

A Redemptive Approach to Preaching

Let me give a quick rehearsal of where we are in the homiletics curriculum. Long ago, we had the class Preparation and Delivery of Sermons, in which I would lecture on the basics of sermon construction. We said that it was like the anatomy class in medical school, getting all the names for the bones and other body parts. We acknowledged there was some artificiality to that, even as we were learning the basic tools. Then we moved into the class Elementary Practicum, in which we would practice using those tools. We acknowledged that it was still using the basics, but we tried to make it more natural by using the reduced forms. We went from long, boxy statements such as “Because something is true, do something about it.” They always had a principle and application. In the Elementary Practicum class we said to chop those statements in half. The proposition became the anchor clause. The main points were the magnet clauses or developing clauses. We tried to make things much shorter, and we preached from the epistles of the New Testament only, because they often have linear paragraphs that structure their thought. You could break them off into paragraph subsets. It was a good way to start learning how biblical thought develops.

Now we are in Christ-Centered Preaching. Whereas back in Preparation and Delivery of Sermons I said we were going to focus on structure, but we were not going to focus much on the theology of preaching, now that we have the structures in place, we are ready to do the theology. We will have four lessons that deal with the theology that is behind preaching. Ultimately we are heading toward the Advanced Practicum class, in which there will be some more lecturing, but the focus will be on creativity. Once you know where all the paintbrushes are and what the color wheel looks like, you will be ready to discern what is best for your job and your personality or even for the style of passage you are preaching from. There will be focus on creativity and there will be lessons on missional preaching as well. That is preaching cross-culturally, preaching to the postmodern culture, and preaching to the unchurched. We will gain a missional understanding as well. Once we have lectured on those things, we will practice creativity and mission.

We now have some structure in place fairly well. We are ready to introduce some theology and consider how that integrates with what we do in the practice of preaching. Let us pray, and then we will move forward.

Father, how I praise you for these men who come to give their lives to You. What You have shared with them, the wonderful glories of the grace of Christ, they want to share with others, and they have dedicated their lives, resources, and much time and energy to preparation for such a grand task. Would You bless them in that? Would You enable and equip them by the mercies of Your Spirit, by the wonders of Your grace, and by the power that You alone can provide to fulfill the task to which You have called them? Teach them much of Your grace that they will need in this class and beyond to do this work, for apart from You, they can do nothing. Help them, we pray. May they lean on You and know the fulfillment of doing so. In Jesus' name. Amen.

An old story, as old as Anselm, tells of a king who stood on his balcony one day and looked out and saw his youngest child out gathering flowers. The king knew the child was preparing a bouquet for the king himself. As the king watched the child go through the fields, however, he noticed that sometimes the child picked the wrong things. A brier was added to the flowers, or something with thorns in it, or a patch of ivy. The king went to his elder son, the younger child's older brother, and said, “Go to my garden. Pick my flowers. And when your youngest sibling comes, take the flowers that he has gathered

and put your flowers in their place.” The elder brother did that. The child came and presented the new bouquet to the king. The king received the flowers with joy and with deep pleasure.

The king, of course, is God. We are the child. The elder brother is Christ. The weeds and briars and thorns are our best works. The flowers from the king’s garden are Christ’s righteousness. It is what He does that makes what we do acceptable and pleasing to God.

That is a very simple notion that can be very difficult to preach. How is it that you tell people to pick flowers for the King, to do what they are supposed to do to please Him? At the same time, how do you tell them to depend on the work of the older brother? How do you compel and motivate? How do you tell and at the same time instruct to lean on another? That is so much of what we are trying to do in Christ-centered preaching. It is reminding people where the best flowers, the only ones that are really acceptable to the King, come from.

The primary goal of this lesson is to see the overarching plan that is the reason we have constructed sermons according to the design we have followed thus far. Let me remind you of some of those design features. We talked early on in *Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* about the principle of a fallen condition focus (FCF). Thus far, we have made 2 Timothy 3:16-17 a key to understanding any text’s purpose. If we ask, “What is a text about?” we do not have to guess. The Bible itself tells us in those verses, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, that the man of God might be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” That is from the King James. That word “perfect” is from the Greek word *artios*, and it carries the notion of completeness. All Scripture is given to complete us. We said that if the Bible is saying that it was given to complete us, then there is a necessary implication about us. We are incomplete.

All Scripture is intended to complete us in some way, by leading to salvation or advancing sanctification. The necessary implication is that we are incomplete. We are fallen creatures in a fallen condition, and God’s redemptive work in Scripture is making us whole in ways we cannot by ourselves. For preaching, it means that we begin to look at people and see Swiss cheese. They have holes in them. They are incomplete. What we have to discern in preaching is what we are going to say fills the holes. As I look at somebody who is incomplete, who is not all that God yet intends, what will I say will make him or her complete? I could say, “You work very hard. You do the best you can. Practice these disciplines. Be more holy than the next person.” Ultimately, it will not work if we say that what you do will fill the holes. Something else has to fill the holes.

