

## **How to Illustrate**

I want you to begin to think about how these truths move themselves into illustrations that we can do. Last time we talked about why illustrations are important. In this lesson, my goal is to explain how to do illustrations. We will talk about it generally at first. Next time we will get very specific and quite technical about how to do illustrations. It can get very technical, yet once you understand it, you can make illustrations work powerfully in your sermons.

First let us talk generally about how illustrations work and how we make them function in our sermons. The first thing we do is isolate an event and experience and associate it with the principle being related. There are a lot of ways this can occur, but let me relate it this way. When you write a sermon, the more that you can sharpen the principle the easier it will be to find illustrations dealing with it. If you say that you want to talk about something dealing with sin, you will not find an illustration. Your concept is too broad. It is when you really sharpen the hook of what exactly you are looking for that you will be able to catch in your own experience or in your readings those illustrations that are much more specific.

Let me give you an example. Some years ago now I was the academic dean here. I became aware that one of our very loved professors was going to leave. I knew it would be shattering to some students and even some faculty, and it was not something I could talk about because things were still unfolding. I was aware it was going to be very hard on some people that this very beloved professor was leaving. I wanted to teach in my own preaching and preparation for that moment how, in a time of ease and a time where God blesses, you should build strength for difficult times. You should not just let down but build strength in the easy time for the hard times that are sure to come. I thought about that message and went to preach in a church in South Carolina. When I was there, I was asked to stay in a family's home. The man happened to be an engineer for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) who was on loan to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The reason that this NASA engineer was on loan to the FAA is because the FAA was studying how to deal with a big problem at the time, which was wind sheers at the ends of airports. There was a period of time when planes would come into airports, and as they landed they might go through a thunderstorm that would knock them out of the air. There were a number of huge crises and tragedies that occurred as a result of wind sheers. So the FAA began to study how they could find wind sheers before they occurred and identify them at the ends of runways. That way they could warn planes about them before they landed. They were prepared to spend elaborate amounts of money to develop systems that could detect wind sheers. It never actually happened. The reason the equipment was never developed is because of the study of this particular engineer. He said originally he thought of a wind sheer as a piece of paper that pushed things down at the end of a runway. But as he began to study more and more the nature of wind sheers, he discovered that it did not work like that. A wind sheer is actually like wind coming out of a hose the way water comes out of a garden hose. If water comes hard out of a garden hose and hits the ground, it splashes back up. They discovered that pilots came into the airport and would hit the splash-up of wind first. These pilots tried to land, but the wind pushed them up as they came in. So they dropped their power and pushed down into the wind. Without realizing it, though, they were about to hit that big wind draft. At the very time they dropped power and pushed down, they should have added power to push through. So they started training their pilots to power up and push through if they came to the end of a runway and hit a big updraft in a thunderstorm. They saved pilots by training them to do that.

Remember that I was looking for an illustration that fit what was going on back at the seminary. When you are in the easy times, or the updraft times, do not power down. Use that as a time to power up for the difficult times that will surely come in life. It was because I knew precisely what I was looking for

that that illustration was so profound to my own experience, and I could relate it to what I wanted to talk about. I isolated an event and experience and associated it with the principle to be related. The more you refine the principle the easier it will be and more powerful it will be to find illustrations that deal with those principles.

Note that you want to take an experience of some sort to relate to a principle. You begin to understand why human-interest accounts are usually the best illustrations. Human-interest accounts are ordinary or extraordinary people in ordinary or extraordinary situations with which ordinary people can identify. Tell me about something ordinary or extraordinary that I can identify with. That principle that you want to make clear is now going to connect to my life. That is what we are trying to do. It is why old preachers' tales are usually problematic. If all of your illustrations in a sermon are about steam engines, it might be interesting, but it is removed from my life. You are not involving me, which is the very point of the illustration.

Some of this is expressed well by Lewis Paul Layman, who did a lot of work in the last generation on the use of illustration. He says, "An illustration is a piece of life. It is a setting so familiar to the hearer, so totally believable, that a minimum description enables him to see it and live it. If the illustration is well proportioned, designed, and chosen, the hearer recognizes, 'I have seen that. I have heard that. I have handled it.'" He reflects on John again. If the illustration is well done, the hearer says he has seen, heard, and handled it. Even if we tell an old-time illustration, we contemporize it. We find some way of connecting it to our experience today. Maybe we change the language we use, maybe we say, "At a museum I saw..." Somehow we need to bring that event into present experience so that the listener says, "This is what I understand." We need to use our own heart, mind, and experience to do this. It will throw you sometimes because you might want to use a great illustration out of Dostoyevsky. That is powerful in your English class, but you may need to adapt it to tell it here in a sermon. D. W. Ford writes, "Admittedly to quote from Dante, Dumas, Dostoyevsky, and Dickens is impressive. But what a congregation will most readily hear is references by the preacher to objects, events, and people's comments that he has seen and heard himself in the present locality of the people. An illustration drawn from the derelict house in the next street, the aftermath of a recent storm, a local flower show, a current play at the theatre, is the kind that is most serviceable." He says this because in using illustrations you want to motivate, not just inform. Take that proposition to their lives. If you go to a more distant setting, like a NASA engineer on loan to the FAA, you try to relate it to the people in some way. I asked, "Do you remember all the accounts of planes falling out of the air because of wind sheers?" I try to engage my audience in some way instead of removing them from the event. I try to pull them into the event. Hopefully they will remember reading or hearing about what I referred to. They may ask, "Why did they not install that equipment at the ends of runways?" Try to engage the hearer, even if your illustration is something removed from them. The proposition and the truth should be associated with an event with which they can identify.

