Various Scriptures *How to Eat a Sermon: The Menu*

***My Daddy can Outpreach your Daddy***

There is a story of three little boys who were sitting around bragging about their fathers. You know, saying stuff like: "My daddy can beat up your daddy" and "My pa is smarter than your pa."

Eventually they got around to the one measure of greatness that matters in today's world: money. One little boy, whose father was a doctor, said, "My daddy makes $60 an hour just for looking at people without any clothes on."

Another little boy, whose father was a lawyer, said, "That's nothing, my daddy makes $120 an hour just for sitting at his desk."

The third little boy, whose father happened to be a preacher, said, "You think that's a lot, my daddy talks for 15-minutes and it takes four men to collect all the money!"

For the jaded, that's what preaching has become, a 15-minute (or 30 minute) fund raising speech in order to run the rest of the church's programs. The world has seen too many preachers on TV and elsewhere for whom the bottom line has been the bottom line.

On the other hand, complaints have arisen that church is boring, or that it is not relevant. And so, attempts have been made to change preaching...to make it more exciting or to make it more practical. The results have ranged everywhere from drive-thru churches where an entire service is conducted in 15 minutes and the worshippers don't even have to leave their cars; to “progressional dialogue” sermons where the congregation participates in the preaching in a sort of town hall style discussion; to more "traditional" looking sermons which consist more of jokes and stories than any sort of serious examination of scripture.

***Mistaken Notions and Wrong Expectations***

We are in a series right now called “How to Eat a Sermon”. I’m preaching about preaching because preaching is an important part of the life of the church. Week after week we gather here to listen to the proclamation of God’s Word. But we don’t think that much about why we do it. It’s easy to think, “We have a sermon because that’s what churches always do” But that’s not a good enough reason to do anything.

So we’re using the image of food. That’s one of the Bible’s own metaphors for itself. And I’m suggesting to you that the weekly sermon is an important part of our spiritual diet. And it’s important because the sermon is an explanation of God’s Word, which is one of the primary ways God wants to communicate with us.

And this week’s sermon is called “The Menu” because I’m going to give a list of ideas about what preaching is. Today we are going to look at some common ways that people think about and evaluate sermons.

I do not mean to say, however, that each of these options is equally valid. Usually, when you go into a restaurant and look at a menu, the idea is to pick the whatever meal is most appealing to you. One person might choose a salad while another might go for the burger and fries. By calling this sermon “the Menu” I am not suggesting that we walk into church and pick the approach to preaching that appeals the most to our tastes. Rather, I am suggesting we need to identify mistaken notions of preaching so that we will better understand what preaching really is.

I’m going to give you a list today, and it will be a list of mistaken notions about preaching. I want to give you five things that preaching is NOT. These are common ideas about preaching, but I’m going to suggest that if they are our main idea about preaching, they fall short. Five things that preaching is not, and then I’ll give you my definition of preaching at the end.

***Preaching is not Entertainment***

First, **preaching is NOT entertainment**. The main goal of preaching not to make you laugh or move you to tears.

We live in a world of multi-media entertainment. We are a culture that puts a high priority on our leisure time. The movie, television, and video game industries are multi-billion dollar cash cows. We are accustomed to the very best in entertainment, and if we don't get it, we switch the channel.

We also now get church on TV and church on radio and church on the internet. The problem with that is that as soon as you put anything on a screen it becomes entertainment. That's the nature of the medium.

Moreover, with our cars, we do not think twice about driving 20 to 30 miles to go to a church. If the preacher in one congregation doesn’t hold our attention, we’ll drive to the one down the street, or in the next town, to find a preacher who does.

So suddenly, with all these various churches and all these preachers competing for the same market, the pressure is there to deliver something on the same level as the church on TV, or the church in the suburbs. The pressure is there to entertain.

I am not trying to excuse boring preaching. I think the Bible is an exciting book, I think the gospel is the most exciting story that anyone can ever hear, and preaching which is dry, lifeless and boring does not do it justice. But once the priority of a preacher becomes entertainment rather than faithful proclamation of the Word, the sermon has become something other than preaching.

