

Introductions

Let us do some review. What components are wed in formal main points and propositions? Universal truth and application or exhortation, or you could say principle and application. Or the most basic answer would be what is true and what to do—principle and application. Again, the classic terminology is universal truth and exhortation. There is a combination of what is true and what to do about it, because that is what the sermon itself is ultimately about.

What two basic forms do we have for main point wording? We have conditional and consequential. If it is consequential, what is the key term that will appear? “Because.” If it is conditional, what is the key term? “Since” or “if.” How do anchor clauses and magnet clauses differ in main points? The anchor clause stays the same. The magnet clause changes. What specifically changes in it? The key terms change. This is the magnet clause, because the changing key terms draw attention. They draw all the attention of the exposition, because the key terms are what change. Everything else stays parallel, but the key terms change in the magnet clause.

What is a coexistent point, and why should it be avoided? What is a point when it is coexistent? It is too much the same. It is a main point that is too much like another main point or the proposition. They may be too much alike in wording, in terminology. What is another way they may be too much alike? The wording may be different, but what could still be the same? The concept could still be the same. It is not just a difference in wording that is important, but it should be different in concept. Classically this occurs when you simply word something in the negative, “We should keep praying... We should not cease to pray.” Well, even though the second point is worded in the negative, it is the same thing over again. One of the things we do to avoid that problem is we are not using “not’s” this semester when we word main points and propositions. What is the double pronoun error? That is where you have a pronoun whose antecedent is another pronoun.

To let you know what is happening, my friend the pastor who left the suicide note has been found. His body was found two days ago. Let me ask you, if I could, to join me in the Lord’s Prayer this morning. Would you repeat that with me, please?

Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Thank you. For this lesson you see that we are talking about introductions to sermons. The goal for this lesson is to understand the basic purposes, marks, and construction elements of good sermon introductions. Here is one I would like to ask you to listen to, and then we will begin to think about its components.

The words were too close for comfort. Had Mickey Mantle not asked that these words be sung at his own funeral, we would have thought them too candid to be appropriate. This is what the legendary Mickey Mantle *asked* to be sung at his funeral:

“Yesterday when I was young,
The taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue.
I lived by night and shunned the naked light of day,

And only now I see how the years ran away.
I used my magic age as if it were a wand,
And I never saw the pain and the emptiness beyond.
The game of life I played with arrogance and pride,
And every flame I lit too quickly, quickly died.
Yesterday when I was young,
So many drinking songs were waiting to be sung.
So many wayward pleasures lay in store for me,
And so much pain my dazzled eyes refused to see.
I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out.
And now the time has come to pay for yesterday, when I was young.”

So much swirled around Mickey Mantle that promised happiness, that promised satisfaction in this life: physical ability, fame, wealth, worldly pleasure, the bottle (alcohol), and formal religion. Each in its turn offered what it could. Each time Mickey Mantle grabbed for all the joy he could. And each time he came up empty. We understand, do we not? We understand how enticing the world’s promises of satisfaction are. But sometimes we forget how empty those promises are. The writer of Ecclesiastes responds and tells us in plain terms, “Because the promises of this world are empty, we must find our satisfaction in God alone.”

Now I want you to think of some of the things that are occurring in that actual sermon introduction from a sermon I preached a few years ago. Think of what is happening, what is occurring. There is an attempt to get people’s attention by speaking of particulars. Even the opening words are meant to stand alone, to arouse attention, “The words were too close for comfort.” Now, what we sometimes do in introductions is to begin to write English essays and say, “Sometimes life is complicated, and we think that...” We do some kind of big overarching thing. Sermon introductions do not do that. They invert the pyramid. We start with the particular. What is some particular thing you can say out of the account that would make it gripping from the beginning? “The words were too close for comfort. These are the words Mickey Mantle asked to be sung at his own funeral.” That is part of the beginning. In the introduction we also want to prepare, in concept and in terminology, for the proposition. Now, the proposition in the above example was “Because the promises of this world are empty...” Did you hear anything about promises of this world in the introduction? What was promising happiness to Mickey Mantle? Physical ability, wealth, fame, the bottle, pleasure... all these were promising, but Mickey Mantle came up empty. These are key words that are beginning to beacon already: promises of this world coming up empty because they are not providing satisfaction.

Thus the key words that will be in the proposition occur within the introduction itself. It does not just prepare conceptually. It prepares the ear—the ear is hearing key terms. Therefore when the proposition finally occurs, it sticks out. We know that is the point now, because we have heard those key words beaming. Thus when they finally come together, we know that is the point of the whole message. The introduction has gotten us ready.

One other piece is I did not just say, “There is an answer for this somewhere.” I said, “The writer of Ecclesiastes addresses this...” That is known as a Scripture bond. The introduction does all these things: it gets us ready in concept and terminology, it identifies a problem, it prepares us for the proposition, and it also bonds to Scripture. It tells me that the answer is someplace in the Scriptures.

