

The Road from Text to Sermon

I am Dr. Zack Eswine, and I will be teaching in Dr. Chapell's place today. He is traveling, so if you would keep him in your prayers, that would be appreciated. It is a privilege for me to be with you. Let us begin our time together in prayer.

Father, we thank You very much for the way You have been faithful to each one of us. You are so thoroughly knowledgeable of the cares that we have and the dreams and hopes we have, the regrets we have, the confusion, the questions, the joys. We thank You that You have declared You are the knower of the heart. We ask that You would be pleased to continue to be the lifter of our head, as You say in Your Word, that we might know that You are God, that there is no other, and that our hope rests with You. We ask that You would bless Dr. Chapell and his work as he travels today, that You would bless their efforts in the Gospel. We ask, Lord, that You would bless our time now for Your name's sake. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Let us begin today with a little bit of review. Why do we need to be cautious about spurious texts? Because we want to preach what the Holy Spirit has preached for us, has written for us, so we want to be cautious about texts where there are questions and do our homework on those.

Second, how does an allegorical method of interpretation differ from an expository one? An allegorical method goes beyond what appears to be the clear meaning of the text. So, in an expository approach, we are trying to get at the intent of the author, what the author meant by the connection of words. In an allegorical approach, we look from the imagination of the reader, us—we are making connections from our own imagination. An example that you may have discussed is Rahab's red cord. The spies go in, there is Rahab, she sets out a red cord. Red is the color of blood. Blood is what our Lord shed for us. Therefore, when Rahab set her cord out, she was foreshadowing the blood of Christ. Well, that really preaches well. A similar one would be of Noah and his ark. The ark is made of wood. The Lord Jesus died on a cross, which was made of wood. Therefore Noah in his ark was saved by the wood of the ark, just like the people of God are saved by the wood of the cross. David chose five smooth stones. The first stone was the stone of faith. The second stone was the stone of courage. The third stone...well, I think you see where we are going. It is not that the Lord does not use these things, He certainly does. It is certainly true that God has blessed many of our faithful brothers who have preached sermons like that. But God has blessed them more because of His compassion and kindness to us in our weakness than because of the wisdom of those interpretations. As best as we are able, we are seeking to understand from Scripture what connections Scripture actually makes. So, with Rahab's cord, for example, we have no textual indication that in that historical text red is supposed to point us somewhere else. As best as we are able, we refrain from making connections that the Bible does not make. All of us are mixed works in this endeavor, and God is kind to us nonetheless, but we try our best.

The third question is what are web and flow and how do they affect text selection? A web is where the situation that you are facing determines the kind of text you choose. Flow is when the text itself, the passage itself, determines what we will preach about.

Finally, why should a preacher be careful not to run to a commentary as a first step in his sermon preparation? We should be careful, because we are in a situation that the person who wrote the commentary is not in. We may even be in a time and place, a generation that the person who wrote the commentary is not in. We trust that the Lord has called us and given us tools to understand His Word by

means of His Spirit. So, we want to give ourselves to Him first and then look to see what other brothers and sisters have said as a guard and check for us.

Moving from review to our present talk, the goal for this lesson is to see how we progress from words on a page in a passage of Scripture to a sermon that is designed to change hearts. We will combine arguments for a sermon and tools and rules for interpreting a text. We will give some basic introductions to what you do as you look at a passage of Scripture as you are thinking of using it to prepare a sermon.

Now, why might this matter? Imagine I am sitting in my office as a social worker in Indiana and a woman is sitting across from me. Her face is swelled up and black and purple from where her husband in all his various weaknesses, brokenness, and sin, has been hitting her. She asks the question, "What does the Bible say to me about this?" By that question she is not just asking, "Do I leave or not?" She is asking the question, "How does a person of faith handle this kind of trauma? What it does to my dreaming, what it does to my memories, what it does to all that I had hoped for and longed for, what it does to the betrayal I feel, the love I had thought once was, how does a person of faith walk with God in the midst of this kind of trauma?"

