

A Preaching Resource for the Steward Declaration

Money, materialism, and consumption have god-like powers. Nothing else competes for our attention and threatens with such intensity to interfere with one's relationship with God, with self, with neighbor, and with all that God creates. The power of advertising can convince people to spend their lives and all the endowments given them by God in ways that are not life-giving. Therefore, effective preaching is just as strong, helping people clarify their values and life choices. Good preaching brings desire for faith to be lived out in one's daily decision-making. Such preaching requires an inner strength coming from personal renewal and clarity about the discipleship commitments in the preacher's own life. But many sermons are little more than management talks. Ministers are easily preoccupied with managing the church organization, finding volunteers, preparing for sermons, and caring for troubled people, and equating these with how one lives as a Christian. To do a better job of connecting Sunday to Monday, pastors do better by talking about the power of God-given endowments to do God's work in God's world when the opportunity presents itself in the biblical texts.

So how does one prepare to preach in this way? Let's start with how a sermon is put together.

Exegesis is the struggle to understand the biblical text. It is a struggle to answer the following questions:

- 1. What is the biblical writer talking about?*
- 2. What is the biblical writer saying about it?*

When the preacher or teacher can boil down answers to these questions with a tightly worded sentence, they can be confident in their understanding of the text. But it isn't a sermon yet.

The next stage of sermon preparation could be called the *exegesis of the audience*. To effectively communicate the message, an effective preacher understands the audience and its context. They consider the following questions:

- 1. Who will hear the sermon? Does anyone connect to the text in a unique way?*
- 2. How can I communicate God's message in a way they will be able to hear it?*

The next stage is that of **homiletics**, figuring out how to get the message across. Preachers or teachers who seek to answer the following questions:

- 1. Based upon my understanding of the text and the audience, what am I going to talk about?*
- 2. What am I going to say about it?*

When preachers or teachers boil down answers to these questions with a tightly worded sentence, they have the core of a message to communicate in sermon form.

Sermon Starters

The following are four sermon starters. These are not topical sermons. Rather, they are focused on biblical texts related to themes that distilled in the Steward Declaration. They do not remove the responsibility of the preacher to ask and answer the questions identified above. Rather, they point in a useful direction. Each starter is different in its style, with the intention to point the richness of how God's Spirit guides the preacher toward timely messages

1. Acts 4:32—5:11 - The story of Barnabas' generosity and Ananias and Sapphira's deception.

In answering the exegetical questions, perhaps the preacher settles on the sentence: *"As the early church dealt with money and possessions, some were motivated by a profound level of grace, while others were motivated by selfishness and a desire for recognition."*

In exegeting the audience, the preacher notes their congregation has a variety of business owners, one family of recent immigrants from Asia, three families experiencing unemployment, a dozen teenagers who are working at their first jobs, and fifteen retired couples. This congregation is largely lower middle-class, and it is clear many feel their purchasing power and economic lifestyles are declining. Hitting them over the head with a sermon on Ananias and Sapphira's deception might produce even more economic despair, and failure to be open to God's word. In preparing, the preacher asks how business owners will hear the scripture and the sermon, how those from different ethnic groups will hear this sermon, what might get a teen's attention, and how those who have much to give and those in great need will react to what they hear.

So, after exegeting the audience and working with the homiletic questions, the preacher chooses Acts 4:33 as the key verse and decides to preach on the stream of grace—how Christians who drink deeply of this stream find it flows through them to others.

Ultimately, the preacher decides to call three to five lay people known for their generosity, describing the plans for the sermon, and asking them to share one or two practical ways they demonstrate God's grace to others—popcorn fashion. These testimonies become the sermon's application. Their sharing becomes a realistic way of applying the text to life.

