

THE ART OF   
**PREACHING**

with Carey Nieuwhof and Mark Clark

COURSE  
WORKBOOK

A Tried and True Method to Preach Better  
Sermons That Engage Audiences.

The Art of Preaching with Carey Nieuwhof and Mark Clark.

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# Introduction

# Introduction

Welcome to The Art of Preaching. We're Carey Nieuwhof and Mark Clark, and combined we have more than forty years of preaching experience. So we have a few ideas of what to do (and what not to do) when you're in this incredibly important role.

By the time you've completed this course, our hope is that you'll be an even better preacher than you are now. These are the principles we've used throughout most of our careers, and we believe they'll connect with you as well.

We'll cover all kinds of topics in this twelve-session course—everything from preaching without notes and creating catchy memorable phrases to preaching to the unchurched and staying fresh as a pastor.

This workbook is designed as a supplement to the video course. Here, you'll have summaries of each session, practical applications and exercises, and places to take notes so you can continue your learning. But the meat of this course is the videos. These lessons are dense, informative, and (hopefully!) entertaining, and the videos are where you'll find the heart of our teaching.

As you go through The Art of Preaching, you'll probably notice that we have different styles. We both prepare and preach differently—and that's exactly the way it should be! This course is here to help you hone your own style, not become a carbon copy of one of us, or another pastor. Use these tools to become the most authentic, real pastor that God has designed you to be.

No matter where we are in our pastoral careers, we can all become better at what we do. So we pray that you'll enjoy watching and learning from this series as much as we enjoyed creating it.

Let's get started by busting seven commonly held preaching myths. Watch the video and then tackle some myths.

Myth 1 - Sermons need to be short because people have tiny attention spans.

Myth 2 - Clear preaching is watered-down preaching.

Myth 3 - You should judge your message based on how well you did.

Myth 4 - Biblical preaching doesn't reach unchurched people.

Myth 5 - Topical preaching isn't faithful preaching.

Myth 6 - You should imitate your favorite preacher(s).

Myth 7 - Thorough planning eliminates the Holy Spirit.

# Discussion Questions

1. Which myths are you most tempted to believe? Why?

3. Are there any other myths you believe that you should probably abandon? List them.

4. What will you need to do to abandon those myths and embrace what's true?





# Session 1

# What is Preaching?

What's the point of preaching, and how do we define it?

The best definition of preaching comes from 1 Corinthians 2:1. Paul calls preaching “proclaiming the testimony of God” (nasb).

Proclaim. That's a strong word. The church was born out of preaching and proclaiming. The book of Acts has nineteen sermons. The early church took the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and it changed the world. That didn't happen because of soft, uninspired ideas. It happened because people got up and said, “This is how beautiful God is. You need to reorient your life around this.”

The enemy of proclaiming is this idea that preaching is just sharing information. It's all doctrine and theology and not heartfelt application. You see, the goal of preaching is more than just information transfer. It's transformation. Jonathan Edwards said you've got to “preach to the affections.”

Your job as a pastor isn't changing what people do, but what people want to do.

How do you change their affections, their pleasures, what delights them? You've got to preach to the heart.

The philosopher James K. A. Smith says people's biggest motivator in life isn't what they know. It's what they feel. Statistically, flying is the safest way to travel. But so many of us are frightened to our core of flying in a plane. That's because our affections, our heart, what we feel, is actually more powerful than logic.

Here are three things you can do to make your sermon a proclamation, not just a transfer of information.

## 1. MAKE THE CONTENT LIVE

It's relevant and contextual. If we're quoting Matthew 23 and Jesus says you've strained out a gnat, swallowed a camel, and you've neglected the things of justice, mercy, and faithfulness, then what does that mean to a modern person?

Well, maybe it's the family who spends \$15,000 on a trip to Hawaii but doesn't tithe, give to charity, or donate to mission work. They've neglected the most important things in life. It's not that going on vacation is wrong. But it's about finding a way to do both.

## 2. PREACH WITH PASSION

Someone asked David Hume, a famous atheist, why he was going to watch George Whitfield preach. “You don't believe anything he says,” the person said. “Yeah, but he does,” Hume responded. Something about belief is addicting.

Without passion, it will appear you don't care about your content. And the gospel is far too beautiful to give someone just information.



### 3. SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY

You're not just teaching or suggesting.

You're calling people out of their lives to a new way of thinking. Think about it this way: you're mobilizing the English language and sending it into battle. That's a proclamation—making God look so beautiful with your words that people are drawn to him.

I (Mark) smoked for years. Even as a youth pastor, I would take a smoke behind the building before I went up to preach. I saw all the warnings, the gross teeth and the deteriorated brain pictures that resulted from chain smoking, but none of that affected me. It was all external.

What changed? I met a girl who hated smoking. Eventually, my affections for her outweighed my love of smoking. So I stopped smoking. My desires changed.

Your job is to get people to realize that Jesus is the only true pleasure and delight, above everything else!

Now let's go back to 1 Corinthians 2. Talking about preaching, Paul says we are "proclaiming." But what are we proclaiming? He says it's the testimony of God.

So whether you're a topical or expositional preacher, it all has to be based in the truth of the Bible. When life falls apart—when a marriage is gone, a child dies, and tragedy strikes—you're not going to always be there to walk your church members through the "ways to do X, Y, and Z." They've got to be able to rely on the text.

Ephesians 4 says to equip the saints to minister to themselves versus being dependent on you as a preacher. Show them by example that every idea you have comes from the text.

That's what will equip your people to not be dependent on you.

Our passion in this course is to employ the best of both worlds: great content and great communication. We've got plenty of great communicators who don't fill their sermons with passion. And we have plenty of preachers who have the passion but just don't know how to communicate it.

In this course, we're going to take both of those elements, blend them together, and show the key to going from a good preacher to a great preacher.

# Discussion Questions

1. What pitfall do you fall into? The information-transfer teacher type or the preacher type with great technique but shallower content? Name three adjustments you can make this week to balance your content and communication style.

2. How can you as a preacher effectively preach to the “affections” and the heart, not just the mind, without becoming cheesy, shallow, sentimental, emotionally driven, or predictable? How can you preach to the mind without becoming boring?

3. How can you be more winsome and persuasive this week? How can you be profoundly biblically based so your people aren't dependent on your personality or charisma this week?

4. Write down three ways you can start being more intentional about your words. What does it mean to be “sent into battle” every week versus just “writing a sermon”?



# Session 2

# Preaching to the Unchurched

The ultimate goal of preaching is to reach people with the gospel. That's why all of us, as preachers, do what we do.

Regardless of your denomination or theology, reaching the unchurched is the inevitable goal of preaching, which is why we call our message the Good News. The gospel isn't just for us, it's a message for everyone.

There are also more unchurched people in our culture than ever before. So how do you make sure you're speaking to the unchurched?

It's less complicated than you think. Here are five principles to help you connect with the unchurched.

## 1. PREACH TO PEOPLE

It's easy to believe that there are church issues and issues that unchurched people struggle with. But what if there aren't church and unchurched issues? What if there are just people issues? This is an insight I (Carey) picked up from Andy Stanley.

Think about it: for the most part, people all deal with the same issues. Self-esteem and insecurity are challenges for the church and unchurched alike. Everyone has relational problems, doubts, anger, and stress. Research says 70 percent of people don't like their job—another issue that impacts both Christians and non-Christians.

So how do you connect with both the church and unchurched? Focus on people issues. Get inside the head of the average person and figure out what they're thinking about before they even come into the room, speak into that issue, and you'll have an attentive congregation whether people have a church background or not.

## 2. MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE AT

So how exactly do you know what the average person is thinking when they come into your building? Wise preachers learn how to identify the common struggles everyone deals with—marital issues, career problems, and the normal worries, doubts, and anxieties of life. You can study culture and study people to identify those.

Not surprisingly, the problems we face aren't just our generation's issues. Most of our struggles have been around for thousands of years. The Scripture is filled with life challenges people have faced since the beginning of time. What people in our church today struggle with is the same stuff David and Peter dealt with. People issues have existed as long as people have existed.

How do you know if it's an issue you should address? Well, here's a shortcut. If you struggle with it, then they probably struggle with it too. Wise leaders realize that most of the issues they're struggling with personally are issues people face at one time or another.

So speak out of your struggle. This forces you to be a bit vulnerable as a preacher, but people will applaud your authenticity when you talk about your imperfections. After all, **people admire your strengths, but they resonate with your weaknesses.**

Think about it. If all you ever say is, “My wife and I are doing great,” they’re probably thinking, “Okay. Good for you.”

But if you tell a story about a fight you and your wife had at Costco (with her permission, of course), and you play out the scene for them, people are going to lean in and listen. They’re going to think, “You’re just like me.” And the truth is, you are.

This is so important. Even as a preacher, you never want to appear like you have it all together, because you don’t. None of us do. The church needs to feel like you’re in this together, trying to figure it all out.

If you can assume this posture, you’ll discover that people can deeply identify with what you’re saying.

### **3. ASSUME INTELLIGENCE, NOT BACKGROUND**

Great communicators assume their audience is intelligent, but they also realize that their listeners might not have a deep knowledge or even any knowledge about Christianity. There’s a critical difference between assuming someone is stupid and assuming someone doesn’t have the same background.

So how do you demonstrate sensitivity to a lack of background? First, guard against “Christianese”—that language we only use in church that makes no sense to anyone who doesn’t go to church. Every preacher should eliminate insider language. And let’s be honest—as Christians, we get weird sometimes, using phrases that don’t make any sense to anyone else. Every time we do this, we alienate the unchurched.

How should you speak? Imagine you’re having a cup of coffee with your audience (one-on-one) or chatting with them at their home. Ask yourself what type of language you would use. If it’s not how you talk normally, then don’t use that language in the pulpit. Speak clearly and plainly, like you would in normal conversation.

Preachers should also master the ability to speak with minimal assumptions. Become a master at bringing people up to speed on the biblical background of a passage or character in sixty seconds or less. If you’re talking about King David, avoid saying, “As we all know, King David...” because, frankly, they don’t all know. Instead, do a two- to five-sentence summary of who David is and how he fits into the story you’re about to tell.

Eliminate insider language and become a master at bringing people up to speed quickly, and you’ll help intelligent people stay engaged and find the background to the biblical story.

### **4. DELIVER WHAT PEOPLE NEED TO HEAR IN A WAY THEY WANT TO HEAR IT**

There’s a debate in church circles about whether you should preach what people need to hear or what people want to hear. The best preachers deliver what people need to hear in a way they want to hear it. You can do that without compromising your theological integrity one bit. In fact, you’ll enhance it because you’ll have an audience ready to hear the gospel.

This isn’t a matter of preaching what people’s “itching ears” want to hear; it’s a matter of delivering timeless truth to them in a way they can hear it.

Here’s an example: I wanted to do a biblical series on fear. I wanted to call it “Scared to Death.” I thought it was a really great phrase that people would resonate with. However, as our team talked about it, we realized that, while fear is a topic a lot of men struggle with, many men don’t want to admit they’re afraid.



In discussing this, we agreed that fear can be broken down into four major struggles: fear, depression, anxiety, and stress.

We researched and learned that men were much more okay with the terms stress and anxiety than they were with depression and fear.

So we changed our approach. We decided to deliver what people needed to hear in a way they were more likely to hear it. We ended up calling the series “Stress[Less].” Because most guys are okay saying, “I’m so stressed at work,” or even admitting to struggling with anxiety.

Our theology didn’t change. God is the answer to our fears, but we positioned the series in such a way that people would want to hear it.

