



THE MYSTERY OF PREACHING, PART 1
ENCOUNTERING CHRIST FROM THE PULPIT

Deuteronomy 32:1-3

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Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak,
and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
May my teaching drop as the rain,
my speech distill as the dew,
like gentle rain upon the tender grass,
and like showers upon the herb.
For I will proclaim the name of the Lord;
ascribe greatness to our God!

Introduction

Today I want to interrupt our series on 1 Peter to speak to you about preaching. I trust and pray you will find this to be not a disruption, but a timely and even transforming word from the Lord to you about this most precious treasure God has given to build his church: namely, preaching.

I have been at Calvary now for eighteen months. During that relatively short period of time, I have preached over two hundred times: three sermons each Sunday for forty or more Sundays a year. Now, this makes me nothing like an expert in preaching, much less an expert preacher. But it does mean I have grown as a preacher; I have grown in a host of ways. But do you know where I experienced the most growth? In my conviction about what preaching is—and what it is not.

This is my growing conviction: preaching exists not simply to impart information to you about God or the Bible or the Christian life. No, preaching exists to enable you to encounter the living Christ. This is why preaching exists, and this is what preachers ought to do: they ought to unfold the word of God with such clarity and conviction and passion and anointing that Jesus Christ stands forth from the pages of Scripture to be seen and indeed tasted. “O taste and see that the Lord is good,” ought to be the cry of the preacher and the experience of the listener every week.

When this happens, both preacher and listener are caught up in *the mystery of preaching*. Preaching is a mystery because it cannot be simply reduced to the mere exchange of information from the preacher to the hearer. If that is all that happens, it is not preaching; it is a lecture. No, preaching is a mystery because when it is true, biblical, Spirit-empowered preaching, another Person shows up on the scene: so that you have not only the preacher and the hearer, but Jesus Christ himself. Jesus Christ is the mystery of preaching and your encounter with him. That is the goal of preaching!

This is what preaching is all about: encountering Jesus Christ. That is what great preaching has always been about. During the Second World War, a Scottish member of the armed forces sat under the preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel in London. Lloyd-Jones was surely one of the twentieth-century's greatest preachers. Here is how this Scottish soldier describes what happened:

There was a thin congregation. A small man in a collar and tie walked almost apologetically to the platform and called the people to worship. I remember thinking that Lloyd-Jones must be ill and that his place was being taken by one of his office bearers. This illusion was not dispelled during the first part of the service, though I was impressed by the quiet reverence of the man's prayers and his reading of the Bible.

Ultimately he announced his text and began his sermon in the same quiet voice. Then a curious thing happened. For the next forty minutes I became completely unconscious of everything except the word that this man was speaking—not his words, mark you, *but someone behind them and in them and through them*. I didn't realize it then, but I had been in the presence of the mystery of preaching, when a man is lost in the message he proclaims.¹

That is what I am talking about when I talk about preaching. And that is what I long for—both for you and for me. O, that this would be our experience: that when I preach, you become unconscious of everything in your world except the word I am speaking to you—not my words, but someone behind them and in them and through them, someone speaking directly to you—Jesus Christ.

This is the mystery of preaching. But how are we swept up into this mystery? What do we need to do to encounter the living Christ consistently in preaching? Today, I want to explore what *I* need to do, as the preacher, to help you encounter Christ in preaching. Next week, we will consider what *you* need to do, as the listener, to encounter Christ in preaching. Then, we'll be in a position to think about what *God* might be pleased to do, should Jesus Christ be encountered in both the pulpit and the pew.

But, first, what do I need to do, as the preacher, to help you encounter Jesus Christ in and through preaching?

First, I need to pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit to empower my preaching.

It has been my experience that there is preaching, and then there is *Preaching*. There is preaching with a small 'p,' and then there is preaching with a capital 'P.' There is preaching that is thoughtful and biblical and applicable. Then, there is preaching that is all of these—and *empowered by the Holy Spirit*. And the difference between the two is simply enormous.

The difference is one, not of degree, but of kind. Not because there is a difference in content, but because there is a difference in *power*. God is really present in the one; you are not so sure

¹ The story is in Iain H. Murray, *Lloyd-Jones: Messenger of Grace* (Edinburgh: Banner, 2008), p. 29-30.

in the other. It is the difference between Elijah's offering, and the offering of the priests of Baal. For the priests of Baal, there was feverish activity but ultimately silence from heaven; for Elijah, his humble offering was met with fire that fell from heaven and set the whole thing ablaze!

