Ten Specific Steps You Can Take  
To Make Your Sermons and Preaching Better!  

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The American humorist Will Rogers reportedly said, “I refuse to accept my religion from anyone who earns his living only by the sweat of his jaw!”

Preaching is a tough business, but it is a primary, God-appointed means of communicating His truth. As refreshing and helpful as group Bible studies may be, there is no substitute for the clear, authoritative proclamation of God’s Word. And in our western context, that usually happens up front, behind a podium or lectern, with a hopefully attentive congregation listening.

I grew up preaching after getting saved as a teenager. And I’ve made every preaching mistake in the book. I’ve also taught homiletics and public speaking and have evaluated scores of sermons from students who paid for the class (and unsuspecting preachers who didn’t realize they were being critiqued for free).

So, here are ten specific steps you can take as a preacher of God’s Word that may well help you become more effective and more confident in your preaching.

STEP ONE: Do the Work!

There is no substitute for spending the necessary hours pouring over your biblical passage to understand what God is saying. Oh, sure, you or I can purchase sermons off the internet, but that’s just spiritual prostitution, don’t you think?

One great temptation for preachers is that we have an idea of what we want the text to say, and might be inclined to force that point onto the passage. As one ditty put it, “Wonderful things in the Bible I see — When they are put there by you and by me.” Make sure you’ve done the hard work of observation and interpretation.
before you jump to application. The great commentator William Barclay wrote, "You will find a certain type of preacher and evangelist who claims that he is entirely dependent on the Holy Spirit. It is a blasphemous thing to saddle the Holy Spirit with the blame for rambling, wearisome, and unprepared effusions." (Fishers of Men, p. 18).

I believe it was Donald Grey Barnhouse who was asked by one of his preaching students his opinion of the young man’s sermon. Maybe Barnhouse was having a bad day, but the story I heard tells us that Barnhouse said, “Son, if your text had had leprosy, your sermon would not have caught it!”

Doing the hard work of study will increase your confidence as a preacher. Time, of course, is of the essence. And some of us need to carve out sufficient time to do what we were called to do.

I try to blog on topics or texts that I will eventually preach on, so I’m trying to think ahead and not wait to the last minute to prepare my sermons. I’ve recently been doing a sermon series entitled “Jonah: Belief Contradicted by Behavior.” And I’ve been writing posts every day as I go through that short book. This particular set of posts won’t be published until a couple of months after I’ve preached the series, but it’s been a very useful exercise for me each morning. Start a WordPress blog. It’s free and will help you in your labor.

Walter Burghardt in his book Preaching: The Art and the Craft, said, ”To me, the unprepared homilist is a menace. I do not minimize divine inspiration; I simply suggest it is rarely allotted to the lazy.” Do the work. Ask God the Holy Spirit to guide you in making wise decisions about the time you invest in studying the passage you will preach on.
STEP TWO: Develop a Clear Outline!

Most sermons we preach should have a strong outline so the congregation can follow the progression of the passage. Outlining takes some practice, but there is a real joy in seeing the congregation anticipating your next point because your outline is easy to follow.

One of the many mistakes I have made in preaching is failing to have a KEYWORD for my sermon. A keyword is a word you use in each of the major steps in your outline as you announce your next point. For example, a word like “thing” should almost never be used by a preacher: “The next THING we notice here in Luke 12 about worry is . . .” If the message is on the sin of worry, a far better keyword would be something like “aspect” or “failure” or “mistake.”

If I were going to preach on Luke 12:22-31, I would probably use the term “waste.” Here’s the passage:

22 Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. 24 Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! 25 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life[b]? 26 Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

27 “Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 28 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! 29 And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. 30 For
the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

I might say, “The first WASTE of worry is that it causes us to devalue our lives (vv. 22-24).” “The second WASTE of worry is that it is unproductive (vv. 25-26).” “The third WASTE of worry is that it causes us to forget God’s care for us (vv. 27-28).” “The fourth WASTE of worry is that it can make us look like pagans (vv. 29-30).” “The fifth WASTE of worry is that it is a barrier to our seeking God’s kingdom (v. 31).”