I’ve also done a series on idolatry. We didn’t name it “Burn Your Idols” or “Idol Worship 101.” Instead, we cashed in on a cultural trend and called the series “Selfie.” People could easily understand that. It was yet another way for people to hear what they needed to hear in a way they wanted to hear it.

## 5. START AND END WITH APPLICATION

Finally, it’s critical in preaching to the unchurched that you emphasize application, because application establishes relevance to the church and unchurched alike. How much application, you ask? Well, Rick Warren was once asked what the key to a great sermon is. His response: “Application, application, application. Begin with application, put application in the middle, and end with application.”

How do you do that? Well, you establish the why behind the what, walk people through specific scenarios, and take time to give specific examples and stories from your own life. Make sure you include details in the stories you tell.

For example, instead of talking about “this guy at work who is annoying,” get into the details. Talk about how you arrive at work, put your lunch in the fridge, and sit down next to your desk mate. Explain that his chair squeaks, he moves all the time, you don’t think he’s showered, and he talks so loudly.

That’s a word picture your audience can relate to. It conjurs up far more emotion than when you just say that some guy is annoying.

These five principles will help you better connect with people from every background and help you bridge the gap between preaching to the church and to the unchurched.

These practices take years to develop and hone. Be patient, but be persistent. I still don’t have it down perfectly. But if you’ll start following these five principles, you’ll be able to better connect with unchurched people.

# Discussion Questions

1. Which of the five principles do you currently utilize at some level? Which are new to you?

2. Make a list of 10–15 life issues that you or someone you know struggles with (i.e. marriage tension, financial pressure). Refer back to this list to create future sermon illustrations and examples:

3. List at least five past or current struggles you've lived through that you can share in future messages:

4. List 3–5 biblical issues people need to hear about and then figure out a corresponding felt need you can address. This will help you figure out a way for people to hear what they need to hear in a way they want to hear it.

5. Write a story about a dad who's frustrated with his young son in a grocery store. Practice sharing details, emotion, and nuance so the story comes to life.



# Session 3

# The How of Preaching

One of the most effective ways to go from being a good preacher to a great preacher is by simply understanding who you are.

Who are you as a person? What is your past and your experience?

I (Mark) grew up in a skeptical, unchurched background. My parents divorced when I was nine, and I developed Tourette's Syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. So, literally, as a kid I would just randomly swear at people. I'd be sitting at a bus stop and just yell out the f-bomb.

Maybe not a good habit for a preacher, right? This is the last job you'll ever get if you're randomly yelling curse words in public. So it's very odd that this is the role I'm in many years later. But here's the reality of my situation.

**God uses us not because of us, but in spite of us.**

Don't be ashamed of how God has wired you. We've all had disadvantages in some way. It's just a matter of realizing God will use that crucible in your life to create a resurrection. God will use you not because you're great, but because he's great.

Here's another way to become a more effective preacher: **Pick a text and pick a target.**

Your message, whether you're a topical or exegetical preacher, must be based in the Bible. That's the authority.

With that, you'll have different messages for different audiences.

I was speaking at a pastor's conference one time, and the organizers asked me to stay deeply theological and very "lecturish." When I got there, I realized the attendees were broken pastors looking for peace, not some academic lesson. So I changed everything. I based my message on my target audience.

Think about the Prodigal Son parable. Tim Keller talks about the idea that our audience in church should always be the older brother and the younger brother. The older brother is religious. He knows all the right things and does all the right things. Then you have the younger brother who's a disaster. He spends all his dad's money, sleeps with prostitutes, and his life is a train wreck. Every sermon you preach should be focused on both of these audiences.

**The bottom line: Discipleship and evangelism can happen at the same time.** They can happen every week, every sermon, every moment.

Here's another way to know yourself better and improve your effectiveness: **Find the best process.**

Every pastor has a different process. But people ask me about my process all the time, so let's walk through it.

On Monday, I start reading commentaries in the evening, maybe underlining with a pen in the living room while the kids are watching TV. I read a lot of commentaries Monday through Wednesday. Then I block off every Thursday at noon until Friday at 5 p.m. for sermon prep.

During that time, I take all the notes from my commentaries and write them all out. Usually I'll take twelve pages or so home with me on Friday evening. I spend Saturday with my family. At about 5 p.m. on Saturday, I say goodbye to my family and take those twelve pages and cut them down to five. I cut the boring stuff, read, and say everything out loud.

At about eight or nine on Saturday night, I put everything on my iPad and mark it up. I circle keywords and highlight stories. Then I get up at 5 a.m. on Sunday and study for another two hours. By the time I'm in the pulpit, the notes are like a Linus blanket—I know them all front and back, but they're there for backup. As Carey says, it's all about understanding your talk instead of memorizing your talk. And I believe my process has helped me do just that.

Get to know what works for you in a weekly process. Your free time will feel more free and your work time will be more productive.





4. What changes could you make in your preparation process to help make you great?  
Evaluate your week. Do you work hard and smart on your sermons?



# Session 4

# How to Cultivate Growth and Evangelize Through Preaching

In the last session, we focused on the importance of both discipleship and evangelism. That was Jesus' call and, as preachers, it's our call as well.

Let's dig in a little on the evangelism side of things in this session. How can you practically cultivate evangelism in your church? Here are six ways.

## 1. YOU NEED TO BE CONVINCED THAT EVANGELISM IS CORE TO YOUR CULTURE AND DNA AS A CHURCH

That will filter down from the pulpit to the pew. If you never tell stories about neighbors who are coming to know Jesus, that will reflect in your church.

If you represent someone who seeks and saves the lost—not only in your messaging but also in your life—then you'll have a group of people who are on mission with you.

## 2. FOCUS ON WHO IS PREACHING

If you're their leader, they want to hear from you. Not every sermon will be a perfect ten, and some weeks you may feel unprepared, but there's something about that consistency every week.

Of course, team preaching is great. But everyone has to have the same DNA and point the same way in their messaging. If not, your church will have a scattered focus. So use those teaching pastors and campus pastors to preach and teach. But the presence of the lead pastor is vital to creating an evangelistic spirit in your church.

## 3. YOU NEED TO MAKE SENSE

Well, of course.

But think about it this way: When you're prepping, don't just think about "church Joe" who is always there. Think about your skeptical brother-in-law or that unchurched person you know. What would they think of this message?

Take John 1 for example. He says, "In the beginning was the Word..." Your unchurched brother-in-law would be like, "What does that even mean? The word?" You've got to explain that in a way that makes sense.

## 4. YOU'VE GOT TO TALK ABOUT SIN

You have to be real with people. You can't avoid talking about sin.

If you don't tell people what their situation is, they're not going to understand what they're being saved from.

Martin Lloyd Jones once told me, “There are many people who preach about the Lord Jesus to no effect, and we can see why. They have no doctrine of sin, and they never convict or convince people of sin.” His point is that you have to actually tell people their plight. You have to show them their scenario and show why Christ actually came and did what he did.

So you’re constantly dialoguing with that skeptic in your head. You’re constantly looking at the biblical text through their eyes, and you’re not afraid of telling them their plight.

## 5. LEVERAGE THE RHYTHMS OF THE CULTURAL CALENDAR

Our church has two massive attendance points each year on Christmas and Easter, as yours probably does too. Attendance doubles during those weeks.

Do you leverage those opportunities?

I try and catch people off guard. They have expectations on those days, and I try to really step on those expectations.

I might say something like, “Why are you here? Because this day is either the dumbest day and a joke—and you shouldn’t pay any attention to it or show up next year—or it’s the most important thing that has ever happened and you need to rearrange your entire life around it.” Then I build on that throughout the sermon.

Or we might have a series that comes out of that idea—something like “The Top Three Questions about Jesus.” New people have shown up, and we want them to actually know Jesus. So we invite them into an ongoing conversation.

Don’t waste these opportunities. Catch them off guard.

## 5. EQUIP THE SAINTS TO BE GOOD EVANGELISTS

If your whole church looks to you to be their evangelist, then your ministry is going to orbit around you.

But imagine if all your church members were evangelists because you modeled evangelism in your preaching. Whether they’re soccer moms or CEOs, they’re becoming equipped to talk about the gospel and lead people to Jesus.

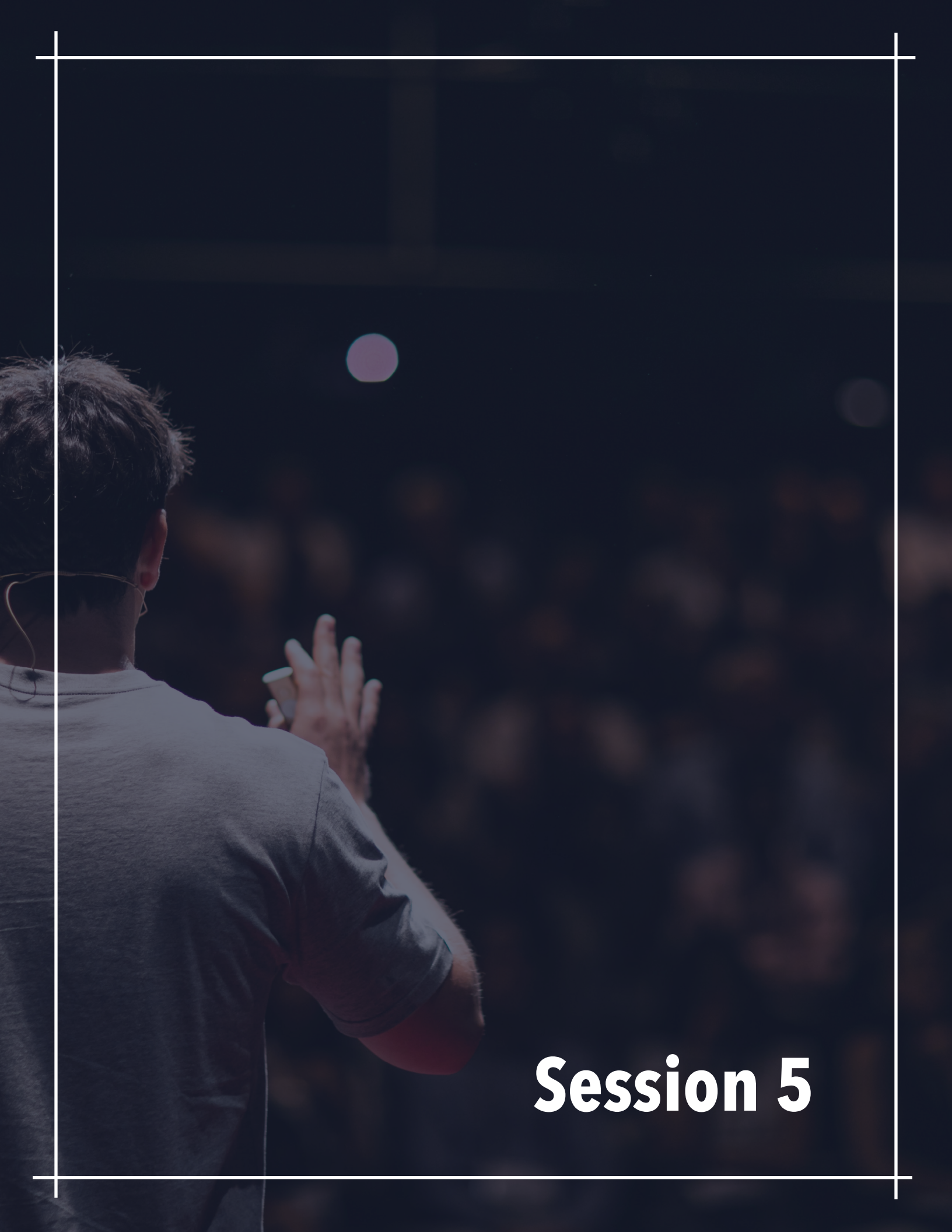
Imagine if people were coming to know the Lord on a Tuesday afternoon over coffee, or on a Thursday evening at a small group, and it didn’t depend on you. They didn’t just bring someone to you and let you explain it. They’ve learned what evangelism looks like from you, and now they’re equipped to pass it on.

