

## **Word and Spirit**

In this lesson, we want to talk about how the Word and Spirit function in preaching and how we properly honor them as we preach. We want to be workmen who are well approved and well prepared for the task. Ultimately, we want to be men who are on our knees and thinking of our dependence on what God provides for us. Our goal for this lesson is to consider approaches to preparing messages that keep preachers true to the priorities of the Word and Spirit. We have not talked about that much yet because it is often intuitive. It is what we expect of someone who preaches from the Word. How do you say you are more concerned about the Word than the words that you say? How do we communicate that when we preach? Here are some ideas to keep in mind.

First, preach from an open Bible. That may sound obvious. There are certain caricatures in our society that are well known. When you watch Billy Graham, he always has a large black Bible whose pages droop over his hand as he holds it. His classic phrase is “The Bible says.” As simple as that may be, it is also powerful, not only in culture but to the human heart. Such a statement communicates that this is not what I am saying, but the Bible says it. We may be tempted to read our passage and then close our Bible when we finish reading. What do we communicate when we do that? Now that we are done with God’s Word, we are ready for the important stuff, my sermon. The ability to communicate what I want you to hear is out of this open Bible. It has more import in my mind than what I am saying. Thus I am basing whatever I say on this Bible. It does not close. The expositor’s ethic is to tell what the text says. It is a visual clue, and you are saying that, with the tools in front of you, the Bible is of prime importance. Simply keeping the Bible open while you preach is one way, in this culture, to communicate the importance of the Word.

What about issues like modern Power Point presentations? Typically, even in churches that use Power Point presentations for people to look at while the Scripture is being read, the preacher is still reading from a Bible. Some of the more noteworthy preachers who are appealing to younger audiences have been known to take their computer into the pulpit and preach from the laptop. Most have stopped doing that. They recognize that even in a modern culture, our sense is that the Word is what is represented on the pages here. You and I both know that an electronic representation of the Word is just as good as any other. Yet there is something powerful about indicating that the Bible does not close while I preach. While I preach, the Bible stays open.

A second way to emphasize the priority of the Word is to refer to the text often during the sermon. You can simply follow the pattern we have talked about before: state, place, prove. State an idea. Then place it, which is to locate where in the text it is. When you state, place, and prove it, it takes people back to the Word repeatedly. So you say, “Look with me at verse 3.” Or, “Look at verse 2.” In this culture the ability to say, “It is not me. This is what the Word says.” is very important.

Another way to emphasize the importance of the Word is to point people to helpful parallel passages. This can be overdone. Early on in this class, we talked about preaching that amounts to “let me show you that I have used my concordance in preparing this message.” You go from one text to another to another and another. The classic line from a preacher of a congregation that is always looking for another passage is “Oh, how I love to hear those leaves turn.” Yet it can ultimately be distracting. Instead of making a point about what this text says, you are just saying that there are more texts that you can tell them about. People lose the sense of where they are.

There are other problems in this culture in this day if you are referring to numerous texts outside your central text during the sermon. Many people simply do not know where the texts are. So they just give up and tune out. You will be in many different church settings. Some will go to church settings that are highly traditional and well schooled. Some of you will not be in that kind of church. Some of you will vary throughout your ministry career. You may start out in traditional churches, and then you may begin ministry to people who are rather unchurched. It is a tact and prudence issue.

One thing that makes people nervous is when you say, “Look where this word is also used.” Then you turn to another text or parallel passage. It makes people nervous when you cannot find it. It is not that you do not know where it is. For most of us, when we begin preaching, we do know where John 3:16 is, but with 100 people looking at me, I cannot quite get there quickly. I find it helpful to often use little sticky notes in the passages that I want to turn to. Then my concentration is not broken while I am trying to find the page. I can be engaging people while they are finding the page. Then I am not worried about whether I can find the text. There was a time when I used paper clips on the bottom side of my Bible, so that I could turn to the page without trouble. If people see many paperclips on your Bible, however, they may get concerned. Now I use sticky notes, and I can turn directly to the page while I keep talking. I often even mark with pencil in my Bible where I am going to be reading from. It can be a problem if you are teaching a Sunday school class or preaching and someone hands you a different Bible from the one you have been preparing with. Your eye has been trained where to look on the page, so it may be difficult to find the passage. So the idea of marking the passage is that people will not be nervous that you cannot find the text. While taking people to parallel passages says something about your priority, your ability to find the text also says something about your priority.

