Module #1

How to Build a Sermon
Too many communicators love to speak in public but fail to put in the hard work to craft a compelling message. Preaching quality messages that honor God, clearly communicate the truth of the Bible, and impact people’s lives takes a lot of work. But your sermon is worthy of such work.

1. **Your calling demands hard work.** One of the great preachers in the Bible was the Apostle Paul. In Colossians 1:25, Paul told the church at Colossi that he was commissioned as a minister by God in order to present the full counsel of God’s word. Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:1 the call to preach is a “fine work.” For Paul, the calling of God on his life was serious, and he wanted to honor that calling. Likewise, if you are called to preach the Gospel, you should devote serious time and effort to preparation.

2. **Your congregation demands hard work.** Let’s say it takes you ten hours to prepare a message. That’s a significant amount of time from your week. Now imagine the collective time your congregation will invest simply attending church. 100 people in the congregation represent 100 collective hours. Add in preparation and drive time and the time could triple.

3. **Your topic demands hard work.** Passion for your topic should drive you to invest in preparation. If you really care about the message, work hard to make it the best it can be. If you really believe God’s Word has something to say about work, family, faith, sin, forgiveness or any other subject, shouldn’t you put your best effort into studying God’s word and preparing well.

Prepare well!

When people come to church, they come needing to hear a word from God. They enter the building with weight on their shoulders in need the Gospel. Whether they fully realize it or not, they are looking to you to share God’s Word with them in a real way. Your congregation recognizes low-quality work. As a preacher, you are responsible for your congregation’s level of interest.

“**PREaching THAT COSTS NOTHING ACCOMPLISHES NOTHING. IF THE STUDY IS A LOUNGE, THE PULPIT WILL BE AN IMPERTINENCE.”**

- John Henry Jowett
how your body feels after giving it all you've got. It's a feeling of being tired, but it's a good tired.

The work of wrestling with a text, creating an outline, crafting a sermon and delivering a message is not a burden; it's an honor. It's hard work that will often wear you out, but at the end of a day or week, you should feel good.

Poor preparation will lead to a weak message. Commit to do the hard work and you will reap the fruit of your labor.

Now that you know some work is ahead of you, let's talk about what the work should look like.

THE GOAL OF THE SERMON

Recently, I ate at a fancy restaurant in Atlanta. I listened as the server carefully explained all the ingredients of a dish and how it was prepared. By the time she was finished with her romantic description of the food, I knew I wanted it.

It came to the table ten minutes later and was gone ten minutes after that. Weeks later, I can't remember the description and certainly couldn't duplicate the preparation process. But I know it was good, and I've recommended the restaurant to others.

Our primary goal is not for people to remember everything, but to feed them week to week. Don't be discouraged when people can't remember every detail and point of your sermon. That's not the goal. The goal is to feed them from the Word of God.

THE SERMON OUTLINE

In general, every sermon, speech or presentation has these five elements:

- **Introduction.** In the opening moments, you capture the audience's attention and draw them into the message. You could use this time to ask a provocative question, find common ground, or create tension.
- **Body.** Most of your time will be spent here. You'll unpack the meaning of a text, present relevant information, and explain the main idea.
- **Illustrations.** These are the windows in the sermon. They shed light on the topic and help people understand. The teaching of Jesus is filled with interesting stories and illustrations.
- **Application.** Helping people understand the text and apply it to their lives is an important task. Because the Word of God is timeless, every good message has modern and relevant application to today's audience.
- **Conclusion.** Once information is presented, illustrated and applied, it's time to land the plane. How you conclude your talk and call people to action is important.

Why is this important? Because a good sermon is not a collection of random words, sentences and paragraphs. It has a clear structure and moves along at a healthy pace. It has a destination and a direction.
Every message should have a central theme or a main subject. You can have a topic without having a point.

### TWO TYPES OF MESSAGE OUTLINES

There are many types of sermons, and each different type lends itself to a different kind of presentation. Here are two main outlines:

1. **Deductive:** Idea presented early (during the introduction) and the body supports it. This type of sermon outline takes people on a journey that unpacks the main idea.

