



On June 15th, Pastor Mark held an impromptu Preaching and Preparation Q & A session on his [Facebook Page](#). The Q & A session was spurred by the responses to Pastor Mark's post earlier in the day, "Prepping 2 sermons today. Thankfully, a sermon takes about as long to prep as preach." The following post is adapted from the conversation.

Preach the Word

Many people have asked questions about my methods for preaching and sermon preparation. So, I thought I'd share my methods, which are unorthodox and not something I'd suggest copying.

Also, to be clear, I'm not critical of anyone else's methods. As long as the Bible is open, and Jesus is the hero, I'm glad. How we get there is not a major

concern of mine. The Bible tells us to "preach the word," but it doesn't not tell us how to do that in detail.

What Preaching Is for Me

When prepping a sermon, I first lay out the text of Scripture into units of thought. I then get a big idea for each thought unit, make a few notes on each, and read commentaries quickly to catch anything I've missed. Generally, this takes me about an hour.

For various projects, I'm reading and studying all the time. I'm also writing constantly. These other projects end up coming in very handy for my sermon prep and significantly reduce my prep time.

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By God's grace my memory is very unusual. I can still remember a section of a book I read 20 years ago while preaching and roll with it. I've also never sat down to memorize a Bible verse. Yet, many just stick, and I can pull them up from memory as I go. Lastly, I'm a verbal processor. I think out loud, which is what preaching is for me. A degree in speech and over 10,000 hours of preaching experience also helps. And most importantly and thankfully, the Holy Spirit always helps.

When I get up to preach, the jokes, illustrations, cross-references, and closing happen extemporaneously. I never teach others how to preach, as my method is not exactly a replicable method—nor a suggested one. But it works for me.

The Q & A

That being said, there are many things I've learned about preaching over the years, and I'm happy to share them with young and old alike who are looking to grow in their gift of preaching.

The following are some Q & A's from my Facebook Page on preaching and preparation.

Roger Tanton: Do you make mental note of illustrations in the week before you preach and think, "I'll use that," or do you just wait until you preach and see how you feel led by the Lord?

I never know. Most illustrations just seem to happen as I'm talking. So, as they come to mind while I'm preaching, I put them in. I think of it like self-taught musicians. They don't read music and play the instruments technically right, but somehow they make songs.

Zac Sawhill: Mark, as a young pastor who loves to preach, I often struggle with the feeling that I am too attached to my notes. What are your suggestions for cutting the umbilical?

It just takes time. It's like driving a stick shift. The more hours you put in, the more comfortable it becomes. At first, you're stressed and highly conscious about the vehicle. Over time, you focus more on the journey, and you intuitively shift and clutch.

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Preaching is like that. So, don't worry about how you're doing it. If your messages are true to the Bible, lift up Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is using them to serve people, then rejoice. The more hours you get under your belt, the less notes you'll need. And, even if you always need notes, it's no problem. The Holy Spirit can always get you off your notes if he likes.

Emma Thornett: What do you do when you come across bits of the Bible you don't understand? Wouldn't it take longer than an hour to work through?

I find that prayer and listening helps me work through the harder parts of Scripture. I also use commentators and theologians to check my thoughts, but I always start with the Bible and prayer.

Also, [Logos](#) is a life saver. I love it. Being able to read so many resources so fast and cut and paste sections and ideas saves me hundreds of hours a year in sermon prep. And, it allows me to work outdoors and get fresh air.

Coen Tate: Should preaching always include the gospel presented clearly?

Ryan Swale: Christ in every sermon? Do you feel the need to present the gospel in every sermon?

Jesus Christ must be in every sermon, or it's not Christian. The whole Bible is one story about Jesus. Every character and story is part of the big plot of the Jesus story. So, every text and topic must connect to Jesus.

That being said, every sermon should also have both law and gospel. This [Law-Gospel](#) concept is based upon the insights of [Martin Luther](#). The law shows us our sin. The gospel shows us how Jesus lived without sin in our place, died in our place for our sin, and rose as our Savior to free us from bondage to the law.

Jesus Christ must be in every sermon, or it's not Christian. The whole Bible is one story about Jesus. Every character and story is part of the big plot of the Jesus story.

Jesus gives us his righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21) so that we may live a life of obedience by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not so that God would love us, but because in Christ he does love us. Not so that we can be forgiven, but because we are in Christ we are forgiven. With only law, people feel condemned and only try harder. With only gospel, they don't know how sinful they are or what Jesus has done for them.

Justin Ryan Grice: How do you pull teachable points out of scripture and keep it all together in a coherent message?

You can't say everything a text says in one sermon. If you do, you sound like a commentary and lose lost people and non-nerds.

