

Leadership Equipping Thoughts

How to communicate God's word in a way that promotes (not prevents) discipleship.



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I have a friend who had an interesting story that highlights the challenge and limitations of the average corporate proclamation of God's word. He and his wife were on their way home from a Sunday morning service when his wife dutifully commented, "You did a great job speaking this morning." He was somewhat shocked and bewildered, and after a long pause he reminded her, "I didn't speak this morning...ugh!"

I remember reading one leader's lament about Sunday morning messages.

Why do I spend all this time on these sermons if people forget almost everything I say by the time they're halfway home on Sunday mornings?

One of the challenges of the routine Sunday morning or midweek proclamation of God's word is familiarity. This can subtly minimize the impact of the word due to expectations. Jesus spoke of this in the parable of the shallow soil (Matthey 13, Mark 4). We also see it in the account of Jesus going to His hometown (Mark 6:1-5). Even Jesus couldn't work any significant miracles there because of the expectations of the people due to the familiarity with Him.

The public speaking of God's word is important

Paul tells Timothy to be diligent about speaking God's word.

*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...**preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.** For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim 4:1-5)*

God's word bears little fruit if simply listening to it is all there is, especially in light of what Jesus said, "if you put My words into practice, then you are disciples of Mine, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

Important truths for leaders to remember about speaking God's word

- **You can't make disciples by preaching alone and you can't make disciples from the pulpit.** In fact, sermons can end up mattering very little in the day to day life of making disciples if that is all people get.
- **Becoming more effective in speaking God's word doesn't happen simply by increasing your preparation time.**

While we never want to discard the public ministry of God's word, maybe the solution is more about what we mean by preaching.

The deficiency may not be **what** you are preaching but **how** you are doing it. It may be in the limitations of understanding about how to preach.

What we proclaim publicly must supplement what we continually speak into the lives of people daily. I remember something God spoke to me as I was preparing to speak at a college meeting. I was going to share something from the sermon on the mount which many believe was a compilation of what Jesus continually taught. The phrase hit me,



"It's not what you say that they will remember, but what you continually say."

In Ephesians 4:14-16 Paul speaks of a phenomenon that promotes "maturity" called "speaking the truth in love." He obviously wasn't speaking of Sunday morning preaching alone because he was writing in the context of "every member doing it." "Speaking the truth in love" is the everyday bringing of God's truth into the lives of God's people. This is done relationally as well as corporately.

Public preaching and teaching must be followed up with the everyday relational application of truth worked in the lives of His people. This takes relationships in which we bring God's truth to bear in everyday life. What is said from the pulpit isn't more important than the pointed-out truth that is applied in everyday life situations.

We also need to publicly speak in such a way as Peter says, "speak as the utterances/oracles of God" (1 Pet 4:11). One of the main definitions of the word "utterance/oracle" is "a Divine utterance delivered to someone in response to a request for guidance." In other words, an utterance in response to a specific situation. This is the day in, day out "speaking the truth" which is the context of the Mt 28:18-19 commission to "make disciples teaching them to put His commands into practice."

There are other ways we can sabotage the public ministry of God's word. Sometimes it is the way it is done that makes it ineffective in discipleship.

Speaking that hinders discipleship

- **The ivory towered theological treatise.** Our goal with preaching isn't conceptual theology but pavement theology. It is following and obeying Jesus' discipleship, not information based, as Mt 28 shows us. We are not trying to impress people with our great understanding and inform their heads of all the theological innuendos that come with "in depth" Bible teaching.
- **Overly stylistic messages without clear substance.** A consistent diet of thundering or overtly stylistic messages with little clear substance can become more of a nostalgic means of comfort rather than a change agent. "That was some good preaching" can simply mean "Gimme some of that old time preaching so I know I've been to church," rather than help me change into the image of God.



- **Therapeutic Rah Rah messages.** We don't want a bunch of messages that provide a positive therapeutic feeling about our life. **God's word isn't about feeling better but living better in obedience to Jesus.** The Bible says much more about our "paths" than about how we feel about them.
- **Amazing insight messages.** This is speaking that promotes a phrase or jingle that gets our attention to focus on something. I belonged to a business speech club for a few years and it centered around techniques and content to make interesting speeches. That can become more like a TED talk rather than the Spirit inspired word of God. These jingles can be helpful to create memes but not necessarily to change us by the Word of God.

Remember that the goal of discipleship isn't information but obedience (putting His word into practice). We are not trying to get people to remember catchy sermons but to apply God's truth in their lives. **Preaching and teaching isn't about impressing or informing. It is about transformation.** We are helping people "follow and obey Jesus" in everyday life.

3 Important questions to consider in every proclamation of His word.

- **What has Jesus said or is He saying through His word?**
- **How will it affect your life?**
- **What practical steps can you take to apply it, and how can I help you follow up putting it into practice?**

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