2. **Inductive:** Build a case for your message through the introduction and body and present the idea during the conclusion. This type of sermon outline builds suspense and tension and ends with the main idea or action step.

### GETTING STARTED

Assuming you’ve heard from God and have a general direction for your sermon, let’s get started. If we were in the room with you and personally coaching you through how to craft your message, here are the questions we would ask.

1. **What is my message about?** Every message should have a central theme or a main subject. You can have a topic without having a point.

2. **Why is it important?** You might know why it’s important to you, but why is it important to your congregation? What’s at stake?

3. **What do I want them to do?** Great sermons don’t just present important information…they lead people to action. Do you have a clear and compelling action step?

4. **What is the single most persuasive idea?** I have a topic, but do I have a point? If you can’t summarize your idea for Twitter, keep working. The best ideas are short and memorable.

Before you write a sentence, paragraph or an outline, answer those four questions. Those questions don’t need quick answers; they need prayerful answers.

### A FRAMEWORK FOR THE MESSAGE

With answers to those four questions in hand, it’s time to start laying out the message. I’m going to give you a framework for a message that works in most circumstances. This isn’t meant to be a fill in the blank template for every message, but it’s a general framework that has worked time and time again to help organize content and ideas.

Let’s think of your message in three boxes.

1. **The first part is the INTRODUCTION.**

During the introduction, you must answer the question: Why is this important? And when you set out to answer that question, it’s got to be deeper than why it’s important to you. Sometimes, things
To the listener, the most important thing is why they should listen.

that are important to the communicator are not important to the congregation. Just because you’re passionate about something doesn’t mean your audience will be passionate about it.

It’s also not important to everyone because it’s in the Bible. Of course, the Bible is the Word of God and all sermons must be based in the Scripture, but everyone in your congregation will not automatically listen to something because it’s in the Bible.

The introduction is the proper place to build tension and find common ground.

In these first, important minutes, you’re not talking to an audience, you’re talking to a single mom, a teenager, a skeptic, a committed Christian man, and more. How will you find common ground with them? How will you relate?

To the preacher, the most important thing is the bottom line. To the listener, the most important thing is why they should listen.

How will you build tension during the introduction? Tension gets someone to lean in. Tension is what engages someone. When you tap into tension, the person sitting in the audience wants you to keep talking. Instead of thinking, “how much longer is this?” they are nodding their head in agreement and hoping you’re going to answer the questions they are thinking.

So here’s box one.

- Why is this important?
- Here’s why you need to listen!
- If you don’t listen to this, you forfeit something. There is something at stake.
- I need to convince you that the next few minutes are worth the price of your attention.
- I am not the hero of this story. You are.
- I want to create common ground. A story is a great way to do that.
- A story that says, “We share something in common.”
- There is a problem or challenge that we share, and we’re about to discover the solution, together.

The introduction to any message is important, because the first five minutes often determine the effectiveness of the next thirty. It’s so important, we’re going to dive deeper into this topic.

2. The second part of your message is THE ANSWER.

If you’ve done a good job during the first five minutes, the congregation is ready for you to answer the question you’ve asked or resolve the tension you’ve created. This section is really the meat of your message.

In this section, you need several things:
**You need to unpack the Scripture.** Your opinion might be interesting, but what God says in his Word has eternal implications. During the meat of your message, you need to carefully explain the Scripture in a way people can understand.

One of our core convictions is that sermons should be Bible based. It’s not our job to share opinions, but to communicate God’s truth. What God says in His Word is more important that what you think.

**You need a memorable bottom line.** In the resource vault, we’ve given you a BOTTOM LINE WORKSHEET that will help you craft memorable bottom lines. A bottom line is the big idea. It’s the main and memorable point of the entire message. We will spend time on this in Module two, but the worksheet will help you get started if you’re ready.