Of course I would want to elaborate on (and illustrate) each of those points, but you see the value of a well-chosen keyword? Apart from the separate points, you are making an overall statement that worry is a WASTE!

If you have studied your text sufficiently, sometimes a keyword will jump out at you. But please don’t use the word “thing.” Ever again. Promise?

STEP THREE: Expository Versus Topical Messages!

I heard about one preacher who received a compliment after his Sunday morning sermon. The elderly lady didn’t realize what she said, but what came out was, “You are one of the best suppository preachers I have ever heard!” [She obviously meant “expository”].

Expository messages are a means of working one’s way through an entire book of the Bible. They typically focus on one main text — the next section coming up in that study. Topical sermons, on the other hand, seek to give the overall Scriptures’ teaching on a particular subject from a number of passages.

Topical sermons are often quite helpful for those who are new to the faith. They give the preacher the opportunity to briefly explain the overall teaching of the Bible on a subject. One danger of topical sermons is that the preacher might only
preach on the subjects that are interesting to him. He might begin riding his hobby horse. [Someone has asked, “What is the difference between riding a hobby horse and riding a real horse?” The answer? “You can get off a real horse!”]

Expositional messages, however, focus on one main text at a time. They are seeking to expose the point the passage is making. Exegesis, a fancy term which literally means “to lead out,” is the art of unfolding what is truly there in the passage. We can read into a passage what isn’t there — and that’s called “eisegesis.” If someone says to you, “Your sermon was the best example of eisegesis I’ve ever heard!”, they are not complimenting you.

I would recommend that most of your sermons ought to be of the expository kind. One advantage is that you are working your way through an entire book of the Bible. So if you are doing a sermon series on the Gospel of Matthew, and this Sunday’s message is on Matthew 19, no one can really complain that you’re going to speak on the topic of divorce. That was your next preaching section!

**STEP FOUR: Begin with a Great Introduction!**

In his excellent book, *Introducing the Sermon: The Art of Compelling Beginnings*, Michael Hostetler says that in football the two minute warning is at the end of the game. For preachers, he says, it is at the beginning! We can win or lose a congregation within the first two minutes of our sermon. So we had better start out well!

Hostetler discusses four contact points that he says ought to begin each sermon. These four contact points are: the secular, the biblical, the personal, and the structural. Here’s what he means by each:

By the secular contact point, he means that we begin our sermon with
something in real life, a need, an issue, a situation that cries out for the biblical truth we are wanting to present. Many preachers begin their sermon with words like “Let us turn in our Bibles to . . .” That is beginning the sermon with the answer before we’ve even raised the question! Start with where people are. What are their challenges, their dreams, their catastrophes? Begin with something “secular,” something of this world, before you jump into the biblical world.

By the biblical contact point, Hostetler is referring to the Scriptures. “The Bible has a great deal to say about this issue of worry . . .”, the preacher might say. “Let’s take a serious look at Luke 12.”

By the personal contact point, he is referring to how the truth of the Scriptures applies to my daily life. The preacher might say, “We will see in Luke 12 some truth that will help you and me conquer the waste of worry!”

By the structural contact point, one introduces the keyword which will steer the sermon from one main point to the next. The preacher might say, “We will see in Luke 12 five wastes of worry . . .”

We preachers assume that we should start with the biblical (“Let’s turn in our Bibles to . . .”), but even believers need to know why they are turning to their Bibles. You would agree (I hope) that the Bible is the most practical book in the world. But that conviction is squeezed out of a lot of believers by the maps, the cross-references, the genealogies, and the Shakespearean language in our Bibles. We preachers need to make the case for the Bible’s practicality. But we must first raise the issue for which the Bible provides the truth we need.

