

What is the Big Idea?

In this lesson, let me review what we did last time. Who alone has the power to change hearts? The Holy Spirit, working by and with the Word in our hearts. Remember, that is the point. It is not the Holy Spirit working independently of His Word but rather taking the Word and applying it to our hearts. The One who inspired the Word also inspires the messenger so that our hearts receive it properly. Thus the Holy Spirit, working by and with the Word in our hearts, is the power by which God transforms people eternally. He does not merely change their behavior but transforms them. What aspect of preaching is the most persuasive, *ethos*, *pathos*, or *logos*? *Ethos* is the most important. What is *logos*? It is the verbal content. That includes not just the words, but also the logic content as well. *Pathos* means what? The emotive content of the message. And what is *ethos*? The perceived character of the speaker. Those are key thoughts. It is important to know, of course, that when you are inadequate in *ethos*, it is the sufficiency of the Word that takes the burden of transforming men and women off of us. But that is not to say that the Spirit does not use our gifts. We are instruments. Granted, the Spirit can get around our weaknesses, but the normal way God works is by using the character of the one speaking to confirm the authenticity of the Word. God can work past us, and that takes the burden off of us. At the same time, we have the blessing of being instruments in God's hands. For those who are renewed by the Spirit, being able to serve God for His glory is part of our blessing and our joy. Let us pray to God this morning as we praise Him for the joy He works in us. Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that Your blessings are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness. We know it is Your faithfulness that has brought us here and ultimately that will equip us to go from this place with the message of Your Word. And so we pray that the mercies You give us would be plain not only to our hearts, but that You would be equipping us through what we do in this class to make those mercies plain to others as well. We acknowledge before You in humility that we are only earthen vessels, but with joy we proclaim that You pour Your glory out of earthen vessels so that the glory is all Yours. Grant, Father, Your blessing on us by Your Spirit even now, making us conformed to Your purposes and filling us with Your glory. For the sake of Your Son and our Savior, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

As we begin, the goal of this lesson is to understand the essential components of a well constructed sermon. Just to think about what that is, let me reflect from your readings a bit. Why would the following be a terrible outline for a sermon? Here is my first point: *agape* is one of three Greek words for love. My second main point is this: Esau was a hairy man. And my third main point is this: expiation refers to the turning aside of the wrath of God. Now, everything I just said is true. Everything I just said is biblical; it is all in the Bible. Why would this make a terrible sermon? What do these three main points lack that is necessary for a well-constructed sermon? They lack unity. There is nothing that seems to pull together the components of this sermon. Though it is all true, there is nothing linking these three very disparate ideas of three Greek words for love, Esau being a hairy man, and expiation. It also lacks purpose. While we may begin to think that there is some reason to know about three Greek words for love, at the same time knowing that expiation is the turning away of God's wrath—while true—does not appear to have the same purpose as the earlier point. And because it does not have purpose, it also lacks apparent application. It is these three things that are necessary for all good sermonic preparation. Every sermon must have unity, purpose, and application. Having said these things, we now want to explore them in depth.

Unity is the key concept. How many things is a sermon about? One thing. Sermons may have many facets, many components, many subsets of a central idea. But essentially, every sermon is about one thing. Now, we need to talk about why that is. What is the need for sermonic unity? Well, the first

reason we need unity is that preachers need focus. The speaker himself needs focus. Why? Well, first because the old hymn is true of us: we are prone to wander, yes we feel it. There are so many interesting and wonderful things to say from the Scriptures! And yet we recognize that we have been in sermons and, sadly, may have produced sermons that just seem to wander about. They do not seem to have a central purpose that people can grab onto. A second reason we need unity as preachers is that preachers need focus to funnel the infinite exegetical possibilities.