We talked about using your own mind-heart reading in experience. It is not wrong also to use illustrations of others as catalysts for your own. Once you begin preaching a lot, you begin to recognize not only the power of illustration, but also that it is hard to find as many as you would like. Let me say a couple of things. It is not wrong to use illustrations of other preachers whom you hear. You just need to give the credit away. You do not have to say, "Tim Keller, in his sermon in Covenant Seminary's Chapel on November 3..." The minimum number of words that you can use to give the credit away and still keep your integrity are, "A preacher said..." or "I have heard it said..." Your sermon is not a research paper. As long as you give the credit away, your integrity is intact. That is what you want. People get in trouble, not because they do not cite the footnote, but because they take the credit. As long as you give the credit away, you do not need all that footnote citation material. Most of you who go into

a preaching setting will go first into assistant or associate pastor roles. But some of you will go into solo pastorate roles in small churches. I want you to think about what that means: many of you will be preaching or teaching several times a week. You might regularly do Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Sunday school, midweek service, a funeral, a wedding, and the meeting at the VFW. The average preacher in a small town at a small church will preach five or six times a week! It is not wrong in my mind to use those books of illustrations and listen to other preachers. Gather, mine, and collect illustrations for your own purposes as long as you do two things. You need to modify the illustration for your purpose and give the credit away. We will talk a lot next time about what it means to modify an illustration. How do I take other illustrations and modify them appropriately for my sermon? Did you ever hear an illustration in a sermon and think, "That does not sound like him. I wonder where he got that." Automatically the message is removed from you. How do we take illustrations and rightly incorporate them into our language and the way we talk? You can use other illustrations as long as they are catalysts for your own.

Let us get into how we tell illustrations. First we need to recognize the story nature of illustrations. A true illustration is not just an allusion to the account of David and Goliath. It is a retelling of the account of David and Goliath. I asked you to think about human-interest accounts. A human-interest account is a story. It is not an allusion to a story, but it is the story itself. Therefore you must introduce the situation and present characters. Someone is involved doing something. You need to identify a problem: something goes wrong, there is a sense of wonder, or they need to find out something. Then there is resolution. Somehow that situation is resolved. Then there is a conclusion. Now that I have been through this story, what is the meaning of it? You cannot do all of that in one sentence. An allusion alludes to another story. A statistic is a reference to a fact that has been found, but none of those are true illustrations. True illustrations are the retelling of a story. We recognize that there is an illustration hierarchy that is of illustrative material. There are things like metaphors: Satan's ways are a web. There are similes: life is like a banana peel. There are examples: I know of an abortion clinic that says it is pro-life. There is analogy: some of you think of God as a grandmother who sits inside the house, banging her cane on the window to get the squirrels to go away from the birdfeeder. He is upset about it, but he cannot do anything about it. That is an analogy; it is not exactly an illustration. An allusion is when the preacher reminds people of a story but does not retell it. A true illustration is the retelling of a story distinguished by lived-body detail presented in narrative. If I were in that situation, what would I feel, hear, smell, and taste? If my body were in that situation, I would be able to describe the sensations. They may be physical or emotional sensations. I need to describe the sensations of someone in that event.

There are also longer aspects of illustration like allegory, novella, and novel. But an illustration is typically a paragraph or two paragraphs in a sermon that tell a story. Two paragraphs is a very long illustration. There some story sermons where the whole story tells a story with a moral. It was done in the Bible, and it is not wrong to do it, but it is not what we will do in this course this semester. This semester we will find out how to do paragraph illustrations that come out of the explanation and demonstrate what the truth is before we apply that truth. A key thing is that an allusion reports on the speaker's memory of an experience. An illustration recreates the experience. An allusion is something like not only referring to a story but also simply referring to an experience. "I can remember when I was a kid, and I loved it when I was able to hit a double. I almost liked it more than when I hit a home run. I loved watching the ball sail over the second baseman's head, into the field." That is somewhere between allusion and illustration. It does not fully tell of an experience, but it is just a reference to something. Often you will get stuck in there somewhere. I want you to think of something that is about a paragraph long that has a story nature.