A solid, four-contact-point-introduction will take time and effort to compose. And I would recommend that your introduction be written out so that you don’t miss any of the four contact points. Writing out those four contact points helps you ask the right questions: What is the need I’m addressing? What does God’s Word have to
say on this topic? How can I personally be helped by the truths of this text? How should I logically think about this subject?

Confession time: I don’t always use this Hostetler-type introduction in my preaching. But, if I took the time to craft a well-thought-out first few sentences, I believe my sermons would be stronger, more practical, and easier to listen to for the congregation.

**STEP FIVE: Illustrate. Illustrate. Illustrate!**

Everyone loves a good story. You can see the heads of a congregation lift up when a preacher says, “Let me illustrate . . .” or “Perhaps you heard the story about . . .” We need truth illustrated!

But unfortunately many of us preachers seem to think that if we have a few extra minutes, we must pack in more Scripture or more doctrine into our sermon. However, rather than adding more material, ask (long before you get into the pulpit), how might I illustrate this point? If you get your study done early, you might look for useful illustrations during the week.

Here are several practices that have helped me: Collect good illustrations. Witty sayings. Great quotes. Strong (short) stories. Reader’s Digest is a gold mine of possible sermon illustrations. Start a Word file with your illustrations. Don’t panic over some complicated filing system. Just file your illustration under the first word that comes to your mind (“Anger,” “Theology,” “Second Coming,” “Babylon Bee,” etc.). I’ve been collecting illustrations for over forty years and my Word file, if it were printed out, would be about 300 pages. (Drop me an email if you want my file. I give it away).

Allow the Lord to use your personality in your preaching. And in your use of illustrations. You do not need to be a stand-up comic. But practice telling your story or delivering your appropriate joke. Make sure it fits your point.
I once taught homiletics to a group of undergraduate students. In one class session I talked about illustrations and how, if one messes up a quote or illustration, the preacher should just keep going. I remember one student in his sermon trying to use the famous Jim Elliot quote (“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose”). The student botched the quote at the very beginning. He said something like, “As the missionary/martyr Jim Elliot once said, ‘He is no fool who loses what he couldn’t find to gain what he thought he had’”), and he kept going! I was roaring with laughter (inside), but was very proud of him for moving on with his message.

If all of life illustrates biblical truth — and it does — be observant of your everyday surroundings. Be careful not to be the hero of all your stories. Congregations appreciate a preacher who (occasionally) admits his own foibles.

I’ve been helped by the adage “Quantity equals quality.” What I mean is, collect all the illustrations you can — and many will prove to be useful and helpful.

I love finding gems from past preachers. For example, C.H. Spurgeon said to his students, “Men, when you speak of heaven, let your face radiate with the glories of the very presence of God. But when you speak of hell, then your everyday face will do.”

Keep a count of how many illustrations you use in your sermon. Most of us illustrate far too little! Make a note of which illustrations you use and when. Some people don’t buy into the idea that a good story is worth telling more than once.

Be careful not to exaggerate in your stories, especially if some in the congregation have some acquaintance with the incident you’re describing. Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, tells about one time when he was preaching on Sunday morning. He was to preach the same sermon twice — once to those of the
early service and again to those in the second service. Between services he would meet with an elder or two for feedback and any tweaking that he might consider.

In the first service, Hybels told a story about a six car accident he saw during the week and used the story to illustrate some point in his sermon. After the first service concluded, he met with one of the elders who asked him, “Bill, was the accident you described the one on Wednesday over at such and such an intersection?” “Yes,” Bill said. “Bill,” said the elder, “did you forget that there were only three cars involved in that accident? You didn’t inflate the number just for sermonic impact, did you?”

Hybels says that at such times, “I hate accountability groups!” But then he says, “I realized that I had committed a small act of cosmic treachery by exaggerating the details of that story.”