A friend of mine gave me a great quote, though he could not tell me where he had gotten it. He was pretty sure it was a statement of one of the 17th century English Puritan preachers. The quote goes like this: "We have gone from telling the old, old story to telling stories."

Think about that: replacing the old, old story of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love, with mere stories. Could we be any more shallow? And if that could be said of the 17th century church, how much more true is that of us here in the 21st century?

This replacement of preaching with entertainment cannot be blamed on preachers alone. We are a consumer culture. We comparison shop for our food, for our cars, for our homes, for our entertainment, and for our churches. If the preacher is not making us laugh enough, or not telling enough stories, or just plain not entertaining us, we don't hesitate to find a church or a preacher who will. If all else fails, we can watch the preachers on the Web.

Last week, we looked 2 Timothy 3 and 4. I think it is appropriate this week to go back to some of those same verses. **2 Timothy 4:3-4:**

**3**For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. **4**They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

We need to be careful that we do not get “itching ears.” We need to be careful that we are not just looking for preachers who are good at telling a story and know how to make us laugh. More important is whether the preacher is proclaiming “sound doctrine.” The truth of the message is more important than the skill with which it is delivered.

And so, as we try to define what preaching is, and what it is not, one of the first things we need to set straight in our minds is that preaching is not entertainment. Preachers are doing their congregations a disservice when they make entertaining them their first priority, and a congregation does its preacher a disservice when it judges him or her primarily on entertainment value.

I’m not trying to be boring. I try to put my sermons together with care, and I try to include humor where appropriate and tell interesting stories that illustrate the concepts in the Bible. But I’ll be the first to admit, coming to church on Sunday morning is not going to be as entertaining as watching an episode of *America’s Got Talent*. I’m not as funny as Jimmy Fallon. Coming to church isn’t going to be as dramatic as going to a movie. That’s not the point. And if that’s how we evaluate a sermon, we are doing it a disservice.

***Preaching is not Moral Lessons***

Second, **preaching is not moral lessons**. The main goal of preaching is not to tell you how to behave better.

We are a very practical culture. We want to know the "bottom line." We want to know: what is the best way to live our lives and how can we do it in a few easy steps. So often, then, our preaching becomes a sort of how-to guide, filled with moralisms that can be essentially boiled down to: "Be good, be nice, and tell the truth." Instead of preaching about God, we get sermons on how to be like David or how not to be like the Pharisees.

We want to have the "Seven Steps to raising a Happy, Healthy 7 year-old." We want the "12 Habits of Effective Living." The "3 Principles of Exceedingly Happy Marriages."

But Christianity cannot be reduced to moralisms. It is not less than our moral behavior, but it is certainly more. The Bible is not "God's Handbook of Hints for Happy Living," it is His revelation of Himself.

The church is not a self-improvement center, it is a temple. We are called to contemplate what God has said, to meditate on who He is as He has revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ. It is as we encounter Him through His revelation that our lives are transformed.

Consider Isaiah, and his vision of the throne room of God in Isaiah 6. It seems like I reference this passage quite a bit:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted,seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2**Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. **3**And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
    the whole earth is full of his glory.”

**4**At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

There are no moral lessons to be gleaned from that experience. Isaiah did not return to the Israelites with 6 points of application springing out of that encounter.

Isaiah did not apply his vision of God, it transformed him. As he witnessed the holy, holy, holy LORD God Almighty Isaiah's life was changed forever. Ray Ortlund Jr. writes:

That is our aim in preaching--to take people up out of this vulgar world, with which they are entirely too familiar, and lift them up into the presence of God through the expository unveiling of his glories, so that the ministry of the Word becomes a mystical encounter with God himself. When the Bible opens up to us in this supernatural way, we do not apply it, it applies us.

Now, don't get me wrong. The Bible does have a moral standard to which we are accountable, and one of the tasks of preaching is to call people to live more holy lives, but we cannot allow preaching to be reduced to that alone. Christianity is more than just a set of rules to be followed, it is a relationship with the living, eternal God.