So your job is to equip your entire church to be evangelists. Then you’ll see growth because they’ll be out taking what they’ve learned from you and doing ministry on their own.

Growth won’t happen overnight, but a culture based on evangelism will eventually bring more and more people through your doors.







# Session 5

# Find Power in the Text

There's no question that the power in preaching always comes from the Scripture. Often, all we have to do as pastors is facilitate the message of Scripture to the people who need to hear it. Your best preaching will happen when you get out of the way of what God's Word has to say.

So what's your job as a preacher?

Surprisingly, many of us default to imparting information. It's as though we want to tell people about God rather than facilitate an encounter with God. Your job as a communicator is not to impart information, it's to facilitate transformation.

If that's true, the question then becomes, "How do you do that?" To put it another way, how do you get people to leave thinking, *This Jesus stuff is real*, rather than thinking (or saying), *That was a nice message*.

One of the best ways to do that is to make sure you have discovered the power in the text and brought that power with you onto the platform or into the pulpit. Here are the five keys that have helped me (Carey) approach Scripture in a way that allows me to find the power of the text and allows the text to do what it is supposed to do.

Most of it happens during your personal interaction with the text when you're first researching and writing your message.

## 1. START WITH THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT

The Bible always comes more alive when you understand the original context in which it was written.

You might already know this, but sometimes you have to remind yourself that chapter and verse assignments are arbitrary and not part of the original Scripture. So if you preach on John 13:1–5, it's important to remember that the chapter and verse are just the way translators and editors have edited the text. And that can work against context sometimes.

Read ahead and behind your chosen passage to look at the original context. Ask yourself: Where does this particular text fit in the wider story?

Again, take John 13 for example. There's more about Jesus' final days in John than anywhere else. So that's going to inform everything you read in that chapter.

When you understand the context, you better understand the text. In the case of John 13, the context shows you what's at stake—this is one of Jesus' last opportunities on earth to show his disciples what love looks like. And he does.

## 2. LOOK FOR MOVEMENT IN THE TEXT

In almost every biblical passage, there's movement. The story or text never ends up where it begins. Movement in the passage can help you shape the movement in your message.

Here are three key questions to ask as you read your passage:

Where are we geographically?

Where do we start, and where do we end (geographically and theologically)?

What is wrong at the beginning of the passage and what is fixed by the end?

You'll want to take your sermon on a similar journey.

Luke 15 is a great example. The passage contains one key point told through three different illustrations: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. There's movement all over the text: the losing of the sheep/coin/son, the finding of the sheep/coin/son, and the celebration each time.

Theologically, there's also movement. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father celebrates his son's return despite the son having taken the inheritance and squandered it all. He runs to his son, embraces and kisses him, and kills the fattened calf.

What if that's exactly what God wants to do in your church that day? That passage might be where someone in your congregation is in their story. Needing to hear that there is a heavenly Father out there waiting for his child to come home.

Some people are in the pig pen or leaving the estate and asking for their inheritance. Some are on their way home, wondering if they're going to be a servant and whether they'll receive acceptance or rejection.

Find that movement in the text and where you and the people you're preaching to fit into that story and its context.

### **3. PULL MEANING FROM THE TEXT INSTEAD OF IMPOSING MEANING ON THE TEXT.**

One of the biggest challenges preachers have is to make sure we're pulling meaning from the text, not imposing meaning on the text. The question is, how do you do that?

Fortunately, the biblical writers left clues as to what they thought the main point was.

One of the devices biblical authors used is repetition. If you're a parent, you're familiar with this technique. How many times do you tell your kids to brush their teeth? Clearly, more than once. Why? Because you repeat things that are important.

Biblical writers do the same thing. When you're studying a passage, start looking for repeating words. Again, Luke 15 features this. Luke keeps talking about things being lost and found and about the reality of deep celebration.

Sometimes comparing two accounts of the same parable provides some amazing insight. Look at the parable of the mustard seed. Matthew, Mark, and Luke actually say different things. Two of them say the mustard seed will become a plant; Mark says it will become a tree. That's not a contradiction—it's just that Mark is telling the story in a slightly different way.

When you start exploring the text, you begin to realize that this isn't a lesson in botany nearly as much as it's a lesson in theology. When God gets involved, little tiny seeds that are supposed to be bushes actually become trees. That will preach.

So that's how you begin to extract the meaning from the text instead of imposing your meaning onto the text.

#### 4. LOOK FOR SURPRISE AND OFFENSE

Another way to let the text do the work is to look for times when the text surprises and offends you. Believe it or not, Scripture should surprise and offend you. If it's not doing that, then you're not reading it properly.

Think about the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus commands his audience to love their enemies. That's shocking, isn't it? Jesus asks us to love the guy at work who drives us crazy, to love the narcissist who got the promotion instead of you. And Jesus didn't just say don't kill him or tolerate him. Jesus went way further than that: Love him. Bless him. Wish him well. That's offensive. At least to sinful human beings, that's offensive.

Here's another example: in John 13, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you" (v. 34). Chances are you've read it so many times you're no longer really reading it.

Notice this: Jesus is commanding love. How can you command someone to feel an emotion? It's a great question. You can't make someone love someone, can you?

Well, maybe Jesus is giving us a clue that what he means by love and what we mean by love are two different things. To us, love seems like an emotion. Perhaps Jesus is signaling that love isn't an emotion. Maybe, in the kingdom of God, love is a decision.

Like is an emotion. Love is a decision. And Jesus didn't command us to like our enemies. He did command us to love them.

Maybe the way couples stay together and enemies love each other has less to do with how we feel and far more to do with what we decide to do. Decide to love. Decide to bless each other. Decide to put the other first.

And then guess what happens? Eventually, your emotions catch up with your obedience. That will preach.

So pay attention to the text—it should be surprising and offensive.

#### 5. BRIDGE THE BIBLICAL WORLD AND YOUR WORLD

It's vital to find the common emotions and dynamics between the original text and your current context. This is how you can bridge the gap between the biblical world and your world.

Here's an example. Psalm 137 takes place in Babylon, after the Israelites have been ripped from their homes and taken captive in a foreign land. You're preaching to an audience that, in most cases, lives in the suburbs or the city.

How do you bridge the gap? Maybe you ask some questions: Do you ever feel like you're in exile in a foreign culture? Or how does our current culture feel foreign? Do you feel like you're in a prison—stuck in a bad job or in a bad situation in your marriage? Do you feel like your kids live in another world you don't understand? Do you sometimes feel like our culture has changed so rapidly that you no longer belong?

Look at what is happening in the text and then make an application to this world. These are real people in the biblical world with real issues and the same emotions we all have.

The power of the text gets released when we understand the biblical context and how it can speak into today's world. Try applying the five tips above and see your messages and application clarified. Allow Scripture to shine and allow people to have an encounter with the living God through his living Word.

# Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the most powerful and memorable sermons you've ever heard? Why were they powerful and memorable?

2. Some preachers bring so much exegesis to the pulpit that they fail to bridge the gap between the ancient text and today's context. Other preachers are guilty of eisegesis—reading a message into an ancient text that isn't there. It's important that we're honest with ourselves as preachers. Which one are you more guilty of? How would the people who listen to your preaching answer that question? Finally, what will you do about it?

3. Pick a passage you're working on or would like to preach on. Run it through these filters:

a) Where's the movement in the text:

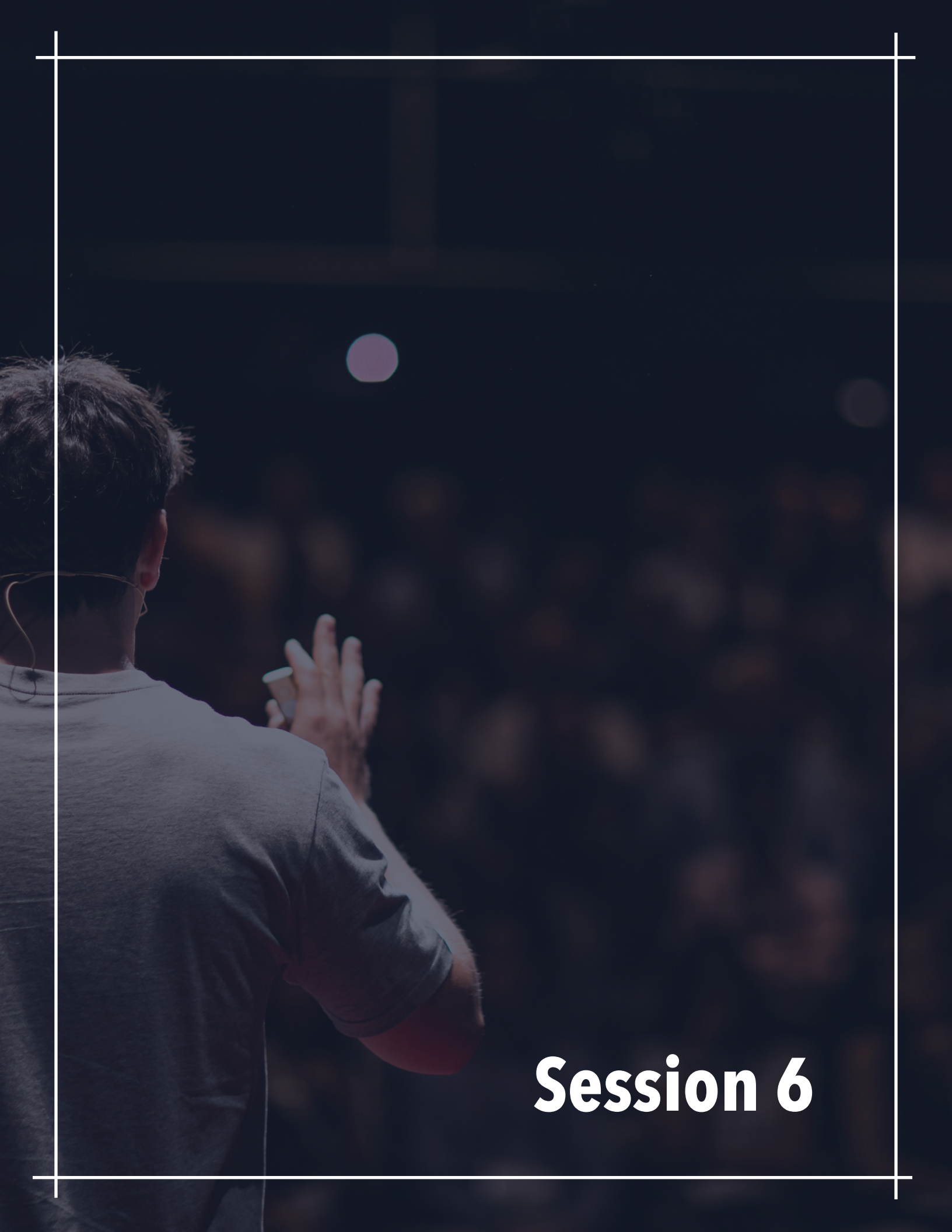
- i) Geographically?
- ii) Theologically?
- iii) From problem to solution?

b) What surprises you in the text? Why?

c) What bothers or offends you about the text? Why?

- d) What life issues were the people in the text struggling with or suffering with?
- e) What life issues are the people you're preaching to struggling with or suffering with?





# Session 6

# Creating a Killer Bottom Line

Here's a challenge for any preacher: Can you boil your message down to a single sentence?

