

Introduction

I preach about 45 sermons a year. I have been preaching since I was 24 years old, for almost 33 years. And in many of these years I was preaching two sermons per Sunday. So in my lifetime I have preached more than 2,000 sermons. It is staggering for me to think about. But now think about yourself. You may not have preached that much, but how many sermons would you imagine you have heard across the years? How many do you still remember? I remember a number of sermons that I have heard through the years but nowhere near the number I have heard or preached. And yet there is a sense in which almost every one of them has had a cumulative impact upon my life. I believe the same is true for you as well. It is because the sermons to which we give our attention play a critical role in our sanctification. For that reason I am spending this final session of the series on sanctification by looking at the close connection between the preaching of sermons and personal growth in holiness.

The session is inspired largely by a recent publication by Paul Shirley entitled ***Expository Sanctification***. In this session I want to draw your attention to the connection between sanctification and preaching, the exposition of what preaching should be, and the attention that is exercised in listening well.

1. Connection.

That our sanctification is linked inextricably to biblical preaching is demonstrably apparent. You might notice, as many others have observed, that those people whose lives demonstrate a high level of personal holiness are people who are strongly impacted by faithful biblical exposition.

Paul Shirley writes, "Preaching and sanctification are bound to one another in God's plan, which means they must be found together in the local church. A church faithfully proclaiming the word of God will produce Christians faithfully growing closer to God. However, sermons that distort God's truth will distract believers from this primary means of grace and alienate them from the practical help God has promised for their lives. In other words, weak pulpits and weak Christians go hand in hand; a church failing to proclaim the word of God produces Christians failing to grow closer to God." (2)

The connection between preaching and holiness is evidenced when we consider two of the central pursuits of the church and its pastors.

i. First, there is a clear and straightforward purpose of God and command that the disciples of Jesus, his blood-bought church, pursue holiness and godliness.

1 Peter 1:14-16—As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

Ephesians 5:25b-27—Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

I could go on and on with texts that demonstrate this point, but we have covered it exhaustively from the beginning of this study.

ii. Second, there is a clear and straightforward purpose of God that his word be taught and proclaimed in the context of the church. Paul reminds Timothy of the value of the scripture and then solemnly charges him to preach it.

2 Timothy 3:16-4:2—All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. 1 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Ephesians 5:26 states that Christ purifies by the word. The word is what the pastor-teachers are to preach. Again, Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17). This is the truth to be proclaimed.

Titus 2:11-14—For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

God's grace is at work for our holiness and zeal for good works. Does preaching have anything to do with this? Absolutely! In the very first verse of Titus 2, Paul commands Titus to "teach what accords with sound doctrine." This is part of what he is to teach. Then the very next verse that follows the emphasis on holiness says this:

15 Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you."

Preaching is visited by the work of God which produces faith. Romans 10:17 declares that "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Romans 10:14 asks, "How are they to hear without someone preaching?"

One more critical text is Romans 16:25-27—Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— 27 to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

God gets glory as the gospel is preached and the prophecies exposed and those who believe obey! What Paul and Peter did in their letters was to preach. And it is by their preaching that we are strengthened through understanding and obeying what God has said.

To bring this section to a conclusion, I offer you another statement from Paul Shirley:

"We not only need the word of God in our lives, we need it preached to us. We need the definitiveness of the preached word to pin us into submission under the authority of Scripture; the clarity of expository sermons to help us understand the nuance of divine truth in our lives; and the influence of public shepherding to exhort us to live in accordance with what God's word declares. The church needs preaching that will unleash the sanctifying power of the Bible in our lives." (7).

2. Exposition.

If biblical preaching is linked to our sanctification, it is important that we preach in the way the scripture sets forth. What kind of preaching is it that feeds sanctification?

It is a preaching that is centered an and consumed with the word of God (2 Timothy 4:1). It is word focused and truth anchored.

1 Timothy 4:13 sets forth three components of apostolic authorized preaching. "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching."

The components are:

1. Declaration. Reading and giving the sense of the text so that it is understood.
2. Explanation. Communicate the meaning to the listeners.
3. Application. Exhort and proclaim what the text requires of the listeners. What is God saying, commanding instructing?

Out of these components comes a definition of expository preaching which is set forth by Paul Shirley, "Expository preaching is the method of preaching that proclaims the substance, the significance and the stipulations of a passage of Scripture.

To put it another way: Expository preaching takes a Spirit-inspired text of Scripture and declares, 'Here is what it says, here is what it means, and here is what it requires.'" (77)

How does this kind of preaching look?

Usually verse-by-verse; Text-driven (as opposed to story-driven or application-driven); Practical (unfolds the person of God speaks to the soul and relates to earthly living for the glory of God). THIS is what your soul needs! Your flesh will desire junk food, but your soul will not be satisfied without "what proceeds out of the mouth of God."

3. Attention. Sanctification is greatly dependent upon expository preaching. But there is another element without which the most faithful preaching will not succeed in producing holiness. We must give attention to how we hear. Jesus would often say, "He who has ears, let him hear." How do you listen to preaching so that holiness flourishes in your life?

Pray for God's grace in listening. Ultimately it is the grace of God that grants spiritual sight and spiritual hearing.

Attach yourself to the preaching of the truth. Do not settle for the light and frothy and shallow appeal which is focused more on you and handling your challenges than a Holy and glorious God who requires obedience and promises glory at the end of life's trials.

See your attention to the word as an act of worship from listening to grasping to obeying. Listening to the word of God is an act of worship. Listening and absorbing renews the

mind and produces life-transformation to the glory of God.

Romans 12:1-2—I appeal to you therefore, brothers,[a] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Ingredients for Attentiveness

Study. (Like the Bereans - Acts 17:10)

Prepare for upcoming sermons.

Meditate on sermons past.

Pray. A prayerful life is a life ready to receive the word.

Prepare your heart. (Repent from patterns of sin - James 1:21)

Get sufficient rest. (The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance,
but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty. - Proverbs 21:5)

Show up with expectation. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Be attentive. Work for it. (1 Timothy 4:7-8)

Respond. (James 1:22-25)

Conclusion

Resolve to appreciate the crucial role that preaching plays in your life. And appreciating it, resolve to attend to it “with diligence, preparation, and prayer, while receiving it with faith, love, and obedience. This side of heaven there is nothing God uses for sanctification more consistently and more powerfully than faithful preaching joined with obedient hearing.” (Shirley, 91)