Sometimes, you see, what we need from Scripture is not just the answers to pass a test. What we need is help to know how to live. Imagine that you are a person in a workplace, a corporate setting, and a decision is made higher up that is unethical. This causes you to question. So you come to your pastor, your Bible study leader, or your elder and say, "How do I navigate this situation?" At that point we could say, "Do you believe the creed? Do you believe the Westminster Confession of Faith?" He might say, "Well sure, yes." And we say, "Then, all is well." He would say, "Well, no, how does the Westminster Confession of Faith help me know what to do in this situation? How do the truths of the faith help me to know what to do in this situation?" When we come to a sermon passage, we are reminded of the fact that you may have two people married for 15 or 20 years who come into your pastor's study having marital difficulty. You might ask them the question, "Do you believe in the fundamentals of the faith?" They would say, "Yes." "Do you believe in the Apostle's Creed?" "Yes." "Do you follow the catechisms?" "Yes." "Then, what is the problem?" "Well she started...and he started..." See, it is not a matter of accenting the right truths. It is a matter of the wisdom to apply those truths to the situations that we all face in a fallen world. Therefore a sermon, what we bring forth from the Word of God, is not just trying to equip people to answer the right questions. We are trying to equip people for living. We are trying to bring truth to their life circumstances so that they have wisdom, so they will know how to think, what to do, and how to respond.

To do that we can use, as Dr. Chapell mentioned, six critical questions for sermon preparation. These are six basic questions you can ask. That is what we want to walk through in this lesson, these six questions.

The first question is what does this text mean? These questions seem obvious and intuitive as we walk down through them. But in the midst of time demands, in the midst of the rush of our own heart, we may forget to walk through these steps and ask these basic intuitive questions. Also, we are taking these questions in a particular order but gradually as you become familiar with them they sort of ebb and flow. But first, what does this text mean? To answer this question, you employ these steps. First, step A, read, reread, and digest the text. You remember Psalm 1, where we are told about the person who is like a tree, "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither." Who is that person? It is the person who meditates on the Law of God day and night (that means always). Meditating means thinking about it over again and again, holding it up and looking at the same thing we have looked at before but looking at it from a different angle. Charles Spurgeon called it "Lying asoak in the text," bathing in the text. We read it, but we know just because we have

read it once does not mean we know what is really there. By the fifth or sixth time you read the passage, you will see things you never saw before. We keep saturating ourselves with the text because our intention is to get a sense of what the text has to say to us in the hands of the Lord.

Second, step B, observe context. That means we look at the literary phrasing, words, and genre that is going on there. Imagine you are in the Psalms, for example, and a psalm says, “The Lord has delivered me from the pit.” Compare that to Joseph in Genesis; in the account there we know that Joseph was thrown into a pit. Does the psalmist mean the same thing that Moses meant in Genesis about the pit? No. The Psalms are poetry. When David uses the word “pit,” he is using it to describe a condition of the soul in light of a circumstance. Whereas in the historical narrative, the account of Joseph, it was an actual pit that he was thrown into. So, context involves looking at phrasing, the literary features of the text. But it also involves looking at the history, the surrounding context of what was taking place.

When my wife Shelley and I were first engaged, we were in a living room in a house where many of my family were gathered for an occasion. We came in beaming, and we announced our engagement. Then we said, “Everyone is invited to the wedding!” Now imagine that a reporter from a newspaper was there and he took a picture, wrote up an article, and the next day the headline said, “Eswine invites everyone to the wedding!” It is a right quote, is it not? He quoted me correctly. But if you read the paper, you will assume you have been invited to the wedding because of context. I said the word “everyone,” and I meant those who were in that living room. So, we have to get into “the living room” of the passage to see what someone meant when they wrote it.