I (Carey) know it sounds difficult, and at first I really pushed back against it. My talk is too complex, too important, too nuanced—I had a million reasons not to reduce it to a single sentence.

But over time I realized it's completely doable and, actually, critical. It's a challenge and discipline I learned from Andy Stanley years ago, and for years now I've done this every time I speak and write.

The challenge is to reduce your talk to a "bottom line." A bottom line is simply a memorable, short statement or phrase that summarizes the entire content of your talk. Here are a few examples that I've used in the past.

*If you don't take the Sabbath, the Sabbath will take you.*

*Prayer is not a button to be pushed. It's a relationship to be pursued.*

*The best sex life is a surrendered sex life.*

*Change is unkind to the unprepared, so prepare.*

*God doesn't run away from runaways.*

*Prayer changes everything. Things change. You change.*

Boiling down the content to a single sentence or phrase forces you to clarify your thinking and, as a result, your message becomes much more clear and memorable not only to you, but to your audience.

After all, nobody remembers the five points of a thirty- to forty-minute message. To be truthful, you can't remember them six hours later either.

Here's what's at stake: If you can't reduce your message to a single sentence, chances are your audience won't remember it either. If you do manage to do it, though, you'll be surprised that your congregation might quote a bottom line back to you years later or even a decade later. That's the power of a memorable bottom line.

So how do you craft a killer bottom line? Here's a process that can help immensely.

## 1. START AHEAD OF TIME AND COME UP WITH A GENERAL TOPIC

To begin, get a basic idea of the subject and the direction of the message. For example, maybe you want to talk about fatigue or the pace of life, the sabbath and rest, or perhaps you want to talk about money and giving. Just pick a general area.

It's fine to be vague at this stage because all you're doing is picking a subject or a biblical text. You don't need to take a stab at the single sentence yet.

Ask yourself: What's my subject or my likely text?

## 2. EXPAND YOUR RESEARCH AND THINKING

If you've preached for even a few years, one of the dangers is that you'll end up saying the same thing over and over again, sometimes in the same way.

So for step 2, continue to expand your research and thinking. Give yourself as much time as possible—even start working on a bottom line several months in advance if you can. The expanded time frame will allow you to do the necessary research and press your brain to think in fresh directions.

If you don't have that kind of time when you're doing this exercise, at least start a day early. Time is your friend.

## 3. LET IT SIMMER

Great preaching and great ideas are like cooking a stew. The longer you let it simmer, the better it tastes. As you research and write down ideas and insights, it's like putting ingredients into a slow cooker in the morning and letting it simmer all day. Whenever you do that, you know it's going to taste amazing by dinner.

As you read more widely (commentaries, books, articles) and think through your message over a period of time, keep good records in a physical notebook, a Word doc, or an app like Evernote—whatever your note-taking method is.

I keep Evernote open to write down ideas. In most cases, I start collecting ideas months before I know a series is scheduled on the calendar. If you get good at keeping notes, you might come up with ideas a year or two in advance of preaching them. Note keeping is a fantastic way to never be short on ideas.

Your thoughts will be fuzzy at first, but they will slowly grow sharper. Plus, you've got time on your side, so you can really let those ideas grow. By the way, this is also a fantastic way to avoid being trapped by the sad but growing pastoral phenomenon of plagiarism—stealing other people's ideas without giving credit because you didn't take the time to create your own.

## 4. MAKE YOUR FIRST ATTEMPT

A month or two before you need to preach the message (or early the week before if you're on a compressed time frame), take your first shot at distilling your thinking into a bottom line. You may not love the first draft or two, but that's okay because sometimes you need a lot of bad ideas to get to a good idea.

Take your best shot at summarizing your main point: the one point of the message you most want to get across. Still stuck? Set a timer on your phone for five minutes and write down all your thoughts related to the Bible research, scripture reading, and any ideas you've had to this point. Then see if you can pull a first shot at a bottom line from that list.

## 2. CREAM IT

Next, you take your first attempt(s) at a bottom line and CREAM them.

CREAM is a proven method used by many communicators (my friends Jeff Henderson, Casey Graham, and Michael Lukaszewski at Preaching Rocket introduced me to it years ago) to produce sticky, memorable statements.

CREAM stands for: **C**ontrast, **R**hyme, **E**cho, **A**lliteration, and **M**etaphor.

Not every bottom line will have all five of these elements. It only takes one or two of these elements to craft a phrase that becomes “sticky” and very memorable to your audience. It’s a technique that will help people remember what you said months, years, or even a decade after you taught it. It’s surprisingly powerful.

One note: You can easily create a statement that means nothing, is misleading, or is trite using this formula. The power of the CREAM method is that it helps you make a profound truth memorable. This is especially important for preachers to remember. Simply saying something trite like “Yesterday’s pain is tomorrow’s pleasure” may be memorable, but it means nothing. In fact, it may be misleading. “Yesterday’s pleasure may be tomorrow’s pain” is more accurate and far more true if you’re teaching on the mindless pursuit of pleasure, or “Yesterday’s pain can become tomorrow’s purpose” could be a powerful bottom line if you’re preaching on how God redeems pain. But you see the point, right? Don’t be trite or clever. Be accurate.

With that said, here is how each element of the CREAM method can make a phrase memorable.

### CONTRAST

When John F. Kennedy said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” one of the reasons his phrase resonated was because he used contrast (as well as echo).

He flipped his first statement so that it reversed what’s asked of the listener. Our brains are very attracted to contrasting statements. So when crafting a sticky statement, spend some time brainstorming for contrast.

For contrast, you create a tension between opposites: light vs. darkness, today vs. tomorrow, selfish vs. selfless. Here are some examples from the public sphere and from my teaching.

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that.” —Martin Luther King Jr. (double contrast: light vs. darkness + can’t vs. can)

Influence takes years to build and only seconds to lose. (years vs. seconds + build vs. lose)

Very few people get judged into life change. Far more people get loved into it. (few vs. more + judgment vs. love).

If you don’t take the Sabbath, the Sabbath will take you. (reversal of the main idea)

You can accomplish more with 300 engaged Christians than with 3,000 disengaged Christians. (300 vs. 3,000 + engaged vs. disengaged)

Visible practices help you get to know an invisible God. (visible vs. invisible)

People who feel entitled to everything will be grateful for nothing. (entitled vs. grateful + everything vs. nothing)

Sin lives where Christ doesn't. (sin vs. Christ + lives vs. doesn't live)

## RHYME

Music and poetry have employed rhyme for thousands of years because it's effective.

You likely don't want to rhyme all the time (see what I did there?) because it can quickly sound cheesy or trite. But when you can fit in a rhyme, go for it. It makes a statement very sticky.

Examples:

"You need to be knowing where your money is going." —Andy Stanley  
You'll never address what you don't confess.

Increase your standard of giving before you increase your standard of living.

Do what you can. Open your hands.

Your stress reveals what your mind conceals. (I used this bottom line to talk about how stress and anxiety reveal the source of our true worries and idols.)

## ECHO

Echo involves taking an idea or phrase and repeating it for greater effect.

It often involves sharing a contrasting or amplifying idea during the repeated part. Once you learn how to identify and then leverage it, you'll see it everywhere.

Here are some examples of echo along with some explanations of how it works.

You can make excuses or you can make progress but you can't make both. (you can make + you can make + you can't make)

The best sex life is a surrendered sex life. (sex life x 2)

God doesn't run away from runaways. (run away + runaways)

Prayer changes everything. Things change. You change. (change x 3)

Do what you're best at when you're at your best. (best at + at your best)

When you believe the best about others you tend to get the best from others. (best about + best from)

Fixing your mind on Christ fixes your mind. (fixing + fixes and your mind x 2)

## ALLITERATION

This may be the most common form of bottom line creation for most preachers—alliteration. Alliteration is an incredibly effective mnemonic device that helps you remember points based on repeating the first letters of words.

In the examples below, you'll see just one or two alliterated words can move the sentence from being ordinary to being memorable.

Examples:

Faith-based religion is not perpetually at war with fact-based science. (faith-based + fact-based)

In the future, churches that love their model more than their mission will die. (model + mission)

Your boldest moments are your best moments. (boldest + best)

Prayer is not a button to be pushed; it's a relationship to be pursued. (pushed + pursued)

Gifts that are separated from the Giver frustrate more than they fulfill. (gifts + Giver and frustrate + fulfill)

Saying no to good things allows you to say yes to great things. (good + great) Note the use of contrast in this bottom line as well (no vs. yes and good vs. great) and echo (saying + say).

## METAPHOR

This is probably the least used of the five (unless you're poetic). Metaphor uses a word picture or imagery to paint a memorable phrase.

A metaphor can really help a point lodge in people's minds and hearts.

Examples:

Never wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty and the pig liked it. (Fighting fair—one of my favorites. Source unknown.)

Don't let someone who's only been on the sidelines tell you how to play the game. (sports)

The seed you sow produces the crop you harvest. (farming)

Becoming a Christian is like getting married. Being a Christian is like being married. (Marriage—I use this metaphor to distinguish between the one-time decision to become a Christian and the lifelong process of sanctification and discipleship.)

Live today in a way that helps you thrive tomorrow. (Thrive conjures up pictures of what a great life could be like.)

One last point: Sometimes it can be hard to get the ideal phrase when you're working by yourself. Your team can help. Bounce your bottom line ideas off them. You'll be amazed at how often just saying a phrase out loud in front of a group of people can help you find a slightly better expression of it. If you don't have a staff, ask your spouse or a friend. Bounce your ideas off other people so you can get honest, constructive feedback.

The bottom line with your bottom lines: You want to create phrases that have weight. If people are in a tough spot in their relationship and they remember something you said five years ago, that's a win. Take some time to start developing bottom lines for your messages.

I believe your messages will become clearer and resonate even more with your audience as a result.



# Discussion Questions

1. Recall some quotes or bottom lines you remember from famous people (politicians, historical figures, business leaders, preachers) or people you know. Were they memorable because the speaker used the CREAM method? If so, in each case, which of the five techniques did the speaker use?

2. Read Galatians 5:16–23 on the battle that wages inside every person and the fruit that’s present when the Holy Spirit is present in our lives. See if you can create five bottom lines from that text, each using a different component of the CREAM method. (Note: You could preach on a lot of topics from those verses, so don’t feel you have to say the same thing five different ways. You can choose five different subjects, verses, or angles for the five different components of CREAM.) Go!

## CONTRAST

## RHYME

**ECHO**

**ALLITERATION**

**METAPHOR**

3. Pick a subject or a biblical text you'll be preaching on. Practice creating a bottom line using each of the five methods.

**CONTRAST**

**RHYME**

## ALLITERATION

## METAPHOR



# Session 7

# Becoming the Best Preacher You Can Be

We could spend days talking about different ways and tips to become a better preacher, but I want to focus on just a few of the nuts and bolts of our craft.

Let's jump right in.

## 1. USE MORE APOLOGETICS

Everyone has questions. Everyone has reasons and barriers for doing or not doing something. If you're talking to non-church people, they'll have reasons why they haven't become Christians yet.

We call our church "a church for skeptics." We're here for people who don't believe in God too. We open our doors wide for them so they can come and take part in a conversation.

Almost every week, I (Mark) try to use apologetics in some way. So, instead of just quoting Genesis 1 and saying, "God created the heaven and earth. That's cool, right?" I might say, "You know, modern philosophy has really started to actually believe in God. Because, you know, the ancients used to believe that everything that begins to exist has to have a cause."

Then we look at the age of the universe, some fifteen billion years old, and we know it had a beginning. So it's not actually crazy that I, as a Christian, believe that God exists, because there's evidence crying out that he does.

