

## Words of Wisdom from the Preacher on Preaching

### Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

**Introduction:** 1) When we stand to preach the infallible and inerrant Word of God, the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, and “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), there is an essential and necessary plumb-line that must always guide the God-called messenger: “What you say is more important than how you say it. But, how you say it has never been more important. [repeat].

2) This plumb-line, axiom, dictum, this homiletical “must statement” is not new, though its urgency is. No, we find its genesis embedded in the wisdom of Solomon when he said in Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 that the wise Preacher “taught the people knowledge... words of truth,” the what, and that “The Preacher sought to find acceptable (*NASV*, “delightful”; *NIV*, “just the right words”) words... words like goads, and... well driven nails, the how.

3) Martin Lloyd-Jones said, “What is preaching? Logic on fire. Eloquent reason! Are these contradictions? Of course they are not!”

Logic → what      Fire → how

Eloquent → how      Reason → what

4) In the text before us, the Preacher, *Qoheleth*, addresses the proper means of teaching truth to the people of God. His primary focus may be on words that are written.

However, written words of truth will also become spoken words of truth. Similar principles cohere for effectively delivering either a written or spoken message.

**Transition:** What words of wisdom then do we receive from the preacher on preaching?

David Jeremiah says we find in these verses a “final exam” (p. 301). Applied to the task

of preaching, what is the bar we must reach for in order to score a passing grade, no(!), an excellent grade in the awesome assignment of preaching?

**I. Faithful preaching involves instruction.            12:9-10**

- Solomon begins by saying, “because the Preacher (*NIV*, “teacher”) was wise,” he had a certain approach or strategy that shaped and guided his teaching ministry. It was “knowledge” and “truth” delivered with acceptable or delightful words that led his students to “fear God and keep His commandments” (v. 13). In other words he faithfully taught his students the Word of God. God provided the message, He was simply the messenger.
- Such a goal for preaching is reflected in Article 25 of the “Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics” penned in 1982. It reads,

Article XXV

“**We affirm** that the only type of preaching which sufficiently conveys the divine revelation and its proper application to life is that which faithfully expounds the text of Scripture as the Word of God.

**We deny** that the preacher has any message from God apart from the text of Scripture.”

- Because he is wise, the faithful preacher will be a faithful expositor, an engaging expositor. What are the essential elements necessary for engaging exposition? Our text highlights 4.

**1. We preach didactically.    12:9**

- The wise preacher will impart “knowledge” to his people. There will be content, what could be described as “theological exposition.” Such a preaching agenda is the only reasonable and defensible strategy given the nature of the Bible as divine revelation.

- John MacArthur is on target when he says,
 

“The only logical response to inerrant Scripture...is to preach it expositionally. By expositionally, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented entirely and exactly as it was intended by God.” (John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, 35).
- Good preaching always involves teaching just as good teaching will always have an element of preaching. Without it, our preaching is tepid and timid and our people malnourished!
- Walt Kaiser saw this malady more than 25 years ago when he wrote, “It is no secret that Christ’s Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed... “junk food”... The Biblical text is often no more than a slogan or refrain in the message ... Biblical exposition has become a lost art in contemporary preaching. The most neglected of all biblical sections is the Old Testament-over three-fourths of divine revelation! ... Motto preaching may please the masses in that it is filled with a lot of epigrammatic or proverbial slogans and interesting anecdotes, but it will always be a powerless word lacking the authority and validation of Scripture.” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 7, 19, 37, 191).
- Haddon Robinson reminds us, “When a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority. He confronts his hearers no longer

with a word from God but only another word from men” (*Biblical Preaching*).