If you were to go over to the library and begin to research any particular verse, you will be overwhelmed initially. You will see that there are many commentaries dealing with any portion of the Scriptures. That means books have been written or could be written on practically any verse. There are near limitless exegetical possibilities of what could be said about any portion of Scripture. And while it seems at first constraining—oh no, I just have to concentrate on this one central idea!—ultimately you will find it to be very liberating. When you are in that labyrinth of infinite exegetical possibilities, there are so many things you could say that you just get overwhelmed with the possibilities. When you are able to say, “I know there are many things I could say, but I will relate those things that deal with my central purpose,” then actually you feel freed from all the possibilities, all the complexities of the sermon that could be there. John Stott in some tongue-in-cheek way says, “The torture of every preacher is that he has to throw away 90% of what he knows about any particular message when he preaches the sermon.” There is so much any passage contains, but being able to focus is what allows us to move forward and our listeners to move forward with us. Of course, that is the other reason we need sermonic unity. It is not merely because speakers need focus. Our listeners need focus as well. If you were to go to research virtually any passage of Scripture, you will find in the commentary sections of the seminary library book after book on any passage you are looking at. Now you have to say, “I have to preach on this in a timeframe.” It varies from state to state and from nation to nation, but the average for evangelical churches is about a 30-minute message. Well, you will come across material that would be sufficient for 300 30-minute messages as I look at virtually any passage. Thus, if I have these infinite exegetical possibilities, how do I know what I will grab on to? How do I know, out of all these possibilities, what I will say? The thing that will free you from this infinite labyrinth of possibilities is unity. We will press hard on it this semester, and we will say, “Yes, all those things are true, but what is the thing you are trying to say in this message?” I will just tell you, initially it feels so constraining—I could tell you all of this, but you are making me focus on just this! When I know where I am directing things to, I actually have some basis for the choices I will be making out of all the possibilities available. Thus, speakers need unity because we are prone to wander. But also, it actually helps us with the infinite exegetical opportunities.

Of course, another reason for sermonic unity is not only that speakers need focus, but that listeners need focus. One of the things we will talk about with some frequency is this: almost all of us have been trained quite well in how to write essays for readers. But sermons are not essays. Sermons are for listeners. There are different ways in which you communicate to a listener *versus* a reader. There are things we will talk about that your sixth grade literature teacher will not like. We will talk about things like one of the most powerful tools preachers have is repetition. Now, if you were writing an essay, your English teacher would say, “Do not say it again. That is redundant.” But in an oral medium we will say, “It is not redundant. It is power.” A listener does not have the ability to back up in the paragraph and read it again. Thus what we do is provide all kinds of cues, signals, and means to grasp the material as it goes by, and that includes unity. We have to have some way to coalesce things, to let people know what the kind of wall of words that is coming at them is all about. Unity is a means to help them find their way, because sermons are for listeners, not readers.

And beyond that, all good communication requires a theme. Even a novel that is many, many pages long somewhere has its theme, what it is basically about. Certainly an essay would reflect that. We would say the temptation for all of us as preachers is to say, “I have so many good things to say, and it is all important and all true,” and just to kind of throw it at people. But it is so much easier to catch a baseball than a handful of sand. They may weigh the same, have equal gravity, but if you do not pull it together, it is very hard to grasp. In fact, what we know as a rule of communication is if the preacher does not supply unity, the listener will. He is required, somehow, to pull the information together. If I were just speaking about different subjects, not spiritual but just generally telling you about a movie I saw last week, I would find some way to not tell you the whole plot but to sum up the storyline. “It was a boy-meets-girl movie,” or “It was a cops-and-robbers,” or “It was a western.” I would have some way of pulling it together before I expected you to deal with all the details. That is what preaching is about as well. As we prepare sermons, we should recognize that we have to have unity for our sake and for the listener’s sake.

Let us talk about the nature of sermon unity—what goes into making it what it should be. You already know one key idea. In expository preaching, the meaning of the passage is the message of the sermon. We want what God says to be what we say. So part of unity is saying, “What is the big idea of the passage? What is it dealing with?” When I identify that, it will also be the big idea of the message, if it reflects the main idea of the text. The Bible says what God says, and I want to say what God says. Thus I need to make sure that its theme is my theme. The meaning of the passage is the message of the sermon.

Second, the meaning of the passage that becomes the message of the sermon is the big idea. Now, some of this is just terminology. In preaching circles, that word, “big idea,” is mentioned over and over again. “What is the big idea?” By that we are looking for the unifying theme of the passage that is also reflected in the message. What is the unifying concept of the sermon? The originator of that terminology, simple as it sounds, is a man named Haddon Robinson, who still teaches at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Here is Haddon Robinson, who is kind of the beginner of preachers this day in the teaching of preaching. He says it this way, “You determine the big idea by asking this: what is the purpose of the biblical writer here? What is he trying to communicate? What is his theme? What is his idea? What is his concept? This leads us always to original intent.” Now, that is the key terminology. The big idea is seeking to get us to the original intent of God and the author of the text. My goal is not eisegesis, to bring from my experience what the text means. My goal is to have God speak to me through the text. What was the original intent of the author? Now, you recognize that so much of what you do in seminary, exegesis, New Testament studies, Old Testament studies, church history, all of that, is saying, “What did the writer mean to say?” This is because that is what I want to say, if I am being true to his intent and therefore to what God is intending to say.