Another way to indicate your concern for the priority of the Word is to allow people time to find the passage before you read from it. If I am saying, “Look with me at this passage,” and then I begin talking, what I am really saying is that I do not expect people to find it. It is not really important that they find it. If we take people to parallel passages, we should follow some of the same principles as the reasons we develop Scripture introductions. Scripture introductions are useful for giving the context and creating longing, but it also has the pragmatic benefit of giving people time to get to the text. If we just start talking right away, we are basically saying that it is not important that they read along. Giving people time to find the text before we read it is encouraging to people to read the text.

In recent years I have begun to do something that I wonder if your pastors are doing as well. I encourage people to read the text with me. Have you done that? I find that very powerful these days. I am not only saying, “Look with me,” but I am also saying, “Read with me. What does it say?” I actually have them read a clause with me that makes my point. They cannot miss the point. They feel the impact of the passage if the words come out of their mouth. I confess that I was not taught to do that. I have observed other preachers doing it, and I have felt their people want to do it. They are engaged with the text. They are given time to find it. They feel the weight of it. Occasionally, therefore, it is appropriate to ask people to read the text with you. I am not just talking about before the sermon. Even within the sermon, when you want them to catch important details, it is appropriate to ask them to read part of the text with you.

The next way we can show the import of the text is to read it meaningfully. For many of us, if we are only preparing academically, only preparing our message in our studies, even if we practice our message, one of the things we often do not do is to practice the reading of our text. Yet that is the first major thing we are going to say to people after the Scripture introduction. Reading the text meaningfully involves reading the text ahead of time. That way you know there is a question mark or exclamation point. It will not surprise you. You are prepared for it. Certain words are difficult to say together.

How do we read the Word meaningfully? That question relates to that voice you hear in your head when you think of what preaching is. What does it mean to read the text meaningfully? For this generation in particular, it is neither reading sentimentally nor theatrically nor with stained-glass preacher tones. A text like Luke 18:1, which says, “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up,” can be read in a slow, deliberate, and oratorical style. That style, however, is a put-off these days. There was a time, however, when reading Scripture in a very oratorical style was part of honoring it. Today such a style is viewed as a caricature, so it seems to dishonor Scripture. So we should not read sentimentally nor theatrically nor with stained-glass preacher tones.

We should read at a conversational pace. We should also let voice and intonation reflect content and meaning. The primary way of doing that, which is very important, is to emphasize verbs and modifiers. A verb almost always carries the action or thrust of the sentence. Simply emphasizing the verbs is going to help your intonation carry the content of the passage. Emphasizing modifiers is also important. If you say the sentence, “He was a big man,” it will change the meaning if you emphasize the word “big” or if you do not emphasize it. The adjectives often carry the nuance of a sentence, whereas the verbs carry the thrust of it.

Consider Luke 18:1 again. What carries the meaning in that verse? What words would you want to emphasize with your voice? The modifier “always” is an important word. The verb phrase “not give up” will also be important to emphasize. The idea is not to speak theatrically and emphasize those words as though you were on stage. The idea is that if you were in a conversation with someone, those words carry the point that you want to make.

Now consider Luke 18:2, which says, “He said: ‘In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men.’” What words would you emphasize if you were going to read that verse? You want to emphasize the verbs “feared” and “cared about.” It is those verbs that will carry the meaning of the verse. What we are trying to do is restore natural speech. That is all we are trying to do. We are trying not to be theatrical. And we are trying not to be flat. The idea is, if I were talking to someone, or if these verses were Luke talking to you, how would he have said it? We are trying to repeat that supposed conversational tone.

Your reading can engage people, or it can put them off. You must realize that your reading of your text is your first interpretation. As people are asking, “What does this text mean?” the way that we read it is actually interpreting the text. When reading the passage from Luke 18, for example, there are words that make the point, and so I must say them as best I can. There are people who are great preachers but poor readers. As far back as Broadus, he said there were more great preachers than there are great readers of texts. By that he means that there is something that is curious about our theology. We dispense with the text so we can get to our sermon. Instead we should think that the text itself has the power to transform, and it is the first sermon. Reading the text is explaining it to people as we go. If we think of it in those terms, it helps.