Now that you have heard those things, let us begin to particularize and say how we will develop our own introductions. Here are the basic purposes of introductions. There are four. The first basic purpose of

introductions is to arouse attention: “This is important. You must listen to me. This has something to do with your life.” To arouse attention is the first goal. The second purpose is to introduce the subject. Not only do I try to get attention, but I also say, “This is what we will be talking about.” To introduce the subject is the second goal.

The third purpose, and the most important of the things I will say to you, is that it seeks to identify the fallen condition focus (FCF). The introduction seeks to identify the FCF. It does not just say what the subject is. It gives the reason why we are looking at the subject. This is where you take one of those key elements and say, “This is converting a lecture to a sermon.” I am not just saying, “I will talk today about the history of Israel.” I am not even just saying, “Today I will talk about the fall of Jericho.” I have to say why you must listen, what this has to do with you. So when you identify the FCF, you identify the burden of the sermon. What is wrong that requires this subject to be dealt with? What is wrong in whose life? The listener’s life. It is important that you recognize that. It is not just what is wrong in the life of the people in the Bible. Nor is it something that is simply wrong in the preacher’s life. When it is identifiable, it is not simply my identification. It is phrased in such a way to make it clear that we have identified what is wrong in the listeners’ lives so that they now must listen to what this sermon will be about.

The tendency, and sadly the great temptation of training to preach in an academic setting, is that we become great at giving sermons without reasons: “Here is simply information for you to know.” But what is so important is to let people know why it is important to listen. People may say, “You have to listen to this man. You have to listen to him. He lets you know from the very beginning, ‘Here is why you need to listen to this information. Here is what it will have to do with your life.’” You need to identify an FCF that is identifiable, one that we as listeners can identify with.

The fourth purpose of the sermon introduction is to prepare for the proposition in concept and terminology. It should prepare for the proposition in concept and terminology.

When you think of why all these are important, it is, I think, common sense. Why do we have importance attached to these opening words and opening moments? Because the opening words determine listener attention and speaker estimation. The opening words determine listener attention but also their estimation of the speaker, what they think of the speaker. This is typically determined in the opening moments.

Let me detail those a little bit. Let us begin with listener attention. There is an ancient phrase, going back to the time of the Romans, that says, “Well begun is half done.” “Well begun is half done.” If I lose you at the beginning, if you do not think this is important at the beginning, I will not get a second chance to make that first impression. The listener asks in those first few moments, “Are you speaking compassionately and credibly to me?” If you say that decision entails not only listener attention but also whether or not you are speaking compassionately and credibly, that is speaker estimation. The study of D. Cleverley Ford was done three decades ago in his book, *The Ministry of the Word*. He says, “The listener judgment of whether a speaker should be listened to was made in the first 60 seconds.” That was 30 years ago. Now, 30 years later, what would you say? You might say that happens in the first 30 or even 15 seconds. It is an amazing thought that people are estimating very early on, “Are you saying something that seems to communicate care for me?” and “Are you credible?” If those things are determined for the whole message within the first opening seconds, then it is very important what we say in those opening moments. This is, by the way, why we speak particulars rather than generalities at the beginning. If I just speak generalities, “The problem in the world today is sin,” people may think, “Well, that is not a new thought. Why did you bother to say that?” Rather, I could say, “It was 10

minutes past midnight, and she still was not home. And it was the third weekend in a row that she had broken curfew. It is hard to raise teenagers in today's culture." Now, if you were writing an English essay, what would you have put first? "It is hard to raise teenagers in today's culture." And then you would begin to do the particulars under that. In preaching we invert that. We put the particulars first in order to say, "This is important to you in particular. This has relevance immediately to life." And then I will develop the general principles out of that that will be addressed in the Word.

It has been asked when you are dealing with people you know very well, do these same rules apply? Is it still important to do particulars rather than universals? The answer is I think when people begin to know you and love you they forgive you much. If you ask, what is typically best, I would still say particulars should come first. Because we are all oral listeners with preferences for what that means as oral listeners, it is good to be aware of the differences between a written message and a heard message. Thus these principles will apply.

But I need to say clearly, not only about this but also about virtually everything I will say in this course, rules are meant to be broken. If you know what the rule is, then you may know reasons to break it. That becomes a strategy decision. What best enables me to communicate to these people I know? Thus sometimes I will do things that I might know in another context would not be wise or good. But because I know *these* people and I know the effect of doing this thing, I will actually seek to break this rule or standard that I am aware of. The danger comes when you do not know the rule at all. Then you are doing things you do not know the consequences of. There are times, for example, when I will say, "Start with particulars and then move to generalities." What if it is something you know is very, very sensitive in the congregation? Then my strategy may be, because I know all of that, I want to start with the generality and then move to a particular. This is because I know how sensitive this subject is. But now I know *why* I am doing what I am doing. What I am doing is not just haphazard; I know what the effects of these choices are, and so I will make appropriate choices. We will talk about delivery next time, and I will say, "I am going to talk about general rules for delivery. But you must know something: you cannot do anything wrong as long as you have a purpose for doing it." Does that make sense? You cannot do anything wrong as long as you have an adequate purpose for doing it. Thus these are things to know, to be guided by and sometimes to vary from, because you know what you are doing.