Don't believe the myth out there that people aren't interested in this stuff. The regular Joe has tons of questions, and they're eager to be pointed toward truth. Apologetics is an excellent way to do that.

## 2. BE WINSOME AND PERSUASIVE

A church member once told me that I "play and punch" when preaching.

I might be a little hard on people and throw a few punches, but then I back up and play with them. Their defenses go down.

So I might call on people to do hard things and realize some stuff about themselves, but then I say, "It's me too." I have the same problems.

If they realize you're preaching to yourself, they can engage. So you hold a high view of discipleship, but you also let the people know you're not perfect either.

## 3. BE AUTHENTIC

Be real. Talk about real life. Use real language. Don't be afraid to actually connect with people. Authenticity goes a long way.

# Becoming the Best Preacher You Can Be

I'll delete my Instagram because there are too many half-naked pictures of women coming up on it. I don't want to be tempted toward that, so I delete it. If I want to post a picture, I download the app, upload a picture, and delete it again. I tell my church that as an anecdote because I want to be authentic. It's an issue that every guy in the room knows about.

You have to be yourself, not some robotic preacher, when you're up on the stage. That's how people will connect.

## 4. PREACH WITH A LIMP

In other words, don't be the hero of every story. That's Jesus' job.

You have to lead with a limp. Your church will connect with your failures, not your seemingly perfect life.

The problem is people compare. If we want to embody the gospel, we can't fall into the trap of comparison. The gospel is about the fact that you're a disaster, but Jesus was perfect for you, so you don't have to be.

I've told my church about the time I sat a woman down and told her that her husband was dead. He wasn't. I had the wrong guy and had gone into the wrong hospital. She fainted into my arms. I sat there for forty-five minutes ministering to her. Then another pastor called me and told me the husband was in the hospital waiting for her to visit. So I had to go back in the room and say, "Remember what we were just talking about? Yeah, that's not a thing."

If I make a mistake like that, is my church going to trust me? I shouldn't care because the gospel's true about me just like it is for everyone. Satan can attack and convince you that all you're going to do is make mistakes. He'll tell you that you're not fit to be a preacher.

I felt that way once, six months before I planted my church. I almost didn't go through with it. But I realized the gospel's true about me. It's not based on my performance but Jesus' performance for me. Once you get that gospel truth into your spirit, you'll be free to preach and lead with a limp.

As a result, you'll continue on further into this journey of becoming a great preacher.

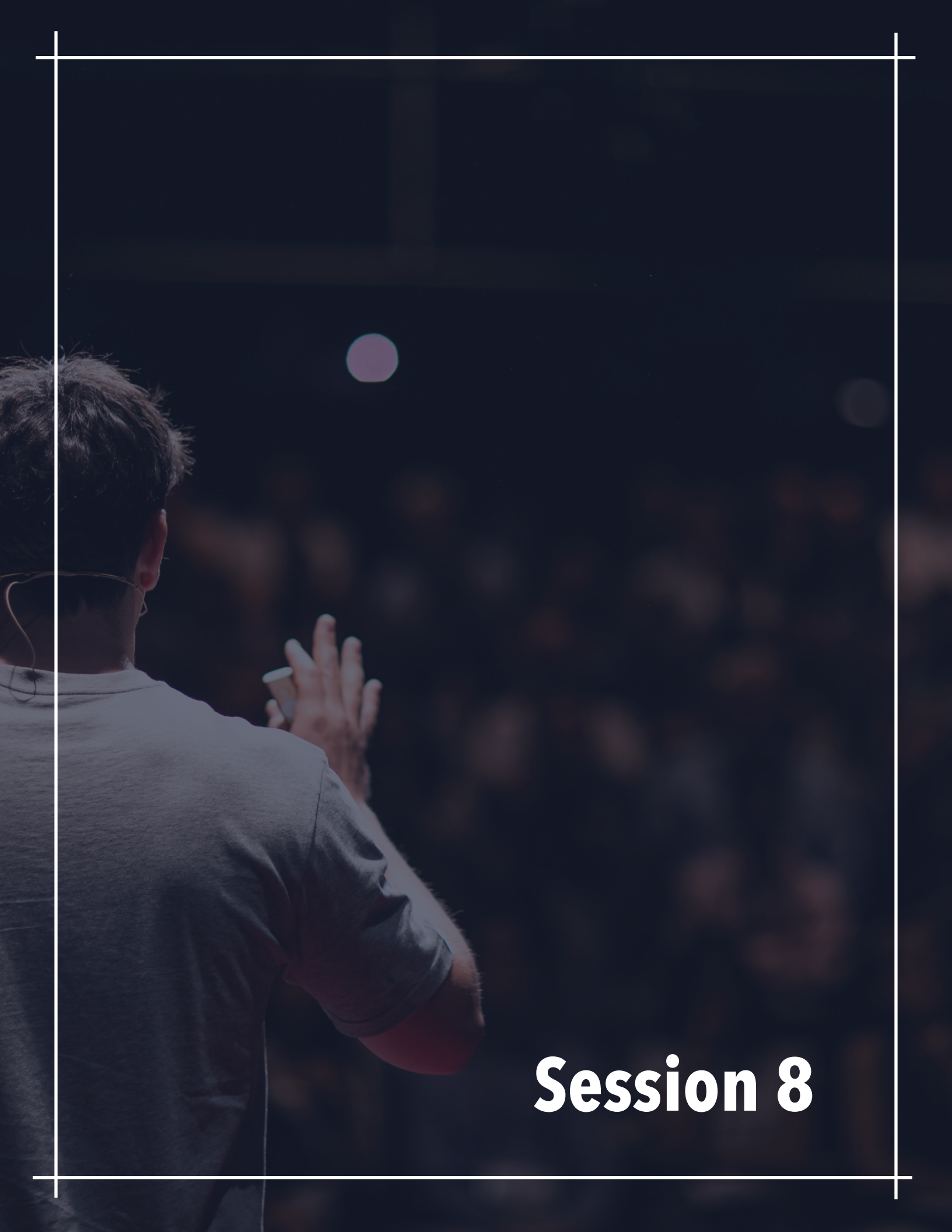
# Discussion Questions

1. Which of the four things discussed here are you BEST at? Write down three ways you can be intentional to lean into that this year. were they powerful and memorable?

2. Which of the four things are you WORST at? How can you work to become better at those things? Write down three ways you could work on those this year.

3. So often we are too protective and don't let people into our struggles and limps as a leader. How can you break that this year and let people in? Name three weaknesses you will talk about in sermons this year.





# Session 8

# How to Deliver a Talk Without Using Notes

One of the top questions many communicators ask is this: How do you deliver a talk without notes? I mean, a three-minute talk—sure, that’s not hard. But how do you give a forty-minute talk or an hour-long talk without using notes?

That question is actually the number one question we received from pastors while preparing for this course. It’s a great question, and the issue of going notes-free is one of the most intimidating issues for communicators today.

When I (Carey) first started preaching twenty-five years ago, I used a full manuscript. I wrote down every word and carried that manuscript up on the platform. I’d read about 90 percent of my message and look up about 10 percent of the time. It took a few years, but eventually I ditched my notes. This session shows you how to do it.

One of the most formational pieces of advice I have received on this subject (from Princeton’s Tom Long when I asked him this question as a seminary student) is this: **Don’t memorize your talk. Understand it.**

But before we dive into the mechanics of speaking without notes, let’s talk about why going notes-free even matters. Here are a few reasons why it matters.

## 1. YOU’RE MORE BELIEVABLE

Every communicator is more dynamic when they ditch their notes. Why? Because you speak more freely and normally when you’re not reading from a script or outline. The very act of reading makes you sound more mechanical.

In a time when authenticity is so important in preaching and communication, speaking off the cuff creates a believability that isn’t there when you’re following a manuscript. It’s not that you’re not as sincere when you’re reading, it’s just that you don’t sound as sincere or believable when you’re reading.

## 2. YOUR EYE CONTACT IMPROVES

You know how important eye contact is in a personal conversation. It’s no different when you’re speaking. If you’re looking around the room at people instead of being glued to your notes, you’re increasing your ability to connect—and that’s vital as a speaker.

In addition, eye contact gives you feedback. You can sense when your message is tracking and when you’re losing people, or when you need to slow down or pick up the pace. Wise preachers know how to read the room and adjust as they go. Eye contact allows you to do that.

## 3. YOUR BODY LANGUAGE IS MORE NATURAL

When you are communicating without notes, you move more naturally.

You will also naturally tend to speak with more variety; you’ll be louder, softer, quieter, because to you, it feels more like conversation. As a result of all that, you’ll be perceived as more believable.

## 4. YOU'RE MORE VULNERABLE

Not using notes does put you in a vulnerable position. You'll always feel a little fear when you speak without notes. Which in many ways will further endear you to your audience. That vulnerability, again, makes you more natural. You may even find yourself saying things that come to you in the moment—which, a lot of times, can be better than what you put on the page.

So, for all those reasons (and more), I'd suggest attempting to speak without using notes.

But now the big question: How do you do it?

Again, don't memorize your talk. Understand it. Understanding your talk actually solves most of the problem of remembering it. In the same way that you might go into a conversation with a few objectives, you can head into a talk knowing that these are the main points you want to communicate.

But still, you ask, how? How will I not freeze? What if I forget?

Let me introduce you to the basics of how to understand your talk so you can remember it.

### THE FIVE PEG COAT RACK



Every talk, regardless of length, has a beginning, middle, and end. Think of the beginning and end as the first and last pegs on the coat rack, and the middle peg is the middle of your talk.

The other two pegs are the transitions: how you get from the opening to the middle and from the middle to the conclusion.

Understand all five, and you pretty much know your talk cold. And if you ever freeze or panic, just move on to where you need to go next. Your audience will never know what you forgot.

Another thing that will really help you is to learn your opening and closing lines. As much as we're suggesting not memorizing your entire talk, memorizing your opening and closing lines can be helpful. Just two sentences. That's all you need. Learning the ending is super helpful because it helps avoid crash landings—something that happens to far too many communicators who don't think clearly enough about how a talk will end.

After you've learned the opening and the closing, think about the middle of your talk. If you're working through all the sessions in this course, the middle of your talk is the killer bottom line we talked about previously. It's the single sentence, the meat of your talk.

Finally, simply think about how to get from your intro to your middle and from your middle to your finish. These are your transitions, and they're vital to giving a smooth talk.

That's just five things to remember instead of an entire talk.

What are you saying to start and finish? What is the meat of your talk? And how do you get from the introduction to the middle and from the middle to the end?

That's all you need to think about. Once you have those five things memorized, everything falls into place. Even knowing those will remind you of the other elements you prepared: that story about the trip to Disney with the kids belongs in the introduction, and the story about you alone in the thunderstorm is the transition to the end.

## FOUR HELPFUL QUESTIONS

Now that we've walked through the fundamentals of giving a talk without using notes, let's look at four questions that have helped me learn my talk even more deeply.

I got these questions from the book *Communicating for a Change* by Andy Stanley and Lane Jones. These are great questions to ask because they'll help you remember the most important points of your sermon and why they matter.

### 1. WHAT DO THEY NEED TO KNOW?

That's your main point. If you're talking about a surrendered sex life being the best sex life, that's the meat of the talk.

That's where your whole talk is heading, and it's likely the middle of your talk. What do they need to know? Right. A surrendered sex life is a better sex life.

### 2. WHY DO THEY NEED TO KNOW?



The answer to this question establishes relevance. This can often help you think through what you need to say in your introduction.

For example, maybe someone listening to your message is single and unchurched and thinking, I don't want to be a Christian because I don't want to give up sex. As communicators we have to address who's in the room and engage the "why" for different people. If you introduce the "what" without also covering the "why," people won't care.