Here are some tips for reading. Practice out loud for sentence breaks, punctuation surprises, and punctuation problems. Use the Scripture introduction to prepare listeners for surprises and difficulties. What kind of surprises might be in the text? There might be difficult terms or difficult names. When I went to a town in southern Illinois to preach, the people there told me that their preacher had taught them who “Artax-Eraxus” was. I had no idea who that was. Over time I learned that was Artaxerxes. Yet a generation had grown up calling him “Artax-Eraxus.” Part of the difficulty is that different generations and different translations will articulate the words differently. If you pronounce the book in the Bible,

Habakkuk, with an emphasis on the middle syllable, then you say it the way the King James Bible articulated it. In Hebrew classes today, however, you are taught that the emphasis is on the last syllable, which makes the name sound quite different. In our culture, this is a difficult time. Those people who are 50 years and older, even if they are reading the New International Version Bible, their ears hear the King James pronunciation. Of course, there are also people who do not know the pronunciation of words and names one way or the other. In this culture, most people do not know how to pronounce a name like Artaxerxes or Gilead. One way you can learn the way that people pronounce those names who do know them is to look at a King James Bible. The King James still puts accent marks on the vowels, so it will help you learn how many people are accustomed to pronouncing terms. It is part of preparing to read to not be surprised by names.

In your Scripture introduction, you can also mention new ideas that are going to be introduced. You can introduce new background, new contexts, or new twists. If you are going to skip verses, you will want to announce it in your introduction. If you skip a verse while you are reading through your passage, everyone will think that either you did not see it, your eye slipped, or you were afraid of it. If you are going to combine passages, then you also want to mention that. People are still confused when the reading goes across a chapter division. You may well know that the chapter and verse divisions are not scriptural or originally inspired, but it throws people when you stop in the middle of a verse in your Scripture reading or if you go across a chapter division. People might think you do not know what you are doing. It helps to train people during the Scripture introduction so that they know what you are doing and why you do it.

Another interesting hint for reading effectively is to read about delicate matters in more appropriate translations or with unconcerned matter-of-factness. For example, the King James Version has the phrase “bowels of mercy” in Colossians 3:12. In this culture that expression would be met with snickers. The New International Version simply says “compassion.” The idiom has changed to be more appropriate. There are other kinds of delicate matters. For example, Onan spilled his seed on a rock. The teenagers may know what that means, and they may snicker. On the other hand, those who are 3 years, 5 years, or 8 years old do not know what you just said. If you get red-faced and flustered, then everybody will be concerned. Yet, it is in the Bible. There are examples of everything you can think of in the Bible, including incest, rape, and people who have their bowels gushing out. That was one of my son’s favorite verses when he was growing up. The knife went in all the way and the fat overflowed the hilt. There are things you can talk about in the Bible that if you get flustered about, it will fluster others. An attitude matter-of-fact attitude that says, “This is what the Bible says,” can get you through almost anything.

Another tip is to practice reading meaningfully to children. One way to determine if your Scripture reading is engaging is to find out if you can hold your children’s attention as you read the Scripture.

Another way of indicating the priority of the Word is to give respect before or after you read it. It is more common now than any other time that I can remember that preachers say certain words either before or after they read the text. It is a way of saying, “I want you to know the respect I have for the Word.” You hear pastors say many different things. One thing they say is to simply ask people to stand during the reading of the Word, to show respect for it. That was a pattern that we know happened in the synagogue. They might simply say, “Listen carefully to what the Word of God says.” They are identifying it as the Word of God. We are in an era in which liturgical practices are rising, particularly among younger preachers who appreciate them. So you may hear things like, “This is the Word of God.” To that the people will respond, “Thanks be to God.” That may be after the Word. An older generation would say, “Thus far, the Word of God.” That means, “I have read the Word, now these are my words.” I never felt comfortable saying that. It said that the Spirit may not be speaking through me now, whereas

I think He is if I have prepared accurately to preach the truth. Yet I understood the sense that “That was the Word of God. Now human words are coming.” I understood the ethic, yet I felt uncomfortable saying it. I felt very comfortable saying, “This is the Word of God” and having the people say, “Thanks be to God.” Another thing to say is “Let us read together God’s holy and inerrant Word.” That is another way of announcing what it is we are about to read.

Another way we show the importance of the Word to us is we pray, either before we read or after we read the Word. That praying sets it off in importance in our minds. The reason we do all of this is that, if you are like me, I am so focused on what I am about to say that the reading of the Word becomes perfunctory. So we emphasize this in order to say that the reading itself is a type of exposition and interpretation.