The definition therefore is this: in expository preaching, unity occurs when the elements of a passage or expository unit (new terminology again) are legitimately shown to support a single, major idea that is the theme of a sermon. Why do homileticians talk about an expository unit rather than just a passage? Are the verses and chapter divisions inspired? Did Luke write those down? No, not at all. Sometimes you will find that the expository unit has to cross over what in our English translations appears to be the passage. Those paragraphs and even verse divisions were not inspired. They were not included originally in the text. Thus it is for us to come with our understanding and say, “Do I need to cross over a verse? Do I need to cross over a chapter?” In fact, you will discover at times that the expository unit, what needs to be preached on, may run over many chapters. If you do not know what happens in Job 40-42, it is very difficult to explain what happens in Job 1 and 2. The expository unit tries to say, “What did God mean to say? And what chunk of Scripture (sometimes very little and sometimes very large) will be

necessary to get the big idea and to actually within context say it?" Thus, in expository preaching, unity occurs when the elements of a passage or expository unit are legitimately shown to support a single, major idea that is the theme of a sermon. Haddon Robinson says it this way, "The big idea of a sermon is a subject and its complements." A subject and its complements. Sometimes the notion of one big idea of a message gets people a little frightened because they think, "You mean I have to talk about this one thing over and over again for 30 minutes?" No, you talk about that one thing in terms of its development. There may be many facets, many subsets, but it is all about one thing. Now you will join the last 20 years of homiletic students in knowing this: a sermon is like a stool. The unifying concept is the seat of this stool. It is all about one thing. So the big idea is the subject, with its complements, the things that support it. We get in danger in preaching when we have a subject and its support is over there somewhere. Or the subject of the main point may not appear to support the subject of the sermon at all. Thus we want to make sure, for unity, that we have a big idea and its complements. That is, all the major parts of the sermon complement the main idea.

Now, what happens when I have to say something to be true to the text, and it does seem to be unrelated? Then I recognize that I have the wrong seat, the wrong subject. I do not yet have a unifying concept that deals appropriately with the subjects of the text. I may have said this text was about God's guidance, but the more I study, the more I say, "You know, there are things in here that really do not reflect much about guidance. That does not appear to be what Paul's main idea was. I will have to change, then, what I said was the big idea as I prepare this message, because it does not adequately reflect the material in the text." And my goal is to say what the text is. Thus one of the tests of whether a sermon has unity and also whether it has truth is if the main idea can be supported by the major components of the text. I test myself by asking, "Do my supporting points support what I said is the main idea?" And I also ask, "Do those supporting points adequately cover what the text is talking about?"

A sermon is about one thing. That is the key concept of sermon unity. The process by which we obtain unity is not a mystery; it is not really hard. We read and digest the passage to determine first, what is the big idea of the writer? I read and digest the passage to determine what the (here the article is important) big idea of the writer is or what themes in the passage have sufficient material to develop the main theme of a sermon.

Believe it or not, I just led you into one of the major debates in the history of homiletics. Do you recognize the debate? The question is this: can a minor theme of a passage be the major theme of a message? Now, there are certainly those in the history of homiletics who say no. But I want you to think about it for a little bit in this way. If you were looking at Luke 15, you would recognize that there is a series of parables there relating to "lostness," right? There is a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. I will guess that at some time in most of your spiritual experiences, you have heard a sermon on your assurance of God's love because God is like the father who received again the prodigal son. If you have sin in your life, if you have been prodigal, you can still have the assurance of God's love because of the nature of that father toward his son. Have you ever heard such a sermon? Would you say that sermon came out of that text? Would you say it is wrong? Most of you would say no. But if you say, "The purpose, the big idea of the total passage of John 15, is to assure prodigal sons of God's love," is that what that is about? No. Who is the passage actually directed to? Who is listening in, and what are they concerned about as Jesus tells these three parables about lost things? What just preceded the parables of "lostness"? What are the Pharisees doing? They are upset because Jesus is eating with the publicans and prostitutes. They are saying, "How can you deal with people like this? If you were really a representative of God, you would know that you are not to deal with people like this." Now Jesus tells parables of "lostness." For those who are sinners, there is the wonderful assurance of how the father

deals with his younger son. But who is really the point of the parable? It is the older son, the older brother. He is upset that the father receives a sinner, the prodigal. Jesus is telling the account to remind the Pharisees that they are being like the elder brother who is upset that God is gracious. Now, is that an appropriate message for a sermon, that you should not be upset that God is gracious toward sinners? Is that an appropriate message? Yes. But many of you also said it would be appropriate to talk about God the Father receiving sinners from this passage. By doing this you recognized that there is a major overarching theme—the wrongness of being upset with God’s grace. And you also recognized that there are sub themes that might be sufficient for a sermon—like God is gracious towards sinners like me and like you.

