A PRIMER ON

PREACHING

LIKE JESUS

BY RICK WARREN
THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A MORE APPEALING AND INTERESTING PREACHER THAN JESUS. WHY NOT MODEL HIM?

Jesus’ preaching attracted enormous crowds, and the Bible often records the positive reactions of those crowds to his teaching.

Matthew 7:28b (NIV) . . . the crowds were amazed at his teaching.
Matthew 22:33 (TLB) The crowds were profoundly impressed by his answers.
Mark 11:18b (TLB) . . . the people were so enthusiastic about Jesus’ teaching.
Mark 12:37b (NASB) The large crowd enjoyed listening to Him.

These crowds had never heard anyone speak to them the way Jesus did. They were captivated by his delivery.

To capture the attention of unbelievers like Jesus did, we must communicate spiritual truth the way he did. I believe that Jesus – not anyone else – must be our model for preaching. Unfortunately, some homiletics classes pay more attention to Aristotle and Greek rhetoric than to how Jesus taught.

In John 12:49b Jesus admitted, “The Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it” (NIV 1984). Notice that both the content AND the delivery style were directed by the Father. This is extremely important to note. We often overlook the manner in which Jesus preached.

There’s so much we can learn from Jesus’ style of communication, not just his content. But for now I want to briefly identify three attributes of Jesus’ preaching.
1. JESUS BEGAN WITH PEOPLE’S NEEDS, HURTS, AND INTERESTS

Jesus usually taught in response to a question or a pressing problem from someone in the crowd. He scratched where people itched. His preaching had immediacy about it. He was always relevant and always on target for that moment.

When Jesus preached his first sermon at Nazareth, he read from Isaiah to announce what the preaching agenda of his ministry would be: “The Lord has put his Spirit in me, because he appointed me to tell the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to tell the captives they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the Lord will show his kindness” (Luke 4:18-19 NCV).

Notice his entire emphasis was on meeting needs and healing hurts. Jesus had good news to share, and people wanted to hear it. He had a message that offered practical benefits for their lives. His truth would “set people free” and bring all sorts of blessings to their lives.

**Our basic message to the lost must be good news.** If it isn’t good news, it isn’t the Gospel. We must learn to share the Gospel in ways that show it is both “good” and “news.” The Gospel is about what God has done for us and what we can become in Christ. A personal relationship to Christ is the answer to all of our deepest needs. The Good News offers lost people what they are frantically searching for: forgiveness, freedom, security, purpose, love, acceptance, and strength. It settles our past, assures our future, and gives meaning to today. We have the best news in the world.

**Crowds always flock to good news.** These days, there is plenty of bad news in the world. The last thing people need to hear is more bad news in church. They’re looking for hope and help and encouragement. Jesus understood this. That’s why he felt so compassionate toward them. He knew that the crowds were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36b NIV).

By beginning with people’s needs when you preach, you immediately gain the attention of your audience. Practically every communicator understands and uses this principle except pastors!

**Wise teachers know to start with the student’s interests and move them toward the lesson.** Effective salespeople know you always start with the customer, not the product. Smart managers know to begin with the employee’s complaint, not their own agenda. You start where people are and move them to where you want them to be.

Pick up any textbook on the brain and you’ll learn that at the base of your brain stem is a filter called the Reticular Activating System. God graciously put this filter in our minds so we don’t have to consciously respond to the millions of stimuli that we’re bombarded with on a daily basis. It continuously sifts and sorts the things you see, hear, and smell — forwarding only a few of those stimuli on to your consciousness. This way you’re not overloaded and overwhelmed. If you had to consciously respond to every stimulus your senses pick up, you’d go crazy! Your Reticular Activating System determines what gets your attention.

Now, what does get people’s attention? Three things always make it past your reticular activating system: things you value, things that are unique, and things that threaten you. This has profound implications for the way pastors preach and teach. If you want to capture the attention of an uninterested group of people, you must tie your message to one of these three attention-getters.

While sharing the Good News in a unique or threatening way can get attention of unbelievers, I believe
showing its value to people is most consistent with how Christ taught. Jesus taught in a way that people understood the value and benefit of what he was saying. He didn’t try to threaten unbelievers into the Kingdom of God. In fact, his only threats were to religious people! As the cliché goes, he comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.