Sometimes it is a way of studying the Word itself. You may read it out loud before you start doing your sermon research. That will allow you to actually hear what it is saying. You can practice being a first-century Christian. You can hear the words coming out of your own mouth and hear what meaning those words are carrying. You can realize again that the reading itself is an exposition and interpretation. The old saying of the preaching masters is that “Preaching is always the second sermon.” The reading of the Word is the first sermon.

Another reason to emphasize the reading of the Word is that ever more people are dependent on the public reading. We can say that is a fault of our culture. As you read, they often do not read along with you. In the early church, however, one person read the epistle and everyone else listened. It does not mean we are especially bad today. Yet we are ever more in a culture in which you will minister to more unchurched people. It helps to recognize that when I am reading people are looking at me. They may not be reading the text. To them it may be an awful, mystical, labyrinth book that is difficult to get through. As I read it, they are often looking at me. As more people are dependent on the public reading, one of the things that I would encourage you to think about doing is to ladle the text with your eyes. Do you know how you ladle soup? You go in and out of the pot. As I read the verse, I look up as much as I can. I am trying to engage those who are looking at me. I have done this in hundreds of settings. I will tell you that in very traditional churches probably two thirds of the people are looking down. Yet even in the most traditional church, a third of the people are looking at me. The way I keep engaging them, saying, “This is important,” is that I keep looking up at them, as though I am speaking to them what the text says. Quite candidly, I would rather that they were looking at the text. Yet my primary concern is that they not forget the text or not listen at all. I keep trying to engage them with my eyes.

Another reason to emphasize the importance of the Word is that it reflects your own theology of the Word. You believe the Word is able to change people eternally and that it is the source of authoritative truth. The reason we preach from an open Bible, try not to stumble over words unnecessarily, try to read meaningfully, try to say the Scripture is more important than the words I will say, is that we know what the Bible says, “Blessed is he that reads and they that hear the words of this book.” It is the Word of God that is quick and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. We could repeat the stories many times of the person who simply read the Scripture and the Spirit moved their heart to conversion. There is the person who simply heard John 3:16 repeatedly, but it was read in such a way, with such heart by the pastor, that it finally broke through. Believing that the Word of God itself is one of God’s instruments for change helps us read it with due import.

I not only want to talk about the importance of the Word but also the priorities of the Spirit. These are not going to be new ideas for you, but I want them to come in a way that I hope impresses you with the

importance of being on your knees before you preach. That can be difficult to do. You prepare so well and so long, and you may be rushed before you go. I sometimes say, “Lord, forgive me, I did not get on my knees before the sermon.” I do not say that as though it is magical if you get on your knees. Yet if the Spirit is not operating in your preaching, then you are doing absolutely nothing.

Something to remember is that preaching is itself a redemptive event. When Jesus prayed, He said, “Lord, sanctify [which means make holy] these disciples by truth. Your Word is truth.” I wonder if you have thought about that. We often think that people will hear a sermon and then afterward they will remember and act on what we have said and that will be the sanctifying process. That certainly happens. What I think we forget, however, is the power of the Spirit in the moment. While someone is preaching, have you never been convicted by the Spirit? I have been doing what I know is not right. I have been arrogant before God. I have not listened to His Word. In academic settings, in which we are training with information so that we will respond to it later on a test or employ it in our ministries later on, we can forget that this very moment is redemptive. As I am speaking, the Holy Spirit is changing people right now. He does not just do it out of memory, but also by what is being said in this moment.

So it is not simply thoughts from mind or memory, but also the things we read or say in the sermon are words of life that come by the Word of life. Consider how Paul says it in 1 Thessalonians. He said, “We also thank God continually because when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the Word of men, but as it is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” The Word is at work as it is being preached, as it is being proclaimed. To me that is both a powerful and intimidating thought. As I am speaking to people, the Spirit is now working in them. He is not waiting for them to apply it, but right now He is taking His scalpel and His forceps and working on the heart, even as I am preaching. That is what the Spirit is doing right now.

The reason for this, in ways that astound us, is that the Bible is presenting, even as I am speaking, Christ as the speaker and God as the audience. Often in the worship wars, we make the point to remember that God is the audience of worship. That is true. What we sometimes forget when we are preaching is that not only is God the audience, but also Christ is the speaker. If I am being true to His Word, if what I am saying right now is true to His Word, then Christ is speaking through me to His people. Remember the words of Calvin, “God has so chosen to anoint the lips and the tongues of His servants that, when they speak, the voice of Jesus comes out.” That is an amazing dynamic. God is both audience and speaker in the process of preaching.