Let us look at James 1:5 as an example. “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” Now, on most occasions when we think about this passage, we are thinking about decisions we have to make, something unknown that we want God to show us. We need to know which school to send our children to or which job we are supposed to take. So we turn to this passage and find comfort: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God.” That is a wonderful help that this passage brings to us. However, if we take a look at context just a bit, we see that James has a meaning much more profound than decision making. Remind yourself of verses 2-4: the situation is “trials of various kinds.” As you go down through verse 4, you see “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” “Not lacking anything.” Now, you will see that phrase repeated at the beginning of verse 5, a parallel phrase, “If any of you lacks wisdom.” Thus, what he says is “If you are in a trial of any kind, the Lord wants to complete you so that you lack nothing. If you lack wisdom, ask.” Now, suddenly here it sounds a little strange. We lack wisdom. We lack the ability to know which school to choose in the midst of trials, so we take this as a comfort. The context seems to be about trials in people’s lives. Well, we keep reading, and by the time we get over to 3:13, we realize that James uses this word again. It is always a helpful thing when thinking through context to ask, “Does the author talk about this idea any other place in his writing?” James 3:13-15 says, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.” What is wisdom that is unspiritual? It is, notice, “bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts.” It seems like James is equating wisdom with character. Well, let us keep reading. Verse 16 says, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice...” Now, notice the contrast in verse 17: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

Notice how James uses the word wisdom. There are two kinds in his mind, heavenly and earthly or unspiritual. Notice that wisdom for James has to do with character, as in the contrast of bitter jealousy with gentleness or peace. Now go back to chapter 1 and have James' definition of wisdom in your mind. You are in the midst of a trial, beloved, "If any of you lacks wisdom," that means, "If any of you lacks gentleness, peace, if any of you lacks being full of mercy and good fruit, let him ask." "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." Now suddenly—see?—that makes much more sense and becomes much more profound for the believer. If you are in the midst of a trial and you are responding to that trial with bitter jealousy or envy or anger and you need wisdom from heaven, you need the grace from heaven to respond to that trial in a way that imitates the character of God, ask and He will give it. Suddenly now you see what this verse means.

The way I often think of it is, it is three o'clock in the morning, and the baby has been crying for two hours now. You are sliding down the hallway, weeping on the floor because you just yelled at that baby with all your might and you cannot believe what you just did. Suddenly James 1:5 becomes a promise for that mother or that father in the night. If you lack gentleness, peace, mercy in the midst of your trial of any kind, ask for it. He will give it. So, context helps us, it opens up for us the meaning of a passage.

Step C is open up the unknowns, such as the grammar, words, meaning, and the historical data. You are in the book of Jonah 1:2 or 3, and you notice that the text uses the word "Tarsus" three times in one verse. You think to yourself, "It must be important to know what Tarsus is because it says 'Tarsus...Tarsus...Tarsus' in one verse." So you look it up. You find out what Tarsus is. We look up things that are unknown.

Step D is identify parallels, words or concepts that are in other passages. We begin by looking at one passage. Then we do just like we did in James chapter 1. We see him talk about wisdom, and we find if it is talked about somewhere else as well. We go and find those passages that help us.

Step E is we grasp the main idea and identify features of its development. We are trying to grasp the main idea and the features of identifying the main idea. So when we ask the question, "What does this text mean?" We are trying to conclude what the text is basically about. What is it saying?

Question two is how do I know what it means? This is really important. Our practice in a small group type of setting is to read the verse, say, "What does this verse mean to you?" and then everyone in the group shares. This can be a very helpful way to discuss the Scripture together. But it is often helpful to first ask the question, "What did this mean for the writer of the text? How do I mean that is what this meant?" This forces me to look back at the Bible and prove to myself I am getting my ideas from the Bible.

There are some different ways to do this. The first is to create a thought-flow outline. This is where you simply identify the subject, verb, and object. You may have learned this at some point in your schooling. You put the subject, verb, and object into a sentence schemata so you can look at it and see what the primary words used are. Another tool is to use a mechanical layout. This is an outline of sentence or paragraph structure. You show the independent and dependent clauses and how they connect to one another. An independent clause is the main idea in relationship to a dependent clause, which is the supporting idea or the modifier. The independent clause in Matthew 6:1 is "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men..." The dependent clause is "...to be noticed by them." The dependent clause is that which modifies or further expresses what is being said. Another tool you can use is a conceptual outline, where you walk down through the text and outline the concept. You highlight the main ideas

you see. For example, you might outline 2 Samuel 11-12 this way, “David disobeyed God. He committed adultery and murder. God convicted David. He sent His Word to identify the sin. David repented toward God. He confessed his sin, expressed sorrow, and sought new obedience.” It is just the overarching theme you see as you walk down through the passage.