If the opening words are so important for listener attention and speaker estimation, there are some logical consequences. What do opening words require? First, they require careful preparation. They require careful preparation because they are so important. Second, they require a gripping presentation, since people make their estimation of you so quickly (Granted, if they know you they will not make such a quick estimation). Eye contact is very important. To bury your head in your notes and read introductions to people will usually cause them to think, "I will not listen to this person." It shows lack of care for your listener, not just lack of preparation for your message. Thus a gripping presentation usually means good eye contact and not reading word for word. Third, opening words require heart involvement. The introduction is the time to start reaching for hearts, to say, "I care about you." It is typically not the time to be argumentative. Now, there is a time for argumentation in a sermon, in a message. But the introduction is probably, most of the time, not the right time for argumentation. The standard wording of homileticians is "The introduction is the handshake of good intent." Does that sound good? This is the handshake; I am reaching out to you and saying, "Here, come with me. I have things to tell you." As in your introduction you try to say, "Here is good intention," you try to reach out and pull people in with the handshake of good intent. This typically means that in addition to careful preparation, gripping presentation, and heart involvement, there is also, fourth, a strong lead sentence. By that we often mean, if I were just to hear this opening line, would I be interested in this sermon? "The words were too close for comfort." "What will he talk about? What will that be about?" This is

better than something like “The world’s pleasures lead to dissatisfaction.” Both these sentences stand alone, but which would make you want to hear the message more? The generality or the particular?

The reason we are doing all this is for awareness of how sermons typically develop. The introduction often involves nearly the highest emotional intensity of a message. What do preachers usually try to have as the greatest emotional intensity of their message? The conclusion. This is because at the conclusion you are saying, “This is what is so important. This is why we gathered today. You must listen to me now on the basis of everything I have said,” and you give that final exhortation. That is the conclusion, and typically nothing has greater emotional intensity than the conclusion. But the second point of greatest emotional intensity usually the introduction.

Now, intensity is a strange word. It does not mean bombast, it does not mean loudness, and it does not mean great energy. But somewhere you are saying, “I care about this, and I want you to care about it too.” Thus we typically start out with some indication of compassion and credibility. It is that engagement of the heart, emotive intensity. Then typically after that we move into some technical things, “Here is my proposition...” We begin to lay out some context for the passage and that sort of thing. We typically, then, come down from the high emotional peak. But then we start to climb the mountain again so that when we are done we recognize that a sermon has an eventual movement. It starts high, then comes back down to begin to explain, but it moves up the mountain toward the greatest emotional intensity that comes at the conclusion. We are building the case (to use argumentative or debaters’ language), but more than that we are laying foundations on which transformation can be based.

Someone has asked, did the way I worded the Mickey Mantle introduction involve a strategy, and is that a standard thing that happens in preaching? The answer is yes. I worded that introduction in such a way as to raise questions in the listeners’ minds. That is a standard thing that happens in preaching. Now, that is only one strategy, but it is not the only strategy. This is a strategy to create questioning. Others create a sense of wonder, and others create a sense of controversy. But these are all varied strategies to say, “How do I make you have to listen to this biblical material?” And certainly one way is to create those questions, “Why is he talking about this? If that is not the answer, what is the other answer?” Part of this strategy is even to word things in a way that makes you say, “What? What does that mean?” Of course, this only works if you explain it later. Thus you create that interest, in one strategy, by raising questions.

If this is the importance of introductions, what are some standard types of sermon introductions? I have seven types to tell you about in this lesson, and you could multiply that by 10. There are so many variations of introductions. But here are some basic types, basic tools to put in your toolbox and be aware of. One basic type of sermon introduction is called “simple assertion.” This is the most basic type of sermon introduction. It should not be demeaned. This is where you simply say, “Here is what we will talk about today.” It is very clear and forthright. For example, “I want to talk to you today about how harbored anger can harden the softest heart.” This is very straightforward. It is simply, “Here is the subject.” This is “simple assertion.”

Some variation on that is “startling statement.” “‘Get out of here, and never come back.’ That is what Jesus said to the moneychangers when He drove them out of the temple. ‘You get out of here, and you never come back. You have no place in my Father’s house.’” Do you hear the startling statement? It makes you think, “Who would say such a thing?” “Faith without works...is alive and well and living in this church.” Would you listen to that sermon? If you did not drive him out of town first, would you listen to this sermon?

