

## **Conclusions**

The goal of this lesson is to understand the characteristics and construction principles for sermonic conclusions. The reason is that this is the high point of the sermon. This is what we have been driving at. This is the final exhortation, to say, “All that I have been saying is to have you hear this response that God is calling for you to achieve or to follow because of what we have talked about in this text.” Here are three basic guiding principles for why conclusions are so important.

First, the last lasts longest. What you say last, particularly in an oral medium, lasts longest in people’s minds, memories, and impressions, so it is so important because we know that is what people are going to hear echoing as they leave. As a result, we also recognize that the last punches hardest. What is said last, assuming it is said well, is what actually carries the greatest impression of the overall sermon. Now why is that intimidating to us? Because, you know, all of Saturday I have been working on this sermon, and about one o’clock in the morning I was getting to the conclusion. So when I am most tired, I am trying to say the thing that will actually have the greatest import. This should help us to say, “Now what are my priorities here?” Typically, those who teach preaching encourage people that the conclusion is the most important thing. It carries the biggest punch.

So it needs to be produced with some care, and therefore the last guideline is the last comes first. You read about this in your readings, and you recognize that this is an old debate among homileticians. When do you prepare the conclusion relative to the rest of the sermon? Now if you are presenting the sermon, you know that the conclusion comes last, but when you are preparing the sermon, there are some dangers in preparing the conclusion last. I have already mentioned to you one of them: you are just tired. You are now very tired, and you are trying to do the most important aspect of the message. Another problem with waiting to write the conclusion until after you have written everything else is that you might suggest something new. In fact, if you did not know what your destination was, how did you even choose the words and the terms and the exegesis to spotlight as you were working through the sermon? It is like driving a car without having a destination. If you do not know where you are going, then how did you even decide what route to pick, what words to choose, or what exegesis to concentrate on? That is one danger. What is another danger of writing your conclusion before you have done all the other preparation of the sermon? There is a reverse danger. What is the danger of saying, “This is what I am going to talk about,” before you have written everything else? You might impose something on the text that is not there. You might create a sermon that is moving toward something before you have really thought through what the text means. You know that, even as you are writing, the Holy Spirit works in your heart and mind to direct you as you are going, but you may be deaf, as it were, to what the Spirit and the Word are saying to you because you are going to your destination. Now how do we put these two things together? If there are dangers on both sides, what do we do? I would say it this way: you create the target, but you hold it loosely. It is very important to have a fairly clear idea of your destination before you write the rest of the sermon. If you do not know where you are going, at least in general terms, there could be all kinds of word choices—in terms of knowing how to state your main points and your subpoints and what applications to use—that will be very difficult to make if you do not know what your

destination is. However, I think you want to be willing to change your destination if the Spirit and the Word are directing you elsewhere. So it is important to have a fairly clear idea of where you are going.

We will talk a little later about what I call the “left-field rule.” You know that you are out in left field when you are doing a sermon and you get toward the end and you say, “Hmmm, I wonder how I should apply this.” When you say that, you know that you have missed the point. What were you doing all that exposition about if you did not know what the application was? If you do not know what the conclusion is and where you are going, then what was that other stuff even about? So holding it loosely, but having a general idea of where you are going because you have studied the passage enough, will guide you to the conclusion.

When we do application, I will say it this way: application should come at the end of sermon research. You do not want to be doing application before you have researched the material, so application comes at the end of sermon research, but it comes at the beginning of sermon writing. In other words, I have to know how I am putting this thing together. This principle is all the more important with conclusions. I should have researched what this passage is about before I came up with conclusions, but I should have a clear idea of the destination as I am doing all of the preparation for the presentation of that material.

As I said, this is an ongoing debate among those who teach preaching. Do you remember some of the authors who say that you should prepare the conclusion first? Broadus, the father of expository preaching, says to prepare the conclusion first. He is very much aware of the fact that you are so tired that you may not do it well. Rayburn says to prepare it first. Haddon Robinson, in his book on biblical preaching, says to prepare it first. It is interesting that Stott is the one who kind of breaks the pattern, and you will read that work next semester. John Stott is the one who says you should not prepare the conclusion until you have done everything else. I have said that you should do something in between preparing the conclusion at the beginning and saving it until the end, to be aware of the dangers of both sides. That is known as the “mealy-mouthed approach.” I think what you will find is that it is what you begin to do. If you do not have an idea of where you are going, you just feel adrift as you are preparing all the material. On the other hand, if you say, “No matter what I find out, I cannot change my conclusion,” then you will feel as if you are constrained from saying what the Spirit has been saying to you.