If you came to the conclusion that only the big idea of a passage and no minor theme is sufficient for a sermon, what would you be required to preach on every time? It is hard to tell. You might have to preach on a whole chapter every time, or you might even have to do a whole book every time. After all, the chapters are only minor points of the bigger book. And by the way, the books are just minor points of the whole message of Scripture. So where we are going is this: it is that word “sufficient.” Minor themes also can be the big idea of a sermon if there is sufficient material. Now this becomes a judgment call. Is there sufficient material in this passage to support what you are saying and particularly for an expositor who will not be importing from other places but only saying what this text means? You are saying, “Within this text, is there sufficient material to say, ‘God is gracious toward sinners?’” Is there sufficient material to say, “You should tithe”? After all, the father provided things here. Well, that may be a minor theme in there, but there is not sufficient material to develop the theme exegetically, not from this passage. So, is there sufficient material to support what I say will be the main theme of the sermon. Therefore, you begin with those two ideas of unity: identifying the big idea of the writer and what themes in the passage have sufficient material to develop the main theme of the sermon.

The second major thing we do for unity is melt down the supporting ideas into a proposition. This is another key term. A proposition, in the history of preaching, is one crisp, clear statement of the big idea—of the, to use your essay language, theme of the message. We then say, “Is there sufficient material here to support what I say is the theme?” That is a proposition. As I state it, is it apparent to me as I have studied it (and hopefully to the listeners after they have heard me) that there is sufficient material in the passage to support that proposition for the message? The mark of success in unity, in developing that proposition, is the 3:00 AM test. The goal is to say, if your spouse or roommate were to bump you out of bed at 3:00 in the morning and say, “Preacher, what is the sermon about?” Can you say it? It has to be a rather crisp, clear statement, because at 3:00 AM you will not be thinking well. “In Psalm 111 and 112, the chiasmic structure of the Hebrew enables the listener to understand that God is not only communicating His character but also showing how they are transferred to man so that His nature is part of their nature, and this is part of His atoning-redemptive process.” That is all true, but it is way too long. “God transfers His nature to us.” That is the same thing. Now, I will prove that statement, establish it, and develop it. I will do all that within the message. But a proposition is to be one crisp, clear statement of what the message is united around. Unity is striving for these things. Unity is striving for a single thrust *versus* multiple thoughts. One sermon really cannot be about the cause of Absalom’s sin, the cure for alcohol addiction, and the case for infant baptism. Now, notice the great alliteration! But it is still way too broad for it to be united around anything.

Homileticians have a cute way of reminding us how we will do this: TMT/ITK/TMT/TMT. What does that stand for? “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Unity, sermonical unity in a message, strives very hard for that ethic. Your greatest threat is your knowledge of the passage. You will know so much. As I mentioned earlier, John Stott says, “The greatest torture of any preacher is throwing away 90% of what he knows about a passage to preach on it.” The people who listen to us in local

churches, as you go out and start preaching, kind of smile when they talk about the “seminary sermon.” What do they mean? The speaker included everything he ever heard in systematics class and said it as fast as he could to get it all in. He did this rather than recognizing, “I only have this much time, but God’s people have this week, and next week, and the next week. This week we will talk about this. We will deal with this theme that the Scripture addresses sufficiently so that they will see this is what this passage is about. And if it is too much material, I need to deal with a smaller bit of the passage.

What is the purpose of the main theme? What are we trying to get to when we talk about the big idea the passage is about? We are trying to get to a purpose that I will identify as the fallen condition focus. When we identify that big idea and ask why it is here, we do not really have to guess why it is here. The Scripture itself is telling us the purpose of every passage. If evangelicals would not make John 3:16 their only motto verse, we would say the other major motto verse of evangelicals is 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17, which says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” In the King James Version, the last phrase is “so that the man of God may perfectly, thoroughly equipped unto every good work.” It is that word “perfect” we stumble on. It is actually the Greek word *makarios*, which means “complete.” All Scripture is given for these various reasons, teaching, rebuke, correction...to complete us. Now, if Scripture is given to complete us, what does that necessarily say about us? We are incomplete. Apart from what God provides, we are incomplete. We are fallen creatures. We have holes in us that the Scripture is designed to fill by telling us of the work of God.