**Because preachers are called to communicate truth, we often mistakenly assume that unbelievers are eager to hear the truth.** They aren’t! Unbelievers aren’t that interested in truth these days. In fact, surveys show that the majority of Americans reject the idea of absolute truth.

This is the source of all the problems in our society. People don’t value truth. Today people value tolerance more than truth. People complain about crime, drug abuse, the breakup of the family, and other problems of our culture, but they don’t realize the cause of it all is their rejection of truth.

Moral relativism is the root of what is wrong in our society. But it is a big mistake for us to think that unbelievers will race to church if we just proclaim, “We have the truth!”

Their reaction will more likely be, “Yeah, so does everybody else!” Proclaimers of truth don’t get much attention in a society that devalues truth. To overcome this, some preachers try to “yell it like it is.” But preaching louder isn’t the solution to this apathy. It starts by being wise as serpents and harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16b ESV). **While most unbelievers aren’t looking for truth, they are looking for relief. This gives us the opportunity to interest them in truth.** I’ve found that when I teach the truth that relieves their pain or solves their problem, unbelievers say, “Thanks! What else is true in that book?” Sharing biblical principles that meet a need creates a hunger for more truth.

Jesus understood this. Very few of the people who came to Jesus were looking for truth. They were looking for relief. So Jesus would meet their felt needs, whether leprosy, blindness, or a bent back. After their felt needs were met, they were always eager to know the truth about this man. He had helped them with a problem they couldn’t solve.

Ephesians 4:29 says, *[Speak] only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen* (NIV). Notice that who we are speaking to determines what we are to say — this has nothing to do with compromising the message and everything to do with understanding the needs of your listeners. The needs of those listening decide the content of our message. We are to speak only what benefits those we are speaking to. If this is God’s will for our conversations, it must also be God’s will for our sermons.

Unfortunately, it seems that many pastors determine the content of their messages by what they feel they need to say rather than what the people need to hear.

**One reason sermon study is so difficult for many pastors is because they ask the wrong question.** Instead of asking, “What shall I preach on this Sunday?” they should instead ask, “To whom will I be preaching?” Simply thinking through the needs of the audience will help determine God’s will for the message.

Since God, in his foreknowledge, already knows who will be attending your services next Sunday, why would he give you a message totally irrelevant to the needs of those he is intending to bring? Why would he have me preach on something unhelpful to those he’s planned to hear it? I believe that people’s immediate needs are a key to where God would have me begin speaking at that particular occasion.

What I’m trying to say is this: The crowd does not determine whether or not you speak the truth. The truth is not optional. But your audience does determine which truths you choose to speak about. To unbelievers,
some truths are more relevant than others.

Can something be both true and irrelevant? Certainly!

If you’d been in a car accident and were bleeding to death in the emergency room, how would you feel if the doctor came in and wanted to talk about the Greek word for “hospital” or the history of the stethoscope? All he said to you could be true but irrelevant because it doesn’t stop your hurt. You would want the doctor to begin with your pain.

Your audience also determines how you start your message. If you are speaking to the unchurched and you spend the first part of the message on historical background, by the time you get to the personal application, you’ll have already lost your audience. When speaking to the unbelievers, you need to begin where your sermons normally end up!

Today “preaching to felt needs” is scorned and criticized in some circles as a cheapening of the Gospel and a sellout to consumerism. I want to state this in the clearest way possible: **Beginning a message with people’s felt needs is not some modern approach invented by 20th century marketing! It’s the way Jesus always preached!**

It’s based on the theological fact that God chooses to reveal himself to humanity according to our needs! Both the Old and New testaments are filled with many examples of this.

Even the names of God are revelations of how God meets our felt needs! Throughout history when people have asked God, “What is your name?” God’s response has been to reveal himself according to what they needed at that specific time:

- those who needed a miracle, God revealed himself as Jehovah-Jireh (“I am your provider”)  
- to those who needed comfort, God revealed himself as Jehovah-Shalom (“I am your peace”)  
- to those who needed salvation, God revealed himself as Jehovah-Tsidkenu (“I am your righteousness”)

The examples go on and on. God always meets us where we are — our point of need. Preaching to felt needs is a theologically sound approach to introducing people to God.