That kind of understanding pushes us toward a different kind of preaching than what many preachers do. Many preachers approach a text with only two thoughts in mind. I can tell you right doctrine to believe, or I can tell you right acts to do. If that is all I am saying, if the way I am saying to fill the holes is either to accept and know this doctrine or do this right behavior, you must recognize that both of those are merely forms of human legalism. It is saying that either what you know or what you do makes you right with God. Even though what you do may be right, and what you know may be right, you must know that it is not you who make things right with God. You cannot fill the holes.

When we begin looking at the text in this next portion of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, we must consider what that theology means for preaching. If all that is in my brain is “I am supposed to be feeding these people in right doctrine or instructing them in right behavior,” then something will still be missing. There will be hole in our own preaching. We want to discern what that is. Thus all Scripture dealing with this incompleteness, and all expository preaching, which is designed to reflect the meaning of a scriptural passage, addresses aspects of humanity’s fallen condition. Our goal in expounding a text is to

determine not only what it says but also why it was written. We also want to determine what we spiritually share in common with those for or about whom it was written or the one by whom it was written. I am looking at the text and saying, “These people [either the ones by whom or for whom a text was written] have holes in them. How are they like us?”

Thus far we have only discussed the negative. We have only discussed the absence, the wrong, the hole, the fallen condition. Yet if all Scripture focuses on some aspect of our fallen condition, why does it do so? The answer is clear. It does so to supply the warrant and the need for the redemptive elements that Scripture contains to be applied. Just as every Scripture echoes our incompleteness, it is also in some manner signaling the Savior’s work that makes us whole. Our goal in redemptive preaching is to decipher these signals. Until we do so, we do not truly understand our text. It is possible to say all the right words and send all the wrong signals.

If you got up very early and listened to the major radio station in our town and you heard the transition from the late-night programming to the early morning programming, you would hear that every weekday there is something called “the thought for the day.” The thought for the day is given every weekday morning by a man named Richard Evans. Richard Evans says things like, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children. The Bible tells you that you should not exasperate your children. The word “exasperate” is a word that God reserves for His own anger toward His people when they do not do the things they ought to do. You should not give your children cause for exasperation with you, such as being hypocritical by requiring things and then not obeying them yourself. Fathers, do not exasperate your children.” He might say something like, “Employees, when you work today, you should not just work because your boss is good and kind. Even if he or she is not, the Bible says you should work as unto the Lord. It is really Him that you are trying to serve.”

In my mind’s eye, I can envision many Christians, as well as other people, commuting through the streets of our city. The Christians are all doing the same thing as Richard Evans talks. They are all nodding their heads. They are saying, “That is right, Richard. You tell them. Straighten them up. Maybe they will listen today.” Yet there are a couple of problems with Richard Evans. The first problem is he is dead. He died years ago. His words are all recorded. The recording is turned up very high in its reverberation so that it sounds like his voice is coming directly from Sinai. Richard Evans’ other problem is that he is not and never was a Christian. Richard Evans was a leader of the Mormon Church. He was the head of a large cult.

You might say, “But wait. He is saying so many right things. He is giving such wonderful biblical instruction.” The problem is almost never with what Richard Evans says. The problem is with what he does not say. There are certain things he will never get around to saying. If the topic is human performance or good things that good people ought to do, then he is on the money every time. Yet there are certain aspects of grace, the atonement, and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf that will never be mentioned. That is the problem. My concern is that so often in evangelical preaching, when the topic is the behaviors and even some of the doctrines, we are right on the money. Yet when it comes to our dependence on Someone else’s works, not gathering our flowers but depending on the flowers gathered for us by the Elder Brother, that is absent from our messages. The trouble is that we are trying to be true to the text. The text said, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children.” I said, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children.” How could that be wrong? I just said what the text said. To discern why that is wrong, we must move forward.

