reinforce the explanation, it will hold interest and enhance recall, it will give listeners a pause to relax and take a break from concentrating, it will engage with the emotions as well as the mind. Don't have too many. There is no need to illustrate everything. And never let the illustration overshadow the point you are trying to make.
5. **Apply the point**

c. Applying the point

Application is our response to what God has said. It can be the hardest part of the process because this is where personal change becomes necessary. Always start by applying the text to yourself. If it has changed you, then your application has some credibility. Also, your experience will likely be shared by others.

The following ten questions are a helpful guide for identifying applications.

1. Is there a SIN to confess? Has the light of Scripture illuminated something in your life that needs confession, repentance, and forgiveness?

¹ John Chapman, *Setting Hearts on Fire*, 1999, pp.93-104

2. Is there a PROMISE to claim? There are more than 7,000 promises in the Bible. Does the passage contain a universal promise or a specific promise to a particular person or group? If it is universal, ask yourself whether you've met the conditions of the promise.
3. Is there an ATTITUDE to change? Is there something you need to think about differently? Do you struggle with pride, apathy, covetousness, or anger? Confess it and commit to change.
4. Is there a COMMAND to obey?
5. Is there an EXAMPLE to follow? Are there positive examples to follow or imitate and negative examples to avoid?
6. Is there a PRAYER to pray? There are many recorded prayers in the Bible. Praying God's Word back to Him is powerful!
7. Is there an ERROR to avoid? Wisdom learns from the experience of others! What can you learn from the errors in the passage you've studied?
8. Is there a TRUTH to believe? Sometimes we'll simply discover something about God or his purposes that we didn't know. No specific action is required other than to believe it.
9. Are there things in the passage to PRAISE or THANK God for? We can always find something in a passage for which we can be grateful to God.
10. How can I ENCOURAGE myself and others with these truths?

4. General comments

a. Is there a difference between teaching and preaching?

Yes. The purpose of teaching is to educate and inform. The focus is more on communicating facts and details and transferring knowledge. The purpose of preaching is to persuade or motivate. Obviously, preaching requires facts and details and teaching includes motivational elements, but the two modes of communication have distinct purposes. Because it is much easier to communicate facts and details than it is to persuade or motivate, preachers can easily end up being teachers. To be effective, we must work hard to ensure that our presentation has a persuasive or motivational dimension.

b. Should I speak from full text or notes?

Use whichever you feel most comfortable with. The danger of having the full text in front of you is that you will read it rather than preach it. That can be boring. On the other side of the coin, there is great security in knowing that you have the full text there to fall back on. Do whatever gets you through.

c. All the rules of good public speaking apply

- **Practice** - The more familiar we are with the text being read, the easier it is to make that text our own.
- **Knowledge** - Knowledge of our subject matter is essential. We need to be familiar with the context and the content of what we are reading and the purpose for which it was written.
- **Volume** - If we can't be heard, we will not be successful. Where a PA system is available, use it. Where it is not, learn to project.
- **Variety** - Effective public speakers vary the pace, volume, intensity, and inflection of their voice so that their listeners remain engaged. While it is possible to be too theatrical, usually we err in the other direction and become monotone and uninspiring.
- **Enunciation** - A reader has visual markers that help communicate the meaning of the text – line breaks, punctuation marks etc. Listeners don't have any of these written cues. They rely on the speaker to create those cues with their voices and with their silences.
- **Eye Contact** - Eye contact with helps maintain the relational nature of worship. It also allows the speaker to gauge, through nonverbal cues, whether or not their listeners are still engaged.

d. Be conscious of the effect of nerves

Our nervousness impacts our speaking, even without our knowing it. I recall when I was asked to preach my first ever sermon, long before I went to Theological College. I practiced multiple times at home and each time my sermon took around twenty minutes. That was also how it seemed to me when I preached the sermon in Church, however, I was told afterwards that I was only in the pulpit for about eight minutes. Nerves! Deliberately slow yourself down. Take deep breaths at the end of sentences. Build in pauses. That's good practice anyway as it allows time for ideas sink in.

e. How long should I spend on preparation?

The length of time differs for everyone based on a whole range of variables. However, there is no substitute for good, solid preparation. Research suggests that the majority of pastors spend between 10 and 15 hours preparing a sermon. On that basis, five minutes of speaking will require at least two hours of preparation, ten minutes will require four hours, and so on...