I have been in situations that you will be in at times in which I am facing angry people. They may be angry at me or at something the church has done. It is freeing to say to myself, “Lord, let me preach to You. Be my audience now. Do not be ashamed of what I say. Let me speak to you.” It works both ways. “Let me speak as though Christ were speaking to His Father. Persecution, difficulty, anger, and embarrassment may all be here, but be my audience above all these people and let me speak as Your Son. Let me not know Your reproach from the way I speak this day. Let me speak to you as Your own Son would.”

The familiar words from 2 Peter are “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of men, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” That is first saying what we are working with, which is Spirit-inspired text. That is where we are starting. Augustine said the famous phrase, “Where the Bible speaks, God speaks.”

What is the Holy Spirit doing? In John 16 we hear the words of Jesus, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you in all truth.” So He has not only given truth, but He also guides in truth. What

is He going to say? Jesus goes on to say, “He will speak only what he hears.” The Spirit is only going to speak what He hears. Jesus then says in verse 14, “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.” The insight is that the Spirit is speaking to His people, but the Spirit only says what comes from Christ. If the Spirit is taking my Words and working in His people, the Spirit is only taking what has been given to Him by Christ. In the Trinity economy, even though we do not want to be too strict about assigning categories, the Father is the One who wills, the Son is the One who performs, and the Spirit is the instrument. The Spirit is still the instrument in the process, but He is only speaking what God has given Him through Christ to say. The words that are coming by virtue of the Spirit are Christ’s own words. The Spirit’s testimony is of Christ. And the Spirit’s testimony is from Christ.

Therefore we can say with Paul that “In the presence of God in Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing in His kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the Word.” That is one of those wonderful places in Scripture in which Paul is making a pun. In the presence of Christ, who is the Word of God, preach the Word of God. When we are preaching, we are actually preaching Christ to His people. It humbles you. In this moment, just as a sacrament mediates the presence, power, and promises of God to His people, so preaching is functioning so that I am now mediating Christ to His people by the truth of His Word. His Spirit is working, and Christ is now present in the work of His Spirit because the Spirit does nothing apart from Christ. It is the testimony of Christ that is being communicated. I do not want to overstate it, but Luther’s theology of Christ was that I am now Christ to these people. By the proclamation of His Word, I am Christ to these people. With all my weaknesses and all my sin, to the extent that my words are truly His Word, I am Christ to these people.

How does that happen? The Word was made flesh. Paul takes that to new heights when he says that preaching makes Christ’s ministry present. Midway through 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul says, “For the message of the cross is the power of God.” Later Paul says, “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” The message of God is the power of God to save. When I preach, God’s power now comes. It is not my preaching, but His power now works to save.

We are told that in His appointed season He brought His Word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior. Paul said that we have moved from darkness to light, but the Word of light came by preaching. People were moved from darkness to light by the power of God by preaching.

What that means is we become co-creators of a new creation. God spoke, and the world came into being, but we are new creatures in Christ Jesus. We are new creations. As God spoke His Word and brought the world into being, so the preaching of His Word is creating a new creation. We become co-creators of the spiritual renewal of all things by the preaching of the Word. It astounds us to think that when Paul says “all things are being worked together for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose,” that God is taking, by the prayers and the working of His saints, all of creation and retooling it, re-bending it sovereignly, by the actions of His saints, so that now all things work together for good. Creation is being changed by our prayers, and new creation is being made by our preaching. We are co-creators of a new creation by the power of the Spirit.

How do we do that? John 17:18 says that we as proclaimers become one with the Father and the Spirit. Jesus said to the Father in His High Priestly Prayer, “As You sent me into the world I have sent my disciples into the world.” Then in the next verse He says, “So that the world may believe that You have sent me I have given them the glory that You gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and

you in me.” By proclaiming the truth, we actually unite with the Father and the Son. We become one with God in the proclamation of truth. We are co-creators, one with Him, in the purpose of that new creation.