The point of a sermon is to grab the truth, big ideas, and pertinent details, and with passion press those into the hearts and minds of people in a compelling way by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As a student, there will be things that minister to us personally as we study that don't best serve our people. So, we can't share everything we learn, and it takes wisdom and discernment to decide what our people need to hear. The sermon is not to impress folks with our knowledge but rather with our Jesus.

Roger Tanton: How do you know when the Holy Spirit is prompting you to say something during your sermon that you hadn't planned to say? Is it an inner conviction/burden or something more than this?

I often feel when I'm preaching that the Holy Spirit is telling me to say something. I will actually pray while I'm speaking and have a second dialogue in my mind while I preach.

The sermon is not to impress folks with our knowledge but rather with our Jesus.

This is why I keep my notes to a minimum. Juggling the reactions of the people, listening to the Holy Spirit, paying attention to the Scriptures, and tracking your notes takes a lot of juggling, which most people don't understand unless they preach or teach consistently.

If you feel the Holy Spirit is prompting you to say something in a sermon, you may want to just stop for a minute and pray and listen. Also, you may want to

preface yourself by saying, "I feel compelled to say something that I'm thinking," and then say it. If it's off, apologize. If not, roll with it.

Jeff Alexander: Do you employ any specific type of process when determining a specific sermon or sermon series?

I spend time praying over what my preaching series will be. I get time in silence and solitude with the Holy Spirit and my Bible. I then bring my ideas to the Executive Elders at the church, to whom I'm submitted.

I tell them what I'm thinking of preaching and get their feedback. I seek their permission as I believe in submitting to spiritual authority. If they approve, then I begin studying the book and laying out how I'll preach it.

For the sake of the church and our sermon-based small groups ([Community Groups](#)), I need to plan well in advance. So, this year we will finish Luke, and then we'll have a Christmas series. In 2012, I'll do a marriage series based off the book *Grace and I* are releasing, a series on the 7 churches of revelation that will include footage from Turkey, a summer series based off of my book [Vintage Church](#), and in the fall we're tentatively planning a series on the book of Esther. In 2013, I'm planning on preaching Ephesians and releasing a book in conjunction with it. So, I'm usually 2 years out on my preaching planning and know each week and topic upwards of two years in advance. The more

advanced you can start prepping, the easier the week of preaching will be. Right now, thanks to this planning, it takes me as long to prep a sermon as preach one.

Jared Vagle: I feel called to preach. How can I be sure it's not just a desire, but in fact, a calling?

I don't actually know if God calls men to preach. I think he may gift them to preach, but he calls them to pastor. So, if you're feeling a call to preach, I'd dig in on [1 Timothy 3](#) and [Titus 1](#) to examine the qualifications of an elder.

Alexander Strauch's book, [*Biblical Eldership*](#), is helpful as well.

Be in a good church, under godly leaders, and ask them to help confirm your calling.

I would also be in a good church, under godly leaders, and ask them to help confirm your calling. If they agree you're called to pursue eldership/pastoring (synonymous words in places like [1 Peter 5](#) and [Acts 20](#)), then they can help you develop.

Timothy John Blitz: What would you say to a young man (I'm 24) that is pursuing a call to ministry but may not have "the experience" to do ministry?

Insofar as I know, Malcolm Gladwell is not a Christian, but I think his insights are helpful. He says it takes 10,000 hours to become world class at something (e.g., musician, athlete, etc.).

If this is true, it takes a long time to become a great preacher/teacher. The first few hundred hours are brutal. In the early years of Mars Hill, I was amazed anyone showed up twice. We don't have those sermons online for a reason—most were terrible. I'm not saying I'm great today, but I was far worse then.

I finally had to stop listening so much to other preachers, as I started to copy them rather than finding my own voice, cadence, humor, style, etc. The key for young and new preachers is to get in your hours. Using the example from earlier, it's like driving a car with a clutch. You need to stall it a lot, and eventually you figure it out.

So, teach and preach anywhere, anytime, and to anyone. Get in your hours. By God's grace, I'm preached over 10,000 hours and, Lord willing, still have a lot of years left. This explains why older men tend to be the most consistent preachers.

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Craig S. Hensel: What preacher, dead or alive, has inspired and taught you the most?

I'm a huge fan of [Charles Spurgeon](#). I recently visited where he courted his wife, his home, his church, and his grave in London. I've read every biography I could find on him—including the five-volume autobiography his wife finished after he died. He was solid and evangelistic, which is a rare combination.