Whatever tool we learn to use (remember we are only introducing these tools today), what you are to try to do is to show from the passage where you are getting your ideas. Why is this important? Because eventually, when you preach your sermon, you will have a concept that we will call “state, place, and prove.” What that means is that you will be expected to state your main idea, state what the main idea is from the passage (for example, “You must love one another”). But then we will also ask you to place that idea in the text. Then you will need to prove from that text the concept you are expressing to us. As you listen to others preach, you will notice this kind of phrase that someone may use all the way through the sermon: “Look with me in verse...” Some preachers will come back to that all the way through the sermon: “Look with me in verse...” Or they may say, “...as we see in verse...” all the way through the sermon. When we do this, it is in essence because we want the hearer’s head to constantly go down into the text and back up and back down. This is because we want them to see in the text where we get our ideas from. Why is this important? Because the text is their authority, not us. We want the Scripture to be what leads them and for the Scripture to be what guides what we say. Therefore we want to ask this second question. It is not just, “What is the main idea?” but also, “How do I know from the text?” This causes us to look back at the text.

Dr. Chapell says, “The larger the expository unit, the more appropriate the latter alternatives for outlining.” What he is saying there is that when you have a larger portion of Scripture to deal with, it can be very time-consuming and tedious to do a sentence-by-sentence grammatical outline on, for example, two chapters. (This, of course, will depend on your situation). In the context of pastoral ministry, you will normally have at least three, maybe four other sermons and Bible studies to prepare for as well. Thus we do not always have the opportunity to use the more meticulous outline. But what you can do is use the conceptual outline for those larger portions of Scripture and then use a grammatical outline for those key places in that larger portion that stand out to you. In creating such outlines for the study of a passage, which are known as exegetical outlines, it is advisable to identify which verses correspond to which outline components. You could do this by putting the verse number in parentheses next to the sentence or next to the concept you are getting. Why should you do this? This is part of the second question we are asking, how do I know? When I write something down about what the text is saying, I want to put the verse or portion of the verse next to it so that when I come back to it I can see where in the text I got my point or idea. It keeps leading me back to the text.

Use the development of the thought-flow outline, then, to lead you into and through an in-depth study of two things: (1) language, the study of language and (2) genre. Language becomes important for communicating rightly the Word of God. Genre is what I referred to earlier. Our earlier example of this was how the psalmist uses the word “pit” in contrast to its use in Genesis. What helps me to know the difference between the uses of this word is to know the genre of the Psalms, which is poetry, and to know the genre of Genesis, which is historical narrative. Knowing the genre of the passage helps me to rightly understand, or at least have more clues as to what the Word might mean. We know the Lord has communicated to us with history, with psalms, with narratives, with proverbs. Thus we want to ask the question, “What is the genre?”

Another question to ask within this category is what is the context? You will notice we continue to repeat this idea. Why is that? Context, context, context. Context matters to keep us in the “living room” of the passage so that we will know the meaning. Context involves four things: observation, comparison,

word study, and context study. Thus looking at context means observing what is there, comparing with other Scriptures, doing word studies, and looking at the historical background (such as the connections of that text with any other text in Scripture.” When we get to Christ-centered preaching, we will add another idea to our context. That idea is redemptive context—what does this passage mean in the light of redemptive history? Redemptive history is the Lord unfolding what He would do in Christ Jesus. Was this before the cross, or does this text come after the cross? What implications does the location of the text within the scope of God’s plan have for us?

The third main question we ask is what concerns caused this text to be written? Why was this text given to us? First, that means we study the author’s intentions. Why did Paul write this to them? Why did the author write this to them. Well, Paul, for example, talks about love to the Corinthians in a way he does not with the Philippians or the Galatians. It is only to the Galatians that Paul says, “If anyone preaches another gospel to you, let him be accursed.” It is on to the Galatians that he speaks so strongly. Why the differences? That is what we are getting at. Why did the author say this to them? By asking these questions, we can better understand the author’s intentions. Second, we study the passage’s context. The question, “What concerns caused this text to be written?” brings us back to context again. What was going on? What was the situation in Galatia, for the Galatian churches? What was the situation that caused Paul to speak so strongly to them? What was the situation in Philippi that would cause Paul to speak about “joy” so much to them? Third, we study God’s mind, the mind of the Lord. What concerns caused this text to be written?