Peter states the idea powerfully. “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God. The Word of God stands forever, and this is the Word that was preached to you.” You have been born again by the Word. That Word will stand forever. It is what has been preached to you and what you now have to preach. All this is saying is that preaching is a supernatural event. You may say, “Of course.” Yet with all we have said about structure, delivery, presentation, and reading the Bible well, they are techniques that mean nothing if we do not remember that there is something supernatural that has to occur, or else it is all done in the flesh. It would have no more significance than any other carnal thing that we do.

Preaching is a supernatural event. Some have compared it to fire and wax. The preacher is bringing fire to melt the listener so that God can mold as He intends. We tend to be more concerned to perform our part creditably than we are about God’s mighty involvement in our efforts. We tend to be hungrier for success than we are for overpowering. God made it clear to Zerubbabel that the task of rebuilding the temple would be accomplished “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit.” As someone has said, never allow yourself to feel the equal to your work. Do not say, “I can do this now. I have had Preparation and Delivery of Sermons.” Never allow yourself to feel the equal to your work. If you ever find that spirit growing in you, be afraid.

There are times, usually when I am very tired at the end of a conference or long trip, when I am asked to preach, and I get up and am not nervous. Then I say to myself, “You are not nervous. There is a problem here. You are about to bring the Word of God to His people. Christ is about to speak through you. Yet this has not gotten your adrenaline going at all.” I know at some point in my tiredness that I have begun to think, “I can do this. I will call on a past message. I can do this.” It is a danger if you ever begin to believe you are up to the task.

Historically, preachers have talked about the need for unction. That is an old-fashioned word that means the working of the Spirit. The word “unction” does not appear in most modern translations. The only place that you might see it is in 1 John 2:20 in the King James, which says, “But you have an unction from the Holy One and you know all things.” Curiously, it is not particularly applied to preaching but rather to the understanding of the disciples. It is saying that you have something from on high, something that you could not provide. Through the history of preaching, that word unction was applied to preaching to refer to something that you cannot provide. You need something from on high. If this is a supernatural event, then there needs to be supernatural intervention.

That concept is expressed in various verses. First Thessalonians 1:5 says, “Our gospel came to you not only with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, with deep conviction.” In Luke, Jesus is recorded as saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has appointed me to preach good news to the poor [notice what the Spirit does in that preaching] to proclaim freedom, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” That is an interesting task that the Spirit is involved in.

The traditional way to think about unction in preaching circles is that it means the anointing of the Holy Spirit on a sermon so that something holy and powerful is added to the message that no preacher can naturally generate, no matter how great his skills. Do you ever get to the point of thinking, “What will I feel like if at some point in life I have the world’s acclaim for being a great preacher and yet I do not know if I have done anything spiritually?” They may say, “You are so easy to listen to. I am moved



when you speak. You are so articulate.” What people say about you can carry you for a few years. I find that the pastors who pastor for 20, 25, 30, or 40 years, however, are the ones to whom people say, “The Lord used you, and the Spirit convicted me. I was changed supernaturally by how the Lord used you.” I think that will be the only thing that will carry you for the long term.

What is necessary for unction when we preach? The Puritan divines talked about three things that are necessary for unction. They are illumination, conviction, and assimilation. Illumination is not a surprising idea. It is simply revealing the meaning and purpose of the Word. You need to be able to understand the Word and say what it says. Illumination is simply saying what the Word says accurately. John 14:26 says, “When the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name comes, He will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said.” To teach is having understanding and insight into what the Scriptures say. To remind is when the Spirit reminds us what is appropriate for the present task.

I will explain this in a couple of ways. Illumination involves understanding the Word, which anyone can do in the flesh, to an extent. If you say, “Tell me what *luo* means,” anyone can tell you that it means “to loose.” Anyone can understand that logically. Yet if you ask, “What does it mean to be loosed from my sin and to really understand it?” That is part of the Spirit’s preaching. A couple of years ago I heard a pastor whom I greatly respect say in a prayer, “Lord, lift Your hand from the page, because if You do not lift Your hand, I cannot see what is there.” I understand that prayer at a deeper level than I can explain to you. He did not mean he could not see the words on the page. He did not mean he could not rationally or cognitively make sense of what they say. He was saying he could not really understand its impact on his life or its import to the people to whom he was speaking if God did not allow him to see what it mean for that moment in his peoples’ lives. Lord, by Your Spirit teach me what this means for us today, my heart first and then these people, and remind me.

