

Sermon Application and the Impact of the Disciplines

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There is a distinct connection between sermon application and spiritual disciplines. After reflecting on my seminary training, I lament a thorough exposure to sermon application. Sermon application is the portion of the sermon whereby listeners are encouraged to allow the Holy Spirit to have His way with them. *The purpose of this article is to emphasize to expository preachers the great benefit of practicing spiritual disciplines in order to make an effective sermon application.*

The topic of this article was birthed in the mind of an expositor with a passion to get application right. Perhaps other expositors would agree that we love the element of *explanation* in the sermon. We could wax eloquently all Sunday morning explaining our text. But our listeners have ears for application not explanation. They want biblical answers on how to raise a pure child in an impure culture. They are seeking the power necessary for overcoming real-life addictions, or ways to overcome their fear of death. James Majors put it this way, "Good application should spread from the high school to the hospital, the playground to the job downtown, life and death and everything associated with living while following in the footsteps of Jesus."¹ I propose that the secret to an effective application is deeply rooted in a routine of transparency before God that focuses on practicing the presence of God, or devotional theology.

The pastor more than any other is to be a man always under conversion-or as Paul

¹ James Edgar Majors, "The Foundation for Text-Accurate Applications in Text-Driven Sermons: Systematic Integration of Exposition and Application" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, , 2014), 70.

might have put it, "working out his own salvation"(Phil 2:12). This is a work wrought out by the Holy Spirit as the preacher submits himself under the spiritual disciplines. This awareness of daily, no hourly submission, might be referred to as *devotional theology*. Devotional theology is simply meant to convey the everyday awareness of applied theology. Better yet, it is the moment-by-moment practice of spiritual discipline.

The Puritan theology of preaching reflects a distinct connection between sermons and the character of the preacher. No other historical movement emphasized this more than the Puritans. The Puritan preacher made much of allowing the text to speak first to him and then to his people. In his preparation, the modern day expositor must rediscover this kinship with the biblical characters, and allow their faith struggles to be his struggles with faith, permit their joys to be his joys, and to allow their character flaws to italicize his character flaws. Then, the expositor is prepared to perch himself behind the sacred desk of God and transparently teach the Word of God with meaningful, relative life-application.

The Spiritual Disciplines: The Fuel for Life-Application

The New Testament shores up support for the argument that one can find biblical documentation for the spiritual disciplines. Paul instructs Timothy, "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Tim 4:13). Moreover, in 1 Timothy 1:15, "Meditate on these things, give yourself entirely to them, so that your progress may be evident to all." While the preacher is practicing what he preaches in his private life, his ears will be spiritually tuned to the Spirit who likewise is in touch with the spiritual needs of his congregation. As he meditates upon the text, the Spirit guides his thoughts to identify with the struggles of his hearers. How many of us from time to

time have heard, "Pastor, have you been reading my diary?" Our goal must be to hear those words more often! By exercising the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, the expositor can maximize the opportunity for life-impacting sermon application.

According to Donald Whitney, spiritual disciplines "are those personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth."² Prayer, fasting, silence and solitude, Bible intake, and journaling are some that Whitney features. Effective application is best shaped by the serious business of spiritual discipline. For the expositor to know his people better, he must know God better. Scripture confirms that what is practiced in private with God will manifest itself in public with people. Take for example practicing the discipline of solitude. Solitude is not just quiet time. Solitude is spiritual war. John Owen, a defining English theologian stressed the importance of solitude this way:

The heart must be guarded against the thoughts which gain advantage over it; the sources of temptation must be avoided, and a constraint in the mind towards duty fostered. The means of grace must be used to supply strength for an unwavering conflict with the devil.³

Solitude breeds spontaneity in the pulpit. Solitude in the study frees the preacher in the pulpit to step away from his notes and let the Holy Spirit transport his work to the ears of his congregation.

By wedding these two, *spiritual disciplines* and *sermon application*, the sermon becomes less predictable and more conversational. The expositor will be able to spiral back and forth from explanation to application, because he has one eye in the world of

² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 17.

³ William H. Goold, *The Works of John Owen Volume 7* (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850).

the text he is preaching and one eye in the world of his listeners. This sort of marriage I am proposing between the two must become part and parcel of our weekly writing. Let's begin our Monday morning preaching tasks with life-change in mind; first with the expositor, then our audience.