Lesson Plan & Study Guide

Effective Preaching
Part Three: Drafting an Outline

Working with Jesus

iFOLLOW

The iFollow Discipleship Series

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

Vervent

CENTER FOR CREATIVE MINISTRY

About the iFollow Discipleship Series
Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

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Effective Preaching, Part Three:
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This is the third in a series of five units.

Learning Objectives

1. How to understand structures of thought and design a sermon accordingly
2. How to fit the three core elements in a logical progression
3. What to leave in and what to leave out of a sermon
4. How to craft a sermon that can truly affect the lives of listeners

Content Outline

1. Understand the structures of thought
2. Make a map for the mind
3. Three core elements revisited
   A. The life question
   B. The biblical answer
   C. The life application
4. Three sermon design schemes
   A. The presidential soapbox
   B. The explorer's quest
   C. The text-led sermon
5. Designing your sermon to fit the task
6. Fitting a design to the text

Background Material for the Presenter

Structures are everywhere, though you rarely notice them. It's like watching a movie. You see the story but forget the screen it shows on. Each sentence you speak is a structure. When you whisper gossip, there is a structure to the way you tell it.

Your favorite sitcom keeps you watching because it is structured well. The biblical text, as we explored already, has a structure. The trick is to notice these structures so
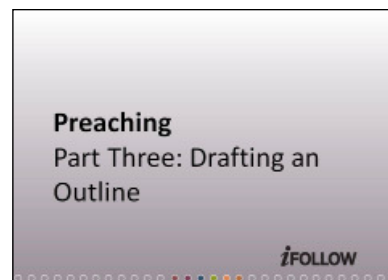
you can apply what you already knew, but didn't know you knew, to sermon crafting.

To cite another example, a grasp of structure makes the difference between a joke told well and one that falls flat. You have to allow time for the buildup, and the punch line must come at just the right moment.

Make a Map for the Mind

Sermons are more complex than jokes, and a good deal more edifying, but a good structure is still half the task. Your sermon can rise or fall on its structure. It is the map for the minds of your hearers. Without it, they'll get lost.

A pastor and his wife were traveling to a pastors' conference across the state from their home. They took an Interstate highway north from their home planning to catch another Interstate that would take them to the western side of the state. They were late due to a wedding the pastor had performed earlier that day. Then uncertainty set in. They could not recall if the highway they were on connected directly or if they had to take another highway for a short time to reach the Interstate going west.

Having no map in the car, the couple convinced themselves that the right choice was to get off on what they thought was the interconnecting highway. But they were both tired from the emotional drain of the wedding activities and missed the sign. Thirty minutes later, they realized their mistake.

Taking the next exit, they turned back. Only after backtracking quite a distance did they find a gas station where they could get a map. It showed, to their horror, that they had turned back just short of the road they needed. They arrived at the meeting but more than an hour later than if they had started out with a map in the car. Preaching good stuff without structure is like giving your audience all the roads they need but no map.

Three Core Elements of Sermon Structure

Although sermons take myriad shapes, there are structural elements basic to all good sermons. These elements include a guiding life question, a biblical answer, and at least one life application.

Shaping your sermon is the art of bringing the listener's world and the biblical world together. You begin in their world by raising a life question that hangs in the air of their

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world. Then, you strap on the gear and carefully lead them into the biblical world, where the biblical answer they need is waiting.

You can lead them because you have discovered the answer and know the trails. But the answer is not all they need. You must lead them back to their world, answer in hand, and show them how the answer solves the riddle of life—life application. This final step is a call to action, to live truth.

Which element receives the most attention depends on how much your audience already knows. For example, some issues are both perplexing and mysterious. The listener has a life question but doesn't know what it is. In this case, you might spend most of your sermon raising and defining the question.

At other times, the question is clear but the biblical answer is murky. If so, you should pour yourself into explaining the text. Then, there are the facts that people know but don't live by. These demand a sermon that leans toward life application.

But, be cautious—don't take anything for granted. Since every audience is diverse and people need reminders, develop all three elements in every sermon. Now, let us explore ways to do this.

 1. The Life Question—The first element of sermon structure is the life question. This question must be clear in your listener's mind before you give her the answer. The question is her reason to listen. It is better not to preach than to preach without it. But, the need for clarity does not always mean you should state the question right away.

Envision that question mark as a hook in your hand. Swing not just for the head but also the heart. Usually, the best way to hook the listener's heart is through a story they can feel. If the life question is, "Why do bad things happen?" you might tell of a heart wrenching tragedy from the news. Suddenly, that question mark hooks the heart. Then, the question matters and they crave an answer.