Identifying fallenness, what is wrong, is what Lutheran homileticians call the burden of the text. What is wrong that God must address with His redemptive work in order for us to be whole or complete before Him? Our fallen nature requires Scripture’s completion. And all of Scripture has this purpose of completing us. Thus every passage has a fallen condition focus, what I will simply call the FCF. The purpose of the text is not simply to give you information for the test tomorrow. The goal of the passage is not just so that you will go home and have more knowledge. The purpose of the text is to deal with us as fallen creatures in our fallen condition with the knowledge of what God can do about that. Some aspect of our fallenness is being addressed. Our fallen condition is the purpose that is beaconing behind the words. It is the purpose that is even beaconing behind the information. It is the answer to the why question. I see what question here, but why is it here? Why did the Holy Spirit require a biblical writer to write this down? If it is not just so that we will be able to answer right questions on the test, what is the purpose? What is the burden of the text?

Let me tell you why that is so important. I hope you feel a little of the weight of it right now. When you come to seminary or learn from seminary classes, you have the wonderful privilege of beginning to see the Scripture in greater detail, with more knowledge, and through greater tools you are provided with than virtually any other person. That is a great gift. That is a wonderful privilege. But if you are not careful, you can get caught into just displaying the joy of your privilege instead of the reason you have been given it. When people look for the common denominators of great preaching, that is a difficult thing to do. You could go to the seminary library and look at the multiple volumes of 20 centuries of great preaching. If you were to say, “What is common among all these sermons?” I will tell you, you will struggle to find a common denominator. They are so different, given the era. It could be the type of preaching that reflects ancient Greek rhetoric, being highly ornate, very doctrinally oriented, and not dealing much with the text explicitly. It might be Puritan preaching, again dealing with the text but typically giving a key verse to get a thought out of it, and then going to many different passages to develop the doctrine in that text. Or, from the time of John Broadus, we have expository preaching as we know it today, which says, “Look at the text and explain what it means on the basis of the biblical writer who wrote it, not going to all those other places until you have proven the idea first.” Thus you will find

ornate preaching, Puritan preaching, expository preaching—many different kinds of preaching. What is the common denominator of great preaching? Who made the choice and why? The common denominator of all great preaching is that it gives hope, not that it gives information, although all preaching gives information to some extent. The common denominator of all great preaching is that it uses the information in the text to give hope. Why are we dealing with fallenness? So that I will recognize that “there is no temptation taken you but such as is common to man.” What you are struggling with, the people in the Bible were struggling with. And God gave them aid. So I will tell you what they were struggling with, what the burden of the text is, so that when you also struggle with something you will know how to deal with it, with the divine solution that God provides here. Romans 15:4 says, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.”

Here is the definition of the FCF: the FCF is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers (us) share with those for or by whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage to manifest God’s glory in His people. What are we doing? We are starting the message, thinking of it redemptively, by saying, “As I look at this text, what is the burden of the text and what is the hope of God?” Why is it here? If I do not ask that question, I will get into sermons that are merely lectures on topics. “I will talk to you today about justification by faith alone.” Well, that is very interesting. “And I can tell you all the places in Scripture where justification is shown to be by faith alone and how God expressed it...” That is all great information. Why do I need to hear that? Why does the mass of people even in our churches base their justification on their sanctification instead of on faith in what He has done? What is the burden of the text? What becomes the problem if I think I am okay with God based on how I am doing? Then honesty will always take me to an understanding that I have no assurance before God on that basis. Why did the Holy Spirit write this down? What was the burden of the text? Why did it have to be there, and what now is the hope that God is providing? The FCF takes us beyond the mere factual questions to the redemptive answers by saying, “Here is the problem that is human: you have holes in you. By the way, you cannot fix it. But God can.” By dealing with fallenness, true fallenness, I am forced to deal with the divine solution.

What are the implications of the FCF? First, we should never preach on a text until we have determined why the Holy Spirit put it there. The great temptation will be to preach on what you know, the facts, rather than going beyond that to say, “Why are these details here?” We will say, “Until I have gone on to the why questions, I am not ready to preach.” That is the second implication. Until we have determined an FCF of a text, we do not know what it is about, even if we know many true facts about it. If we do not ask the why question, we do not really know what it is about. One very good way to find out if you are really dealing with the burden of the text, justification by faith alone, God’s sovereignty, and the like, is, after you have answered the questions of what the text is about, then you can go through the “who” door. All right, God is sovereign, He knows about tomorrow. That is very interesting. Who needs to hear that? Now you are pastoring. Now you are not only lecturing. You are saying, “What is the burden of the text?” Think pastorally for moment. Who needs to know that God knows tomorrow? Are any of you struggling to find a job right now? Do you know young people who are still worried about their college choice for next year who have no idea where to go? For whom is it important to know that God knows? The One who loves you and gave His Son for you, He knows tomorrow. Who needs to hear that? When you think of the “who” question, you will get to the “why” answer—to deal with people like me. I look at the text and ask, “What is its burden?” This enables me to preach truly as God intended.