This brings us back to our theology for a moment. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, we are reminded that the natural man does not understand the things of the Spirit. We are reminded that when we come to the Scriptures, we cannot naturally understand what is there. God is the author of the Scriptures. The Spirit of the Lord is the One through whom this Word was written. Therefore, when Paul wrote to the Galatians, he wrote as an inspired apostle. It was the Spirit of the Lord speaking to the Galatians with Paul as ambassador of Christ. So we want to know ultimately why the Lord is saying this to His people. That leads us to a remembrance of our dependence on the Spirit of God. It reminds us of the psalmist’s prayer, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from your law.” It reminds us of Proverbs chapter 2 when we are told to cry out for wisdom, to raise our voice for understanding from His Word. Therefore the study of context is not just grammar and historical study. It also includes prayer, because we are trying to understand what the author meant, and thus ultimately, why the Lord wrote this to us.

To answer the question of authorial intention also requires remembering. What does this mean? First, causal concerns may be implied or stated. Sometimes the author of the text tells us explicitly why he writes. For example, near the end of John, around chapter 20 or so, John tells us why he writes the book. He says, “These signs have been written so that you may believe.” Thus anytime you preach from John, you are reminded of what his purpose was. Any of the signs, any of the miracles recorded there, have been written to strengthen and arouse faith in people. The apostle Paul says in Philippians 4:2 (this is a stated purpose), “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.” This is an explicit purpose he states. But in Philippians there is also an implied purpose. It is less explicit, but it is still there. Philippians 2:4 says, “Look not on your own things, but on the things of others.” That makes sense, right? He has been speaking about having the mind of Christ and about considering the needs of others. By the time he comes to chapter 4, he makes an explicit application. These two sisters need to apply this to their lives. Thus sometimes the intention of the author can either be implied or explicitly stated. Background and logic may also be needed to determine implied concerns. Historical context can also help us understand what the author was trying to get at and why. We remember in Galatians when Paul the apostle talks about what justifies us before the Lord. Why does he talk so much here about what justifies us before the Lord? Well, because we know from history

and from the text itself that a group called the Judaizers were coming in and persuading this new church with a new teaching that went contrary to Scripture. By knowing that context and what he is saying, even though the apostle may not explicitly state, “This is why I am writing this letter,” we gain a sense of why this text had to be written.

At this point you have been asked three questions: what is the text saying? How do you know? and What are the intentions of the author? At this point, when you have answered all those questions, you merely have a lecture. You are ready to give a lecture. You can say true things about the passage. You can tell us historical context, you can tell us the meanings of words. You can tell us what the situation was and why the text was written. You could give a lecture at this point. Now, often in the midst of ministry demands, we stop there and think we are ready for the sermon. But, we want to remind ourselves of where we started. People are living before the Lord in the world. This means they are facing all manner of situations. This means they need more than just the answers to the test. They need the Word of God to come to bear on their situation. We might remind ourselves of a subtle nuance between teaching and preaching. That is, when the apostle Paul speaks to Timothy in 2 Timothy about “Preach[ing] the Word...” he goes on to say, “with correcting, rebuking, exhorting with all longsuffering and patience.” The preaching of the Word seems to have this further movement of getting into the inner being, bringing the Word to bear in such a way that it corrects, rebukes, and exhorts. It moves beyond the giving of information and into applying that information to the souls of the hearers, according to what they need before the Lord, according to the Word.

We want to start moving, then, toward the sermon. We do not want to stop at question three but continue on to question number four: what do we share in common with...? Another way to think of this would be “mutual human condition.” What is the mutual human condition? What do we share in common with, first of all, those to whom the text was written? And also, what do we share in common with those by whom the text was written? How we answer this question identifies the fallen condition focus (FCF). So the answer to this question identifies the FCF. Remember that the fallen condition has to do with either our finiteness—that we are not the Lord and cannot know all things, we experience difficulty simply because of that and we need His provision—or it can also do with sin, the fact that we are broken, even willfully so and we need His provision. To answer the question, “What is the Fallen Condition Focus?” we ask, “What do we have in common with the author of the text or with the recipient of the text?”

