

8

HOURS

OR

LESS

WRITING FAITHFUL
SERMONS FASTER

RYAN HUGULEY

7

SUNDAY

Finish Strong

MILESTONE: To prime your heart and mind, pray for your preaching, and prepare your notes in one hour.

Every Sunday morning, I wake up with a strange mix of excitement and nerves. All the struggle of preparing is behind me, and I'm just hours away from pouring out everything I've wrestled with all week. I usually feel a brief sense of panic in that place between being half asleep and half awake as I can't, for a moment, remember anything from my sermon. I actually used to have a recurring nightmare on Saturday nights that involved me stepping into the pulpit, looking down at my notes, and finding nothing prepared. As every eye looked on, I would start to mumble and make up a sermon out of thin air. I'd love to report that the dreams end with me preaching an earth-rattling, hell-shattering sermon resulting in revival, but

more often than not, I wake up just before falling off a stage I never should have set foot on.

After this brief panic subsides, the anticipation sets in. It feels like game day. Sports consumed most of my younger years. Football, baseball, track, basketball—if you could compete in it, I wanted to participate in it. Similar to sermon prep, I never loved preparation in sports, but game day was always my favorite day of the week. It was finally time to put all the practice to work. Every game day I followed similar rituals. I listened to the same music, ate the same meals, and walked through the same stretches and warm-ups. It helped me calm my nerves and focus my attention on the task in front of me.

I approach Sunday morning the same way. I tend to stick to the same rituals week after week, because having a consistent routine helps me better prepare my heart and mind to preach. I want to commend the same practice to you. You are not done preparing your sermon until after it has been preached. Sunday is not the day to sleep in and coast to the finish line. There is still critical work to do. These final hours prior to preaching can make or break your sermon. While you will need to develop your own routines and rituals, here are three essential rituals for Sunday morning that I believe can work for all preachers.

PRIME YOUR HEART AND MIND

I have a theory about Sunday morning and spiritual warfare for preachers. Based on the last fifteen years of my life as a pastor and preacher (which I realize may seem like nothing compared to the years others have put in), I believe preachers

are often hit hardest by spiritual attacks on Sunday mornings. The early hours of Sunday morning can be disproportionately dark, discouraging, and even depressing for me. I often feel more overwhelmed on Sunday mornings than any other time of the week. All of this occurs just prior to stepping up to preach, which I believe is the most important thing I do all week.

The attack of the enemy is always greatest when the threat to his kingdom is most imminent. Every sermon is a declaration of war on this world and the one who seeks to rule it. Paul calls Satan “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). John tells us “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Every sermon is spiritual warfare. That warfare starts in the study and moves into the sanctuary. The intensity of the attack you experience increases the urgency of your need to combat it. When attacked, we don’t lie down in defeat. Instead, we stand in the victory Christ has already won, and we fight back.

Fighting back against the ever-present Sunday-morning spiritual attack starts with priming my heart and mind. To prime something is to prepare it for action or use. The idiom “priming the pump” originated in the late 1800s in reference to the process of pouring liquid into a pump to expel the air and prepare it for work. Priming is a regular process in our lives. I prime my coffee cup in the morning by filling it with hot water prior to pouring coffee into it. I prime my mind for the day by drinking said coffee and by taking a hot shower. I prime my body for strength training by jogging. Priming something prepares it for action or use.

No part of me needs priming more on Sunday morning than my heart and mind. And nothing primes my heart for

action like ascribing worth to the One I'm called to proclaim boldly. When I drive to my study on Sunday mornings, I lift my voice in worship through song. Music has an amazing amount of influence on the heart and mind. It informs the way we think and feel. It can lift a lousy mood and encourage a despairing heart. We're blessed to live in a culture where nearly all music is easily accessible, and there has never been such an abundance of God-centered, Jesus-exalting, Spirit-filled, and biblically saturated songs to sing. It's even easy to find whatever type of worship genre you prefer. Traditional, contemporary, folk, and gospel worship are all just a click away. Let's not waste this great gift. Pick your preferred style, turn it up loud, and lift your voice to God.