What are the components of conclusions? I will give the summary first and then we will go into the details. G. Campbell Morgan said it this way: “Every conclusion must conclude, include, and preclude.” It must conclude. It must end! It must stop the sermon from going on, so it must conclude. It must include. That is, it must include what has previously been said. That is summary. It is reminding people of what has been said. A conclusion must also preclude. That is, it must preclude the possibility that the listener will escape the message. It is giving not just a reminder but also the implications. This is what we will ultimately call the exhortation—“Now that you know, what is God calling you to do or believe? How should you respond?” The technical ways of saying these things are, first, recapitulation, or concise summary. The first component technically is called recapitulation. There should be some sort of concise summary, not extended explanations, but hammer-stroke statements that quickly reiterate the

central concepts of the message in order to make the final appeal for action. It is the fast marshalling of the sermon's forces using its key terms. It is very important that recapitulation use the key terms of the sermon.

Again, from where do the key terms of the sermon come? They are the key terms of the magnet clauses of the main points. What are two ways of presenting them in summary? We have already said that you can group them together, but another way that you can do it in the telling of a story is that you can thread the key terms throughout the story. You can group or thread. Grouping is putting them together in a summary statement. Threading is telling a story and having the key terms reappear in the telling of the story, to bring the mind and the ear back to an awareness of what things have been about. Let me just read to you from W. H. Sangster, who was a really wonderful pastor in England a century ago. Let me show you how he did it one time. I will tell you what his sermon was about, and then I want you to listen to his conclusion and how he threads so well. His sermon was about this: he was emphasizing that the believer has been purchased by Christ's blood. Therefore he no longer belongs to the world. He belongs to God. Do you hear it? The believer is purchased by Christ's blood, so he no longer belongs to the world. He belongs to God.

Sangster said this:

Some time ago, a poor drunkard committed his life to Christ in this church. Twenty years before that, he had actually been a pastor in a church nearby, but when he assumed a pastorate in this town, he took to drink and he ended up in the gutter. When he gave his life to Christ, he had a hope, though. When he truly believed he was purchased by Christ's blood, he believed that his thirst might be quenched by some stroke of omnipotence—that God would just take the thirst away. But that did not happen. There began the day that he was purchased by Christ a long guerilla warfare in his soul between the deadly craving and the keeping power of Christ. As his new friend, I suggested that on any day that he found his fight especially hard, that he would drop by the church and we would pray together. He dropped in often. His drawn face often told its own story, and we would go to the chapel and we would pray. One day as I was praying with him, he broke down completely. The contrast between his earlier life of holy service and the revolting bestiality to which his drunkenness had brought him was too much for him that day. He sobbed like a child and said, "I know I am in the gutter. I know it. But I do not belong there, do I? Tell me. Tell me I do not belong there." I put my arm around him. I felt a great elation even in the embarrassment of his tears. He had lost his way, but Christ had not lost him. "No," I said quite positively. "Christ purchased you by His blood, and you do not belong to this world. You belong to Him." This is the same hope that God offers you, each of you here, and that you must claim. You do not belong to the world. You belong to God. Believe it, and live it.

Do you hear the key terms? It is really beautifully done, and at the same time there is a charge to our hearts: you must believe this. You must claim this. That is what a conclusion does. It marshals the forces of the sermon by saying, "Here are the thoughts we have discussed. Here is what this Scripture has said today. Believe it. Act on it."

Exhortation is the next key component of conclusions. Sometimes this is simply called final application. We do not summarize simply to summarize but to marshal the forces for the appeal that we will make either to belief or action. We are saying, “What concrete personal actions are you calling for from the hearer? What do you want me to do?” Now that “to do” may be behavioral or attitudinal. It is not always about behavior; it may be something to believe as well. It typically includes some direction. Show me precisely what you expect of me now at the end of the sermon. We will spell it out. We will do it briefly. The final exhortation is not long. It is usually just one or two sentences. Here is an example. A mere summary of a message would be to say something like this: “Today we have seen that God is sovereign, and He is holy, and He is loving.” That is just summary. You hear those key terms. He is sovereign, He is holy, and He is loving. That becomes exhortation when you say something like this: “Because God is sovereign and holy and loving, we can trust Him. Even in times of our greatest difficulty, He will never lose control, and He will never stop caring, and He will never lose hold on you. Fear not, whatever you face, for you have a God who is sovereign and holy and loving.” The exhortation began with the imperative “fear not.” Here it is just an imperative of attitude, but I have told you what to do with this information. You are to apply it in some way to your lives in that final exhortation.