Besides that, too much emphasis on what we need to do to make ourselves better people entirely misses the thrust of the Christian message. Christianity is not a “self-help” religion. We do not get right with God by acting smarter or trying harder. We are saved only by God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Bryan Chapell writes:

A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian even if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behaviors. By ignoring the sinfulness of man that makes even our best works tainted before God and by neglecting the grace of God that makes obedience possible and acceptable, such messages necessarily subvert the Christian message…Moral maxims and advocacy of ethical conduct fall short of the requirements of biblical preaching.

Preaching is not moral lessons. Sermons which sound like self-improvement manuals miss the heart of the Christian gospel.

***Preaching is not a Pep-Talk***

Third, **preaching is not a pep-talk.** The main goal of preaching is not to make us feel better about ourselves.

We live in a society where "self-esteem" and "positive affirmation" are buzz-words. We are careful not to step on anyone's toes, we want to build people up, encourage them, not tear them down. This is reflected in much of our preaching. It is not uncommon today to hear preachers who proclaim the secret to “living your best life"--a politically-correct, psychologized sort of theology which basically says you can do whatever you believe you can do.

To me, that sort of preaching resembles a pep-rally. 20 to 30 minutes of rah-rah encouragement designed to make people feel better about themselves and to charge them up for the week ahead.

Unfortunately, much of the Bible is not designed to make us feel better about ourselves. In fact, much of it is clearly intended to make us feel very uncomfortable about ourselves. Eugene Peterson quotes Erich Auerbach: “The scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.”

We do not come to church on Sunday mornings--at least we shouldn't-- to receive a pat on the back and a positive affirmation, so that we can go out the next week happy about who we are and what we are doing. We come to hear from God. We come to be challenged, convicted and changed. And for that to happen, sermons sometimes have to get decidedly negative.

If we go back to the Isaiah passage, we see that immediately after Isaiah’s vision of the “holy, holy, holy God” he receives his commission to speak on God’s behalf. But the message he is told to deliver is short on self-affirmations and encouragement. **Isaiah 6:8-10:**

**8**Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

**9**He said, “Go and tell this people:

“‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
    be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’
**10**Make the heart of this people calloused;
    make their ears dull
    and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
    hear with their ears,
    understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”

In this case, the Israelites were on a path of rebellion and idolatry. They were on the verge of destruction and exile. God wanted to call them back, but first He needed them to be aware of their sin and the consequences they were headed for.

Of course, there is room for encouragement in our preaching. Because after we confront the changes that need to be made, we find that God in His grace is prepared to change us. The gospel, rightly understood, is the most encouraging thing in the world.

But if we don’t confront sin first, we can’t understand the gospel correctly. There is no good news unless you first come to terms with the bad news. Preachers who only want to score points with their audience by telling them how good they already are do a terrible disservice to those people.

Preaching is not a pep-talk. A preacher’s job is not to make people feel good about themselves, but to bring them face to face with the reality of God.

***Preaching is not a Lecture***

Fourth, preaching is not a lecture. The main goal of preaching is not to increase your knowledge of the Bible.

We live in the information age. We have thousands and thousands of bits of information available to us in our libraries and via the internet. This is not a bad thing. In fact, it's wonderful. The world is probably as educated now as it has ever been.

But there is a danger that we can let our sermons deteriorate into lectures about the Bible and God rather than messages from God.

This is a problem which my preaching is prone to. I enjoy learning, collecting information. I like to put an outline up on the screen and then lecture on various points of theology. But I need to remember that Christianity is not about how much we can learn; it is about our relationship with Jesus.

It is possible to have large amounts of information about the Bible and about God and still not be in a right relationship with Him. The Pharisees are a prime example. They knew the law inside and out, and yet their hearts were far from God.

The Apostle Paul says this in **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. **2**For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. **3**I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. **4**My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, **5**so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.

Paul is not opposed to wisdom, but wisdom is not the point. Jesus Christ and him crucified. That’s the heart of the message. That’s the point. And so Paul says that he did not preach a single sermon that was not about Jesus.

I am not saying: “Do not study God’s Word.” I’m not saying that it is bad to increase your Bible knowledge. One of the biggest flaws in American Christianity is that we do not know our Bibles as well as we could. The reason I was so careful to cover the Bible's inspiration and purpose last week was so that we would be reminded of how important studying Scripture is.