The louder I sing, the quieter my doubts get. The more I look at the greatness of God, the smaller my problems become. The longer I look at the cross, the less shame due to my sin hangs over my head. This demands intentionality. We don't just wake up with hearts and minds ready to preach. They need to be primed. Worship is one powerful way to do this.

A second source God uses to prime my heart and mind to preach is His Word. As much as possible, I try not to skip my devotions on Sunday morning. I never want to simply rely on what God has spoken to me throughout the past week. I need to go to the well of God's Word for a fresh drink daily—and especially before preaching. I tend to have a reading plan I'm working through in addition to my daily sermon preparation. I just stick to my plan, and without fail God in His providence has something timely for me wherever I'm at in Scripture that day.

Every Sunday when I open the Scriptures, I'm reminded that God is good, great, gracious, and glorious. I am convicted

of my sin and am called to my Savior. I'm comforted by the promises of all God has done, is doing, and has yet to do. More than anything, my heart and mind are recalibrated to the power and prominence of the God I'm about to proclaim.

This priming warms my heart and sharpens my mind. It prepares me for the privilege of preaching that God has given me to accomplish. If your habit has been simply to review your notes or to sleep in with barely enough time to make it to church, I'd commend this practice to you. Give yourself some extra space, and prioritize the priming of your heart and mind before you proceed into these final stages of preparation.

PRAY OVER YOUR PREACHING

Prayer is a natural progression from the priming we just discussed. Any preacher would be foolish to preach a single word without first petitioning God to do what only He can do. While I never set out to make a recurring prayer list for Sunday morning, here are a few requests I pray regularly.

God, guard my speech. I have a tongue that tends to run quicker than my mind, and I communicate for a living. This is a dangerous combination. A quick tongue and a faulty filter go together like fire and gasoline. Some of my greatest regrets are times when I've said something "off the cuff" in the pulpit that was questionable. It may be an unplanned comment, a phrase that lacks clarity and causes confusion, or even something that may in some way lack godliness. I've prayed the heart of Ephesians 4:29 more times than I can count: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those

who hear.” That’s what I’m after. But to be honest, I have so much room to grow here. I need God to sanctify every part of me, including my speech. God forbid we ever speak even one word that is biblically inaccurate or pastorally insensitive. I need help in this area, so every Sunday, without fail, I ask God to guard my speech.

God, soak my heart in the sermon I’ve prepared. I never want my sermon to sound like I’m trying to recite lines I’ve written. Some preachers are so ill prepared or overly concerned with rhetorical precision that they end up sounding like a prepubescent boy trying to remember lines in his first junior-high play. It’s awkward, unnatural, and distracting. I want to prepare every word yet preach in such a way that it flows naturally, spilling from the overflow of my heart. This is why I ask God to soak my heart in the sermon. Each week, I ask Him to press the notes I’ve prepared deep into my heart and mind so I can remember what I’ve prepared. I don’t want to be buried in my notes when I’m preaching to people.

The first step is to get the sermon *on the page*. You may not write a word-for-word manuscript—though I do commend this to new preachers—but you should write out the vast majority of what you plan to say. Roughly 90 percent of my sermon is written on the page. The second step is to get the sermon *in my heart* so I can then preach it to others. Like everything else, I need the Lord’s help in this. Like a needy child, I ask my loving Father for help in this intensely practical and absolutely important aspect of my preaching.