**You need stories and illustrations.** As you unpack a passage of Scripture, you’re connecting it to the bottom line. As you repeat your bottom line a few times in a few ways, you’re illustrating it with stories. You’re looking for ways to show it, not just say it. You need to clearly tell people why they MUST believe the bottom line.

So here’s box two.

- I am now going to begin to unpack the solution to the tension in the introduction.
- This is a great place to introduce the bottom line.
- I am going to repeat the bottom line over and over again from this point forward.
- How can I illustrate the bottom line?
- How can I show the bottom line in addition to saying it?
- I’m going to reference the problem in the introduction and talk about why this solution is the answer, and why they MUST buy into this.
- Here’s why. Here are results.
- Don’t you want to be a part of this?
- That’s what I’m inviting you into.
- We’re in this together.

3. **The third part of your message helps people IMAGINE.**

As your message comes to a conclusion, it’s time to share the vision. Vision casting isn’t just for building projects or launching new initiatives, it’s something you must do in every sermon.

As you’ve explained a passage of Scripture or unpacked a Biblical principle, you must get people to imagine how their lives, their world, their jobs, their kids, and their faith would be different (and better!)
Vision casting is something you must do in every sermon.

if they accepted your proposition.

Not only should you drill home the bottom line, you need to show people what life would look like if the idea you’ve presented became reality in their lives.

So here’s box three:

- Imagine what this would look like if it became a reality in our lives.
- Repeat the bottom line.
- I am now going to share a story that illustrates this.
- After the story I’m going to reinforce the bottom line and then tell them what they can do this week to act on this.

These three boxes…the introduction, the answer and a call to imagine make a great framework for any message. Whether you’re teaching through six verses in Colossians or continuing a series on relationships, these guiding principles can make your message stronger.

It’s important that you find a rhythm, not ruthlessly follow a prescribed sermon outline, even the one we’re presenting. Preparing and preaching a message is both a personal and a spiritual task. Thinking through these three boxes might help you craft your message in a way that leads people to follow Jesus.

That’s a simple framework for the message, and we will spend a lot of time during this program diving into these principles. But let’s turn our attention to your weekly routine and see if we can’t inspire your effectiveness and save you time.

**A FRAMEWORK FOR THE WEEK**

Pastors wear many hats. At times, you’re a counselor. Others, you’re an executive. You might even be a janitor. A typical day might not be typical at all. You lead a staff, meet with volunteers, handle administrative details, encourage people, respond to email, serve your community and more.

It’s easy to understand how one of your most important tasks – preparing and delivering a weekly message – gets pushed to the end of the line. It’s easy for the urgent can push out the important.

Life isn’t rigid, and there are times when we must go with the flow and we should always follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. But, what if you had a framework for message prep that not only worked for you, it yielded better results?

Imagine with me for a minute. What would happen if…

- You didn’t cram for your message like you crammed for a test.
- You were able to work on your message over time instead of at the last minute.
• You were able to relax on the weekend, instead of being stressed about what you are going to say.
• You were able to sleep better on Saturday night.
• You were able to get the most important things done earlier in the week.
• You had margin in your schedule so you could better respond when the Holy Spirit set up divine appointments.

All of these things are possible if you will adopt framework for your message prep. What if you week looked like this?

**Monday: Answer the Questions.**

On Monday, what if you prayed over and could clearly articulate your answers to the four questions I asked earlier?

1. **WHAT IS MY MESSAGE ABOUT?** Every message should have a central theme, but a message is more than a topic. You can have a topic without having a point.

2. **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?** You might know why it’s important to you, but why is it important to your congregation? What’s at stake?

3. **WHAT DO I WANT THEM TO DO?** Great sermons don’t just present important information… they lead people to action. Do you have a clear and compelling action step.

4. **WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST PERSUASIVE IDEA?** I know you have a topic, but do you have a point? If you can’t summarize your idea for Twitter, keep working. The best ideas are short and memorable.

Every Monday, work through your upcoming topic and answer those four questions.