Another variation on that is “provocative question.” “Why would a loving God tolerate hell?” Would you listen to that sermon? Many people would. You ask a provocative question as the basis, getting the subject in view and also creating the thought, “I need to hear the answer to that. I recognize that problem. I need to hear the answer to that.”

Changing gears somewhat dramatically are “catalog introductions.” That is where we group similar items to form a single concept: “A hammock under a shade tree, a tall glass of iced tea, and Mozart on the breeze. Ahh, that is contentment.” You group some items to create a concept of “What would contentment be?” (At least, in worldly terms). If you are a fan of the *Sound of Music*, you could do the song, “Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens...” There you are grouping things to make people think, “This would bring happiness to your life.” This is the catalog approach. Here is another example that is a little heavier, “William Bennett, Kobe Bryant, William Jefferson Clinton, Martha Stewart, Enron executives, you, and me. Secure in the world, sinful before God, ready to be judged.” Do you hear the catalog? What groups all these people, you and me included? We may think ourselves secure in the world, but being sinful before God, we shall be judged.” By the way, when I am judged, I want Christ in my place. And that is the promise of the Gospel, that He will be in my place. But there will still be a judgment as all stand before the great throne. So we group items to make a point. That is a catalog approach.

Another form that is standard is “anecdote.” “A little boy went to his father and said, ‘Dad, what causes war?’ The father looked up from his newspaper and said, ‘Well, suppose the United States and Great Britain were to have an argument...’ And the mother said, ‘The United States and Great Britain would not have an argument.’ The father said, ‘I know. It was just an example.’ ‘Well, it was not a good example!’ ‘I know, I was just trying to make a point!’ ‘Well it was not a point you could make that way!’ ‘Never mind,’ said the boy. ‘Now I know what causes war.’” Anecdotes often are a way to get humor to make a point in a message.

For just a moment we need to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of using humor in a message. Here is the basic idea: humor serves you when you raise the hammer of emotional intensity in order to drive home a point. Now, you must hear that it is to drive a point. The humor must be obviously used to drive a point because of what happens to listeners if the humor does not do that. Not so long ago, if you were trained in law or almost any business school, you were trained to begin virtually every public address, any talk, with a joke. Start every talk with a joke. This is because of that rubric from rhetoric of long ago, “The introduction is the handshake of good intent,” was taught over and over and over again. Therefore people thought, “If I just say something funny, it will draw people in. They will like the joke, and they will feel good about me.” And it is true. If you were to look for the emotional reason people will listen to a message, they will say that by using humor you will get people’s attention. Humor really draws people in, and they listen. But—here is the important “but”—what they also began to recognize was that everyone was doing this. Thus all listeners knew what was going on. “You are telling a joke at the beginning to get my attention and to draw me in and to make me feel good about either you or the situation I am in. Therefore by telling the joke you are trying to manipulate me.” This happens so much in our culture that those who researched it would say that just as fast as attention is aroused, trust goes down, because no one wants to be manipulated.

Now, what is the way to bring attention and trust together to accomplish your point? You should recognize that humor does work when people do not feel manipulated. They do not feel manipulated if they can see what you told as a joke is tied to the subject. It has a purpose. It is when the humor appears not to have a purpose other than manipulation that I will strongly distrust you. When the humor is tied to the point, I can often say, “I now feel the subject in my heart with greater intensity because of the way

you used this. Now I actually appreciate the humor and recognize you did it with purpose for your subject, not merely to manipulate my feelings.” Now, if you throw away humor from your message, believe me, you will be a very sour preacher. Did Jesus ever use humor? There is no question that Jesus used humor. When He talked about “You are willing to judge your brother, and by that you will take the splinter out of his eye but ignore the log in your own eye” or when He said, “It is harder for a wealthy man to get to heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” he was using humor. We may not be sure exactly how to exegete these passages, but there is no question that people laughed when He said it. He used humor, and His humor had a point. That is the issue: humor must have a purpose that is clear.

Now, is there ever a time when you are preaching a subject so heavy that humor lets people off the hook? Yes, and that could be negative or positive. It may be that you cannot deal personally with the intensity anymore and so just to lighten the mood you back off of it. By laughing, you back off of what you have said. “If you do not listen to my message, there will be great and horrible consequences for this church, ha ha ha.” What did I just do? I had trouble saying this. I had trouble in your hearing because I had to humor it to soften it somehow. But that may be very different than pastoral prudence that says, “This is so heavy for so long, if I do not lighten up a bit they will not be able to hear me. Therefore I need humor to do that.”

I was at a service recently of two churches that had a history that was sometimes not always positive. So the pastor who was dealing with this said, “It is great to be here with this church. We have been sister churches for a long time. And sometimes we have acted like sisters.” Everyone laughed, but it meant he could go on with great authority and power. He had named the elephant in the room as if to say, “I will not be intimidated by this. I can name it, you can laugh about it, so let us deal with it now and move on forward.” Thus that willingness I think can at times be a very powerful aspect of humor.