I encourage all preachers, especially new ones, to read biographies of great preachers to see how they organized their home-life, studied, etc. It's amazing to learn from them. Some other great reading includes [Lectures to my Students](#), which were impromptu messages Spurgeon gave for free on Fridays; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones's [Preachers and Preachings](#), and [Light and Heat: A Puritan View of the Pulpit](#), though it's out of print and expensive.

Dustin Belcher: How much of your sermon do you practice before you preach?

I never practice a sermon before I preach. I have more of a direction than a map. It's very extemporaneous, which explains why it takes about an hour to

prep and an hour to preach a sermon. I'm reading and thinking constantly, and always writing. So, the content input is pretty insane.

Usually with all my projects, I have a few hundred books going and thankfully synthesize information very fast. I also process verbally and think aloud, which is fast and more raw. I also have degree in Speech and have been speaking to large crowds regularly since high school, which helps.

Matt Askvarek: Have you ever had an awkward moment preaching where you forgot your train of thought? If so, what did you do?

We all have awkward moments. We forget what we're saying. We realize we brought the wrong notes. We lose our place in our Bible. Our mic feeds back. Someone distracts us. Or, our fly is open (happened to my buddy).

People want an honest pastor who takes Jesus, not themselves, seriously.

The messenger is part of the message. We're imperfect people speaking a perfect word. The power is not in us. So, just be honest with your folks. Have some fun. Make a joke, if you have to. People want an honest pastor who takes Jesus, not themselves, seriously.

Aaron Jones: Mark, with making up your illustrations as you go along, do you realize that you tend to repeat yourself over the course of different sermon series or even over the span of months or years?

I probably do. I'll be honest and say I preach so much at Mars Hill and on the road that sometimes I forget where I said what. Not often, but sometimes.

Kurt Brinker: Do you use anything other than the [Proctor's Pinelyptus Pastilles](#) to keep your voice strong?

When preaching you need to avoid dairy and too much sugar, drink tons of water, warm your voice up (singing with the congregation can do this), avoid citrus, and be careful. If you preach a lot, try to not get caught up chatting in a loud room after the service, as you'll basically yell and fatigue your voice. I love proctors pinelyptus for my throat also. I use one before every time I speak.

Tony Herrera: What is the best way to be biblically sound yet culturally relevant?

To be biblically faithful and culturally relevant does *not* mean we make the gospel relevant. Rather we show the relevance of the gospel.

Also, to be a good preacher means you *cannot* only preach against sin. If you do this you will end up with a bunch of nitpicking, self-righteous, religious people. So, you have to preach against *both* sin and religion.

Sinners need to repent of sin and religious people need to repent of their man-made rules, traditions, inanities, holier-than-thou-isms, and calling things sinful that only their conscience and not the Word of God forbids.

To be biblically faithful and culturally relevant does not mean we make the gospel relevant. Rather we show the relevance of the gospel.

When you call sinners to repent of sin they wrongly think you're trying to make them religious, and the religious people cheer because they are like the older brother in the story of [the Prodigal Son](#). But once you call the religious folks to repent too, everyone gets confused and the stage is set to preach Jesus!

Sean Sankey: Pastor Mark, what's your view on the length of sermons? It seems like the culture at Mars Hill is based around an hour or more of preaching. Just curious as to the reason and what led you to that decision.

Sermon length is not mandated by Scripture. I go 60 to 70 minutes regularly. We do see some long sermons in the Bible from Jesus (Matt. 15:29-31) and

Paul (Acts 20:7-11). To really teach and to speak to believers and non-believers, as well as answer the objections of the hearers so as to press the truth home as the Puritans did, takes time. But, if you bore people, stink at holding a crowd, cannot read when to give them an emotional break with a quip or joke, or are just flat out dull, keep it short.

To Close

I will do many more of these Q & A's going forward. I used to stay around after church and answer questions for hours, but I don't get to do that much anymore.

Thanks to all who participated, and thanks also to the people of Mars Hill. I get to preach to the most teachable group of folks I've ever seen. It's really an honor to do what I do.

Lastly, for the preachers God is always working on the messenger before the message. He wants us to not just be good pastors, but good Christians, husbands, and fathers first, by the grace of God. Out of that wellspring of joy and life in the Spirit comes the passion about Jesus that is contagious and fun. Don't forget fun. Preaching Jesus is hard, fun work. Hard and fun. Blessings.

Your brother,

Mark

Some Great Resources for Preachers

- 1 [*Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*](#) by Bryan Chapell
- 2 [*Lectures to My Students*](#) by Charles H. Spurgeon
- 3 [*Preachers and Preaching*](#) by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- 4 [*Light and Heat: A Puritan View of the Pulpit*](#) by R. Bruce Bickel
- 5 Any biography of a great preacher