C.H. Spurgeon said, ”An apt illustration sticks in the soul like a hook in a fish's mouth.” As we conclude this section, I’ve got to give you two of my favorite illustrations: Here’s one from Leadership Journal: “In 1981 a Minnesota radio station made an announcement about a car which had been stolen in California. The police were staging an intense search for the vehicle and the driver, even placing radio ads to contact the thief. On the front seat of the stolen car sat a box of crackers that had been laced with poison to be used as rat bait. Now the police and the car owner were more interested in apprehending the thief to prevent him from eating the poison than to recover the car. So often, when we run from God, we feel it is to escape His punishment. But what we may actually be doing is eluding His rescue.”

And another favorite: Many years ago a little boy and his twin sister became lost in a small community outside Boston. After they were missing for several hours, the police were called and a search party was organized. Meanwhile, the little boy and girl both showed up when they heard the commotion as the search party got
organized. They asked what was going on and were told that a little boy and girl had been lost. For the next two hours they helped search for themselves!

**STEP SIX: Vocal Variety!**

Can we talk? Some preachers’ voices sound like they are gainfully employed at a local funeral parlor during the week. I’ve sat under preachers (and you have too, if you would be honest) who could make a fortune bottling their voice as an anti-insomnia cure. A monotonous voice causes a congregation to fight to stay awake — and you don’t want their energy for your half an hour so misused.

Vocal variety is critical in preaching. There are times when we need to “punch” with our voice. The late Francis Schaeffer once preached on the topic of belief and truth, and the cruciality of strong evidence for what one believed. He concluded his lecture by almost shouting, “AND NEVER GET THE TWO REVERSED!”

I’ll never forget that quote. However, I must point out that he allowed his voice to become quite high as he hit his point. He should have consciously driven his voice down into a lower register as he emphasized his conclusion.

Dramatic pauses can be quite useful. Reading the Scriptures with excellence is also often overlooked. There are times to shout — and times to whisper! Your voice is your primary instrument. Treat it well. And learn its many dimensions.

If you use the following quote from Samuel Chadwick about prayer, and you don’t appropriately punch the word “trembles,” you’ve lost an opportunity to drive home Chadwick’s point.

“Satan dreads nothing but prayer. His one concern is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, he mocks our wisdom, but he **trembles** when we pray.”
Experts in communication talk about “involuntary listening” and “voluntary listening.” Involuntary listening is when one can’t help but listen to the speaker because he or she is following some of the guidelines we’ve covered in this booklet. That person makes it easy to listen to them. No real effort is expended by the listener.

Voluntary listening, on the other hand, requires a grit-your-teeth, grab-your-pew kind of determination to pay attention. You might say to yourself, “This person is very important and what they have to say is critical. And I have to force myself to listen. Hard.” That takes a great deal of effort. And you are probably more exhausted than the speaker at the end of the service.

What we want to strive for is involuntary listening. The audience can’t help but pay attention to you and follow you as you speak. Make it easy on them!

And let’s be careful not to fall into preacher-speak. This is a kind of holy language which is quite different than everyday speech. Do you know what I mean, Beloved? Be natural. Be engaging. But don’t let your words sound like you just came off Mt. Sinai!

**STEP SEVEN: Use Technology**!

There are a few preachers who can communicate effectively with only their presence and their voice. But most of our preaching would be greatly enhanced with some use of technology.

Learn to use PowerPoint or Keynote in your preaching. But don’t allow its bells and whistles to overshadow your message. Remember that preaching is meant to be educational. Let’s use the best educational tools possible to effectively drive our message home. Don’t resign yourself to appealing only to the ear-gate. Take advantage of the eye-gate and craft your sermon with helpful images and,
occasionally, short videos. Ask the educators in your congregation to help you use presentation software to your greatest advantage.

I’ve also found that a congregation occasionally appreciates some form of handout in their bulletin. For example, a fill-in outline encourages people to take notes and, if they do so, their attention will be more focused on the message.

Here’s an example of a fill-in outline I would use in preaching my message “The Waste of Worry” from Luke 12:22-31 (Remember the points I gave you on pages 3-4?).