The next key component of conclusions is elevation. There is some sense of climax. Here thought and emotion are arriving at their greatest height. If you are not moved in the conclusion, it is unlikely that anybody else will be. Even your tonality should express that there is a sense of urgency in the conclusion. It is not flat. Now it does not mean that it is always said with great bombast, nor is it always said with very low tones. You are saying what, according to your personality and the content of the message, would mean the most to you, and you are saying it as though it does. Manner and content must now conform to one another. Say what you are saying as though it has the meaning to you that you are trying to communicate.

There are two ways we typically do this. One is by using a human interest account that is poignant. I will just be very straight with you. Those of you who are training to preach sermons in this culture, you recognize that for men in this culture it is somewhat difficult to express emotion. In your conclusion, you are trying to be somewhat emotive. Here is where *pathos* is coming to help drive, as it were, the *ethos* and the *logos*—what this means now. But that is hard for us, and so it is typically very important in a sermon and a conclusion to identify those human interest accounts that have their own *pathos* and that can poignantly drive home to the will and to the heart, as well as to the mind, what we have said logically in the message.

If you do not do a human interest account, there really is only one other basic type of conclusion. We went through about seven types of introductions, but there are really only about two types of conclusions. One is a human interest account. The other is what is called “grand style.” Grand style does not depend on the story to carry the emotive *pathos*. It depends on your manner to do it. So it is heightened words and heightened manner that says, “This is very important. Listen to me. You must walk away with this truth.” You are not telling a story, but the words that you choose and the way that you express them expresses the urgency of the moment. So that is called grand style, and having those two in mind will typically help you through. Now I will tell you if you are not used to a lot of public presentation, grand style may feel awkward to you, but telling

a story about people who are dear or important to you will not be awkward at all. You will feel the power of that, and it will not be strange to you, so most of you probably will choose to do human interest accounts when you start out. But grand style becomes an option that is very important as well, and typically even when we are telling a poignant story, if it has touched us, there will be elements of it that are touched with a certain amount of *pathos* as well.

The last part of what is involved in conclusions is termination—that is, they have a purposed, pointed, definite end. What do you want people to walk away with? That is what you want to end with, to have a fair amount of purpose to it. The marks of effective conclusions, when we pull these things together, are first, uniqueness. How many conclusions are there in a sermon? A good sermon has only one. Did you ever go to a sermon and you thought the preacher was done and then suddenly he took off again? The best conclusions arrive in emotion and termination at the same time, so they are unique. There is only one conclusion. Obviously, conclusions have climax. We have talked about the emotive intensity of a message. Remember this is the highest emotive intensity of the message. Conclusions have resolution. We began the introduction saying, “What is the burden of the message?” That is the fallen condition focus (FCF), the burden of the message. That appears in the introduction. The conclusion tells people that we have dealt with what we identified as the burden. The Word of God has dealt with the burden that we identified, so we are bringing resolution by showing how the burden is being dealt with. Another mark of effective conclusions is finality—that is, they arrive on time and do not wander off. Again, Sangster is so good here. He says it this way: “Having come to the end, stop! Do not cruise about looking for a place to land like some weary swimmer coming into the beach and splashing about until he can find a way out. Come right in. Land at once. Finish what you have said and end at the same time.” Now then, this is a good pastoral qualification: “If the last phrase can have some quality of crisp memorable-ness, all the better, but do not delay even looking for it.” It is great if you can end very well, but it is still better to end than to wander about looking for a better way to end. An idea of finality will help. All of these things, of course, tell us that conclusions need careful preparation. They are the most telling thing. They have these basic components, but very soon you will find that people will not remember—though we cannot fail to do it, for reasons we will see shortly—they will not remember much of the meat of the message. They will remember telling conclusions. They really will, and it will become very powerful, so these have to be prepared with a great deal of care.

Let me give you some cautions for conclusions. As you hear their components, you will already recognize some of these. One caution for conclusions is to avoid consistent emotionalism. Once you begin to recognize that the conclusion is the place for *pathos*, it can be a place for manipulation. You know that; they know that; everyone knows that. Are you still being authentic? I had the sadness in some measure of being in a pulpit where there had been a man, a pastor or two prior to me, who had been in that church for 50 years. That was great. The difficulty was that over the last 15 years of his life, he cried in every sermon. Now I was there some 15 or 20 years after that, and the people still laughed about it. In every sermon he was that kind of weeping pastor, and it was, in their minds, manipulative. Now what makes it authentic is what is in your heart. It was said of Moody that he was one of the few people who could legitimately talk about hell, because he truly wept that people would go there. Something was authentic in the way that he preached that people knew that he really cared. He did not weep

every time, but when he did weep, it was genuine. Somehow we want, again, for manner and content to come together. Sometimes that means that in the conclusion we will speak with what almost sounds like great anger: “This *must* change!” Other times we will speak with great tenderness: “This must change, or we will be deeply, deeply hurt.” Manner and content must come together, but somehow that manner has to be reflective of what we are saying. So consistent emotionalism is a problem, but absent emotions is also a problem.