**Preaching that changes lives** somehow brings the truth of God’s Word and the real needs of people together through application. Which end of the continuum you begin with is irrelevant as long as you bring them together!

### 2. JESUS RELATED TRUTH TO LIFE

I love the practicality and simplicity of Jesus’ teaching. It was clear, relevant, and applicable. He aimed for application because his goal was to transform people, not merely inform them.

Consider the greatest sermon ever preached, **The Sermon on the Mount**:

Jesus began by sharing eight secrets of genuine happiness.

Then he talked about living an exemplary lifestyle, controlling anger, restoring relationships, and the issues of adultery and divorce.

Next he spoke of keeping promises and returning good for evil.
Then Jesus moved on to other practical life issues like how to give with the right attitude, how to pray, how to store up treasure in Heaven, and how to overcome worry.

He wrapped up his message by telling us to not judge others, encouraging persistence when asking God to meet our needs, and warning us about false teachers.

Finally, he concluded with a simple story that emphasized the importance of acting on what he’d taught: Put into practice what you’ve just learned!

This is the kind of preaching that we need in churches today. It changes lives! It’s not enough to simply proclaim, “Christ is the answer.” We must show the unchurched how Christ is the answer. Sermons that exhort people to change without sharing the practical steps of how to change only produce more guilt and frustration.

A lot of preaching today is what I call, “Ain’t it awful!” preaching. It just complains about our society and makes judgments about people in general. It’s long on diagnosis and short on remedy. It makes Christians feel superior to “those out there,” but it rarely changes anything. Instead of lighting a candle, it just curses the darkness.

When I go to a doctor, I don’t want to just hear what’s wrong with me; I want him to give me some specific steps to getting better. What people need today is less “ought-to” sermons and more “how-to” sermons. Exhortation without explanation leads to frustration.

Some pastors today criticize “life-application” preaching as shallow, simplistic, and inferior. To them the only real preaching is didactic, doctrinal preaching. Their attitude implies that Paul was more profound than Jesus; that Romans is “deeper” material than the Sermon on the Mount or the Parables. I call that heresy!

The deepest kind of teaching is that which makes a difference in people’s day-to-day lives. As D.L. Moody once said, “The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge but to change our lives.” The goal is Christ-like character.

Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life.” He didn’t say, “I’ve come that you might have religion.” Christianity is a life, not a religion, and Jesus was a life-application preacher. When he finished his teaching to the crowd, he always wanted them to “go and do likewise.”

Christ-like preaching explains life to people. It produces a changed lifestyle. Life-related preaching doesn’t just inform, it transforms. It changes people because the Word is applied to where people actually live. Sermons that teach people how to live will never lack an audience.

Please understand this: The unchurched are not asking that we change the message or even dilute it, only that we show its relevance. Their big question is “So what?” They want to know “What difference does it make?” I’ve found that unchurched Americans are intensely interested in Bible doctrine when it is applied in practical and relevant ways to their lives.

I love to teach theology to the unchurched without telling them it’s theology and without using theological terms. I find it challenging and enjoyable. I’ve preached sermon series to the unchurched on the incarnation, justification, and sanctification without ever using the terms! I did a series on the moral attributes of God and simply called it “Getting to Know God.” I’ve preached sermons to seekers on stewardship, the work of the Holy Spirit, and even the Seven Deadly Sins.

It’s a myth that you must compromise the message to draw a crowd. Jesus certainly didn’t. You don’t have to transform the message, but you do have to translate it.
The crowd loved to listen to Jesus. Mark 12:37 says, *The large crowd listened to Jesus with pleasure* (NCV). The New International Version says they *listened to him with delight*. 

Do people “delight” in your messages? Jesus never tried to convert anyone with anger. Some pastors actually think they have failed in their preaching if people enjoy a message. I’ve heard pastors say proudly, “We’re not here to entertain.” In a Gallup poll a few years ago, the unchurched listed the church as the most boring place to be.