### 3. WHAT DO THEY NEED TO DO?

This question helps you remember and address application.

This is your specific call to action. For example, if you're having a porn issue, it's time to get help. If you're married, here's how you take care of your spouse's needs. This is where application comes in. You can answer this question in the introduction and through the middle as well. But it helps to really drive home application at the end of your message.

### 4. WHY DO THEY NEED TO DO IT?

Answering this question will help you explain the consequences of your listener's action or inaction.

For example, saying you shouldn't take sex outside of marriage is one thing; explaining the level of pain and confusion it brings into your life is another. Sex can create as much, if not more, damage as it does good. When you explain that it never lives up to its potential because you're taking it out of the context it was designed for, this is also an opportunity to cast vision for what the better alternative could lead to.

This will especially help you remember your conclusion.

## HOW DO I GET STARTED?

If you're still a full manuscript person, how do you get started? Isn't this kind of like moving from walking a mile to running an Ironman? You just can't get there overnight.

Start by just taking a few steps in the direction of going note-free.

Try reading from the manuscript 80 percent of the time and looking up the other 20 percent of the time. You'll be surprised how easy that is. That's how I started. Then you can move to 70 percent, then 50 percent, and so on until you're eventually speaking without any notes!

Many leaders who have tried this approach have found they can move from manuscript to no notes in a matter of a few weeks or a few months.

Try it!

**Here's the bottom line: Don't memorize your talk. Understand it.**

Put these points into practice, and it won't be long before you fully understand your talk and you're speaking without notes.

# Discussion Questions

1. What's your greatest fear about not using notes when you speak?

2. Why are you afraid?

3. Of the four benefits of going note-free, which is the most compelling to you? Why?



# Session 9



# Why Your Preaching May Not Be Effective

Every pastor has off days. Believe me (Mark), I've had a few in my career.

But what if you feel like you're consistently not connecting with people when you speak? Let's talk through some of the reasons you might be in that situation.

## 1. DOES YOUR TEACHING NEED TO BE MORE GOSPEL CENTERED?

In Romans 1, Paul talks about this idea that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. We really need to be preaching the person and the work of Jesus in every sermon.

So if we're talking about money, we shouldn't play to guilt. We should play to the gospel. That's exactly what Paul does in 2 Corinthians 8. He's trying to get a church to give their money to a poor church, and he doesn't just say, "Do it because it's the right thing." He says to do it because Jesus Christ, the richest being in the universe, became human and poor so that we could become rich. He grounds everything in the gospel.

If you're a topical preacher, you introduce the topic, the idea, and then bring Jesus into it, showing that the cross is so multifaceted that it covers your money, your marriage, and any of your hurts and pains.

The reality is that we're all broken. We can't be Jesus. We can't do what Jesus would do—that's why we need him in the first place. So when we put ourselves in the right position with gospel-based preaching, people are freed to actually glory in the gospel being true, not just what they can do.

So your sermons have to not only focus on God, but Jesus specifically. Because if you talk about God generically, people will make their own meaning out of that. You have to take generic spirituality and make it specific—the person and the work of Jesus. That's gospel-centered preaching.

## 2. ARE YOU SPEAKING INTO THE WORLDVIEW OF THE CULTURE?

Our job is to make the Bible live for the people we speak to. With that, we need to preach to the city we belong to—what are the issues going on in people's lives?

If you're not preaching to your culture, someone else is. A friend of mine who doesn't go to church told me I was brainwashing my kids by praying with them every night. My response? "You're absolutely right, I am." Because if I don't, this culture is going to brainwash them.

They'll begin to learn a distorted view of sexuality, power, money, and relationships. Speaking the gospel into this culture causes its power to wash over them and offer them an alternative.

## 3. ARE YOU WORKING HARD ENOUGH?

You have to keep the mentality that, every week, people are coming to your service, and you have to reach them with the gospel.

Every week, their eternity is on the edge. You can't assume you'll see them next week. Because of that, you have to be completely committed to your craft. It takes a lot of work to get it right and not settle for mediocrity.

It's our job to pour ourselves into what we do. If you're just kind of winging it up there, assuming people will be at your church every week, then you definitely won't produce your best.

Hard work also takes patience and courage. It takes the patience to realize this is a marathon, not a sprint. Having a bad week doesn't mean you're a bad preacher. You just have to get up and do it again next week.

And it takes the courage to be able to say difficult things. We have to say what God has called us to say, not what our church wants to hear. Paul says as much when he opens Galatians.

So putting in the hard work requires a lot of patience and a lot of courage.

#### **4. ARE YOU INSPIRING PEOPLE TO TRUST THE GOSPEL?**

It's not just about what you teach them. More than that, they'll remember how they felt when they were listening to you speak. They'll remember that feeling of their heart starting to swell as the gospel worked.

So we have to focus not just on the output of our preaching but on the effect of our preaching. How are we making them feel at any given moment? Do they feel like they want to follow Jesus, or do they feel burdened and confused?

As a preacher, you can answer this question by starting with yourself. How does this message make you feel? How do the people around you feel? It's not about what it made them think, but it's how it made them feel. Are you stirring shame and guilt or conviction that leads to repentance?

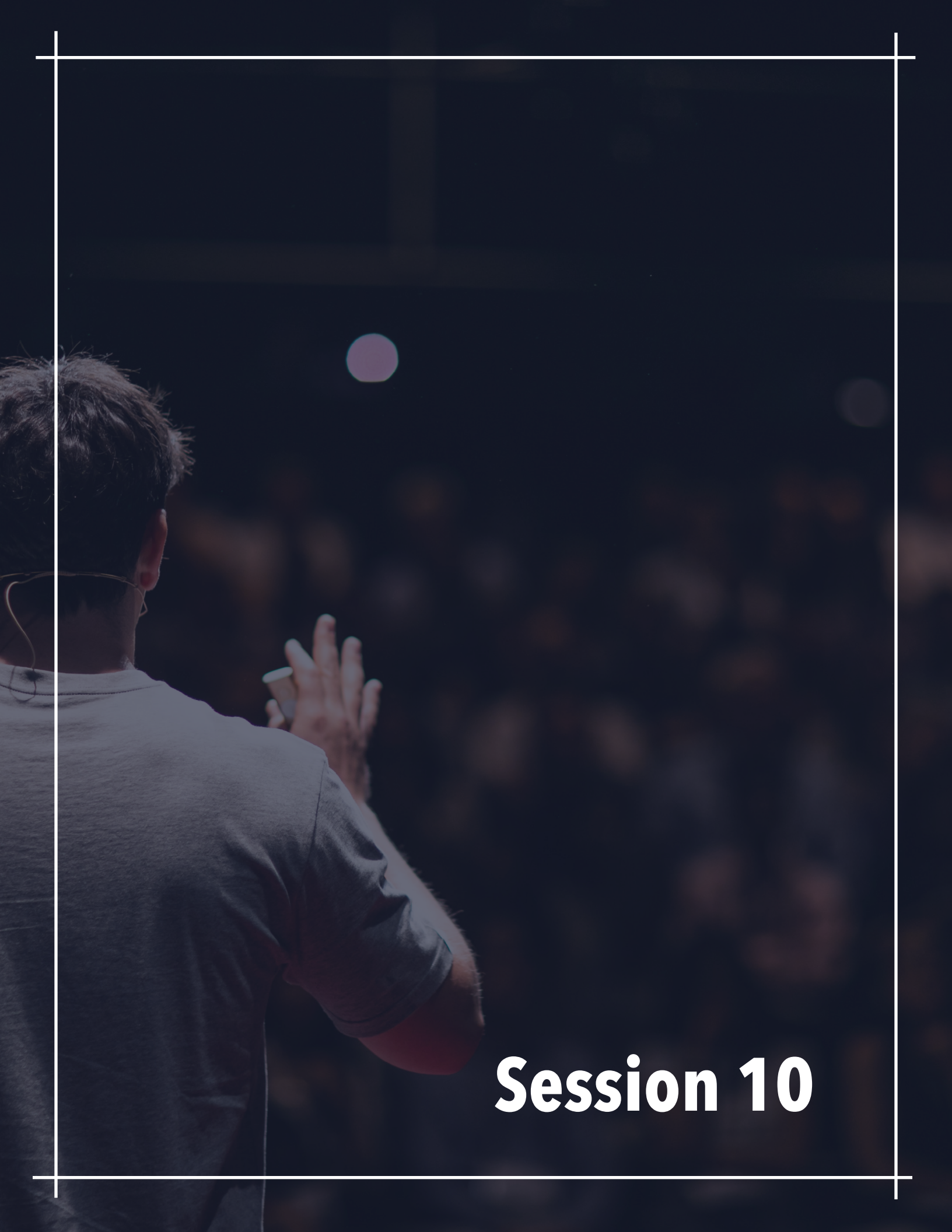
If you're feeling like some of your sermons have been ineffective lately, reflect on these questions.

# Discussion Questions

1. Write out what you think gospel-centered preaching is. How have you struggled to preach like this in the past? What can you adjust to make your sermons more gospel-centered?

2. Write out an example of moralistic or pragmatic preaching vs. gospel-centered preaching.

3. How can you more effectively make people FEEL the power of the truths you are preaching in their daily life?



# Session 10

# Keeping Your Heart and Head Fresh Over the Long Run

To preach well for a year is one thing. To preach well over a lifetime, that's quite another. How do you do it?

Keeping your head and heart fresh over the long haul may be more difficult than expected.

If you look at the statistics, a lot of pastors don't make it to the end. They leave ministry because of burnout or the pressures of the job. Or perhaps they serve for forty years, but they really peaked ten or twenty years in. We've all known preachers who have lost passion over time and whose church is suffering for it.

Which leads to the question: How do you stay fresh over the long haul?

While that sounds like a lofty question, the way to stay fresh and alive year after year is this: **Live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow.** It's your rhythms today that will determine your success tomorrow.

I (Carey) learned this lesson the hard way. I went through my first decade of ministry with guns blazing. Then I burned out. Burnout is an exceptionally difficult thing to recover from, but by the grace of God, I did. And as I recovered, I realized I had to find a new normal because the old normal had gotten me to burnout.

Twelve years on the other side of burnout, my new normal can be best summed up as living in a way today that will help me thrive tomorrow. It's resulted not only in my pace being far more sustainable, but I'm also far more productive, my heart feels more fully alive than ever, and my passion is stronger than it's ever been.

Here are the ways I've been able to take that approach.

## 1. YOUR PRIVATE INPUT NEEDS TO OUTPACE YOUR PUBLIC OUTPUT

At its core, ministry is a lot of public output. You're meeting people, preaching, and preparing your messages. It's so easy to get drained.

Your private input almost always gets cheated in that situation. It can mean not taking as much time with God or getting enough sleep. It could also show up as not reading nearly enough or spending time on hobbies, with family, or with friends.

In many ways, your life is like a bank account. If your withdrawals exceed your deposits, you eventually get overdrawn. Keep it up, and you go bankrupt. When you're overdrawn or nearing bankruptcy, people will notice. They'll see that your sermons lack the power they used to have, or that you're recycling ideas, or that your passion has faded.

To make sure you stay strong over the long haul, make sure your private input is greater than your public output. That starts with committing to your time with God and investing in your own personal growth, first.

## 2. READ FROM DIVERSE SOURCES

Reading about theology is great, but what if you were to study neuroscience, chemistry, astronomy, or business? Your messages would almost undoubtedly become richer and fuller.

When it comes to theology, my biggest tip would be to read the literary works of some people who aren't with us anymore. Don't just read the neo-Calvinists, read John Calvin. Pick up some C. S. Lewis or Dallas Willard. Read some people who have been around a lot longer than you have and have had more influence than someone who just wrote a book (or a course) over the last ten years.