There is a name for the kind of Spirit-empowered preaching. The saints of old referred to it as preaching with unction, or preaching with anointing. But what is this anointing of the Holy Spirit? I have already referred to Martyn Lloyd-Jones; let me now quote him on this matter of the anointing of the Holy Spirit:

It is the Holy Spirit falling upon the preacher in a special manner. It is an access of power. It is God giving power, and enabling, through the Spirit, to the preacher in order that he may do this work in a manner that lifts it up beyond the efforts and endeavors of man to a position in which the preacher is being used by the Spirit and becomes the channel through whom the Spirit works.²

This anointing is what the *prophets* experienced when they were burdened by the Lord and emboldened to speak mightily in his name. This anointing is what *Jesus* experienced when he had declared in the synagogue that the Scripture had been fulfilled which said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). This anointing is what the *first Christians* experienced when they received power from on high when the Holy Spirit came upon them and empowered them to witness (Acts 1:8). This anointing is what the *Apostle Peter* experienced when he was "filled with the Spirit" and boldly proclaimed that this Jesus is the Christ (Acts 4:8). This anointing is what the *Apostle Paul* experienced when he reminded the Thessalonians that "our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1:5). This anointing is what the *great preachers* of the past have experienced, from Wesley and Whitefield to Stott and Lloyd-Jones. And this anointing of the Holy Spirit is what I desperately want to experience more consistently in my own preaching.

But how does one receive this anointing of the Holy Spirit? Only by asking and begging and pleading with the Lord to give this anointing. For it was Jesus himself who said: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). So we must ask for the Holy Spirit! We must seek Him in prayer:

Seek him! Seek Him! What can we do without Him? Seek Him! Seek Him always. But go beyond seeking Him; expect Him. . . . Seek this power, expect this power, yearn for this power; and when the power comes, yield to Him. Do not resist. Forget all about your sermon if necessary. Let Him loose you, let Him manifest His power in and through you . . . This makes true preaching, and it is the greatest need of all today—never more so. Nothing can substitute for this.³

One of the things this means for me, practically speaking, is that I am going to need to be much more prayerful in my sermon preparation. All of my preaching must flow from a mind

² Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 305.

³ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 325.

that is poured over the word of God, yes; but it must also flow from a soul that has sought power from on high in prayer. Because without this anointing, there will never be the kind of preaching that will cause you to encounter the living Christ. You must recognize this: nothing of spiritual significance happens here without this anointing. Preaching must be empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Second, I need to proclaim Christ with clarity and conviction in every sermon.

Let me share with you the worst criticism of my preaching I've ever received: *that I failed to preach Christ*. Nothing worse could be said of a preacher than that. Preaching Christ and him crucified is the whole point of preaching! Without a clear and compelling declaration of the person and work of Christ, there is no preaching that is truly Christian preaching. Period!

Besides, what am I preaching if I am not preaching Christ? And how badly out of step I am with not only the focus of the whole Bible, but with the preaching of the biblical writers themselves.

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1-2).

Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14).

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ (Col. 1:28).

Now, when I first received this particular criticism of my preaching, I accepted it outwardly with a courteous and benign pastoral smile; but I must confess that inwardly I protested violently. "How outrageous! I preach Christ all the time!" I said to myself, of course, in defense of myself.

Yet, as I thought more about this, here is the scary thing I realized: as a preacher it is very easy to talk about Christ, or to unfold truths about the work of Christ, or even to wax eloquent in praise of the person of Christ, and yet *fail to proclaim Christ to the congregation*. It is the difference between preaching about Christ and actually preaching Christ; or it is the difference between talking about the Gospel and actually proclaiming it.

What this means for me, practically speaking, is that I am going to be much more intentional and explicit about pointing to Christ and proclaiming the Gospel in every single sermon. In other words, I am not going to dance around it or make passing mention of it. No, I am going to do everything I can to lift Christ up—to declare the simple, saving message of the Gospel.

Your sin has separated you from God, not just the bad things you have done, but the bad person you are at the core of your being. As a result, God's righteous wrath rests upon you. But what wondrous love is this! God has done a most amazing thing: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. For God so loved the whole sinful lot of humanity that he gave his one and only Son. He gave him for you, to die in your stead on the cross, to bear the full weight of divine

wrath again your sin and mine, that we might enjoy the free gift of eternal life. And now God is calling everyone, everywhere, to repent and believe this good news—including you, everyone of you.

Just to be clear, this does not mean you are going to hear an altar call at the close of every message; nor does this mean I am going to offer an invitation in every sermon. What this does mean is that I am going to work hard to show you how every passage of Scripture finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Christ; how every command of Scripture is impossible to fulfill apart from faith in Christ; and how every promise of Scripture is both ‘Yes’ and ‘Amen’ in Christ. I am also going to let the message of the gospel be central in every single sermon, so that no one could go away having not heard the Gospel and seen the crucified and risen Christ.

At some churches, I imagine it is hard to get saved. At Calvary, I want it to be hard *not* to get saved. Not because we make a ‘hard-sell’ for the gospel, but because we proclaim Christ with clarity and conviction in every single message.