I am trying to warn you both ways. I am trying to say that humor has consequences if it does not have a purpose. And there will be consequences of just being afraid of humor and never being willing to show your own goodness of heart in the pulpit. Humor can have a purpose and strong power as long as it has a purpose. That is the thing to keep in your mind: if it is just an anecdote for humor’s sake, I would caution you strongly against it.

Here are a couple of other notes about humor, and then we will move on. Who is the only person you can make fun of from the pulpit? Yourself. Who is the only person you cannot pat on the back in the pulpit? Yourself. You and I have both sat in those churches where at times the pastor will say something like, “My wife and I have made a commitment that we will never go to sleep at night without having shared the Gospel to at least one person every day.” That makes you want to say, “Well, good for you.” It makes you want to slap him. You do not want to commend yourself from the pulpit. Now, this can sometimes be a difficulty, because you want to say something positive, and you did something positive. If you did something positive, though, who gets the credit? God must get the credit. The Lord enabled you. Thus you do not have to never say you did anything good, but you must always give the credit to the Lord if you did. And if you say something positive about yourself, you should typically say, “Now, I recognize this was not of me.” And maybe you would even say, “And my high view of myself is not of God.” Somehow you have to combat self complementation.

The other note about humor is how easy it is use humor that is damaging to people and not even know it. Some humor is so prevalent in culture, so out there. I remember I did this one time. I used an illustration about a sheriff who was getting older and needed to qualify for his annual pistol target test to be able to keep using his pistol. So he went to take his test. But he had just gotten a new pair of trifocals. For those

of you who shoot, you know this will be a real problem. When you shoot you have to get the target in focus, you have to get the front sights of the gun in focus, and you have to get the back sights of the gun in focus—all at the same time. And this man has new trifocals! So he tried to get the right angle, but finally he said, “I have been doing this for 30 years!” He just let his instincts take over, saying, “I know where that thing is.” He shot where his instincts told him it had to be. The sermon I was preaching was about Christians developing instincts about what is sinful. At times they will not be able to identify the specific verse that pulls the sin into focus, but when they have so long lived for the Lord, their instincts tell them something is off base. Now, I thought that was a pretty good illustration. And then I shook people’s hands at the door of the sanctuary later. And one of my favorite people in the world, my senior elder, came up to me and shook my hand, and then held it and said, “Bryan, I never thought I would hear you make fun of older people.” What did I do? I did not mean to, but I took advantage of other people’s age in life in order to be funny. And it was not appreciated.

Who is the only person you can make fun of in the pulpit? Yourself. Who are people we typically make fun of in the pulpit? If evangelical suburban middle-class culture accepts it, who do we make fun of in the pulpit with impunity? We make fun of our own families. “My wife the other day, you should have seen...” What does everyone do when you mention your wife? They look right at her. How is she responding? How is she reacting? And how dare you make fun of your own spouse in front of everyone? So if you tell something from the pulpit that puts your spouse in a bad or even a compromising light, what must you do? Even as you are telling the story, you must tell the congregation that you have asked permission. You must say that. You must say, “I have talked to my wife about this, and she said I could say this.” Do not assume they know. You are trying to communicate compassion, and if you would be willing to bring even your spouse into embarrassment, who will go to you for counseling? They will laugh at the joke, but they will not trust you.

Who else do we make fun of in our churches? We make fun of children and politicians—particularly of whatever party the majority of your church does not align with. One time I had the awful experience of being confronted by an older woman in my church. We were going down a hallway, and she simply stopped me and grabbed me by the elbows. She said, “Bryan, when did our people determine to get so mean? We tell so many jokes about the president in this church, I cannot bring my own unsaved children here because they are not of the political party that is most appreciated in this church.” Think about that. We just tell the joke, everybody laughs, and we all agree this is somebody to make fun of. And as a result, unbelievers, people who do not agree with us politically, and certainly people who are not already part of the clan, see no reason to sit here. They are thinking, “You just make fun of people who disagree with you.”

Who else do we make fun of? Other denominations and other churches. Again, this is so easy to do. And because we do it so commonly, we do not hear the offense of it to people who are, again, not already part of the clan. But think of this, because of my position I speak in mainly Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) churches. I go to churches that are quite large and some that are very historic in the PCA. Often that means I teach a joint Sunday school class. All the adults get together, and sometimes the kids, and I always ask the question, “How many of you were raised in a Bible-believing Presbyterian church?” Even in the most historic of the churches I go to, if more than 15% raise their hands, it is an exception. It is almost always 15% of the people or fewer. Now, if you tell jokes about other denominations, what do you know you are doing? You are making fun of people, their families, and their backgrounds. They will laugh, but they will not like you, and they will not trust you.