At this point, you might ask, "How can I be sure I can answer the question?" That's easy. You start with the answer and then find the question. This is where all that work you did in your anchor text begins to pay off. If you like to watch *Jeopardy*, this will make sense to you.

Alex Trebek says, "The answer is ... two pieces of bread with something between" and the contestant responds, "What is a sandwich?" Your study of the text has led you to its message. This is the answer. Now, you need the question. So, the question is chosen by the biblical answer you already have.

Take our practice example. The message of James 3:1-12 is that the heart of the speaker determines his words. Put directly, it says, "Wash the heart, not the mouth." The question must be one that is

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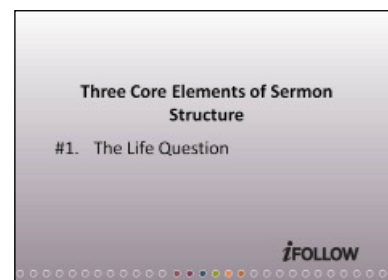
#1. The Life Question

answered by this biblical point. So the life question is, "How can I clean up my words?" or something to the same effect: "How can I stop yelling?" "How can I safely reprimand my children?"

Once the process is clear, it is very simple. Question: How can I clean up my words? Answer: Wash the heart, not the mouth. Through this process, we make the Bible point matter to the hearer.

2. The Biblical Answer—So far, we have searched the biblical world for truth, returned to learn which riddle it solves, and are poised to lead others to that truth. This brings us to the second element of sermon structure, the biblical answer.

We have already seen how to find the answer and we have found it; "Wash the heart, not the mouth." The task remaining is twofold: your audience must both hear it clearly and see it as biblical. This means leading them down the same trails you took to find it, minus the rabbit trails.

Show them the facts in the text that support its point. This way, you lead them to find it themselves. Make it clear that these biblical facts answer the life question.

This means two steps. First, repeat the question to keep them searching. Each fact in the text leads closer to the answer but repeating the question after you've laid each piece reminds the listener that the puzzle is incomplete. Second, explain how each piece relates to the question, what it says and what it doesn't. Stay on task and keep your audience with you.

In James 3:1-12, we've chosen to preach on the overarching message: "Wash the heart, not the mouth." It would have been fine to choose a smaller part of the text, like the part about teachers (verse 1) or the part about Satan using words to destroy (verse 6) but we chose, instead, to follow the whole discourse to its end.

Three Core Elements of Sermon Structure

#2. The Biblical Answer

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If we had chosen to speak about teachers, we might have tried to place ourselves in the shoes of a teacher or discussed all that Scripture says about teachers. If we had chosen to address Satan's use of words, we might have spent a good deal of time on the specific dangers of words in various situations. But, since we are preaching the punch line, we can afford to address these other issues only as far as they move us toward that punch line. This is an extremely important point. Some preachers try to cram every lesson a certain passage can possibly teach into one mega-sermon. There are several problems with this: they go on far longer than their listeners' attention spans, they use up material that could have kept them going for weeks on end, and they don't make any of these lessons clear.

A woman tells of watching a great movie on DVD. "It was so good that I did what I rarely do; watch the deleted scenes. What a mess. It was right to delete them. Though creative,
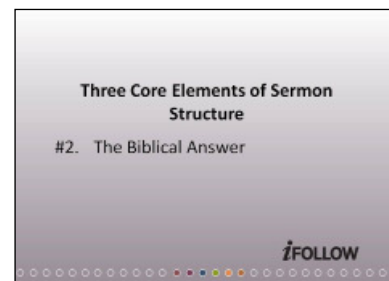
they missed the story. If left in, they would weaken the masterpiece." The same is true when you show too many facts from the text—the story gets muddled.

Stick to the plotline. It's like leading a crew of ten-year-olds through a maze of trails. There are lots of trails, all of them good for reaching their ends. But, the more side trails you wander down, the more kids you lose on the way.

3. The Life Application—The third element of sermon structure is life application. This is where you link the lives of Amram and Jochebed with those of Jeff and Cindy. It is the art of spanning the gap between Scripture and life. In terms of a drama, it is the emotional payoff, the part that moves the audience. In terms of adventure, we have found the truth in the biblical world and led others to find it, but still must lead them back to their world and show them what it changes.