### 3. ASK YOURSELF: HOW MANY “GREAT” MESSAGES CAN YOU HONESTLY EXPECT PER YEAR?

There was a time in my ministry where I spoke on Sunday nights and Wednesday nights and preached almost one hundred times a year.

Am I capable of producing one hundred quality messages per year? No, not really. Not then, not now. But I believe I can produce twenty-five to thirty quality messages.

We live in a time where people have a lot of options. You want to bring your best and not cheat your gift. If you ask yourself the simple question How many great messages do I have in a year? (Thanks to Jeff Henderson for that piercing but powerful question), you'll probably start looking to reduce the quantity of your messages and increase the quality. Ironically, this will likely increase the number of years you can do ministry at a high level.

### 4. TAKE TIME TO EXPERIMENT

Everyone has a pet style, including me. If I'm left to my own devices, I'll do the same style of message over and over again.

Occasionally, I'll make myself do a different type of series. I might decide the next one will have fewer teaching points and come more from the heart. Or if I've been doing a lot of topical series lately, I might focus on a specific book.

Mixing it up pushes you out of your comfort zone and exposes another side of your personality. If you're not a storyteller, tell more stories. If you're a storyteller, do more teaching. Doing that will help you stay fresh and keep your audience awake.

### 5. LIVE IN A WAY THAT WILL HELP YOU THRIVE TOMORROW

This is what I said at the very beginning, and it's what has made the biggest difference for me. There are five areas of your life that will determine whether or not you will thrive in the future. Let's walk through each one:

#### Spiritual

What disciplines bring you into God's presence every day? For me, beginning my day with Scripture and prayer has become a nonnegotiable. For the last twenty years, I've read the Bible cover to cover every year.

One of the reasons I love reading through the Bible yearly is it gets me into passages I may never preach on.

Similarly, ask yourself: How's your prayer life? Have you consistently integrated that time and practice into the rhythm of your life?



If you're struggling spiritually, you may want to recruit a spiritual director or visit a Christian counselor. Whatever you do, do what you need to do to get to a place where your relationship with God is fresh and alive.

## Physical

The mind, heart, and body are far more connected than we think.

Before I burned out, I would cheat sleep and I didn't exercise. I also happen to be somebody who loves eating much more than exercising (not a good combination). As a result, post burnout, I realize I couldn't cheat my physical health like I used to, so I began to embrace activities I enjoy doing, like cycling, walking, and hiking.

I also watch what I eat more than I used to.

The connection between the mind, heart, body, and soul is direct. When I eat poorly, I live poorly and don't produce great content. When I'm eating well, exercising, and resting, I'm a better husband, dad, preacher, and leader.

## Emotional

A lot of leaders tend to ignore their emotions. I used to do that regularly. And I've found that going to regular Christian counseling has put me in touch with my emotions.

When I get short-tempered and frustrated too easily, that's a sign something is wrong and my emotions are out of whack. God is the god of your emotions—that's not just some kind of psychological thing. It's spiritual. So make sure your emotions stay healthy.

## Financial

Financial stress will really put tension on you and your marriage. If you don't have to worry about money, and you don't have to worry about where your rent or groceries will come from, your life becomes so much smoother.

It's difficult to thrive in life and leadership when things are tight or impossible financially. The tension leaks out all over the place.

For my wife and me personally, an important part of operating with financial margin (regardless of how much money we make) has been getting an independent financial planner who makes sure we're giving and saving and making smart decisions with the rest. Whatever you need to do to get financially healthy, do it.

## Relational

Relationships can be both taxing and exhausting in leadership.

Often church leaders struggle even more than others because everyone always wants something from you.

When was the last time you just had lunch with a life-giving friend—someone who makes you laugh and makes time fly by? You need life-giving relationships to balance all the relational giving in your own life.

Those are some of the things you can do to stay healthy and vibrant in life and leadership. Live today in a way that will help you thrive tomorrow, and the future gets bright fast.



# Discussion Questions

1. This is a tough question, but it's important to answer it honestly. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being "not at all healthy" and 10 being "very healthy," how healthy are you in the following five areas:

## SPIRITUAL

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1		10
Not at all healthy	Somewhat healthy	Extremely healthy

## PHYSICAL

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1		10
Not at all healthy	Somewhat healthy	Extremely healthy

## EMOTIONAL

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1		10
Not at all healthy	Somewhat healthy	Extremely healthy

## FINANCIAL

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1		10
Not at all healthy	Somewhat healthy	Extremely healthy

## RELATIONAL

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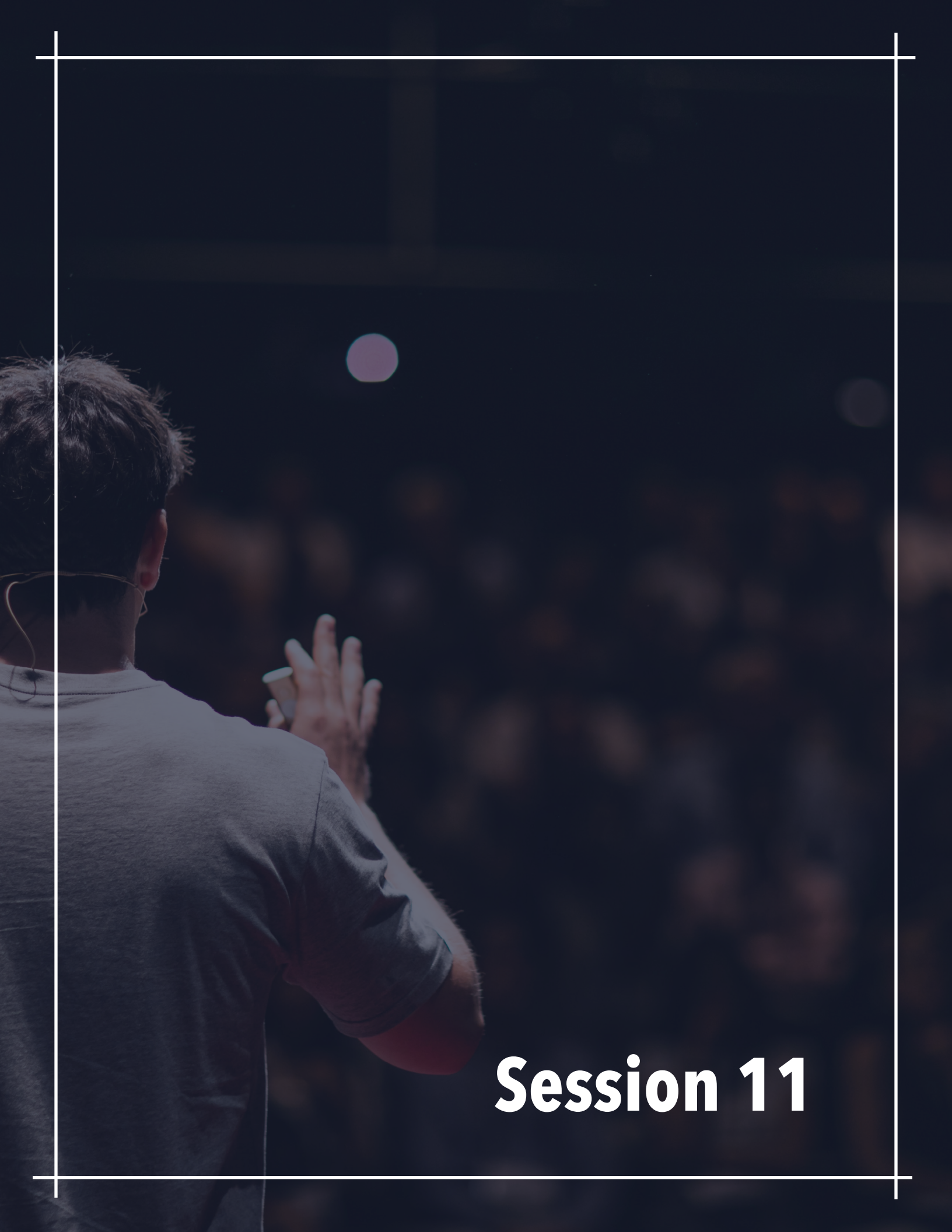
1		10
Not at all healthy	Somewhat healthy	Extremely healthy

2. Review each of your scores. Now hand the assessment to a close friend or spouse and ask them to rate you.

3. Why do you think you're low in the areas in which you're low?

4. Why do you think you're higher in the areas in which you're higher? What can you learn from that?

5. What will you do to change the picture? Write down an action plan and timeline (maybe a few months). Take the assessment again at that time.



# Session 11

# The Spiritual Dimension of Preaching

It's vital to remember that, every time we preach, we're in the middle of a spiritual battle.

That's why you have to draw on something other than yourself. The power doesn't come from you—it comes through you. As preachers, we're the vehicle for the Spirit's power to be used.

## THE RESISTANCE

In *The War of Art*, Steven Pressfield says that any time you try to do something good, like write a book or paint a painting, you're going to feel resistance.

We have a name for that, and it's our spiritual battle.

Some days, you'll have had an awful week and you'll feel like you've got nothing to give, but you still have to go up on stage. That's resistance. Other days, you'll feel completely “on” and think this is the day everyone comes down the aisle . . . and nothing happens.

When that resistance happens, when you feel the spiritual warfare in your life, be encouraged. Because, think about it, *if you're a target, that means Satan doesn't like you*. And you don't want Satan to like you. He's coming after you because you're doing something of significance for Jesus.

As pastors in ministry, we're pretty familiar with spiritual warfare. Sometimes it creeps into areas of our life in the form of burnout or temptation. Other times, it's trivial but it can still have an effect on you.

## GUARDRAILS BUILD CHARACTER

To counter the resistance, you might have to set up some guardrails or create habits in your life. Maybe you shouldn't meet alone with women or manage your church's money because you don't want any sexual or financial indiscretion associated with you.

When you set up habits and rituals in your life, over time those start shaping who you are. It's like working out. The first time you get up at 6 a.m. to run, you hate it. But, eventually, you realize working out makes you feel good. Like that, setting up habits and guardrails helps whip you into spiritual shape.

When Paul talks about the qualifications for elders and overseers, he doesn't talk about competency. He talks about character. He knows that your character has power. As a preacher, the power of your preaching ministry will rise and fall on your character. If your city knows you're a person of character, then you're in an incredible position to influence them.

You can master every skill set related to preaching and be an amazing communicator, but if you're a jerk to your staff behind the scenes, then that's a huge problem. If your public talk and private walk don't mesh, you're undermining your preaching. Who you are speaks louder than what you believe and say.

## DEVOTIONAL TIME WITH GOD

If you're not in the right place, you can fake it for a few weeks. But in a month or two, people will start noticing. They'll “smell” it.

That's why the daily discipline of a devotional is so important. It's not just a box to check. It's the foundation of what you do, and it's how you keep your character grounded and authentic.

You might consider varying what you do during that time. If you read through the Bible last year, think about just focusing on the Psalms this year. When the day is over, it's not about how many chapters you read or how long you prayed. It's about connecting with God. You need that inflow to create an overflow. Otherwise, you'll end up spiritually bankrupt.

The quality of your personhood is actually more important than the quality of you as a preacher. So while we've focused on moving from a good to great preacher, we want you to remember that your identity is in Christ. Your ministry is based in that truth and, at the same time, you're trying to do the best with what God has given you.

Remember the Parable of the Talents. You're only responsible for what God has given you. You'll almost always find a better speaker or a bigger church. You can't do anything about that, and it's not your job to focus on that anyway. It's all about being faithful with what God has provided you—whether it's a little or a lot.