## 2. We preach logically.

12:9

- Sidney Greidanus, in his book *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* says, “Biblical preaching is a Bible shaped word imparted in a Bible-like way. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.” (p. 11).
- The manner in which the preacher delivers the knowledge of God’s Word is critically important. Three essentials are noted in verse 9:
  - 1) he pondered – he weighed carefully what he wrote and said.
  - 2) he sought out – he dug deep into the knowledge content he would present.
  - 3) he set in order many proverbs – he considered how best to deliver wise sayings, wisdom words of truth. Here the word “proverbs” is broader in meaning than our word in English.
- The faithful communicator of biblical truth will be gripped by the realization that the book lying before him is filled with wisdom, for it is the very Word of God. He will tremble at the thought of manipulating it or abusing it. He will carry out his assignment under a divine mandate to honor the text in its context as it was given by the Holy Spirit of God.
- Indeed he will take to heart the wise admonition of Charles Koller, “In expounding the Word of God, there is a grave responsibility upon the

preacher to convey the truth without distortion... With eternities at stake, the hearers can not afford to be in error, nor can the spiritual teacher whom he trusts... Every man has a right to his opinion, but no man has a right to be wrong in his facts... The integrity of the pulpit demands accuracy, thoroughness, and a scrupulous regard for text and context.” (Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes*, 64-65).

### 3. **We preach thoughtfully.**

**12:10**

- A wise preacher will work hard to find the right words as he feeds the sheep under his protection. He will also deliver it in the best way.
- The phrase “acceptable words” means delightful or pleasing words.
- In other words not only is error a danger to the truth. Dullness is a danger to the truth. Beautiful truth ought to be packaged and wrapped in an attractive style. Indeed, it is a sin to make the Bible boring!
- Good preaching gives attention to form and content, structure and substance. It neglects neither and sees no need in sacrificing one for the other.
- John MacArthur has said, “The proper elements in an expository sermon may be summed up as follows:

“Preaching is expository in purpose. It explains the text.

Preaching is logical in flow. It persuades the mind.

Preaching is doctrinal in content. It obligates the will.

Preaching is pastoral in concern. It feeds the soul.

Preaching is imaginative in pattern. It excites the emotion.

Preaching is relevant in application. It touches the life.”

- What about this issue of delivery? Lloyd Jones said: “Be natural; forget yourself; be absorbed in what you are doing and in the realization of the presence of God, and in the glory and the greatness of the Truth that you are preaching...that you forget yourself completely....Self is the greatest enemy of the preacher, more so than in the case of any other man in society. And the only way to deal with self is to be so taken up with, and so enraptured by the glory of what you are doing, that you forget yourself altogether.” (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching*, 264).

He adds, “A theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man’s understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire. A true understanding and experience of the Truth must lead to this. I say again that a man who can speak about these things dispassionately has no right whatsoever to be in a pulpit; and should never be allowed to enter one.” (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching*, 97).

And Charles Spurgeon noted,

“When I have thought of the preaching of certain good men, I have wondered, not that the congregation was so small, but that it was so large. The people who listen to them ought to excel in the virtue of patience, for they have grand opportunities of exercising it. Some sermons and prayers lend a color of support to the theory of Dr. William Hammond, that the brain is not absolutely essential to life. Brethren,... you will, none of you, covet earnestly the least gifts, and the dullest mannerisms, for you can

obtain them without the exertion of the will.... Labour to discharge your ministry, not with the lifeless method of an automaton, but with the freshness and power which will render your ministry largely effectual for its sacred purposes.” (C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-Around Ministry* [reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960], 316-317).

#### 4. We preach truthfully.

**12:10**

- *Qoheleth*, the preacher/teacher, instructs us to communicate that which is “upright” – “words of truth.” I cannot think of a better description of Holy Scripture: words that are upright, straight, words of integrity, because they are words of truth.
- Its source is unknown to me, but its affirmation is powerful. It is simply entitled:

#### THE BIBLE

This book contains: The mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners and the happiness of believers. Its doctrine is holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be saved and practice it to be holy.

It contains light to direct you, food to support you and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler’s map, the pilgrim’s staff, the pilot’s compass, the soldier’s sword and the Christian’s charter.

Here, Heaven is opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet.

Read it slowly, frequently, prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given you in life, will be opened at the Judgment, and be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility,

will reward faithful labor, and condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.

‘Tis the Book that has for the  
Ages, Lifted man from sin and  
shame; That great message  
on its pages, Will forever be  
the same.’