Imagine you are teaching from 2 Peter. We know from reading the letter that the people to whom Peter writes are scattered and dispersed. We also know they are under fire for their faith. So, they are scattered, harassed, and under fire for their faith. If you were in that situation and the only one who could help you was miles away and could not do anything to physically relieve your situation, what would you need to hear? What would you need to know? How would you make it through? We would ask the question then, “What is the mutual human condition? Where is it today that the people of God are scattered, harassed, and facing heat for their faith with no one able to physically lift a hand to help them?” When we ask that question, we are starting to get a mutual human condition, what we have in common with those in the situation of the text.

We might also consider it from the other way. Imagine that those you love are miles away; you cannot do anything to help them while they are physically being pained. They are struggling, harassed, and you cannot stop it. How do you deal with that? That is Peter’s situation. So what does he do? He writes a letter. Even more than that, what would you say to them? What would you say to the ones you loved whom you could not physically help? What would you say to them in the midst of their trials? Read 2 Peter and find out what Peter said to them. Do you see? We are getting at a mutual human condition, why the text was written to apply to us and to help us. If I know why the text was written for Thomas, I

find how I am like Thomas and how that text applies to me. I find how I am like David. It is not just that David had an affair and murdered someone—our response should not be, “Oh, how terrible is that.” Our response should be, “Oh wow, what do I have in common with David? What was in his heart is in my heart.” What does that mean? It means I need to hear what David needed to hear. Now, there are certainly times when we ask the question, “How are we *not* like those who are being written about in the text?”

Imagine Esther. Mordecai says to her, “Who knows, Esther, but that you were appointed for such a time as this?” Thus our great temptation as preachers or teachers is to say right away, “How are you like Esther?” And then we want to say to everyone, “Who knows but that *you* were appointed for such a time?” Well, that could be very appropriate, but if we step back and remind ourselves, “How are we *not* like Esther?” we remind ourselves that 99% of the covenant people of Israel then thought they were going to die. Ninety-nine percent of the people had no knowledge of what was going on inside the palace and what the Lord was doing with this formerly unknown girl named Esther. That means they had to live their lives wondering how God would provide for them in the midst of their trial. Then they found out that God provides for His covenant people in the most unlikely of ways. He raised up a deliverer from an unlikely place. He appointed a girl, Esther, and brought her to the palace for such a time as that, to deliver His people. That opens up a whole other way of application and thinking.

Thus sometimes it is helpful to ask the question, “How are we *not* like Joseph and his dreams? How are we *not* like Esther?” And then we can come back and ask the question, “How are we like them? What do we have in common?” First Corinthians 10:13 forms the basis of why we think this is appropriate to do: “No temptation has taken you but such as is common to man.” God’s Word comes and ministers to His people in their temptations. And He has told us there is nothing uncommon. We too, then, know we face those kinds of temptations as well. We need the Word of God to speak to us just as it did to them. What do we share in common with...? Good preaching, then, does not merely describe the information in a text or the truths about a doctrine. Good preaching identifies how an FCF of the passage touches and characterizes our lives. We are not merely doing what a commentary has already done for us. We are going beyond that to say, “If they needed to hear this from the Lord, and we find ourselves in the same kinds of situations they did, then it stands to reason we need to hear what they heard from the Lord. If it helped them in their situation, it will help us in our common situation.”

Question number five is how should we respond to the truths of Scripture? What difference does this make for me? To answer this you must look first to why we need the truths of the text. Why do we need this? Second, how does this apply to us? When the apostle speaks to us about love, we not only parse each word to describe the Greek word for “rudeness,” “patience,” and all that. We not only describe the historical context of what was taking place in Corinth. We move on from that description to identify what we have in common with the Corinthians and why we need to hear today what Paul said to them yesterday. And then we ask, how does what the apostle said apply to us in our circumstances? This answering of the “why” and “how” questions is the turnkey that makes the following sermons sermons. The truth principle of 2 Samuel 12:7 is Nathan’s account of the rich man stealing the lamb. But then it gets to the point where he says what it means to David, what this account means for David: “You are the man, David.” Or consider Matthew 6:28-30: “Behold the lilies of the field. They toil not, neither do they spin. Yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If God so clothes the grass of the field which today is and tomorrow is cast into the fire, will he not much more clothe you...?” Do you see how the question at the end comes right to His listeners? And then Jesus says, “will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” Or consider Joshua 24:15 when he recounts Israel’s redemptive history. He ends by saying to those who are listening, “Choose this day whom you will serve...” In light of what is true, what God has done—how does this affect you? Choose this day whom you will serve.