“The Waste of Worry” (Lk. 12:22-31)

I. Worry Causes Us to _______ _______ ________ (vv. 22-24)

II. Worry Is _______________ (vv. 25-26)

III. Worry Causes Us to ________ God’s ______ ____ ___ (vv. 27-28)

IV. Worry Can Make Us Look Like ________ (vv. 29-30)

V. Worry Is a _______ to Our Seeking ______ ________ (v. 31)
STEP EIGHT: Gestures!

Gestures are extremely important. And we want our movement in the pulpit or behind the lectern to be purposeful, but not distracting.

Distracting gestures include jiggling the change in your pocket, touching your hair, overusing your hands to express every single point you are making, etc.

Purposeful gestures enhance the delivery of your words. Gestures may be whole body (in which you move out from behind your podium to illustrate a point) or partial body (you might spread your arms to illustrate the greatness of God’s love, for example).

If you are using your hands and arms to illustrate the differences between the godly man and the ungodly man in Psalm 1, make sure you keep your sides straight! If you begin describing the godly man with your right hand and the ungodly man with your left hand, don’t switch them. Keep the visuals consistent.

The combination of a strong voice and appropriate gestures, at the very least, communicates the preacher’s definite commitment to the point that he is making. I’m reminded of the story of a person being surprised at hearing that the skeptic David Hume was going to go listen to the preacher George Whitefield. The friend said, “Surely you don’t believe what Whitefield is preaching, do you?” David Hume answered, “No, but Whitefield does.”

STEP NINE: Listen to and Watch Good Preachers!

I love watching tennis on The Tennis Channel. My son-in-law is shocked that they have a whole channel devoted just to tennis. He is not a tennis player.

Why do I watch Raphael Nadal, Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic? It’s too late for me to become as good as they are in tennis. But I learn things as I watch them strike a cross-court topspin backhand or deftly lay a drop shot just over the net.
Excellent preachers are marked by certain characteristics, most of which we’ve tried to touch on in this booklet. They are well aware, as Walter Burghardt says in his book *Preaching: The Art and the Craft*, that "Life's real enemy is not pain, not even death; life's enemy is boredom.” They have excellent material and deliver it in attractive ways. As a friend of mine says, “Surely it must be a sin to bore God’s people with God’s Word.”

Pick a couple of preachers — they can even be TV preachers — and take notes on both their sermons and their presentation. What draws you to listen to them? What keeps you from changing channels? How are they encouraging involuntary listening in you?

One of my favorite preachers is Dr. John Ortberg of Meno Park Presbyterian Church in California. As a clinical psychologist, John peppers his sermons with secular studies on such issues as depression, cohabitation, and decision-making. His eye-contact is outstanding; his gestures complement his points. He is winsome and humorous and his messages are solid. I always learn something about living out the Christian life from John.

For years people have told me that my voice sounds just like Chuck Swindoll’s. I’m thinking about suing brother Chuck for impersonating me (just kidding). Swindoll is easy to listen to and his sermons are meaty and practical.

Bill Hybels encourages me to care more about lost people. He is not above shedding a genuine tear in his preaching. His practical illustrations and relevant application show why he is a favorite preacher for many.

My friend Stephen Brown (Key Life Network) is an outstanding communicator with a strong and deep voice. He has challenged me on many fronts, but I have been most affected by his wide use of illustrations.
You’re not trying to become the next John Ortberg, or Chuck Swindoll, or Bill Hybels, or Steve Brown. But you can learn from them. A lot. Become a student of those you respect and adapt their positive characteristics into your personality and style.

**STEP TEN: Get Evaluated!**

I know this is a touchy area. None of us like to be critiqued. To us our sermon is like a mother’s brand-new baby. No one would say to her, “Her nose is kind of big, isn’t it?” or “My, he doesn’t look like his daddy at all, does he?”