How do I determine the FCF? Here is a three-step process of determining the FCF. First, ask, “What does this text say?” That is kind of the bare information question. What does the text say? In classic Haddon Robinson language, it is, “What is the big idea here?” What does the text say, what is the big

idea here? Now, that is a very important step. What does this text say, what is going on here? That is necessary and important and requires all your knowledge, skills, and tools that you are being given at seminary. What does the text say? For me the sad thing is, I think, many, many preachers in this culture end their sermon preparation when they have ended the answer to that question. “What does this text say? I will give you the information. And because I was being true and faithful, exegeting the text, I think I have preached.” I will keep pressing you on and say, “Why did you sit down in church to listen to that man? Just so you would get more facts? What were you really expecting?”

A second thing to do to determine the FCF is this: do not only ask, “What does the text say?” but also ask, “What concern or concerns did the text address?” That is looking at its original context. What was going on in Philippi that wrote, “I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to be at peace...”? Was it to have us be able to pronounce Euodia and Syntyche sometime in the future? No. Why did he write that? What was going on then that he needed to write? What was the burden of that time? What concern or concerns required the writing of the text in its context?

Then number three is what I think takes a lecture into being a sermon. It is answering the question, “What do we share in common with those for or about whom this was written, or the one by whom this was written?” When David says, “My tears have been my drink all the night long,” he is the one who wrote that text. Has anyone here ever cried in the night? David did. He is like me in some way. Do not just see that he was going through a hard time. Ask, “How are we like him?” Why did the Spirit record his experience for me? How are we like him?

I hope you are getting the big hint here. The hint is this: the mutual condition, what we talked about in the FCF, finding out how what is going on in the text is like my condition, is the key to the most powerful and poignant preaching—identifying the mutual condition of the original audience and us. This is not just describing the text, although that is important and true. But how is that group of people, the one who wrote that, or the one about whom it was written, like me? What mutual condition do we share, that I may now know that as God treated them, as God rescued them, so He can redeem, rescue, or redeem me? Another key hint is this: it is not just the mutual condition that makes powerful preaching, but the more particular you make the FCF, typically the more powerful the sermon will be. This is again a difference between an essay and a sermon. For an essay you typically write a large principle. “Today, I will talk about the problem of sin in the world.” Great, but what does that have to do with me? Typically, the more personal and particular you make the FCF, the more powerful the sermon is. “Today we will talk about how you can be faithful when your boss is a sinner.” Is there anyone in Scripture who had to be faithful even though his superiors were pagan? That subject is addressed in numerous places. I have to become much more particular about what the FCF is in order to deal with it in general.

A simple rubric of preaching is if you try to preach to everyone, you really speak to no one. If you try to speak to everyone, with universal principles that apply to all people in all places, you actually speak to no one. It is too abstract. But if you will speak to just one, you speak to everyone. “There is no temptation that has taken you but such as is common to man.” If you will actually deal with an individual facing a common human dilemma, everyone will listen in. If I talk about an Asian person in a nursing home who is not visited anymore by family or friends but has found fellowship with God, everyone will listen. None of the people in my congregation are in nursing homes. But do any of them know loneliness? Do any of them know what it is like to be abandoned by family and friends and to need to find God as the One who is a friend? If you speak of one clearly who has a human condition, a fallenness, everyone knows what you are talking about. And they will listen in because you have become pastoral in your particular topic and not just lecturing about universals. Now, there is a balance here. To find that mutual human condition, you have to understand the human condition. And you are

actually personifying it when you become particular. But that mutual human condition has to have the pastoral instincts to say it does apply to enough people. But I will talk about it in particular terms.