**Tuesday: Build the boxes.**

Create the rough outline for your upcoming sermon using the three boxes we talked about. Write or place content in these three boxes.

1. The introduction  
2. The answer  
3. Imagine

**Wednesday: Write a draft.**

With a firm answer of the important questions, plus a build out of the boxes, it’s time to write a draft. Some people prefer to write detailed outlines and others are manuscript writers. No matter your preference, carve out time to write the bulk of your message.

**Thursday: Make it better.**

Ernest Hemmingway said the first draft of anything is terrible. Actually, he used more colorful language, but his point is spot on.

Too many times, pastors preach their first drafts, and
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that isn’t the best draft. But since you wrote the bulk of your message on Wednesday, you’ve got a whole day to make it better.

Look for better stories. Search for an object lesson. Run your bottom line through the BOTTOM LINE WORKSHEET.

Work on transitions. Connect the dots. Find a prop. Make it better.

Friday: Say it out loud.

Most people don’t do this, but there’s incredible value in practicing your message out loud. Maybe you do this in the car, or maybe the mirror. It’s weird, but it works. Say things out loud.

If you don’t currently do this as a part of your preparation process, give it a try for a few weeks.

Saturday: Leave it.

If you’ve followed this process, then it’s Saturday and it’s time to relax. Leave your message alone, at least for the majority of the day. You might read it over at night before you go to sleep, but for the most of the day, let it rest and let it simmer.

Let your message work on you for a while before you stand and deliver it to the congregation.

Sunday: Preach it.

It’s amazing to preach a message that wasn’t finished at the last minute. It comes across as something you’ve lived rather than something you’ve written.

Next Week: Look back.

Evaluating your message is a crucial part of growing as a communicator and leader. It’s so important, we’re going to spend an entire month on this as a part of the Preaching Rocket coaching program.

Frequently Asked Questions

All of the questions are personal, so the answers aren’t prescriptions but thoughtful insight to help you process.

How much time should I devote to sermon preparation?

Preaching is probably not your only responsibility. You might also be tasked with leading a staff, making visits, administering details of the church, and more. But preaching God’s Word is probably your most important task. Even if you don’t believe it’s the most important thing you do, it’s the most visible.

For that reason, you should devote a significant amount of time to preparing your sermon.
According to a Lifeway Research study in 2012, preachers are spending more time in sermon preparation than they were a decade ago. Here is the average time spent in sermon prep each week:

- Less Than 5 Hours — 8%
- 5 to 7 Hours — 23%
- 8 to 10 Hours — 25%
- 11 to 15 Hours — 23%
- More Than 15 Hours — 21%

According to Lifeway, pastors in smaller churches spend less time in sermon preparation, likely due to the bi-vocational nature of many pastors in such churches.

How long should a message be?

We recently conducted an informal experiment. We downloaded the ten latest episodes of the ten most popular Christian sermon podcasts on iTunes. The average individual sermon length across all of those preachers and all of those messages was 38 minutes and 40 seconds.

Longer is not always better. For example, Abraham Lincoln was not the featured speaker at Gettysburg. Another speaker (you’ve probably never heard of him) also spoke that day. Lincoln delivered a 278-word address in just over two minutes, even though he had the opportunity to speak for two hours.

In general, a shorter time frame will force you to prepare better and communicate in a more direct way.

Should I preach with an outline, notes or a full-manuscript?

The more you're prepared, the less you will need in front of you. If you’ve successfully internalized the message, you won't need to rely on a lot of notes.

Most preachers do have some notes or a rough outline in front of them as they work through their sermon. You could write down key quotes or trigger words. Others write delivery tips like “slow down”, “repeat” or “make eye contact” right in their notes.

Though you probably don't want to have a full manuscript in front of you while you're speaking, you might find it helpful to write it. A manuscript is helpful for archives and sharing.

The important thing here, as is with many of these issues, is that you find a rhythm that works for you and helps you devote adequate time to preparation.