Often racial and ethnic humor comes out in ways we do not intend. Just using a dialect other than my own can be offensive. Describing someone by his or her race who is doing a bad thing can be offensive,

“And this great big old Indian came into the store...” What does the fact that he is Native American have to do with the account? Or does he sound worse because you identified his race? You may not even recognize when you do that. But identifying the race of the subject is stereotyping in ways you may never have intended. Who is the only person you can make fun of from the pulpit? Yourself. And you sometimes have to listen very carefully to recognize what you yourself are doing because of how commonly humor is used to demean others to elevate us.

Having moved beyond that, let us continue to look at other ways in which we sometimes use sermon introductions. We just finished talking about anecdotes. Another type is news or historical accounts told in contemporary terms. When we talk about illustrations, we will come back to this. We will talk about how even if we are using historical accounts we do not leave it to 1000 years ago. We will ask, how do we tell those accounts in contemporary terms?

But, above all things I have mentioned to you thus far, the most important and commonly used type of introduction is human interest accounts. A human interest account is a story of an ordinary or extraordinary person in an ordinary or extraordinary situation experiencing thoughts and emotions with which ordinary people can identify. Is Mickey Mantel an ordinary or extraordinary person? He is extraordinary. Is his life extraordinary or ordinary? It is extraordinary. But is a person who pursued the world’s happiness all his life and came up empty extraordinary? It is very ordinary, and everybody can identify with that. Our story can be about an ordinary or extraordinary person in an ordinary or extraordinary situation but with thoughts or emotions an ordinary person can identify with. Princess Diana was an example of someone by whom a whole nation was gripped. She is a princess with a Cinderella story, and so you would say, “Nobody could relate to that.” Her marriage went bad, she lived under the press, in the eye of the world and so forth. But what do we recognize? No matter what came her way, she was very unhappy. Life never gave her anything that made her happy enough. And it was, in a sense, that unhappiness with which so many people could identify. That was what made people long to hear so much about her. A human interest account is the type of story that will over and over again pull people in and make them have to listen.

What are marks of poor sermon introductions? As you begin to get a feel of the importance of the introduction and know what goes into them, what marks poor sermon introductions? The first two marks that I will mention to you are the most important. They are historical recap and logical literary recap.

Let us look at historical recap first. The preacher begins by saying, “Now at this time of the life of Israel, they are 40 years out of the land of Egypt, and they are about to enter the Promised Land. They have been in the desert of sin, they wandered through the Negeb, and they have gone around the Moabite territory. But now they are getting ready to go into the Promised Land, where they will face a number of different people. There will be the Hittites and the Jebusites, among others. And some of these will be more...” What are most people now doing? You just heard the channels switch or else the switch turn off. They sat down, many of them thinking, “I know the Bible was written 2000 to 4000 years ago, but I am sitting here because he is going to say something that applies to my life.” And in the first 20 seconds, you convinced them they are wrong. You will only say things that apply to thousands of years ago. Now, is all of that information about history important to say in the sermon? Yes, it has its place. The introduction, however, is not that place. It is very important information, because contextualization is very important, but this is not the place for it.

Very similar to historical recap is logical literary recap. “Now, here we are in the fifth chapter of Romans. You may remember that over the last three weeks, what we have been covering is how this chapter has had its development up until this point. In the first chapter of Romans, of course, we saw the

consequences of the Fall and how that affects all people. And in the second chapter we recognize that the Fall came through the life of Adam, who was affected through original sin but also had consequences in his own life, so the redemption would be necessary. In the third chapter we recognize that redemption is necessarily applied to all people because all have sinned..." What are people doing now? Again, you just heard the switches go off. Is it important to give that logical literary recap? Yes, we will be doing that. But it is not the place to begin. Often what happens (we will cover this next time) is that people confuse the sermon introduction with what we will call the Scripture introduction. The Scripture reading itself has an introduction, which may have some brief contextualization, so the people know what they are reading. But that is different than the sermon introduction that has this high obligation of arousing interest and communicating compassion.

It is the sermon introduction that we are dealing with in this lesson. We will deal with the Scripture introduction another time. Typically, great errors occur in terms of arousal of interest. These are not errors of doctrine but of communication. Those errors occur when people start with historical recap or logical literary recap. Now, here are some quick additions to marks of poor sermon introductions, and you will commonsensically recognize them all.

A third mark of a poor sermon introduction is a porch on a porch. You start with a story that leads to what? Another story. You know the first one really did not hit the mark that you were trying to get to, but it did lead you to an idea that led you to the next idea to get to what you wanted to get to. So, how many introductions are there to a sermon? There is just one introduction.

Another mark is broad or simplistic assertions. Sermons should not begin with broad or simplistic assertions such as "We should sin less." You might as well not have said it. It is too broad. It is not going to be gripping, in fact they may think, "Oh, there he goes again."