The second major caution is this: do not trail off. You will find that your heart thumps and your breath goes and you perspire and all those things that are just part of being in front of people. When you are doing it for 30 minutes or more, I recognize that what will happen is that you will become tired. It is an exercise. It is tiring. Typically, when I preach, by the time I am done, my back is soaked with sweat. That is almost always the case. It is an exercise. You are taking in a lot of breath to project adequately. You are gesturing. You are thinking hard and working hard, and your body is also into what you are saying, so when that begins to happen, there is the tendency simply to be tired at the end and to begin to say all poignant things very quietly. Everything gets whispered and put up in a high register, and the message has the sense of winding down, but you are saying the most important things, so there should be almost an electricity in the conclusion. Again, I am not talking about bombast and volume every time. That sometimes is appropriate, but there should be a sense of “this is the most important thing” and that you are speaking in a way so that you are not trailing off.

The next caution is just a hint for those of you trained in other modes of public speaking. Ordinarily, there is no final “thank you.” We do not say, “And therefore God says that this gossip must stop, and it must stop in this church. Thank you very much.” We do not say, “thank you.” We do preach sermons in the style of a public address, but we do not say, “thank you,” at the end of sermons. Now what about saying amen? It depends a little on the generation and even the church in which you are preaching. It sounds strange for a young man in churches today to say, “And this is what you must do. Amen.” It almost sounds as though you are congratulating yourself. Now there are churches, I recognize, where the “amen,” means something like, “This is what God has said, and I am saying it with great confidence to you because I have spoken with the authority of the Word of God.” However, even if you were doing that, I do not know that I would do that every time, so I would be cautious about the “amen” that seems like a self-benediction as opposed to, “I really had to say this today.”

Another caution is that you should let the conclusion conclude. Sometimes you may have the thought, “Well, I do not really have to come up with a good conclusion, because we are going to sing that great song afterward.” Or you might think, “I will just think of something to say in the final prayer.” Did you ever hear the final prayer and know that what the preacher was really doing was saying the third main point that he forgot in the sermon? Now if you have to do it, you have to do it, but it is not the way to plan. We sometimes will know that there are things we want to drive home with the concluding prayer or the song, but it is usually not a good idea to plan for those to carry the sermon, so we let the conclusion conclude.

I want you to avoid using rhetorical questions as concluding sentences. Please do not make the last sentence of your conclusion a question. For example, someone might say, “And so what we

have just seen is that the disciples followed Jesus. And what does God call you to do?" Often rhetorical questions come because the preacher could not think of what he wanted people to do, so he asked a question instead. Now technically, there are things that are called maieutic questions, which are questions that are directive, but we will not do that yet.

Use poems and quotations with great caution. We really are not the generation that appreciates very much "three points and a poem." It is not that you would never do it, but I am cautioning you that today people will almost grimace when sermons end that way. If you do end with somebody else's quotation or poem, please use it only if that person says exactly what you mean, not almost what you mean. Recognize that the change of voice and meter and language if you are using an ancient poem or an ancient quotation will actually tend to throw people off. We are not a very patient generation for language we do not understand, so if, right here at the conclusion where you are trying to drive things home, you begin to use archaic language, then the very time you want to say the most important things, people just stop listening. Prepare the audience for what you are intending to do with the quote. We have said that before. If you are going to use a quotation, please tell them what to listen to. Try not to break eye contact. Now just think of that. I have gotten to the point of this message, where I am saying, "This is the most important thing; I want you to hear me," and then I start to read to people. I break eye contact and look down. That is probably not what you want to do. The main question you have to think about is "Do you really want to give the last word of this sermon to someone else?" This is someone who has not lived among these people. They do not know the congregation. Do you really want to give the last word to someone else? Now if it is a very controversial point, maybe you do, but most of the time I would caution you against simply borrowing from another time, unless, again, that person says it so much better and it really will make a stronger impact than you yourself will make.

Here is a very important caution: do not introduce new exposition in the conclusion. It is very easy to say, "Now of course we know this is true because this is a present tense verb." The conclusion is the wrong time to be starting with new definitions, new exegesis, new references to other biblical texts. It is the wrong time to be doing that. It is not wrong to do, but it should not be done in the conclusion. The conclusion should conclude, not start something new.