God, protect my tone. One of my great fears is saying the right thing the wrong way. I’ve heard my friend James MacDonald say, “If you’re wrong in the way that you’re right,

you're wrong even if you're right." This has major implications when it comes to tone in preaching. *How* you say what you say is as important as *what* you say. As I've said, it's critical that our tone mirrors the text. Saying what God says but missing the heart from which He says it is as damaging as misrepresenting what God has said. For instance, the New Testament contains many hard sayings of Jesus, but He is not harsh. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am *gentle*" (emphasis added). If we repeat a hard saying that Jesus said and say it harshly, we are misrepresenting His heart and character. Furthermore, if we are cold in the way we address sin or call people to repentance, we misrepresent the compassionate heart of God. Psalm 78:38 says, "Yet [God], being *compassionate*, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath" (emphasis added). Faithfulness to the text is a non-negotiable for Bible preachers, and faithfulness to the text demands that we be faithful in our tone. To do this, we need God's help, so we ask Him to protect our tone.

God, prepare the hearts of those listening. The parable of the sower in Matthew 13 has to be one of the most humbling stories for preachers. It highlights that not everyone will be receptive to the word of the gospel when preached. No matter what you say or how you say it, some will respond and some will not. Paul reminds us that "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7). And in John 6:44, Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." People's receptivity to the gospel rests in the hands of God, not in the hands of preachers. This alone should drive us to our knees

quickly and constantly. You can preach like a man on fire, and people may even clap and affirm your passion with an obligatory “Amen.” But no one other than the Spirit of God can open a heart to receive His Word. That’s why every Sunday I ask God to prepare people’s hearts in whatever way is necessary for them to welcome what God says and to leave changed.

God, grant me unction. The word *unction* simply means “anointing.” The Puritans and Reformers understood unction to be the type of powerful and passionate preaching enabled by the Holy Spirit. As preachers, we are desperate for the Holy Spirit to rest on and work in and through us as we preach. Uction—the Spirit of God using the Word of God—makes preaching pierce the hearts of those listening. Uction is not about being inspirational or loud, and it’s far more than mere excitement about the topic or text being preached. Uction doesn’t come from inside us. It comes only from God and thus demands that we beg Him for it. Charles Spurgeon put it this way:

One bright benison which private prayer brings down upon the ministry is an indescribable and inimitable something, better understood than named; it is a dew from the Lord, a divine presence which you will recognize at once when I say it is “an unction from the Holy One.” What is it? I wonder how long we might beat our brains before we could plainly put into words what is meant by preaching with unction; yet he who preaches knows its presence, and he who hears soon detects its absence.¹

I want this. Per Spurgeon's point, unction may be difficult to define, but I know I want it. I want the Spirit of God to work through my preaching, because if He does not, what's the point of preaching?

I can't overstate the fact that this "unction" is from God and comes to us through prayer. Methodist minister and Civil War chaplain E. M. Bounds wrote,

This unction comes to the preacher not in the study but in the closet. It is heaven's distillation in answer to prayer. It is the sweetest exhalation of the Holy Spirit. It impregnates, suffuses, softens, percolates, cuts and soothes. It carries the Word like dynamite, like salt, like sugar; makes the Word a soother, an arranger, a revealer, a searcher; makes the hearer a culprit or a saint, makes him weep like a child and live like a giant; opens his heart and his purse as gently, yet as strongly as the spring opens the leaves. This unction is not the gift of genius. It is not found in the halls of learning. No eloquence can woo it. No industry can win it. No prelatical hands can confer it. It is the gift of God—the signet set to his own messengers. It is heaven's knighthood given to the chosen true and brave ones who have sought this anointed honor through many an hour of tearful, wrestling prayer.²

The only true power a preacher has is that of the One preached. We need His help, His power, His unction. So let's storm the throne of God and humbly ask Him to supply it.

PREPARE YOUR NOTES

Now that we have primed our hearts and minds and have prayed over our preaching, all that's left is the final preparation of our preaching notes. I know some prefer to preach from no notes, a practice I will address in appendix 1. For now, I simply want to say that I believe it is unwise for most preachers to attempt any sermon without the use of notes. I know that some do it effectively, but they are exceptions and should not be emulated by the rest of us. The vast majority of preachers will take at least an outline or some form of a manuscript into the pulpit, and it's critical that we prepare our notes before we preach.