## OUR PRAYER FOR YOU

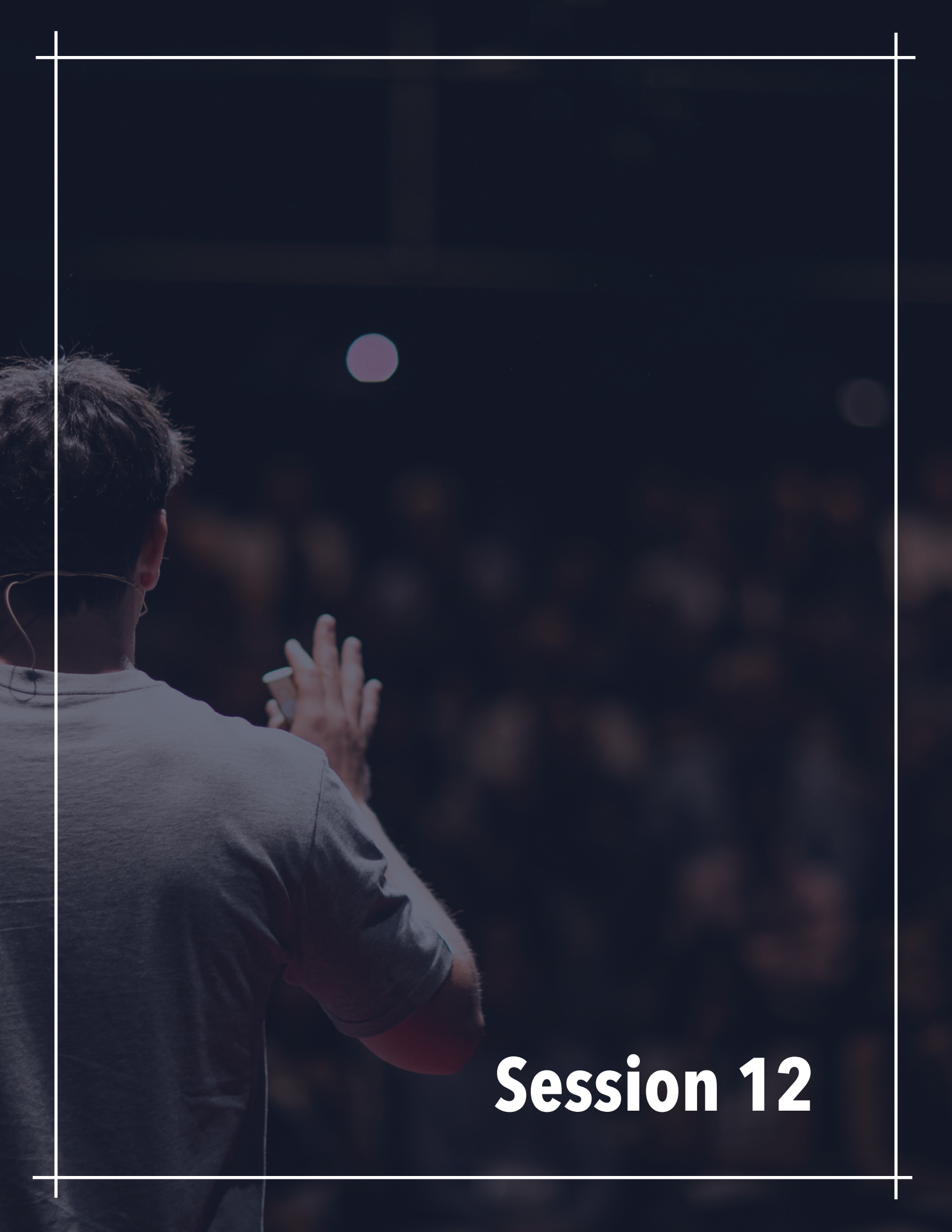
So as we close out this series, we pray you'll continue using your gifts as a communicator for the kingdom of God. We pray for all of you and your ministries and that, in the years to come, you'll reach even more people with the powerful gospel of Jesus.

# Discussion Questions

1. What spiritual practices are you good at right now? What needs work? Have you prioritized your family? Your prayer life? Your financial life so that Satan doesn't have a way in?

2. First Timothy 4:16 says we as preachers and leaders need to "watch our life and doctrine closely." Satan will try to attack and destroy both. How can you fight every day to guard both?





# Session 12

# Q&A with Carey & Mark

Before we started filming *The Art of Preaching*, we asked you to send us some of your top questions about being a pastor. To close out the series, we thought we would dip into those questions and hopefully give you some insight. So let's get started.

## Do you use a preaching calendar? If so, how far out do you plan in advance?

**Mark:** For me, that's a no. I tend to preach through the books of the Bible. We're going through the book of Matthew over a three-year period right now. So we might take a break to do a marriage series or something like that, but that's really the only planning we have.

**Carey:** We plan out about a year in advance. We teach topically with anywhere from three to eight weeks per series. We map out subjects and issues we want to cover and then dig in further throughout the year.

## Is there a list of subjects you have to cover?

**Carey:** Not really. It's more about what God is speaking to me at the time. Maybe we realize we haven't talked about baptism in a long time, so we'll go back to that. But we don't have a specific list. When I've talked to other preachers, like Craig Groeschel or Andy Stanley, they don't actually have a list either.

**Mark:** No. It's all about asking God, "Where do you want us to go next?" What does the church, the city, need to hear at that particular moment? What are the idols in your city, and how do you park on something they actually would benefit from hearing?

## How do you utilize a team?

**Mark:** I have other pastors and thinkers on my team. I'll have a research guy go out and read three articles about this week's topic and get back to me. Or I'll send an email out to the other pastors on staff and ask about a certain parable I'm teaching on and how they would approach it.

**Carey:** For us, it's a little different. I'll pitch the idea to the team and get their feedback. We all start throwing ideas on the wall and sometimes they stick. Sometimes they don't. If I'm the only one that's interested in the topic, it's probably not a good idea. I just want to make sure it has resonance.

But I'll also do a lot of solo work. I'll hammer out my bottom lines several weeks out. Then we'll get back together and work through the other creative elements of the series.

## How far in advance do you prepare?

**Carey:** The answer to this is just based on what's best for your church. If you're working around a last-minute approach and your team is stressed out all the time, you should consider planning further ahead. For me, I tend to have eighteen months to two years of ideas in the bank. I work through Evernote and jot down ideas here and there. We'll plot out where we want to go for about a year in advance. Generally, the actual work is occurring two months in advance. But the entire series is ready before I do the first message. That's what works best and keeps stress levels low for us.

**Mark:** I mentioned this in an earlier session, but I write the message on Thursday afternoon and Friday, then memorize it on Saturday night. Then the team takes a note that I preached up to verse 34 or whatever it is, and that's where I start the next week.

**Carey:** I think the most important thing is your team knows they won't have to wait until Sunday morning to get what they need. The expectations should be clear. If you promise it on Monday and you don't deliver until Saturday, they'll end up quitting on you. Just do what you say you are going to do when you say you are going to do it.

### What's the secret to transitions in your messages?

**Carey:** I think the key is just knowing where you're going. Know where you start, where you're going next, and where you're going to finish. Use little words and phrases like "so" or "therefore" or "consequently" and so on that can move you from A to B quickly. Or telling a story is also a great way to move from one part of the message to the next.

**Mark:** And it just takes practice over time. I think preachers need to be practicing everything they do, whether it's in front of a mirror or a wall or another person. Go over the whole sermon, out loud, multiple times, and you'll eventually figure out those transitions. If the first time you're talking out loud is at the service on Sunday morning, you're most likely not going to create the best end result.

### Do you use a pulpit, table, reading desk, or nothing . . . and why?

**Mark:** I have a pulpit, but it's off to the side. I try and create a space between me and the audience, with nothing between us. I think that's ideal in our culture. But some great preachers today are still standing behind pulpits, so there's no perfect way to do it.

**Carey:** Yeah, I'm the guy that preaches without notes, so I don't really need the pulpit. But in the back we have a confidence monitor that shows the current screen and the next screen so I know what's coming. I practice with a Word doc that includes a picture of the screen the night before and the morning of the message. But I leave that behind on Sunday morning and it's just me and the TVs. If I don't know what the next screen means, I'm in bad shape. But that's why I always say you need to understand where you're going, not just memorize it.

### How do you balance the demands of the job with the demands of preaching?

**Carey:** One of things I do is select certain days for meetings. So at my church, we only have meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That freaked the team out a little at first, but they understood how meetings can fill up our lives if we let them. So I put things in boxes like that. Monday is a sermon writing day and everyone on my team knows that. Doing that helps keep priorities and expectations clear, and it's really helped me start planning months ahead.

## What role does feedback play in the development of the message and the messenger?

**Mark:** We have a Tuesday debrief. We go around the table and talk about the service, and we're honest about all the pros and cons. We all hold each other accountable.

**Carey:** There's a self-development component too. It's really helped me watching myself on video, as much as I hate it.

## How can church and sermons become more interactive in the future?

**Mark:** One of the ways we've been interactive is I'll preach on something and then we'll do a Q&A, via text, at the end of the series. We do another thing called "Hot Seat Sundays" where I'll just sit on the stage and questions will pop up on the screen. I'll have no idea what they're going to be, but I try to answer them on the spot.

**Carey:** We've done some Q&As too. We have sermon-based small groups where there's lots of dialogue, interaction, and pushback. We're increasingly doing pre-series surveys where we'll ask questions like, "What are your top objections to God?" or "What are you struggling with financially?" One time we handed out physical cards and asked for people to write down the negative self-talk that plays over in their head. I read those cards at my desk sobbing. Later, I took them up on stage to illustrate how poorly we think of ourselves. That was powerful.

## How do you measure the success of your preaching?

**Mark:** It starts with "What's the goal?"—which is to see people come to know Jesus, to see transformation in your city.

**Carey:** Is the church growing? Are people responding and being baptized?

## What is one piece of advice you would give a young pastor in his twenties?

**Carey:** Get secure faster. In other words, get to the heart of the issues in your life—the issues that might be affecting you as a leader, spouse, parent, or whatever other roles you're playing. Most of us are pretty insecure and think we're not making a difference. We want to be like someone else . . . that's just the way we're wired.

So get to the root of that, and if that means a lot of counseling and prayer, then get started. The sooner we realize our identity comes from Christ, the sooner we'll be more comfortable in our calling as pastors.

**Mark:** Just make sure you're grounded theologically. You need to be more than just a good communicator who's comfortable on stage. I'm not saying you need to go get a master's at seminary, but just make sure you have some kind of education in theology.

## Most of my church is twice my age. How do I preach to them?

**Mark:** Biblical, exegetical preaching plays huge to those people and it gains their trust. You can still be topical, but show them that you're actually preaching from the text.

**Carey:** People will follow you if you're actually going somewhere. I took over my first church when I was thirty. I just started leading because I didn't know any better. I would get to know the people and just have conversations with them. There's a certain authority with someone who's leading out of a place of humility and confidence. I wouldn't worry about the age barrier. Just focus on being faithful to your calling.

**After writing the first draft of a message, how do you determine the final content that you will preach?**

**Mark:** I start with about twelve pages of content and then trim it down to four or five. Those are the notes on my iPad. I eliminate the bad ideas. And they have to sound good out loud. Sometimes I'll think a point is great on paper and then I read it out loud and decide to cut it because it's boring. This is about heaven and hell every week. So you've got to put in the work and make sure nothing makes it through that's uninteresting.

**Carey:** You know those old shows where you're performing and they literally yank you off stage? It's weird but when I'm not sure if I'm done I will imagine that's happening. So if I have to yell out one sentence before I get pulled off stage, what will that sentence be? That's the bottom line. If you know what it is, then you're done.