Finally, avoid the word "finally." That was in your readings, but let us talk a little about that so that it is clear. If you say, "in conclusion," what does every third person in the church automatically do? They look at their watches. You just created what a homiletician would call "linear consciousness." You put time in front of them when you say "finally" or "in conclusion." Now, I will grant you that if the people have given up all hope that this sermon is ever going to end, then saying "finally" will cause them to brighten. If you have to say it, you have to. It can be a technique, but you should be aware that if you do not have to, you may be creating dynamics you do not intend. This was in your readings, but I just love the quotation from R. E. O. White, when he said it this way, "'Finally, brethren,' can be said by an apostle, and he can keep going for two more chapters, but you should not." A troubled English pastor once asked a farm laborer why he came to church only when the assistant preached. "Well, sir," said the farmer, "Young Mr. Smith says 'lastly,' and he does conclude. You say 'lastly,' and you last." If you do say, "in conclusion," then it should mean you are concluding.

Here are some hints for effective conclusions. How do we do this well? First, use a human interest-account if you can. Not only will it tie up the sermon in terms of emotion and poignancy, but people will strongly identify with these human-interest accounts. So it is just a very strong way of having people identify as well as hear the importance of what you are saying. I will just say quickly again that the other form of conclusion is called grand style, but if you can, human-interest accounts typically are the strongest.

Here is just a hint. Put the illustration of the last main point high in that point so that it is not competing with the conclusion. If the illustration comes too late in the third main point and the conclusion is a human-interest account, then you create anticlimax. You are actually taking away from the climax by having the story in the last main point too close to the story in the conclusion. You remember that we have said these pieces do not have to come in one particular order. The third main point is usually a point where it is helpful to move the illustration as high as possible, so if you have two subpoints, you might put the illustration after the first subpoint so that you create separation from the illustration of the conclusion. Again, these are just hints. These are not rules, but they are thoughts to consider. Think about whether you want to create anticlimax or whether you want the concluding illustration to have a real power of its own because it is not too close to other stories.

We have already talked about recognizing the power of ending with a telling phrase. If you can, it is important to end with a telling phrase. Now again, I am not saying that you would always do this. Does anybody know what the last words are in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? You will know them immediately when you hear them. They are "fell with a great crash." Here are the last few sentences of the Sermon on the Mount: "Whoever hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon the rock, and the rains came, and the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, but the house on the rock stood firm. Whoever hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand, and the rains came and the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and that house fell down with a great crash." That is the end of the Sermon on the Mount. So you see that these are not new ideas. These are just the ways people think and take in information in an oral medium, and so we see what that means even for Christ's time.

We have already talked about the importance of ending where you began. It is something we would not use every time, but a wraparound conclusion is often powerful. We end where we began; we finish the telling of the story. It is called a wraparound, so to end where you began can be a helpful hint.

Finally, a last thought for conclusions is to try to end with a positive. After all, it is the Gospel. It is the good news. Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount with the great crash because it is the last rendering of the Law, and He has showed people that they cannot live up to this. After that, His ministry is about the answer to the great crash, but we know that ministry, so it is not a good idea to end our sermons by saying something like, "And if you do not do what I say, you are all going to be in trouble, and this church is going to be ruined. Let us pray." We are preaching the good news, and I think to take the impact of the Gospel and make that your hope and encouragement



to people is the greater strength of the sermon.

Someone might ask how we can end with the Gospel if the text does not mention Christ or His redemptive work. We will spend a whole semester talking about that, but the key right now is to say that context is part of text. The context is part of the text, so identifying how this text functions in its redemptive context is important. What I said about the Sermon on the Mount is that it is the last rendering of the Law. If I put it in its context, I can begin to see how it functions redemptively. So that is not eisegesis. That is identifying where a text fits redemptively. Now we will not fully answer this question today. This question is addressed in the last half of *Christ-Centered Preaching* that we will not even read this semester. So we have a lot still to do, but it is good to feel the weight of that question. Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing,” so if all our message has been moral imperatives, we have a problem. We have to put the text in its context, and that will always be a redemptive context.

Let me just make sure this gets in front of you before we end. Here is some conclusion on conclusions. You need concise summary. It may be threaded or grouped. It may be both, but you need to have some sort of concise summary in which the key terms of the magnet clauses of the main points appear in the conclusion. You need some form of climax. Is there a sense of emotional intensity? You need final exhortation. Are you telling me now what to do or believe or hope in? Is there an exhortation that is part of the conclusion? Typically it is the last two sentences or so. That is typically where that final exhortation occurs. You need a definite end. Did this seem to have some sort of professional design to it? Did it definitely end and make us ready for that end? You need something that will neither surprise nor seem to wander off.