We need to talk about the nature of redemptive preaching. We are still going to look at the text, yet perhaps in ways some of you may not have considered. If you think about the nature of redemptive

interpretation of Scripture, you might compare it to looking at the Scriptures through two different kinds of lenses. What I am about to say is caricature, and I am going to acknowledge it as caricature. Try to understand my meaning without pushing the image too far. One way of looking at a text is looking at it with a magnifying glass. We get down very close to the text and ask, “What is the tense of that verb? What case is that noun? Is that an objective or subjective genitive? Where was that place? Who was Artaxerxes? We get very close to the text and look at the details. That is a good and necessary thing to do. Historically, that is what we often think that a systematic, exegetical approach to Scripture is. I look very closely at the details. Let me say again, that is a good and necessary thing to do. Yet there is another way of looking at the text. The other way of looking at the text is if you look at it through a fisheye lens. If you look at something through a fisheye lens, you see the horizon. Biblical theology is the process of looking at the text with the fisheye lens so that you are always forced to look out at the horizons. I hope that does not sound too intimidating. What that is saying is that you should always look at the text in its context. Why does every heretic have his verse? It is because he takes it out of context. What biblical theology is doing is asking, “What is the context of this passage?” I need to know that “exasperation” is a term that God reserves for His own anger toward Israel. That is a good thing for me to know. Yet what is the context of that verse? Where does it fit in the larger message?

That discipline of Bible interpretation that emphasizes the overarching themes that unite all of Scripture’s particulars is called biblical theology. Biblical theology is not simply asking what truth this particular passage reveals but rather how it is related to the whole message of Scripture. The primary writer on biblical theology in the last century was Geerhardus Vos. His book, *Biblical Theology*, addresses the forms of interpretation. He identified standard principles of interpretation that are necessary for biblical theology to be done.

The first principle he called the progressive principle. He said, “Biblical theology is that branch of exegetical theology.” Let me pause and point out that his opening statement there was an example of savvy politics. Vos was the first professor of biblical theology at Princeton Seminary. There were New Testament exegetes and Old Testament exegetes already there, and now there was a guy coming for biblical theology. They may have suspected him. “What are you going to do that is different from what we have done for all these years?” So Vos used some savvy by beginning his inaugural lecture, which became the preface to *Biblical Theology*, by reassuring his colleagues that he was only doing exegesis. It was just another form of exegesis. He was still looking at what the text says. He was still examining the meaning of the text. He said, “Biblical theology is that branch of exegetical theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.” God is revealing Himself. That is what He is doing in the Bible. Vos continued, “Revelation is a noun of action, relating to divine activity. Revelation is an historically progressive process, a long series of successive acts.”

There are many big words in that statement, but what he was saying was simple. He was saying that things get clearer over time. God is revealing Himself, and it gets clearer over time. If you were to put it in its simplest terms, you would say that when it comes to understanding God’s revelation, Paul knew more than Samson. It does not mean that what Samson knew was wrong, but Paul knew more. There has been a progression. God has progressively revealed more of Himself through the course of the scriptural revelation.

Vos said that the second principle is the organic principle. He said, “The progressive process is organic. Revelation may be in seed form, which yields later full growth, accounting for diversity.” That means that the seed may seem different than the full fruit. It may seem different, but there is not true difference. He continued, “The earlier aspects of truth are indispensable for understanding the true meanings of the later forms and vice versa.” Another way of saying that is “It is all tied together.” The organic principle

means it is all tied together. In order to understand what comes later, you have to understand what came before. By the way, however, you understand what came before because of what happens later. They explain each other.

Jesus said, “Even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” How do you know what that means? You remember what He was talking about. You remember Moses was leading the people. They were in the desert. They were tired of wandering and tired of manna. Emblematic of the poison that was coming from their lips, vipers came and struck them, and they were dying. Then God told Moses to lift up a serpent, something that was emblematic of their sin, and tell the people to look at it and they will live. If you depend on what God provides, then you will live, even despite the venom that is coming from you. Then Jesus said, “Even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” What did that mean? Jesus was saying, “You must look to Me to live. I am the answer to your poison.” I know what Jesus meant because of what happened in Moses’ time. The brazen serpent explains what Jesus meant. Yet by the way, I understand more of what the brazen serpent was about by the way Jesus used it. The background of Moses explains what Jesus was talking about. Jesus is also explaining what Moses’ background was about. They are explaining each other at the same time.

The final principle for Vos was the redemptive principle. He said, “Revelation is inseparably linked to the activity of redemption.” God is not just showing Himself to be showing Himself. He does not say, “Here is another attribute of my nature. Go memorize it.” The revelation is inseparably related to redemption. What God is revealing about Himself is related to redemptive processes. Vos went on to say, “Revelation is the interpretation of redemption. To see revelation properly, we must see it in its redemptive context. The context and the content of some revelation may be in seed form as it relates to redemption, but it is integrally related to the mature message. It is not properly understood or communicated until this relationship is made clear.” That is an absolutely crucial idea. The revelation is integrally related to redemption. Anything God is saying is related to a redemptive message. The difficult part is figuring out the way it is related to a redemptive message. We must understand, however, that it is not simply there for some future test. It is not to be received merely for information. The revelation says something about what God is doing redemptively.