Often, before this final step, the listener is convinced but unmoved. Take a common plotline, for example. The movie starts with a mystery man up to some murky business. The audience is not sure what to think. Is he evil or misunderstood? Then, a revelation of his love for the leading lady raises the stakes. Now, we must know whether to love him or hate him.
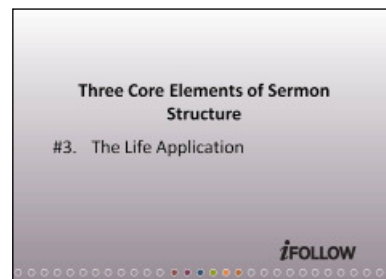
After a flurry of questions and revelations, all the players converge to unmask the characters. The man we thought was good takes a dark turn and the one hope lies with our mystery man. Will he save the girl or will all be lost? In a flash of cinematography, we finally see it; he is good.

Is this enough? Can the movie end here? No. We have answered the guiding question of the story, the first two sermon elements. But, if the story ends with the answer, it ends as a dud. It hasn't changed the girl's peril.

We hold our breath to see his goodness save her. We must watch the rescue. We must savor the closing kiss. A good sermon without application is like a good love story without the kiss. It's like a rescue story that ends before the rescue.

To make application, be specific. If the biblical answer says, "Put kids first," then tell your audience what that means. Give concrete examples, like, "Play with your kids one hour each day." Or, "Pray with your kids every night." Or, "Work less overtime."

Since your audience is diverse, visualize the life situations represented. Put yourself in each pair of shoes, even though some won't fit. Offer a practical suggestion for each group—singles, elderly, parents of young kids, parents of estranged kids, the happy, the sad, the committed, the wayward. Give each person a way to respond to the sermon, a step they can take to apply its message. Say something like, "You can apply this truth in one of the following ways…" and give a list of ideas.

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In James 3:1-12, the message strongly hints at application but it still leaves the girl un-rescued and the hero un-kissed. "Wash the heart, not the mouth" tells what to do (and what not to do) but does not tell how. It is not specific enough. Begin to think of how the message applies to each person differently. The real goal of this message is to put people in contact with God so he can wash their hearts. It is a call to deeper spirituality.

James has made an explicit diversion from the problem the reader first sees. The reader sees that she can't stop cursing her sister but James says that is not the real problem. He hints that the source, the heart, must change before words will—a point Jesus made before him (Matthew 12:34). So, your applications must address the state of the heart.

For the grandmas, who have never uttered a word more colorful than "cripes," the sin might be gossip? For teenage boys, the sin might be bad words. Whatever the case, name the sin (to raise awareness of need) and list ways to let God cleanse the heart. In this case, the classic spiritual disciplines (prayer, Bible study, meditation, etc.) give the best applications.

You might ask each person to make a card for their Bible that reminds them to pray, pray they will love their sister enough to stop cursing her or pray that God will help them hate dirty jokes. We might ask listeners to spend time with certain Scriptures that speak of heart transformation and give them a list of texts to read. We might ask them to meditate on the spiritual issues that make them speak ill, with pen in hand, so they can bring those issues to God. Almost any idea that is both specific and serves the sermon's message is fair game.

Three Sermon Design Schemes

There you have it. A sermon consists of a life question, a biblical answer, and life application. This three-part structure is all you need to build a clear sermon outline. With this core, instinct will probably bridge the gaps. Nonetheless, a word about structural variations may broaden your creative horizons. Preaching experts have catalogued thousands of structural schemes but this, too, is really quite simple. Three design schemes form the structure of most good sermons.

1. Presidential Soapbox—This is a straightforward approach. In a president's soapbox speech, there is little question what his point is, right from the start. He lays out his argument, complete with conclusion, and spends most of his time telling you why he is right. The virtue of this design scheme is its clarity. The listener gets the point. Its weakness is that curiosity dies. We know what he said, so why listen? If you give the biblical answer early in your sermon, you will need other elements to keep people listening. Good stories or compelling applications will do the trick.

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2. Explorer's Quest—The second scheme, the explorer's quest, does exactly the opposite of the presidential soapbox. You keep them guessing 'till the end. In this design scheme, the guiding question takes over. You guide the audience through a string of discoveries that lead them ever closer to that eureka moment when they find the biblical answer. The entire sermon still builds toward a single, simple point but the listener doesn't know how the pieces fit together until the end. Suspense is the strength of this scheme because it keeps interest. Its weakness is that it takes more work to keep your purpose clear. The audience needs constant reminders of what you are searching for (i.e., what question you seek to answer).