Third, I need to pursue greater freedom in preaching.

Preachers must pursue freedom in preaching. That is, they cannot be too tied to their preparation, or too tied by their preparation. Why? Because, as we have already said, preaching is only truly preaching when it is guided, not by the preacher, but by the Holy Spirit. And you can never presume to know what the Holy Spirit wants to do in and through your preaching. He may speak in ways you do not expect; and we must always allow for this freedom—not our freedom, but the Holy Spirit’s.

Preachers must also pursue freedom in preaching because preaching is not a one-way thing: the preacher simply dumping his ideas out on the congregation. At its best, preaching is always a two-way thing: an *exchange* between the preacher and the congregation. This is not to say biblical preaching is a conversation between preacher and congregation. It is to say that great preaching is less like a lecture, and more like a dance, where one leads, the other follows, but both are intimately involved.

Now, what pursuing freedom in preaching means, practically speaking, for me is that while I am still going to prepare thoroughly, I am going to do so in a way that allows for and indeed *expects* God to show up and speak in ways I did not plan or prepare for. This means I am going to deemphasize writing out my sermons in preparation, so that I can increase my sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This also means I am going to rely less heavily on a prepared manuscript when I actually preach, so that I can be more responsive to what the Lord might want to say to you through me. And this means that I am going to deemphasize planning out sermons in advance, so that we can increase our attentiveness to what God may want to say to us about what he is doing in our midst or in our world.

O that we might recover a sense of anticipation that every single Sunday the living God is going to show up and speak to us! God forbid we slide into business as usual and forget that our God is alive and well and ready to speak! So you must come each week with a sense of anticipation and indeed expectation that God will speak to you through his word that you might encounter the living Christ afresh.

Fourth, I need to focus our gaze unswervingly upon God.

My father-in-law is fond of saying that your greatest strengths are often your greatest weakness. When you think about it, that is basically right. But how might this apply to preaching—to my preaching?

Perhaps my greatest strength as a preacher is a close attention to Scripture. I believe an intense biblical focus is essential to biblical preaching. And I have always loved close study of the Bible. I am a teacher by gifting, and I have spent nearly eleven years in post-secondary education, the vast majority of which has been studying the Bible, including a three year doctoral degree, for which I wrote an eighty thousand word dissertation based upon four verses in the book of Galatians.

Now, I say this not to boast, but to be clear about how a strength in preaching can become a weakness in preaching. Because I myself find so much pleasure in close attention to the content and argument of Scripture, I find my gaze resting there: on the words of Scripture themselves. And, naturally, then, when I preach, you too will find your gaze directed there as well: to the words of Scripture.

This was confirmed to me earlier this week when I asked a friend to identify what it is that I help him focus on as he listens to me preach. After groping around for the right words, he said the following: “You focus our attention on those twenty-two words of the passage you’re preaching.” An honest answer! It confirmed my growing suspicion that I have let my strength become a weakness. While all preaching must be biblical and indeed expository, the goal of preaching is never to focus the gaze upon the mere words of Scripture themselves, but upon *the spiritual realities to which Scripture always points*.

In short, preaching must be more than expository teaching; it must be expository exultation, to borrow a wonderful phrase from John Piper. Yes, there must be a close attention to the content and logic of Scripture. But there must also be *worship* of the God of Scripture—my worship as the preacher, which in turn leads to your worship as the listener. Both you and I together exulting in the God who has revealed himself in Scripture!

As essential as the exposition of the Bible is, a congregation is not ultimately fed by expository preaching but by an encounter with God who speaks in and through the Bible. I have found that no one make this point as succinctly and forcefully as A. W. Tozer. This captures the essence of what I am saying with this fifth point:

Sound Bible exposition is an imperative *must* in the Church of the Living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such a way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste

and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.⁴

So be careful, then, that you not let your gaze rest on the mere words of Scripture. Always press on to the reality to which those words point, the reality which the words bring near: the living Christ who speaks in and through his word. This is the mystery of preaching.

Conclusion

I trust you understand there is no greater challenge—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually—than trying to speak for God to the people of God. It is like nothing else. Who is sufficient for these things?

But I also trust you recognize there is nothing you need more, nothing this church needs more, nothing Oak Park needs more, nothing Chicago needs more, nothing this world needs more, than the kind of preaching that brings men and women to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, to an encounter with the living Christ.

Of course, let me say here at the close that encountering the living Christ in preaching is not solely the responsibility of the preacher; the hearer also plays a vital role. What do *you* as a listener need to do to encounter the living Christ more consistently in preaching? That will be the thrust of next week's message. Then, once we have looked at both sides of the coin of preaching, we will be in a better position to consider what *God* might do should the living Christ be encountered in both the pulpit and the pew.

Amen.

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⁴ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1982), p. 10 (emphasis original).