We create illustrations by using narrative components. We introduce the illustration. Just as stories or

narratives have introductions, illustrations have introductions. First I want to talk about the conceptual introduction. An illustration is always introduced by the last thing you said just prior to it. This is not the way you write English essays. This is a critical difference. In an English essay you may illustrate something you said two sentences ago or even two paragraphs ago. The ear does not function that way. In preaching, the thing that you illustrate is the very last thing you said prior to the illustration. I am talking about the words right before it, not even a sentence ahead. Think about that. You may want to illustrate a couple of subpoints in the explanation. You talk about one subpoint for a couple of minutes, then you talk about another subpoint for a couple of minutes. Then you want to share an illustration about both subpoints together. You should know that, before the illustration, you will have to restate and summarize both subpoints. This illustration will not seem to anybody's ear to be about what you said two or three minutes ago. You will have to summarize again. Even if you gave a statement of the subpoint and two or three minutes of explanation, you cannot illustrate that statement without summarizing the statement again. To the ear, the illustration is always about the very last thing you said. If you think you are illustrating something that was from two or three minutes ago, that is not what the people will think. They think you are illustrating the last thing you said. If you are not, there is confusion. The ear always thinks conceptually that you are illustrating that last thing said prior to the illustration.

The second way that we begin an illustration is with the homiletical introduction, not the conceptual introduction. This is how we start the illustration. This is public speaking, so some of you know this. Others of you have never heard this, so you may not have thought of this before. The first thing that you do when you tell an illustration is pause. You shift gears or put in the clutch. I have said, "I want you to recognize the role that every child has in the kingdom of God. (Pause) Rising out of the swamps of central Georgia is..." You do not tell people that you are about to illustrate. You do not say, "Let me illustrate." That creates what is called linear consciousness. It is like saying, "By the way, we are in an artificial situation, and I am talking to you about an illustration." We do not do that. We do not talk about the components of a sermon in a sermon. Do not say, "My proposition is..." Do not say, "My first main point is..." We do not say, "Let me illustrate." To do that is to deaden the message instead of engaging people. We do not talk about illustrating, we just illustrate, and we do it after a pause. We say the conceptual statement, the last thing we said prior to an illustration, give a pause, and then go into the illustration. We slice out as we begin the illustration an experiential context.

We said we describe an experience, so we need to bracket it. I say the experience I am going to talk about—"Rising out of the swamps of central Georgia..." In doing that, I have put another place in people's minds. You can do this in different ways. You can first begin with a separation of time. Those of you with little kids, at bedtime when you tell the story, the first words you say are, "Once upon a time." You separate the experience by another time. I put time brackets around it. To be a little more biblical, you could say, "The time came when kings went to war and David stayed home." A separation in time begins the narrative. It could also be a separation in space that describes another place. Jesus began a parable this way, "Two men went up to the temple to pray." He begins by taking people to the temple. "A sower went out to the field to sow seed." A place is described. The experience is bracketed by taking people to a different time or place, or time and place. That is separation of situation. You may have heard this during your youth, "A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." Time and place separation occurred there. The Star Wars dramas begin, and yet we know that in narrative terms it is separation of situation. That is how the experience begins. In separation of time, place, and situation, we want to avoid what does not involve people.

The words "Let me illustrate" do not involve people. The words of long ago are, "Do not talk about illustrating; just illustrate." That also means that we get rid of all long citations. We do not say, "Charles

Swindoll in the book *Improving Your Sermon*, Multnomah Press, 1992.” We do not do that. Instead we say, “Swindoll says...” or “I heard a preacher say...” We avoid the uninvolved. Then we use concreteness and detail.

Once we separate the experience, we can begin to tell it with concreteness and detail. This is lived-body involvement. The reason we do this is because the more specific your details, the more powerful the illustration will be. We do this by trying to fully describe the experience with concreteness and detail. We use sensory words that name colors, shapes, sounds, and smells. We describe actions, feelings, and dialogue. We keep trying to involve people. As I do that somehow I create crisis. That does not mean that it always needs to be tragedy. It is what speech communicators call “upsetting the equilibrium.” I described a situation, but there is some complication. It may just be that “his eyes grew wide in wonder.” That makes people think, “Why? What does he see? What is going on?” It does not have to be something bad. It can be “the jewel was so big it glistened in the sun.” It is the complication of introducing a sense of wonder. It could be something tragic and bad, but somehow we need to complicate the situation.

Then we come to a conclusion. We resolve the issues so that the hearer sees what he or she was supposed to find in the illustration. A situation has been described, it is complicated in some way, but there is resolution that is actually a demonstration of the principle that the illustration was meant to illustrate. No one is better at this than the Savior. I want you to think of the way He could have talked about a wayward son being welcomed by a father. Think about what He could have said: “God loves us the way a father welcomes back his son, even when he has gone astray.” That would have been true, but instead He said, “When the prodigal son came to his senses he went back to his father. While he was still a long way off his father saw him and ran to him and threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said, ‘Father I am no longer worthy to be called your son. I have sinned against you and I have sinned against heaven.’ But the father said, ‘Bring the robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Kill the fattened calf, and let us have a feast for this son of mine who was lost, and now he is found. He was dead, and now he is alive again.’ And they began to celebrate.” Jesus illustrates by saying what it feels like to be welcomed back by your father when you have been in a faraway land. When we illustrate, we do not just clarify. We say what it feels like. Here is the experience, so that now you know not just in your head but in your heart also. That is the goal.

In the next lesson, we will be very explicit about things we do technically to make this happen.