Vos conceded that the revelation as it relates to redemption may be in seed form. It may not appear to be much about redemption. It may be a small seed message. Yet it is still connected. He was saying that you do not understand the seed until you connect it to its mature form. If I were to explain to you what an acorn is, I could say, “I found it on the ground. It has a pointed end. It has a cap on the other end. The cap is corrugated and rough. The pointed end is smooth. The cap is darker, and the smooth part is lighter in color. Squirrels gather this in the fall, and they eat it in the winter.” That is what an acorn is. I just told you many true things about an acorn, but I neglected to tell you something that you need to know in order to really know what an acorn is about. What did I neglect to mention? I did not mention the oak tree. If you do not know how the acorn is connected to its mature form, I can say many true things about it, and you will still not understand what it is really about.

Imagine another seed in your mind’s eye. This acorn is the commandment, “You shall not steal.” This commandment occurs in the Decalogue. Moses gave it. The commandment, “You shall not steal,” appears again in the New Testament in Colossians and 1 Thessalonians. Stealing is always wrong in the Bible. It is a bad thing. The Bible says not only that you shall not take other peoples’ possessions, but also that you shall not take anything that is not your own. You shall not even take another person’s reputation. If it is not yours, then you have no right to take it. Stealing is bad. Do not do it. Was there anything untrue in what I just said? No, it was all true. Yet somehow Paul said in Galatians that the Law

was our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. It was our pedagogue, the thing that came along to lead us to Christ.

How does “Do not steal” get us to Jesus? Let us ask a couple of basic questions. If God says, “Do not steal,” then what does that tell me about God? What does it tell me about the nature of God? It tells me that He does not steal. It is beyond God’s ethical character to steal. If it is beyond God’s character to steal, then what else do we know about Him? He protects His people. He protects their possessions, because He loves them. It is beyond His character to hurt His people or to allow His people to steal. Ultimately, therefore, I also learn something else about God’s character. He is holy. I understand that God is holy from the commandment.

What do I understand about me from the commandment? You shall not steal. You shall not take little things. You shall not take big things. You are never to take anything that is not your own, not even somebody else’s reputation. You are not to demean other people. Stealing is bad. Do not do it? So what do I learn about me? I am a thief. We are all thieves. God is holy. I am a thief. There is a problem here. I cannot fix it. The Law is telling me that. You have a problem that you cannot fix, because the God who gave the Law is not going to find your behavior acceptable. You cannot make your behavior acceptable. Somehow, the God who gave the requirement is going to have to meet the requirement for you. The Law was our pedagogue to lead us to Christ.

I did not look at the commandment, asking what the tense of the verb was or how it was written in Hebrew. I still have to do all of that. Yet I have to look at the text in its redemptive context. Why could Paul do that? He said that the message was not done. As God was revealing Himself back there through the Law, He was also leading us to understand something else, namely, what He would have to do through Christ. Therefore if I am interpreting the same passage, those same laws, same character referents, then I have to do the same thing. I have to ask how that is revealing redemptive truth as part of the revelation in its context. Asking basic questions such as “What does this tell me about God?” and “What does this tell me about me?” are ways that can happen.

In the same sense as trying to explain an acorn without mentioning the oak tree, we cannot properly explain any aspect of revelation, even if we say many true things about it, until we have in some way related it to redemption. That was Vos’ point. It is not enough to identify a piece of revelation. It also has to be related to redemption. That is ultimately the revelation’s context. In the biblical record, it has a redemptive context.

What are the implications of such a redemptive perspective? The first is that divine provision is necessary for holy living. Since all Scripture is redemptive revelation addressing our fallen condition, our inadequacy, our incompleteness, then we must recognize that in some way every passage points not only to our need of redemption but also to God’s provision of our redemption. The Bible is not a self-help book. How do I know that? Jesus said in John 15, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” That has tremendous implications for our preaching. If all I have said to people is “You go out and do it. God says, ‘Do not steal,’ so do not steal,” then even if I did not intend to, I have preached a self-help message. I provided no other means of help. I isolated the message to the text without mentioning its redemptive context. Context is what we will continually push for.