2. I Timothy 6:7 "We are spirits in a material world."

The musician Sting once recorded a song including the phrase *"We are spirits in a material world."* Sting may not have meant the same thing as Paul, who wrote, *"We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it"* (1 Timothy 6:7, NIV), but the idea is similar. We are more than seventy-some years of life-pumping heart, expanding lungs, and dividing cells. We are more than synapses, tendons, and an assortment of bladders. We have an eternal quality about us. If we serve our desires rather than making them servants of God's kingdom, then we cast off the divine likeness we carry and take up an ultimately futile chase. We take nothing with us. All we can do is cast forward into the lives of others and with God's purposes in mind.

An old Jewish saying teaches: "A person is born naked with hands grasping, but there is nothing in them. When they leave this life, their hands are folded over their chest, but there is still

nothing in them.” Likewise, the Christian who hopes in the promise of eternal life has the freedom to live detached from material gains. Indeed, material life can be lived with eternal purpose, and items like money and possessions can be harnessed for service in love for God, God’s creation, our self and our neighbor. Why participate in an idolatrous pursuit when such pursuits contradict the hope of Christianity?

3. **Isaiah 65:17-25** - God’s new society

The world around us experiences periodic breakdown and repair. Perhaps more seems broken to you now: COVID, political fights, global warming, a loss of civic, community and family fabric. The Hebrews repeatedly abandoned their covenant with the God of heaven for false gods and unrighteous living. At the end of the Old Testament era, the prophet Isaiah looks ahead to a new society that God creates. This new paradise is not a return to Eden’s innocence. Rather, it includes God’s deep-flowing grace to heal pain and *restore* the universe to its intended place. Isaiah describes God’s new society as:

Happy (Isaiah 65:17-19).

- God commands eternal gladness and rejoicing in the new creation (v. 18).
- The people who live there are a joy to behold (v. 18).
- The newly created Jerusalem brings delight. Weeping and crying are removed (v. 19).

Healthy (Isaiah 65:20).

Infant mortality disappears. Citizens of the new society enjoy complete and expanded life expectancies. To dream of a society where children do not die, where disease is absent, and where righteousness is rewarded with long life, is to picture paradise.

Just (Isaiah 65:21,22).

God creates a society where land is fairly distributed, where people can live in homes they build, and in which nobody fills their bellies with crops forcibly taken from another. Justice—especially with land use—is a value God created within this new society.

Full of Dignity (Isaiah 65:22-24).

The society God intends to create also grants dignity to people. God says, “My chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear” (NIV).

The society God creates provides fulfilling work for its people. There are no unfair labor practices. Nobody gets forced into jobs that destroy dignity.

People shall not labor as slaves for another, with no hope for the well-being and dignity of their descendants.

Those who try to seek God in this life often find communication hindered, but in God's new society all hindrances are removed.

Peaceful (Isaiah 65:25).

Natural enemies within the animal kingdom become the best of friends. Carnivores become herbivores. Dangerous serpents become as harmless as house pets. God's new society is peaceful.

4. Titus 3: 8 - God's extravagant love molds the Christian worldview

Because God's kindness, cleansing, anointing, and inheritance met us in our broken and needy state, Christians continue God's tradition of mercy. Because we take on God's character of extravagant mercy, we harness all our God-given endowments for this purpose. We support efforts to share God's extravagant love with other needy and broken people.

For instance:

·God shares the earth's blessings with all inhabitants (Luke 6:27-35; Matthew 5:45).

Our planet holds an abundant supply of water. The sun shines brightly. The earth is layered with topsoil and natural fertilizers. God doesn't grant these blessings to Christians only. All humans benefit from them. Our lives depend on this light, water, good soil, and warmth, far more than on lucrative job promotions, a larger house, or a child who cooperates with the rest of the household.

Jesus adds an interesting twist to this understanding:

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked' (Luke 6:27-35, NIV).

In Matthew's version, the teaching is even clearer: "[The Father] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45, NIV).

Jesus teaches that those who follow God are motivated to love like God does. God shows kindness even to ungrateful and wicked people. God's mercy shows up in well-distributed sunshine and rain. Christians, who understand God's kindness and mercy, will scatter their love just as generously. Sharing God's merciful love with all people is to be their distinction.