I cannot fully explain my understanding. I believe that when the Holy Spirit is working in my preparation for preaching and when I preach, in ways that I cannot fathom, He is bringing to mind things that I would not have thought of had He not been active. I may not have thought of a certain person in a certain situation. I might not have thought of how this verse particularly reflects a struggle that affects our church today. Those thoughts would not have come together. I am reminded how this truth from that text is related to an experience from my childhood with that text and it is brought to mind in a way that is appropriate for this moment in my ministry. I believe the Spirit controls that. Part of unction is teaching what the Word says and being reminded appropriately of what it says at the right times.

Some idea of the Spirit aspect of understanding is powerfully presented in 1 Corinthians 2:14. It says, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. They are foolishness to Him. He cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Again, someone can rationally understand the text. Yet spiritually, at a heart level, those things cannot be understood apart from the Spirit.

Let me review some common questions. Does the Bible support an emphasis on the Spirit’s power in our preaching? You know it does. In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul says, “My message, my preaching, were not with wise and persuasive words, but with demonstration of the Spirit’s power so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom but on God’s power. God has revealed the riches of God’s wisdom to us by His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.” This is not something human that we do. Paul goes on to say, “We have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

Thus one of the things that the Spirit does is simply illumine us to the truth and significance of His Word, both by teaching us its meaning and by reminding us appropriately what needs to be brought to bear.

Another thing the Spirit does as part of unction is to bring conviction. Jesus said in the High Priestly Prayer, “I tell you the truth, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him, because when He comes He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment.” Here is what we can do: we can make people feel guilty. Yet we cannot make people feel dependent on the cross of Christ apart from the work of Spirit. The Spirit convicts people of sin. He shows them what is wrong. The Spirit convicts people of righteousness. He shows them what is right. The Spirit convicts them of judgment. He shows them what is ahead, both in terms of Christ’s victory and Satan’s demise.

This is a different concept. Illumination is what unction is required for the preacher. Conviction is the required work of the Spirit for the hearer. I not only need the Spirit to understand, but also I require the Spirit for true conviction to take place. Without the Spirit, true conviction cannot take place.

The old definition of unction included not only illumination and conviction but also assimilation. Assimilation is what Jesus was talking about when He said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know. We testify of what we have seen. But still you do not receive. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.” You cannot know heavenly things if heaven has not revealed them to you. Assimilation is taking in the things that heaven has revealed.

I am about to say something that will sound the least mystical of all that I have said so far. When we begin to see that the Spirit is responsible for unction and conviction, which is teaching me and others, a question arises. If that power is so important, so critical, so vital, how do I conjure that up? How do I make unction happen? I do not think there is anything we can do first that is more important than to study the Word. That is part of assimilation. According to 2 Timothy, I am to be a workman who does not need to be ashamed, who correctly handles the Word of truth. When Paul was instructing, he told Timothy to work hard at his calling to study, understand, and assimilate what God has said. Second Timothy 3 says, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of because you know those from whom you learned what the Scriptures say, how from your infancy you have known the holy Scriptures.” All of those things that Paul was saying were a prelude to saying later that the man of God should be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This is not magic. After having said all about the importance of the Word, I want to take away some of the magic. I do believe at times that the way I was taught the notion of unction was that it is something magical that you hope occurs somehow. When you see Paul the apostle instructing others in the pastoral letters about the importance of the Spirit, the task that he is giving to the ministers of the Gospel is to know the Word so that you faithfully say what it says. Then you are not depending on magic. You are depending on faithful representation of what the Word says. You then believe that God can use more than you can imagine. All Scripture is God-breathed. What does that mean? It means preach the Word. That is the Spirit at work.

The unction is already on the Scriptures. The Bible is already drenched in sacred oil. When I preach, I love certain inexplicable moments. Maybe you have had them. I love it when I find myself soaring, when I almost feel that I am being carried along by the Holy Spirit and I feel like I want it to go on

forever. I cannot stop. The Word is like honey and fire. Yet I have learned from Paul's last admonitions to Timothy as well. He said, "Be prepared in season and out." I have to learn to trust the unction that is always on Scripture, even when my words seem clumsy or common. Sometimes it does not feel like it is working. Sometimes unction is simply received by faith, without feeling either the wind or the heat. We may go home for a Sunday afternoon nap and say, "It went so badly." I can feel deflated. If you are like me, my adrenaline always falls off after I preach. I always go into depression after I preach because I have been so wired for it. If I am depending on what I feel to be an expression of unction, then I must recognize that I am only being hormonally controlled by my adrenaline and not by what the Spirit is doing.