The fourth mark of a poor sermon is a highly passionate or argumentative beginning. I am going to tease a little bit here, but think of what you would feel if I started a sermon by saying, "Today I am going to tell you the most important thing in the world! You must listen to me!" Now, if I start that way, what will everybody think? "Get out of my face, what are you doing?" It is too much, too fast, too early. Are there places to be highly impassioned? Of course, but it is typically not right off the bat.

The fifth mark is more difficult for us because it involves so much pastoral prudence. It is using inappropriate cultural references. Very soon you will discover the importance of arousing attention. That will create a whole host of temptations for you, because you will recognize that there are easy ways to do it that are inappropriate pastorally. One is to say things that are on the edge of acceptability. For instance, I could begin to quote or name scenes of a recent and controversial movie that may have violent graphic content, sexually graphic content, or a lot of profanity in it. Now, it may be very applicable to what I am saying. I may even kind of like the fact that it may set people's teeth on edge, because they are saying, "Oh, so he has seen that, huh?" That is one possibility. It may be movies, it may be music, or it may be books. We are a pop culture dominated generation. There are aspects of generation, region, maturity, and so forth that need to be taken into account when you think of what is appropriate for you to speak about from the pulpit. For instance, take profanity. Do the people in the pew not know profanity? They all know it, but they are not expecting to hear it from their pastor. They are not expecting their children to be schooled in it from the pastor in the pulpit. Now, this may be appropriate in private meetings. I have certainly been in situations where single moms have asked me as a pastor, "Will you please come and talk to my son? He is in third grade, he is hearing all these words, and he is repeating them. He does not listen to me. Will you, as a man, come in and talk to my son?" Of course I do talk to them and deal with some of those issues. But that is different from other things. Our

culture is changing rapidly. Recognize that until the 1960s (many older people in your church would be from this generation), the word “pregnant” could not be used on television. I remember the very first time I used the word “homosexual” in the pulpit. My wife was frightened, because she thought I would lose my job simply because I had used the word. That was only about 20 years ago that I did that. Things are moving very quickly in our culture. These are things we will talk much more about when we deal with illustrations. But I just want you to be aware of the powerful temptation of thinking, “Well, I really want them to listen to me, so I will rouse their attention by saying this thing,” and you know that thing is on the edge.

It is your obligation to exegete two things. You have to exegete the text and the people. Now, we can say exactly what movies you can cite and which you cannot, right? No, we are back to that pastoral prudence. God called you to the situation. He gave you judgment, understanding of people and understanding of His Word. With what He has given you, what are you able to say to communicate God’s Word? We can talk about struggles with anger, we can talk about struggles even with addictive problems that we have had. But what is the one thing that our congregations will typically struggle to hear from us as a category of sin? Sexual sin. Other cultures are not this way, some are more this way, but American culture very much struggles to hear from the pulpit the pastor’s own struggle with past sexual sin. The reason is because we know that recidivation is so very high. If you have struggled in the past, they know you probably struggle in the present. And so for a pastor to deal with that particular subject even from the past will be a great difficulty. You would have to say so many qualifications that you may not have time to say them all in a sermon. Thus I will typically say, if you feel like you must talk about past sexual struggle, then the place is probably a men’s retreat with a few people around rather than from the pulpit with everybody around, because then the kid goes home at lunch and says, “Mommy, what did the pastor mean when he said...” Is that the right place?

This is (I love this terminology, though it is not my own) redemptive transparency. If I never indicate as a pastor my struggles, then people say, “You do not know what is going on in my life. I cannot listen to what you say because I cannot identify with you.” On the other hand, if the way I am being transparent actually undermines my ability to share the Gospel, then that is no longer redemptive transparency. That is selfish transparency. Now, what is the line? What phrase am I going to use again? Pastoral prudence. The Holy Spirit is very important in the life of a pastor, is it not? The Holy Spirit teaching us, convincing us, helping us think the thoughts of God. Thus pastoral prudence is a major part of our judgment as we move through life and say, “What is appropriate for this people at this time and this place?”

It has been asked, is it dishonest in a human interest account to use people you know but to change names of people and places? We will talk more about this later, but I will say this now. It can be done honestly, but it depends on the words you use. If I say of someone, “There was a man who came to my office a couple of years ago, I will call his name Bill...” What did I just say to people? His name is not Bill. By using that phrase I indicated, “To protect this man, I am changing his name.” Thus I am telling a true account. But by using that phrase, “I will call his name Bill,” I am saying, “That is not his real name, but I am protecting him by not giving his real name.” Now integrity is in place, compassion is in place, everything is in place just by using a phrase like that, and we will learn more of those. Sometimes you can put yourself in the third person: “I know a man who...” But it may be that you recognize that if you would tell this about yourself, you would seem to be self-aggrandizing. Then it might be better to say, “I know someone who did...” and never mention your own name. This is a way to keep from praising yourself and yet still telling a true account.