If you look up the word “entertain” in a dictionary, you’ll find this definition: “capturing and holding the attention for an extended period of time.” I don’t know any preacher who doesn’t want to do that! We shouldn’t be afraid of being interesting. A sermon doesn’t have to be dry to be spiritual.

To the unchurched, dull preaching is unforgivable. Truth poorly delivered is ignored. On the other hand, the unchurched will listen to absolute foolishness if it is interesting. To prove this just turn on your television late at night and see the assortment of psychics, wackos, and weirdoes that dominate the airwaves.

It never ceases to amaze to me how some Bible teachers are able to take the most exciting book in the world and bore people to tears with it. I believe it is a sin to bore people with the Bible.

The problem is this: *When I teach God’s Word in an uninteresting way, people don’t just think I’m boring; they think God is boring!* We slander God’s character if we preach with an uninspiring style or tone. The message is too important to share it with a “take-it-or-leave it” attitude.

Jesus captured the interest of large crowds with techniques that you and I can use:

**He told stories to make a point:**
Jesus was the master storyteller. He’d say, “Hey, did you hear the one about . . .” and then tell a parable to teach a truth. In fact, the Bible shows that storytelling was Jesus’ favorite technique when speaking to the crowd. *Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable* (Matthew 13:34 NIV). Somehow preachers forget that the Bible is essentially a book of stories! That’s how God has chosen to communicate his Word to human beings.

There are many benefits to using stories to communicate spiritual truth: Stories hold our attention. The reason television is so popular is because it’s essentially a story-telling device, whether you’re watching comedy, drama, the news, or a talk show. Even the commercials are stories. Stories stir our emotions. They impact us in ways that precepts and propositions never do. If you want to change lives, you must craft the message for impact, not for information. Stories help us remember. Long after a pastor’s cute outline is forgotten, people will remember the stories of the sermon.

It’s fascinating, and sometimes comical, to watch how quickly a crowd tunes in whenever a speaker begins telling a story and how quickly that attention vanishes as soon as the story is finished!

**Jesus used simple language:**
He didn’t use technical or theological jargon. He spoke in simple terms that normal people could understand. We need to remember that Jesus did not use the classical Greek language of the scholar. He spoke in Aramaic. He used the street language of that day and talked of birds, flowers, lost coins, and other everyday objects that anyone could relate to.
Jesus taught profound truths in simple ways. Today, we do the opposite. We teach simple truths in profound ways. Sometimes when pastors think they are being “deep,” they are really just being “muddy.”

Today some pastors like to show off their knowledge by using Greek words and academic terms in their preaching. They speak in an unknown tongue without being charismatic! Pastors need to realize that no one cares as much about the Greek as they do. Chuck Swindoll once told me that he believes an overuse of word studies in preaching discourages confidence in the English text. I agree.

In fact, Chuck and I — along with Jack Hayford and Chuck Smith — once taught a seminary course on preaching. We each taught how we prepare and deliver sermons. At the end of the course, the students mentioned that all four of us had, without collaboration, emphasized the same thing: Keep it simple!

It’s easy to complicate the Gospel, and of course, Satan would love for us to do just that. The apostle Paul worried that your minds would be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3b NASB).

It takes a lot of thought and preparation to communicate profound truths in simple ways. Albert Einstein once said, “You don’t really understand something unless you can communicate it in a simple way.” You can be brilliant, but if you can’t share it in a simple way, your insights aren’t worth much.

The Saddleback Valley is one of the most highly educated communities in America, yet I find that the simpler I make the message, the more God blesses it.

Simple does not mean shallow. Simple does not mean simplistic. Simple means being clear and understandable. For instance, “This is the day the Lord has made” is simple while, “Have a nice day!” is simplistic.

Most people today communicate with a vocabulary of less than 2,000 words and rely on only about 900 words in daily use. If you want to communicate with most people, you need to keep it simple. Never allow yourself to be intimidated by people who think they are intellectuals. It’s been my observation that people who have to use big words are sometimes hiding bigger insecurities.

I believe simple sermon outlines are always the strongest outlines. I consider being called a simple preacher a compliment. I’m interested in seeing lives changed, not in impressing people with my “erudition.”

I’d rather be clear than complex.

Jesus — not anyone else — must be our model. When we preach like he did, we'll see the results he did.