The second implication is that biblical theology is necessary for proper interpretation. If I recognize that holiness requires God’s help, then biblical theology must come into play. It is that which keeps pointing me toward God’s provision for what God requires me to do. Calvin said it this way in his sermon on Ephesians 2, “We must gather that to profit much in the holy Scripture we must always resort to our

Lord Jesus Christ and cast our eyes upon Him, without turning from Him at any time. You will see a number of people who labor very hard indeed at reading the Holy Scriptures. They do nothing else but turn over the leaves of it. [Do you see the image? They are turning the leaves, but they do not really know why they are doing it.] They do not have any particular aim. They only wander about. Although they have gathered together a number of sentences of all sorts, yet nothing of value results from them. Even so, it is with them that labor in reading His Holy Scriptures and do not know which is the point they ought to rest on, namely, the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

You believe that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit. You believe that holy men of God wrote as they were carried along by the Spirit. Jesus tells us in John 14 and 16 what the Holy Spirit’s job is. He said, “The Spirit is to testify of me.” That is the Spirit’s task. As the Spirit is inspiring the Scriptures, what is His task? He is to be revealing the work of God in Christ. That is why revelation is inseparably related to the activity of redemption. These things are working together in that work of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin is typically not thought of as being in the biblical theological movement. He was a precursor to it. Yet Calvin could say the kind of thing that he did in the quote I read. What a wonderful insight he had. He was somehow able to see that the elements in themselves could not function unless they were related to the redemptive message. Later in this course I will assign you to read from Calvin’s *Institutes* Calvin’s understanding of the Law. Remember that Calvin is the one who gives us three uses of the Law. Between Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Calvinists, we always talk about the different uses of the Law. What is sometimes missed, however, and what I will emphasize, is that Calvin does not simply talk about the three uses of the Law, but He ties all the uses of the Law to the revelation of Christ. We rarely talk about that teaching of Calvin. Yet he was doing it even as he talked about the uses of the Law.

Someone else who speaks about this point in a pithy way is Jay Adams. He said, “It is easy to become moralistic when preaching.” He was dealing with that notion of a need for a redemptive understanding of the text. He continued, saying, “While there is nothing wrong with preaching morality, in contrast, moralism is legalistic, ignores the grace of God, and replaces the work of Christ with self-help.” It is that phrase, “ignores the grace of God,” that I want you to have ringing in your ear. If you just tell people what to do and you ignore the grace of God, that is when it becomes moralistic rather than moral. Adams said the problem with this kind of preaching is “the lack of recognition that there is no merit in keeping God’s commands.” Did you know that? There is no merit in keeping God’s commands. When you have done all that you should do, what does Jesus say you are? He says you are an unprofitable servant. Isaiah tells us that our best works are only filthy rags. There is no merit in keeping God’s commands, or else Christ’s death would not have been necessary. Is there blessing in keeping God’s commands? Surely there is blessing. If I am faithful to my spouse, then there is blessing in keeping God’s commands. Yet God does not love me more because I do better than the next person. God loves me because of the work of Christ.

Therefore, Adams said, “If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the members of a Jewish synagogue or a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it.” Would any Jew be upset if you said, “Do not steal. Be faithful to your spouse.”? Would any Unitarian be upset? Adams says there is something wrong with that message. That something is wrong is revealed by the fact that the Jew and the Unitarian are not upset. He goes on to say, “There is something distinctive in a Christian message. What makes it distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach. This is just as true of edificational preaching as it is of evangelistic preaching.” We know we have to mention Jesus in the evangelistic sermons we preach once per quarter. Yet Adams is saying that in the edificational sermons, in which

you are saying how to pray better or how to be good to your wife or your neighbor, even in those, if Jesus is out of the message, apart from Him you can do nothing. There has to be an understanding of the provision of God as part of the message or it is not even Christian.

The problem with messages that are only instructive is not that they have not quite reached the threshold of a Christian message but that they are some kind of sub-Christian message. They are not merely sub-Christian. They are anti-Christian. Every other faith in the world says that it is what you do that fixes you spiritually with God. Christianity is the one that says you cannot fix it spiritually. That is the uniqueness of Christianity. So if you say to people, “Do better. Do more. Straighten up. Be more disciplined,” all of those messages are not simply sub-Christian, but they are actually pushing people away from the Savior to their own self-effort. That is why they are actually contrary to the message of the Gospel and not just failing to reach their full potential.

This could all be just good theory, but redemptive interpretation is necessitated by biblical instruction. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “I resolved to make nothing known among you but Jesus Christ and what a good guy He was and how you can be really good if you try really hard.” No, Paul did not say that. He actually said, “I resolved to make nothing known among you but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” That is an amazing statement. We almost want to argue with Paul. We say, “No, that is not true, Paul. You talked about worship practices. You talked about stewardship. You talked about marriage relationships. You talked about many things other than Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” Apparently in Paul’s mind, however, there was always a cord, a heart, a thread that was moving through all of his messages. You begin to see it in the way the epistles were formed. Before Paul gets to the marriage instructions, he says, “A man should love his wife as Christ loved the church.” There is this thread. You will get the doctrinal instruction, which is that God has loved you with an everlasting love through His Son before he will tell you to love one another. There is always this redemptive context, this cord, this heart, which is why Paul could say to the Corinthians that he was not going to preach anything else except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. There is an atonement message, this provision of God that is always in view as Paul is preaching. He said in the previous chapter, “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.” No Jew is upset by saying, “Do not steal.” No Jew is upset by saying, “Do not take the Lord’s name in vain.” The stumbling block is saying, “You are thieves. You are adulterers. And Christ had to die for you.” That was the disturbing message that made the Gospel message so much a stumbling block.