It has been asked, am I saying that when we preach we should think of particular people in our congregation who are going through situations or conditions that this text would be applicable to, and to actually think of those people as we prepare? Then I would be going along thinking, “It would be really good for Mary and Sue to hear this.” The answer is I am definitely saying that. Let me tell you where we will go in a few weeks. My goal when I am pastoring as I preach is to think, “Who needs to hear this?” and to think of and prepare even my word choice and structure for specific people, to minister to these people God has put in my context. I should not preach to people somewhere else, but I should preach to these people. Therefore I will think of these people in their actual contexts. But I will never name them. I will speak of their situations, but I will not identify them. If I am preaching to a congregation made up of many, many college students, I will purposely talk about some of the temptations I know are on college campuses. Now, if I were in a rural farm district with mostly older people, I would not talk about college temptations to that group of people. I may talk about how the economy is destroying the farm families, young people having to move away, wondering if they will even be here next year, and God’s assurance to them. I may talk about overcoming the temptation to think, “There is no hope because I do not know what is going to happen.” This may speak to people in a rural setting versus people in a college setting. They may be thinking, “There is no reason to resist, because God does not know what I am doing.” What God knows is still the subject, but I will definitely deal with that subject in terms of the fallenness of people. This is the universal principle that we will apply to specific situations God has put in front of us. But I will not be able to do that well if I have not said what the specific situation is that is here in the text, first. What was David dealing with? What are the principles of his situation that God’s redeeming work is dealing with? The sermon is most apt to deal with the text when even the applications I give are most close to the situation of the text.

Here is another little preaching rubric: you apply what you explain. What you have explained the text is about is what you apply. When people really get upset with you is when you begin to apply what you have not explained—or especially if you have not proven the text says that. That is when you really get into trouble. Someone has raised the problem of the preacher trying to deal with his own problems in the pulpit. This is a balance, is it not? Sometimes the sermons that are most powerful are when you are preaching to yourself, when you know your struggles and you know you have to deal with this. But if the pulpit becomes the place where you always deal with yourself and your concerns, two things begin to happen. First, you rob people of the whole counsel of God. You are just dealing with you rather than with the true subjects of the text. This, by the way, is one of the reasons we do consecutive preaching. We move through a book so that I have to deal with more themes than just those that come to my mind. The other thing that can happen if the preacher too frequently only deals with his problems is that the people stop thinking the text applies to them. It seems he is just doing self-therapy in the pulpit. “He is talking on that subject again? Oh, that is just what he is struggling with.” Thus you end up removing the Scriptures from the people.

Now, this is always a balance. Over and over again we will talk about pastoral prudence. On the other hand, if the preacher never identifies with the way others are struggling, that is harmful as well. Others have written, “If the preacher is the only one in the congregation who does not recognize there is a storm outside, then again the preacher is not able to minister.” There is redemptive transparency. I have to, from time to time, say, “We, me and you—we struggle with this. And God helps us all.” Remember? “All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned each to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Even the prophet is willing to be transparent at times. But if the pulpit becomes

what I think of as the “sympathy bench,” with the pastor saying, “Feel sorry for me, I am struggling so much,” that is not redemptive transparency. That is selfish transparency.

Let us keep going. I want to make sure one more thing about the FCF is clear to you. The FCF, remember, is the mutual human condition we share with those in the text. And I have used that word “burden” a lot. So I hope you recognize that the FCF is always something that is wrong, something that is negative. But I want you to hear this: it is not always a sin. What are legitimate subjects a sermon can address? Can a sermon address the subject of dishonesty? Sure. Can it address the subject of unfaithfulness? Sure. Can it address the subject of rebellion? Sure. The common denominator of all these subjects is that they are all sins. Can a sermon address the subject of grief? Yes. Is grief always a sin? No. What is it? It is a consequence of being a fallen creature in a fallen world. That is why it is not the sin condition focus (SCF). It is the fallen condition focus. Sermons can certainly deal with sins, and many, many times they should, but not always. Sometimes people’s hurting and brokenness, which has to do with Hurricane Ivan, for instance, and not with someone’s individual sin, is a legitimate subject of a sermon. Will there be pastors who will have heavy, pastoral, biblical work to do in areas torn apart by natural disasters? You know there will. And for them to say something like, “You are sinners,” will not be the best subject for those sermons. It may be better to say, “It seems hopeless, but God is here. He is sovereign, He is still on His throne, and you can have faith in Him.” Thus an FCF can be sin, but it does not always mean sin. It is important that you recognize that.