Never compare the Bible with other books. Comparisons are dangerous. Books speak from earth; the Bible speaks from Heaven. Never think or say that the Bible contains the Word of God or that it becomes the Word of God. It IS the Word of God.

Supernatural in origin, eternal in duration, inexpressible in value, infinite in scope, divine in authorship, regenerative in power, infallible in authority, universal in interest, personal in application, inspired in totality. Read it through. Write it down. Pray it in. Work it out. Pass it on. It is the Word of God.

- J. I. Packer says, “...the true idea of preaching is that the preacher should become a mouthpiece for his text, opening it up and applying it as a word from God to his hearers,... in order that the text may speak... and be heard making each point from his text in such a manner ‘that [his audience] may discern [the voice of God].’” (Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 28).

## II. **Faithful preaching invites admonition.**      **12:11-12**

- Solomon says the words of the wise are like goads which prick and nails that stick. They will move us into action; action that leads us to being conformed to the image of Christ.
- “The supreme test of all preaching is: what happens in the pew? To John the Baptist there was accorded the highest tribute that could ever come to a minister of the gospel: when they had heard John, “they followed Jesus!” (Charles Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes*, 19).



**1. It provides principles to guide us.            12:11**

- Wise words are like goads, they prod the sluggish and hesitant into action, they have a power to provide a mental and spiritual stimulus, a spiritual shot-in-the-arm.
- Wise words of “the master of assemblies” are also like well driven nails. They stabilize on the one hand, and give us something to hang things on, on the other. Leupold says, “they furnish a kind of mental anchorage.”
- The end of v. 11 is a direct declaration of divine inspiration. The ‘knowledge’ of v. 9 and the “words of truth” of v. 10 are given by one Shepherd, the Lord who is my Shepherd (Ps. 23), the Good Shepherd, Jesus (John 10).

**2. It provides priorities to guard us.            12:12**

- J. Stafford Wright warns the preacher, “It is possible to be a miser in accumulating knowledge instead of using it for the benefit of others” (*EBC*, vol. 5, 1196). Solomon the realist knows there is no end to book making. Just imagine if he were alive today! And yet he is not down on books and down on study or knowledge in principle. He is down on it as an end in itself. Knowledge is not the same as wisdom. It is possible to be smart but not intelligent. It is possible to know a lot but not be wise. God’s design for our lives is not to make us smart sinners but godly saints!
- If we are not careful and wise, we can linger too long at the “Vanity Fair of knowledge”, only to miss out on the wisdom of God and a life that is really worth living.

- Billy Barnea puts it in colorful poetic expression; giving us something to think about in “I stayed too Long at the Fair.”

I wanted the music to play on forever—

Have I stayed too long at the fair?

I wanted the clown to be constantly clever—

Have I stayed too long at the fair?

I bought me blue ribbons to tie up my hair,

But I couldn't find anybody to care.

The merry-go-round is beginning to slow now,

Have I stayed too long at the fair?

I wanted to live in a carnival city, with

Laughter and love everywhere.

I wanted my friends to be thrilling and witty,

I wanted somebody to care.

I found my blue ribbons all shiny and new,

But now I've discovered them no longer blue.

The merry-go-round is beginning to taunt me—

Have I stayed too long at the fair?

There is nothing to win and no one to want me—

Have I stayed too long at the fair? (Swindoll, 357).

Some of us have stayed too long at various fairs in life (knowledge, power, popularity, wealth). Let God's word guide your priorities.

**III. Faithful preaching includes exhortation. 12:13-14**

- John Piper reminds us, “It is not the job of the Christian preacher to give people moral or psychological pep talks about how to get along in the world; someone else can do that... most of our people have no one in the world to tell them, week in and week out, about the supreme beauty and majesty of God.” (John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 12).
- And just where is this ‘supreme beauty and majesty of God’ found? It is found in the glory of Jesus Christ who is the very face of God. When I preach I always ask 5 questions I ask of each and every text:
  - 1) What does this text teach us about God?
  - 2) What does this text teach us about fallen man?
  - 3) What do I want my people to know?
  - 4) What do I want my people to do?
  - 5) How does this text point to Christ?