But we need to remember that the point of preaching is not that everyone in the congregation will be able to pass a multiple-choice test on the Bible, but so that we will be drawn closer to God.

This is one of the reasons I do not print outlines of my messages in the bulletin. I do not want to give the impression that the main goal of a sermon is to get the outline complete. I have no problem with people who take notes if it helps them to focus (we leave space in the bulleting for that very purpose), but it is important to remember that the point is to know God, and not necessarily to know the three points of this week’s sermon.

Preaching is not a lecture. Coming to church on Sunday morning is different than attending a 9am college lecture on New Testament history.

***Preaching is not an Opinion Piece***

Then, fifth, **preaching is not an opinion piece**. The goal of preaching is not to tell you what the preacher thinks about God.

We live in a pluralistic, politically correct environment. We are told that there are no absolutes and that no one has the right to impose their worldview on anyone else. We hear that it is good for us that we believe what we believe, so long as we keep it to ourselves.

In this environment, Christian preaching is viewed as the opinion of the preacher. For those who share that opinion, the sermon is eagerly applauded and encouraged. But for those who do not accept it, the sermon is dismissed as easily as one dismisses the opinion that the University of Northern Iowa has the best college basketball program in America.

The standard response is: "Well, that's just your opinion." A response which effectively ends any objective sort of conversation.

With this worldview, the final arbiter is not truth, but likes and dislikes. If you like something the preacher says, then you accept it. If you do not like what the preacher says, then forget it. Maybe next week he or she will say something that is more appealing to you.

But preaching is more than just the preacher's opinion. Remember, we have already said that the source for preaching is the Bible. And if the sermon is drawn from Scripture, then it carries the authority of God's word.

The Apostle Paul addresses this in his letter to the Galatians. Different preachers were contradicting Paul’s message. But Paul wanted them to pay attention to the heart of the message. **Galatians 1:8-10:**

**8**But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! **9**As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse!

**10**Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Here is the advantage of having an objective, public record of God's revelation such as we have in the Bible. When a preacher claims that the Bible says something, we can all turn to the Bible together and check. If the text pointed to cannot bear the weight of the claims the preacher is making, then perhaps we can dismiss it as merely his or her opinion. But if the text does support what the preacher says, then the sermon goes from being merely the opinion of one person, to being the opinion of the inspired, authoritative, living, and powerful Word of God. One can still choose not to accept it, but one does so at one's own peril.

Christian preaching, when done right then, is not a mere opinion piece, it is the truth of God.

***What are You Listening For?***

So there you have a list of what preaching is not. All of these are things I have observed in American Christianity that I believe are mistaken ideas of what a sermon should be.

Let me emphasize that there is room for all of these things in preaching. Sermons can be entertaining and practical and encouraging and informative. Sometimes you do get a sense of what the preacher believes and thinks.

But preaching should never emphasize any one of these things at the expense of helping people to encounter God. In fact, my definition of preaching, which I’ll expand upon next week, is: ***Preaching is making clear God’s message on God’s behalf.***

Preaching is one of the unique ways God has chosen to share Himself with the world.

It is entertaining, it is informative, it does train us in right living, it does encourage us, and it includes opinions on who God is and what God does. But it is more than all that. It is the Revelation of God and His invitation to salvation to humanity.

Let me encourage you, then, to take this menu of ideas about preaching and use it as you evaluate the sermons you here. The next time you leave church and you think to yourself: “That was a good message” ask yourself why you feel that way.

* Is it because the preacher was particularly engaging and told a good story, or was it because you felt like you had a heard a message from God?
* Was it because the preacher gave you some helpful advice, or was it because you felt ushered into God’s presence?
* Was it because the preacher made you feel good about yourself, or was it because the message forced you to look at yourself in the mirror of God’s Word?
* Was it because the preacher gave you some factoids you’d never heard before, or was it because you were able to understand God’s Word in a deeper way?
* Was it because the preacher validated your already deeply-held convictions, or was it because the sermon challenged you with the truth of God?

Each of these things may help enhance your experience of listening to the sermon, but if the encounter with God is missing you probably haven’t heard a good message. And if some of these things are absent, but God’s message has been made clear on God’s behalf, then the sermon you have heard is a good one.