Thus a good sermon answers these questions: first, so what? What difference does it make? To illustrate this, Dr. Chapell tells his story of Dr. Rayburn who taught this class when Dr. Chapell was a student. Dr. Rayburn would always say, “When you finish a sermon, I want you to imagine me standing at the back of the church with my arms folded and saying to you, ‘So what? So what? Who cares what the Greek word for rude is? So what? What difference does it make for us, the covenant people of God seeking to walk before the Lord?’” A good sermon answers that question, “So what?” A good sermon also answers the question, “What am I to do or to believe?” What am I to do in light of this passage? Or what am I to believe in light of this passage? How does it shape or transform my actions in the coming week or my beliefs about situations in the coming week? The third question a good sermon answers is what change does God require in my life and/or in my heart?

After we have taken the truth to life, rather than creating a list of to-do’s and beliefs, we are taking the truth to where people live, applying the Scripture in light of the mutual human condition and context to our situation. The next thing we do is ask, “What is the most effective way I can communicate the content and application of the text? What is the best way I can communicate this to this people, at this time, in this place? We know that no matter how long we are given for a message, whether it is 15 minutes or 30 or 50, there is always more to be said. Therefore, we ask the question, what is the best way to communicate what I have to say today in the time allotted for these people?

The best way to communicate what I have to say today in the time allotted for these people is to use organizational tools. First, we use collection. This is grouping multiple ideas into single thought packets. The next thing we do is subordination. We prioritize and arrange major and supporting ideas. Third, we use simplification. We make complex ideas simple, not vice versa.

I would like to ask you to think about what has been modeled for you by Dr. Chapell. You have not had the opportunity to have Dr. Chapell in a doctorate-level class. In a doctorate-level class, you especially realize the expertise and knowledge that he has when it comes to communication and preaching. And yet he speaks to us about swiss cheese, deadly bees, and the “who door.” He has these simple ways of saying things. It requires much humility on our part to speak with the woman by the well and just talk about water. Even though we know all kinds of theological things, we want to make it simple for people so that they can understand it, knowing that they have not had a seminary education. We want to make it simple for them. This is the seminarian error: first, to try to make things complex, believing that complexity equals greatness or maturity. Another error is to believe that seriousness is constituted of complexity and volume. I have fallen into that error myself, both trying to be too complex and trying to be too serious and equating that with having a loud voice and much to say. This is the seminarian error. We need more than explanation of a passage. The seminarian error is to forget to apply the Word. We learn so many facts, so many good things, that some times we just want to share all those facts and things with people. That is wonderful, and yet we need to go on to application.

There is also an overreaction, the overreaction error in America. K-I-S-S stands for “keep it simple, stupid.” This is an acronym used by some mainstream American preachers. Listen, neither you nor your people are stupid. We are not to patronize people. When we say, “keep it simple,” we do not mean to treat people as if they had no intelligence. We simply mean to try to understand where people are at, what they are capable of grasping from this passage, and to make it clear to them what the passage is saying. Here is a more balanced view: the best preaching says profound things simply. This takes work. It is easy to say profound things in a complex way, but it takes work to say profound things in a simple way. That work often involves meditation on our part, continuing to wrestle with how to make this clear.