By this point your notes are written, and you should be about 90 percent done. Hopefully at the eleventh hour on Sunday morning you're not still writing, reading commentary, or figuring out what you're going to say. If you are, go back to chapters 2 and 6. Working from the assumption, however, that by Sunday morning your preaching notes are finished, there is still one critical step that I find essential: vandalizing my notes in order to internalize them.

In terms of presentation, I'm not sure anything is worse than reading a manuscript word for word. No one wants to hear you read. You can't just write a good sermon. You have to *preach* it. This means you have to get the sermon inside of you so that it can come out of you in a clear, convicting, and compelling manner. This is why I "vandalize" my notes.

After I've printed out my typed notes, I edit, circle, and underline key words, sentences, and phrases that I want to jump off the page at me. I write out missing transitions, jot

down a few final illustrations if needed, and maybe write clarifications regarding the implications of the text. I want to ensure the sermon is complete. I don't want to leave any listeners behind because I made assumptions or jumped from one point to another without making the cognitive connections necessary for people to follow me.

I have attempted to write out my entire sermon by hand, but that has never worked well for me. What has proven helpful is writing over the typed notes I take into the pulpit. This ritual helps engrain on my heart and mind what I've written.

I also highlight my notes in various colors so they can serve as visual triggers. I want to be certain that I can quickly identify where I am at and need to be when I glance at my notes. A terrifying experience I had as a teenager has given me an ironclad commitment to this practice. I still break out in a cold sweat when I think about the first time I was forced to speak publicly in high school. If I recall correctly, I gave a biographical speech on the great Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne. I had written out my notes on 3 x 5 notecards as instructed by my teacher. When my name was called to give my speech, I nervously stepped up to the podium at the front of the classroom and launched into my introduction. Unfortunately, as I looked down at my cards, I might as well have been blind, because I lost my place in the sea of black and white. I started to panic, believing I would never find my place, would now have no friends, would probably never graduate high school, and would thus have to live at home while continuing to clean cabins at the local campground for the rest of my life. That may sound like an overreaction, but all those things went through my mind in a single moment. If only I had marked up my cards!

I learned this practice from Pastor James MacDonald, who has taught me more about preaching than any other person. I have taken much of what he does and have made it my own. I highlight all my main points or anything that will be on the screen in blue. Illustrations are in green. Textual comments are in yellow, while all my points of application are marked in pink. Lastly, I highlight all my word-for-word transitions in orange.

Sometimes people will catch a glimpse of my notes and think I've lost my mind. "How in the world do you preach from that?" they ask. It's a fair question, because when I'm done, my notes are quite the creative and colorful mess. But somehow this is how I get them in me, and I believe that if you vandalize your own notes, you, too, will better internalize them.

Generally, this all takes me about an hour on Sunday morning. When I skip any one of these rituals, I feel off. I know that these final steps are an important part of my preparation, so to ignore any one of them would cut a critical corner resulting in a sermon that has not been given my full effort. Your routines may look different than mine. You may prime your heart and mind in a way that I don't. The specifics of what you pray prior to preaching on Sunday morning may be different than mine. How you prepare the notes you preach from and what they look like will certainly reflect your preferences. My hope is not that you will conform to the specifics of my rituals. I've shared them by way of example and to help you think through your own. I do, however, hope you will be mindful of the principles driving your routines. If you do not view Sunday morning as part of your sermon-prep process, you are missing out on an important opportunity to maximize your preparation.

SUNDAY: Finish Strong

All the blood, sweat, and tears shed this week are about to culminate in a sermon God will use to impact those listening. Don't cut any corners now. Lift your voice, open the Bible, get on your knees, and break out the highlighters. It's almost game time, so get to work.

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

WALMART 

AMAZON 

APPLE BOOKS 

GOOGLE PLAY 

BARNES & NOBLE 

CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 