Jesus Himself said such things, as it is described in Luke 24:27. The scene is after the resurrection. Jesus was walking with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. There we read, “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets he said what was in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” For a biblical theologian, those “all’s” are all important. “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets he said what was in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Since Jesus says that all Scripture is about Him, when we try to explain a text without explaining His redeeming work, then we neglect to expound the very thing Jesus said the text reveals. That is a rather amazing hermeneutical principle. He says it is about Him. So if we are explaining the text and fail to relate it to Him, then we have failed to say the very thing He said it is about. Not to relate the text to Jesus is to fail to say what the text is about.

This is where the title of my book can get you into trouble. When people consider the title of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, what they almost always think initially is that what I am saying and what other people like me are saying who are biblical and theologically oriented is that you have to somehow show how every text mentions Jesus. Is He in that camel track or behind that bush? Where are you getting Jesus? Yet that is not the point at all. The point is not to force the text to mention Jesus. It is to identify where the text stands in relation to Jesus. Where does the text stand in relation to what God will be

accomplishing in His Son? The visual representation of this is Matthew 17, the transfiguration. Remember that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in the cloud. Moses represented the Law. Elijah represented the prophets. They appear with Jesus to say, “This is the culmination. This is the climax. This is what everything has been about.” They came to give testimony of what they represent to Him. It has all been leading up to what He now represents. Jesus told the Pharisees John 5:39-40, “You diligently study the Scriptures, but you do not know on what they concur. They speak of me.” Paul later wrote in Acts 20, as he gave the summation of his own ministry, “The Lord Jesus has given me the task of testifying to the gospel of grace.” That was his task, to testify to the Gospel of grace.

These verses, and others like them, demonstrate that the term “Christ centered” is synecdoche, which means “part for the whole.” The term “Christ centered” is synecdoche for all of God’s redeeming work that makes us know and depend on His grace, ultimately provided in Christ. A Christ-centered sermon does not attempt to make Jesus appear where the text does not speak of Him. It rather demonstrates the relation of the text to either His person or His work or both. Thus these are also referred to as redemptive messages or grace-focused messages. Our goal in Christ-centered preaching is not to make Jesus magically or allegorically appear in every text. It is rather to demonstrate the redemptive principles evident in the text that are most fully revealed in Christ’s person or work and are necessary for our growth in Christ-likeness.

People will get concerned and say, “You cannot mention Jesus in this sermon, because the text does not mention Him.” I will say in response, “You live on this side of the cross. You have been given the biblical theology, the biblical record of everything that has led to this point. If you understand that all of those things were leading to Him, then why can you not mention Him when you preach from one of those passages that you know was intended to lead to Him?” Somehow God is revealing redemptive principles here. We do not say, “Elijah met his enemy at the crossroads. Jesus met our enemy at the crossroads.” That is not what we are talking about. We are talking about God saying, “I provide for a faithless people through my faithfulness.” Ultimately, we will see how that is done in Christ, but right here I am saying that Elijah was ministering in a time when the people had turned away from God. Still God provides His strength in their weakness, His faith in their faithlessness. There are grace principles on display here so that when Christ ultimately completes His mission, we will understand what it is about.

In using the grace principles, I am not looking for wordplay, such as the crossroads relates to the cross. Moses met the daughters of Jethro at a well, and Jesus met a woman at a well. Rahab’s cloth was red, and therefore it symbolizes Jesus’ blood. That is not what we are doing. God delivered His people when they could not deliver themselves. One of those people whom He made His own was a prostitute. When the entire town fell, He rescued her, despite all of her sin. It was grace toward one totally undeserving. I am not making the blood appear in the red cloth. I am saying that here are grace principles on display that will reach their culmination in the ministry of Christ. I understand what He has done by what God has been revealing all along.

We will talk much more in the next lesson about how we discern these things. In this lesson I simply want to say to you that it is necessary to see the redemptive development of Scripture in order to properly interpret it. In the next lesson we will talk about how you do that.