You see Jesus teaches us in Luke 24 that all of Scripture is about Him, all of it. We dare not treat the Old Testament, for example, like a Jewish rabbi. In this regard I have been greatly blessed by men like Vos, Gredanius, Goldsworthy and Keller. To gain just a taste of what Christo-centric hermeneutics and homiletics can do, listen to the insight of Tim Keller as he scans the redemptive storyline of the Old Testament.

It’s All About Jesus (slightly revised)

Published December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006 in Theology and Quotes.

Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the wilderness not the garden, and whose obedience is imputed to us.

Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain by wicked hands, has blood now that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for our acquittal.

Jesus is the better Ark of Noah who carries us safely thru the wrath of God revealed from heaven and delivers us to a new earth.

Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all that is comfortable and familiar and go out into the world not knowing where he went to create a new people of God.

Jesus is the true and better Isaac who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us. And when God said to Abraham, “Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love from me,” now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain of Calvary and sacrificing him and say, “Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your Son, your only Son, whom you love, from us.”

Jesus is the true and better Jacob who wrestled and took the blow of justice we deserved, so we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.

Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed him and sold him, and uses his new power to save them.

Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord and who mediates a new covenant.

Jesus is the true and better Rock of Moses who, struck with the rod of God’s justice, now gives us living water in the desert.

Jesus is the true and better Joshua, who leads us into a land of eternal rest and heavenly blessing.

Jesus is the better Ark of the Covenant who topples and disarms the idols of this world, going Himself into enemy territory, and making an open spectacle of them all.

Jesus is the true and better Job, the truly innocent sufferer, who then intercedes for and saves his stupid friends.

Jesus is the true and better David whose victory becomes his people's victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.

Jesus is the true and better Esther who didn't just risk leaving an earthly palace but lost the ultimate and heavenly one, who didn't just risk his life, but gave his life to save his people.

Jesus is the true and better Daniel, having been lowered into a lions den of death, emerges early the next morning alive and vindicated by His God.

Jesus is the true and better Jonah who was cast out into the storm so that we safely could be brought in.

Jesus is the real Passover Lamb, innocent, perfect, helpless, slain, so the angel of death will pass over us. He's the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true light, and the true bread.

The Bible really is not about you is it? – It really is all about Him.

Oh how this needs to be reflected in our preaching.

1. **It reminds us of why we are here.**           **12:13**

- “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter” could be paraphrased for our day: “when everything is said and done.” In other words what is the bottom-line, the end-game? Solomon says it is two-fold: 1) fear God and 2) keep His commandments. Trust Him and then obey Him. The order is crucial.
- “Fear God” means to put God in His proper place, us in our proper place, and all other fears, hopes, dreams and agendas in their proper place. The clear and consistent teaching and encouragement of the Word of God is essential if this is to take place.
- “Fear God”: what does the text teach me about God? “Keep His commandments”: what does this teach me about me?”
- “Keep His commandments”: obey Him out of love and respect for who He is and what He has done.
- Accepted: I obey! Not I obey so that I can be accepted.
- “For this is man’s all.” The *NIV*, “For this is the whole duty of man.”
- Augustine (AD 354-430) said it well, “thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless till it rest in thee.”
- We will never find rest, until we come to rest in Jesus.

**2. It reminds us of what God will do.      12:14**

- Every thought and every action will be exposed to the search light of God’s judgment. Not one thing will escape.
- “Every work”: our actions.  
Every secret thing: our thoughts.

- :Good or bad”: it will all come to light.

**Conclusion:** 1) One of my spiritual heroes and friends in his last years was the great expositor Stephen Olford (1918-2004). On the wall of his private study there hangs a plaque which contained a quote from one of Dr. Olford’s heroes, Robert Murray M’Cheyne. On that plaque are the words, “Lord, make me as holy as a saved sinner can be!”

2) Good words from a great preacher. Good words for any preacher who understands the exhortation of *qoheleth*, “Fear God and keep His commands, for this is the whole duty of man” (*NIV*).

3) Cotton Mather, the American Puritan, accurately assessed the nature of our holy assignment when he said,

“The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the honorable and most important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain; and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity to consider the reasons why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty man!”