Now, when the Bible and sermon identify an FCF, a burden of the text, we have to ask the question, “Why is it doing that? Why are the passage and the message identifying something wrong?” The answer is, of course, so that we will apply the truth of the Scripture to that problem. This, of course, is called application. Dr. Rayburn was the founding president at Covenant Seminary and taught this course for many years. Dr. Rayburn had been an Air Force colonel, and even as a seminary president he kind of kept that bearing and demeanor. He was someone we all respected and feared a little bit. He used his bearing, because he loved us, in very remarkable ways at some points. At this point in this course he would do this. He would say a little gruffly, “Gentlemen, I do not care where you go as a preacher. I do not care how big the church. I do not care how well they say you have preached. Wherever you go in the world, whatever you preach, at the end of your sermon I want you to see me sitting on the back row. I have a frown on my face, my arms are crossed. And as you are leaving the sanctuary after your wonderful sermon, I have a question for you: ‘So what? So what? Oh, so the Israelites went into the Promised Land. So what? So Paul was shipwrecked. So what?’” What was he driving at? What does this have to do with me? This was all true information, maybe even dealing with problems. But what does this have to do with me? When we preach, we are not merely giving information. We preach for transformation.

The biblical instruction of this is plentiful. We can again go back to that “motto verse” in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” There is a reason that doctrine, reproof, and correction are given. It is so that we would live according to the doctrine, reproof, and correction. There is application expected. As Presbyterians, it is often very hard to get a rise out of a congregation. But even Presbyterians have an “Amen” verse. Did you know that? For Presbyterians, the “Amen” verse is Titus 2:1. You can almost always get an “Amen” out of Presbyterians with this one: “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” Amen? “Amen.” See, even Presbyterians will say “Amen” to that one. “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” But how does this continue? What is in accord with sound doctrine that Titus is told he must teach? Titus 2:2-6 continues, “Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way

they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled.” What is in accord with sound doctrine that he must teach? How people are to live in accord with sound doctrine. This is application. This is even the pattern of the epistles. All the epistles of the apostle Paul begin with a salutation, some greeting. Then he gives much doctrinal instruction. Then how do the letters end? With practical application. There are implications of what you know. He tells Titus, as he says in other places, “This you must teach for the purpose of people knowing how to live.” That is application.

What are the implications of this for us? Simply this: preaching is to transform as well as inform. The father of expository preaching as we know it, John Broadus, dealt with the liberalism that was coming into the church in this culture from Europe. Thus he said, “We must make sure we are saying what the Bible says.” The father of expository preaching said, “So what is the main thing to be done in preaching?” His answer will surprise you. You would think that the father of expository preaching would say, “The main thing to be done is to explain the text.” But he did not. Guess what the father of expository preaching said was the main thing to be done? He said application. He said this because he recognized the temptation to become simply dispensers of information and forget what the purpose of the text is. The purpose is to bring the power of God into the lives of God’s people so they will live according to His ways.

The second implication is that preaching will always include two things: what is true and what to do about it. It is not just one or the other. Preaching that is just what is true is abstraction. Preaching that is just what you should do is arrogance. Preaching what is true and what to do about it is ministry. Preach what is true and what to do about it. What we were doing with that FCF earlier was creating a longing for the Word. Remember, “As the deer pants for the water so my soul thirsts for you.” The FCF builds that so we can then say, “And here is what God has called you to thirst for: His will, Word, and ways.”

What are the consequences of not doing application? A message is pre-sermon until its ideas and components are applied to an FCF. You can say many true things in a pre-sermon, like “God is good. God is loving. God is kind. God is patient.” This is all good information, but it is not a sermon until you have applied those aspects to an FCF, to someone who is in fear and needs to know that God is good, loving, kind, and patient. When you take the truth and apply it to that mutual human condition, that is when you have a sermon. Pre-sermons only describe the text. Sermons apply the text to an FCF. Some years ago there was a professor who came to lecture for us. He was an expert in Hittite-ology, the archaeology of the Hittites. We listened with rapt attention for about three days to his lectures. Then one student dared to ask at the end of those lectures, “What do these Hittites have to do with the Hittites of the Bible?” And the professor said, “Oh, these are not the Hittites of the Bible.” And we all said (to ourselves), “Then why have we been sitting here all this time, if this has nothing to do with us?” Now, we did not just leave perplexed. We left mad. If all you do is dispense information, your people will not leave with an appreciative, “Oh, that was interesting.” They will leave hurt and mad. “I came to be ministered to. Why did you not apply this to my life?” We are not ministers of information alone. We are ministers of transformation. We speak the Word of God to give to His people in their fallen condition. When we approach the Scriptures that way, God not only blesses, but He also wonderfully heals His people through the ministry He gives us. We will talk about many of the specifics as we continue, but these are the early things. Every sermon, to be called a sermon, requires unity, purpose, and application.