Before we go down the path of forming redemptive messages, we may consider the nature and design of non-redemptive messages. We can learn to recognize what is not going to be faithful to the revelation in all of Scriptures. The nature of non-redemptive messages is that they are inevitably “sola bootstrapsa.” You pick yourself up by your own bootstraps. It is your job, so get going. It can come in various forms.

One form is to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps. Another form is 10 steps to a better something—financial future, relationship with your neighbor, or marriage. Here are 10 things that you can do to fix something. God’s work is just off on the side somewhere. It is all about you. That is the problem. The scriptural message is that it is not all about you.

All these forms of “sola bootstraps” say, “Do this thing or this behavior to get yourself right with God.” The basic problem is that these are not merely sub-Christian messages. They are anti-Christian messages. No Scripture in context—that is the key word, context—says, “Just be good and God will be happy.” We can create a false dichotomy. We can have in our minds the idea that what separates Christianity is that there is legalism on one side of something that is wrong, and there is liberalism on one side that is wrong. Somehow we think that true Christianity is a balance between those two things. I want you to consider, however, what a legalist says will make you right with God. He or she says it is your works. In this society, those works include not going to bad movies or not cursing. What does a liberal say will make you right with God? He or she says it is care for the poor and oppressed and your fellow man. While these sets of behaviors are very different, what I want you to realize is that they are the same things. One says that what you do makes you right with God, and the other says that what you do makes you right with God. They are different sets of rules, but the same theology is in play. I want you to recognize that Christianity cannot be found on that scale. It is something else entirely. It is not what you do that fixes things. It is entirely dependent on what Christ has done. If you believe that, then it will profoundly affect your preaching and what you are willing to say as you preach.

To think about it in basic terms, we can say that the design of non-redemptive messages has the “deadly be’s.” They are messages that can automatically be recognized as non-redemptive. I will tell you that I have preached these messages. I teach this material, and sometimes I walk away from the pulpit and ask, “What did I just do?” It is very easy to give these profoundly simple behavior-oriented messages.

The first form of a “deadly be” is a “be like” message. It is saying, “Follow this example.” Be like Daniel. Dare to be like Daniel. Be like David. Be like Moses. If you really want to make people feel bad, then tell them to just be like Jesus. Think of how these messages go. We look at a portion of David’s life. He fought the lion and the bear. He walked with God. He wrote tremendous poems praising God. He led God’s people. He was a man after God’s own heart. He showed mercy to Mephibosheth. David was a wonderful guy. You should just be like David. Well, ignore that Bathsheba thing. And ignore that Absalom thing. And forget about him numbering the troops at the end of his life. Do you recognize the Bible takes care to tarnish almost every character? I recognize there are a couple of people we do not have much dirt on. Yet virtually everybody is tarnished. The patriarchs were scoundrels. The apostles were cowards. Why do we see such terrible sin in the heroes of the Bible? It is so that we will say, “Is not God great? Is not God’s grace marvelous?” Were it not for God, David’s sin would have toppled a nation. Yet it was God who said, “I will make an eternal kingdom through your life, despite your great undeserving.” Would David have said, “Just be like me?” If David would not say it, then we should not say it.

I wish you could put neon lights around the statement that God is the hero of every text. Gideon is not the hero. Gideon was an idolater. Abraham was not the hero. He gave away his wife repeatedly to other men. His children did the same thing. Yet God preserved and used him, and we are here because God was faithful when Abraham was not. God is the hero of the text. We continually point to God’s work on men’s behalf.

The second form of a non-redemptive message is a “be good” message. These are various forms of “save yourself” messages. Do not drink or smoke or chew or go with the girls who do. That would be

the mark of a legalist of the past generation. Sadly, in our current context, you get certain churches that come from evangelical circles that push nothing but social agendas. It is a message that says discipleship is not about faith in Jesus Christ but rather it is doing what Christ said. It used to be the social gospel of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s that is now being adopted by some evangelicals. What really proves you are a Christian is that you care for the poor more than the next church or welcome unlovely people more than the next church. The mark of discipleship is not faith in Christ but the outperformance of other churches with regard to good discipleship. They are typically things that we respect and like, so we may admire the message. Yet it can be another form of legalism. The message is “If you are really good, even sacrificially good, then you can be okay with God.” We may not recognize that it has been around before. We have heard the message before, and it is not the one of grace. The call to “try harder” in any form is not what God is proclaiming in His Gospel.

The third form of a non-redemptive message, which is maybe the most easy to our lips, is a “be disciplined” message. These are about sanctifying yourself. Pray more. Read your Bible more. Go to church more. Do more and more, and then God will be happy. By the way, how much more will be enough to make God happy? Do you know people like this? They sin and so they read their Bible more to make it up to God. They go to church more. They sing songs louder in church this week. They are making it up to God by doing more than they did before.