When, with a pure heart, a Christian preacher declares the Scriptures or proclaims Christ or calls for repentance and holiness, his words are still anointed, not because of what he feels but because of the truth of what he says. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, "The right way to look upon the unction of the Spirit is to think of it as that which comes upon the preparation." The preparation that Martin Lloyd-Jones had in mind includes all that I have been saying. It includes the preparation of the message—exegesis, exposition, and homiletics. It includes the preparation of the preacher, through prayer, personal holiness, devotional exercise, study, and general reading. Lloyd-Jones said, "To my mind, this is the sanest and most holistic treatment of the way true spiritual unction is to be found in any twentieth-century treatment of the subject." It is not praying five times and turning east. It is to prepare well, be a man of God, and preach faithfully. You may never see anything change in your lifetime. Yet still the Spirit is at work, because His Word does not return to Him void.

The last parts of unction are aspects of personal piety. We do want the power of the Spirit when we preach. We do want the power of God to come upon us. We know this, however, that the psalmist said, "If I cherish sin in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Being a man of God is part of the Spirit's working through us. Perfection is not going to come your way. So repentance is part of being an effective preacher. There have been moments in my life, though I do not want to over-mysticize it, in which I have actually felt that my sin had caused power to drain out of me. I have physically felt my ineffectiveness before God because I knew I had unconfessed sin in my heart. I have simply had to say, "Lord, I have to repent before You, or there is no power in me. I am asking You to bless. I am asking You to bring Your Word to these people, but there is sin in my heart that is not confessed." I believe the Lord has said to me, "Then I will take the power from you." To the Jews who have believed in Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." If you want to be an effective disciple, then you have to hold to His teaching.

Philemon 1 is a powerful statement to me. It says, "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." That always shocks me a little bit. If I am not active in sharing my faith, then I really do not understand the Scriptures. First, I do not understand their import. They are to be a fountain out of me. Do you not find that, when you are dealing with unbelievers, there is something in you that ignites regarding the necessity of your own understanding of the Word? You begin to see it, feel it, and hear it differently as you share your faith. Hodge said it simply this way, "You must know light to see light." That means that you must walk in God's light to see His Word correctly. Alexander McClaren said, "Power for service is second." That means the power to serve God is always secondary to power for holiness and character. The first, second, and third requisite for our work is personal godliness.

If our piety is so important to our preaching's effectiveness, then our prayers better be effective as well. My piety is insufficient for God to use me effectively. I have to say, "Lord, work beyond me." I pray for it, because I cannot do this. I also say, "Lord, forgive me because my piety has not been what it should

be that You might serve me.” It says in Acts 6, “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this waiting on tables responsibility over to them and give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” It is probably a right criticism of a seminary environment that we give so much attention to learning to preach and not much attention to diligent prayer. Whereas when the apostles said why they needed to be relieved from the diaconal duties of waiting on tables, they said there are dual things that must occur for us to effectively minister the Word of God. They were prayer and the preaching of the Word.

If I can leave you with a thought, it is to proclaim the Word. Make sure the people know that is more important than the words you say. Even in the way you are presenting the Word, you should give it honor and respect. Also, do not believe that you are equal to the task of preaching. It is strange. At some point I said, “Be a man of God, and God can make you a great preacher.” Here I am now at the end of the curriculum, saying, “Do not believe you can do this.” You cannot do it apart from the work of the Spirit. With the Spirit, you can be a great preacher. Apart from Him you can do nothing, nothing eternal. Believe therefore that the preaching task begins with prayer and ends with prayer. Before you prepare, before you crack the commentaries, pray. Say, “Lord, lift your hand from the page, or I cannot see what is here. Melt their hearts, or they cannot hear what I say.” Then preach. Then pray, “Lord, overcome my weakness and let settle in their hearts only what You have said.”

Let us pray.

*Father, for these men who are preparing for preaching Your Word, I do bow before You. I even bow before them, because of how much respect I have for these men, who are at this stage of their lives saying that they want to be faithful to You and they want to proclaim Your Word and be true physicians of souls for Your people. Would You give them such regard for Your Word that they would be faithful to it and such regard for Your Spirit that they would bow before You and ask for You to overwhelm them, to flood them with a power that is beyond them, for the doing of Your work. Bless for Christ's sake. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*