But evaluation is an important step to getting better as a preacher. I’ve heard too many stories of churches that were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their pastor’s preaching. Months and maybe years went by, with the dissatisfaction growing. Suddenly, and without much of a warning, a congregational meeting from hell takes place, and the preacher is “let go.” No one stepped in months before to help the preacher improve his preaching. None of the elders suggested (or required) that he attend a preaching renewal seminar. Nobody loved him enough to assist him in seeing his weak areas and working on them. And now he is out of a job, discarded by the family of God who refused to work with him.

My wife Linda has been an enormous help to me in my preaching. She lets me know when I’ve tried to do too much, when I should have used better illustrations, where I could have employed better volume variety. But she loves me, and I greatly value her opinion.

We’re both converts of Chapman’s *The Five Love Languages*. Her love language (how she shows love) is giving. My love language (how I like to be shown love) is words of encouragement. After I’ve preached my heart out in a sermon, I’ll ask my wife after the service, “How did I do?” She’ll say “Fine.” That’s it. One word. But then the next day she’ll buy me a pair of socks.
Who is speaking words of encouragement to you? Who’s buying you socks? We need those who love us to tell us the truth about our preaching.

Apart from a loving spouse, be bold and give out a short sermon evaluation form (found at the end of this booklet) to several in the congregation whose opinion you value. Tell them you will love them even if they are brutally honest. And keep your word!

Evaluate yourself! Ah, technology! Unless we want to live in the land of denial, there is no excuse not to listen to or even watch our own sermons. You can record your own preaching with a small recorder, your iPhone, or your church’s sound system.

Where I am serving now as an interim teaching pastor, the church live streams their Sunday morning service, then archives the services on their website. It’s not a perfect system, but the next day I can watch my sermon. I can see how I moved, where my gestures might improve, what my PowerPoint slides (Keynote, actually. I’m a Mac snob) looked like, etc.

If you don’t want to listen to or watch your sermons, get over it. There’s a lot more at stake than your pride. Carefully critiquing yourself can be invaluable if you want to get better.

You might consider using one of the sermon evaluation forms on yourself. Ask yourself questions like:

(1) Did I start well? How effective was my introduction?

(2) Did I drive the congregation’s eyes to the biblical text?

(3) Where did I punch with my voice? How could my vocal variety improve? Did I sound like a funeral director?
(4) What illustrations did I use? Were any of them not about my family? (Be careful in using family illustrations. You have to live with those people).

(5) Was my sermon easy to follow? Did my points logically follow one another?

Get over your pride. And evaluate yourself. Thank the Lord for the good elements of your preaching. And ask Him to help you in those weak areas.

There is one more decision you can make in having your sermon evaluated. Let me help you! Yes, I will listen to (or preferably watch) your sermon and give you my best feedback. No charge. Free.

Did you read those last two sentences? Pick the sermon you want evaluated and get it to me. You can either send me a dvd or upload your sermon to DropBox and send me the link to it.

The upside of my offer is that I won’t give my report to your elders or your church. This is between you and me. And God. The downside of my offer is I will be brutally honest with you and provide my best feedback. Your mother cares about your feelings. Me? Not so much.

You can send your dvd to my home address: Dr. Larry Dixon 117 Norse Way Columbia, SC 29229. If you upload your sermon to DropBox, you can email me the link at: theoprof@bellsouth.net.
Sermon Evaluation Form

Preacher: ________________ Date: ________________
Sermon Title: ______________________ Main Text: ________________

Introduction:
Were the four contact points used? [ ] [ ]
YES NO
How might the introduction be improved?
__________________________________________

The Message Itself:
Was a clear outline given? [ ] [ ]
YES NO
Are you able to reproduce the main points of the outline here?
__________________________________________
The keyword was __________
How many illustrations were used? ______

Put into your own words the message’s conclusion:
__________________________________________

Delivery:
Was there sufficient vocal variety? [ ] [ ]
YES NO
Were effective gestures used? [ ] [ ]
YES NO

Opinion:
What did you really like about the sermon?
__________________________________________
What did you really not like about the sermon?
__________________________________________

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