A help to you may be to remember what the apostle Paul prayed, or asked for, in Colossians. In Colossians 4:3-4, he says, “At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” The apostle is asking the Lord and asking his friends to pray for him to the Lord, that when he declares mysteries, the mystery of the Gospel, he can make it plain and clear. So we work hard, which includes meditating and also includes asking the Lord for help, to make profound things simple. After all, He is very good at that. We remind ourselves, as John Calvin would tell us, that the Bible is God’s lisping to us. It is His baby talk. You can think of it in this way—though it is a humbling realization—when you have mastered divinity, you have merely mastered the baby talk of God. He is infinite in wisdom, infinite in majesty, infinite in knowledge. And he has lisped to us so that we can understand something from His infiniteness. Therefore we ask Him who does it so well, “Lord, help us to make Your mysteries plain in Christ to people.” Let us revisit the K-I-S-S acronym. How can we use this properly? Instead of “keep it simple, stupid, we say, “keeping it simple is smart.” There is no need to imply that we are stupid or that our people are stupid. Rather, we keep it simple because that is smart.

Remember, there are only four things that can be done to explain any text or idea. The first is you can repeat it. For example, the text says we are to pray always and not faint. So you just repeat it. “What this means is we ought always to pray and not faint. Or, second, you might reword it, “We ought always to pray and not give up, to hold our ground in prayer.” We can reword it to explain what it means. The third way to explain what it means is to define it. So we can repeat it, reword it, and define it. This can also mean to show how it is developed. For example, “‘We ought always to pray and not faint.’ Now, the apostle Paul uses the word ‘always’...” Then you can tell how many times he uses that word and what he means when he uses that word and give a definition of what is meant. The fourth way to explain any text is to prove it. You show how, for example, the Greek word is in the present tense or how this is a past participle. You prove from the connection of words: “Paul uses the word ‘therefore,’ which indicates something causal or connected.” You prove it. You are pointing to grammar or to some connection or phrasing to prove that what is being said is there. Now, in terms of explaining the passage, you owe no more to explanation than what is required for people to understand it. Thus, when you preach and want to say, “We ought always to pray and not give up,” once you realize people understand, they know what you are trying to say, then move on. Move on. You do not need to keep belaboring an explanation if people have already understood. If they already understand what you are trying to say, then move on. Move on to further application or illustration or the explanation of another point. Thus, we only explain as much as is needed for someone to understand. Why? Because we only have a 20- or 30-minute timeframe. We will probably have a Bible study coming up, and the following Sunday, and the following Sunday, and the following Sunday to continue to open the Word for people. We do not have to get everything in to sermon at one point and one time. We explain as much as is needed for that day and that time with that passage.

Finally, we use communication tools to keep it simple. First, we determine how we can best say something. When Dr. Chapell talks about the FCF and mutual human condition, he talks about swiss cheese—cheese with holes in it. God provides for the holes in our lives. He equips the man of God for every good work from the Word so that he may be complete. Without that equipping from the Word, we are incomplete, like swiss cheese with holes. So we wrestle to try to find a way to say it so people can understand it. Second, we exegete our listeners as well as our text. We will talk much more about this in other homiletics classes, but I want to introduce it now. Exegete your listeners as well as the text. What ages are they? What occupations do they have? What interests do they have? What socioeconomic classes do they come from? Where do they get their news? What radio do they listen to? What do they read? What have their life experiences been? What is it that shapes the way they think and hear as we

preach to them? As we know them, it enables us to be smart in keeping things simple. It helps us to know how to communicate what the Word is saying to people in light of where they are and who they are.

To conclude, what we are saying in all of this is this: once you know what the text is saying, what the context is, what the situation was, what the words mean, you are only halfway done. At that point, you see, there has to be meditation on why the Word was written to those people and what that has to do with us today. And so we ask the question, “So what?” And we ask the question, “What is the mutual human condition between us and those in the text?” And we ask the question, “How do I best communicate the meaning to these particular people I am talking with on this particular occasion?” Once we have done those things, you see, then we are getting closer to having our sermon ready to present before God’s people. Thus, after determining *what* a text means, it is important to determine *why* we need it, *how* we apply it, and to *whom* we are speaking. It is in this way that we can rightly divide God’s Word. It is in this way that when we preach the Word we can wisely bring correction, rebuke, and encouragement, with longsuffering, according to what the Word of God has to say to people in their time and place. Let us pray together.

Father, we thank You for our time together today. We ask that You would continue to teach us, Lord, continue to take what has been introduced today. Use it like seeds planted, and day upon day, week upon week, year upon year, would You begin to bring these seeds to bloom in the lives of each one here according to their calling, with Your Word. I ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.