Repentance truly shows itself in good works. Yet the good works do not earn God’s favor. They are the fruit of those who have been favored. It is totally counter-intuitive to the way humans normally function to say that we live out of grace, not to gain it. That is sometimes why it is so difficult to preach redemptive messages. It is so counter-intuitive. I want to say, “You straighten up, or God is going to hate you.” Instead I need to say, “God loved you before you ever knew Him. While you were His enemy, He died for you. Therefore live for Him.” It is counter-intuitive.

I need to be careful here. I just said some fairly stark things, and you did not even challenge me. Did Paul ever say, “Follow my example? Or be like me?” He did at least five times. Finish the verse, “Follow my example as I follow Christ.” There is always a redemptive context. There will always be a redemptive context that we have to remember. Yes there are “be like” messages in Scripture, but we always have to identify their context.

Again I have another statement that I wish you could put neon lights around. Recognize that “be messages” are not wrong in themselves. They are wrong messages by themselves. Do you understand? Is it wrong to tell people “Do not steal?” In itself that is not wrong. To tell people, “Be holy as God is holy,” is not wrong in itself. What makes it wrong is when it is by itself. If that is all you say, and if you do not throw them on Christ, on His grace, on His provision, then it is wrong.

Why do people fear grace-oriented messages? The greatest fear among orthodox Christians is antinomianism. They worry that if you focus too much on grace then people will do whatever they want. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” He was not an antinomian. At the same time he said, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” The reason to preach grace is not to avoid the commandments, but rather to enable obedience to them. We are saying that it is by Him, through Him, and for Him that you would do these things. It is a compulsion of grace that is the power of the Christian message. It is not antinomianism. It is not that you cannot tell people to live a certain way, but you cannot tell them that alone. You must tell them that. It would be terrible for a preacher not to tell people to obey God. What wounding we would do to people if we did not take them on a path of holiness. It is to their safekeeping, their good, their glory, blessing, and joy to walk with God. Yet we have to make

sure that they do not think they are earning God's favor by doing that. He was walking with them before they ever chose to be His children and do what He said.

"Be messages" by themselves imply that we are able to change our fallen condition by our own efforts. Such messages, stated or implied, make us no different than Unitarians, Muslims, or Hindus. If all we are saying is to be a good person, then there is no distinctive Christianity in that at all. The demerits of non-redemptive messages include first that there is no merit in keeping God's commands. There is blessing, but no merit. The Westminster Confession, chapter 16, says, "Good works done in obedience to God's commandments are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith, but a Christian's ability to do good works is not at all of themselves but wholly of the Spirit of Christ." That is why we cannot tell people, "Be good and be done." There has to be dependence on the work of God.

Challenges to holiness, without mentions of grace, force a human-centered religion. People cannot do what they are told to do apart from Christ's grace. Requirements of holiness by themselves wound people, because without provision of divine aid they will either despair of hope or trust in their own righteousness. Which is worse? That is a trick question. If you tell someone, "be holy," there are only two alternatives. The person might say, "I will never be holy. I will never measure up." The other alternative is that the person will say, "Okay, I will be holy." Either one is spiritually deadly. Both desperation and arrogance are spiritually deadly. It is wounding to people if we have not mentioned grace.

Thus, if you wound, even unintentionally, you are obligated to heal. We heal by wedding all requirements of holiness to a proper relationship with Him who alone can provide holiness. We show where and how the Scripture we are interpreting does the same. Think about how Paul does it. In Ephesians 6, Paul was at his most strident. He said to put on the full armor of God. Take out the sword of the Spirit. Put on the helmet of salvation. Resist the fiery darts of the devil. He was speaking with all the strength he could muster. Yet before he got to any of that, he said, "Be strong in the power of His might." If all he had said was "try harder," it would have been foreign to the Christian message. So Paul said to fight, but to fight with His might. We want to say to God's people, "Fight. Live for Him. Do it by Him, by His wondrous grace, which is revealed in the context of this text as well."

When you have preached, counseled, or talked to your own child, at some point that person whom God has given you to minister to is going to walk out the door and away from you. I hope that in your mind you think, "I sent him out to do what God requires. With whom does he go? Am I just sending him out by himself? Or am I sending him out with the Savior?" If people do not go with the Savior, then they go with despair. If we send them out with the Savior, however, then they go to joy. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

We will talk more in the next lesson about how to do that. As you consider this, ask yourself, "If it is not this way, this redemptive way, then what is the alternative?" If you think of it that way, you will know that there cannot be any alternative. Apart from Him we can do nothing. We have to learn how to have the grace of God within the message. When we do it, there is such joy in your preaching that will be your own power to keep doing it.