Back to the marks of a poor sermon introduction, another that I missed is using Scriptures other than the one you will be preaching from. Do not use Scriptures other than the one you will be preaching from in your introduction. Think pragmatically for a second. The people just opened their Bibles to Philippians 2. And then in the sermon introduction you say something like, “And in 1 Thessalonians 4 it says...” Now what will everyone say? “Oh, I thought we were in Philippians. I am in the wrong place.” Thus by citing references in the introduction other than the one you will be preaching about, you confuse people. Will we cite other Scripture references in the sermon? Of course. But not in the introduction; it just confuses people.

How do you make others have to listen to these introductions? Remember the old line, “There are those you can listen to, and there are those you cannot listen to, and there are those you must listen to.”? How do you become one of those who must be listened to in your introduction? First by recognizing it is important to arouse attention. You already know that, but I will still say it. You can just talk about “little tales for little minds” and make fun of this need, but do you not want people to create some interest in you when you hear a sermon? Thus arousing attention is the first thing. But the second and even more important is include an identifiable FCF. Why do I have to listen to you? Have you identified a burden in my life that makes me recognize that the Word of God will deal with me today in this message you are preaching? It is also important to personalize the FCF. When I say personalize, I do not mean that you should personalize it for you as the speaker. I mean you should personalize it for the listener. “I know what is going on in your life, and I will tell this to you today in such a way that you will recognize that this engages your life. I have identified a burden that you have and that is clear in the message.

What are the marks of good sermon introductions? They have an effective start. I encourage you very much to think about that “stand-alone standard.” Would the opening sentence capture any interest if it stood alone? If you just heard that opening sentence, would it be an effective start? Second, they are of an efficient length. Introductions are not too long. If it is typed out on a standard page to two-thirds of a page, then you are right at the max. You are getting very long if it is two-thirds of a page. Most times it should be about half a page in length. This means two minutes is a very long introduction. The typical length is 90 seconds. Next, it bonds to Scripture. Somehow it tentatively points out that this text will address this concern. The fourth mark is it flows into the proposition. The introduction flows into the proposition in two ways: concept and terminology. The concepts you talk about in the introduction are what the sermon will be about, and the proposition is about that concept. And the key terms, the terminology, is introduced in the introduction. The proposition is actually a summary of the key ideas in the introduction. These springboard it into the sermon. The introduction prepares for the proposition in concept and terminology. This next sentence is very important: there should be no key terms in *either clause* of the proposition that have not been mentioned in *precisely* the same terms in the introduction. Remember, I used the word “satisfaction” in the Mickey Mantle story, right? Then the proposition had the word “satisfaction.” I did not switch them and talk about satisfaction one place and fulfillment in the next place. Precisely the same terms echoed, because I was getting the ear ready for what the proposition would be.

Here is what we are hoping to accomplish in our introduction. We are creating a chain. We recognize that the introduction has the obligation to arouse attention, introduce the subject, create an identifiable FCF (and make the FCF personal for *the listener*), bond to Scripture (somehow Scripture will deal with this issue), and prepare for the proposition in concept and terminology. Here is an example.

As my mother listened to Mary’s brazen confusion, her worst fears and suspicions were sadly confirmed. Mary had just declared that she was leaving her husband and pursuing a relationship with another man. For a long time my mother had been noticing her long-time friend Mary

making frequent trips to visit the owner of a store across the street from her own business. Rumors were flying in the small town where they lived, and my mother had finally decided to find out what was going on. My mother's tentative questions were met with surprising candor by Mary. "It is all right," she said. "God has led me to this new relationship. And besides, I will be much happier with him." My mother left their conversation dumbfounded. She was afraid for Mary. She knew that if Mary continued on her present course God would judge her for her sin. She knew that Mary needed to hear both the words of rebuke of God's Word and the hope of grace in Jesus Christ from God's Word. She wondered, "How can I warn Mary that God judges sin and yet provide her with the eternal hope of biblical truth?" How would you respond in such a situation? [Here is one of those questions, right?] My mother's account reminds us that opportunities to proclaim the truths of God's Word can arise at any time, often in unexpected situations. In His providence, God continually places us in situation after situation where we can provide hope by carefully and faithfully applying the Word of God. [FCF is about to come.] But most of us struggle to speak up with clarity and conviction when God calls us to proclaim His truth, despite our knowledge that God will judge. What will motivate us to overcome our hesitation and fears and enable us to speak the truth of God's Word in many different circumstances that we face? The apostle Paul's charge in 2 Timothy 4 answers these very questions [do you hear the Scripture bond?]. Paul writes that "Because God will judge sin [have you heard the language of God judging sin before in this introduction?], we must proclaim His Word [have you heard that language before?], yes, in every situation [have you heard about "every situation" in this introduction?].

The key words of both clauses in the proposition occurred in the introduction.