3. Text-led Sermon—The third scheme is the text-led sermon. This is my favorite. You simply pick up the story of the text and tell it. That means, after you document the logical steps, or scenes, of the text, you simply build your sermon from its outline. Paint the scenes, add a few illustrations, make practical applications, and you have a sermon. This is the easiest design scheme to preach without notes. As you preach through the text, it reminds you of illustrations, transitions, and the rest. The downside of this scheme is that the approach of your specific text may not fit your audience, and you must make sure none of the bright ideas that occur to you in route are rabbit trails, lengthening your sermon for no good point.

Design Your Sermon to Fit the Task

Don't choose one design scheme and snub the rest. These are tools in the shed. The task decides which tool is best. When a subject is complex, you need the clarity of the presidential soapbox scheme.

If your audience is hostile to the message and you need to convince them before they know it, use the explorer's quest scheme—it allows them to see the real issues before they sign you off.

And, if the text's structure answers well to these concerns, use it. Once you have used each design, feel free to combine and experiment. For example, an explorer's quest may turn presidential soapbox half way through.
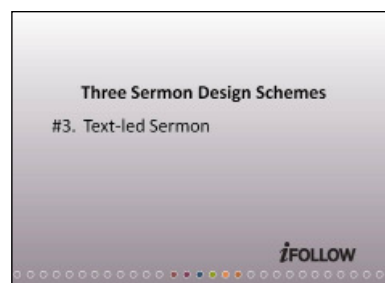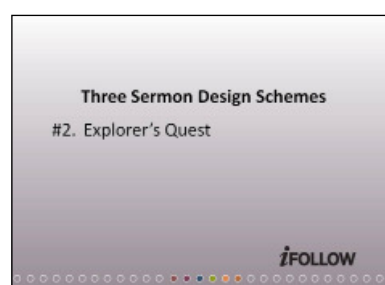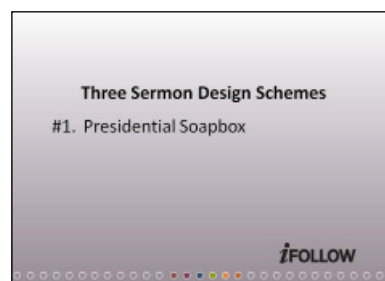
Fitting a Design to the Text

The structure of James 3:1-12 is most like an explorer's quest. The question of how to tame the tongue dominates the text and the answer comes at the end. Since the point is not complex, there is no reason to depart from the text outline.

Of course, James gives no modern applications but he gets us close. We can follow his development of the life question (How can I clean up my speech?), dig out the hidden answer (Wash the heart), and then get creative with applications. We have a text-led sermon.

Today we have looked at the three core elements in a sermon, and have looked at three design tools. We are well on our way to becoming great preachers.

Handouts in this Package

1. Three Sermon Design Schemes
2. Do It Yourself
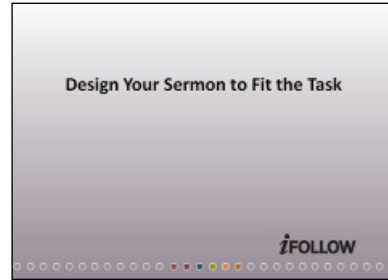
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Additional Resources

Bresee, W. Floyd (1997). *Successful Lay Preaching*. Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Cox, Sherman (2007). *You Can Preach: Seven Simple Steps to an Effective Sermon.* Open Source Books: www.archive.org/details/youcanpreach07

Craddock, Fred B. (1990). *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Erdman, Chris (2007). *Countdown to Sunday*: *A Daily Guide for Those Who Preach.* Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.

Jones, R. Clifford (2005). *Preaching With Power: Black Preachers Share Secrets for Effective Preaching.* Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Lowry, Eugene L. (2001). *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Robinson, Haddon W. (2001). *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, 2nd Edition.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Wibberding, James Richard (2006). *Learn to Preach Before Next Weekend.* Telford, PA: Big Fish Publishing, Inc.

Willimon, William H. (1994). *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Willimon, William H. (1992). *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Discussion Questions

1.   Why does a preacher need to "understand thought structures"? Can't one just preach the text and let the chips fall where they may? Explain your answer.

2.   What are some of the diversity factors in audiences that could or should change the way one preaches to them?

3.   Can you find examples in Jesus' and the apostles' ministries where they changed their styles to fit their audiences?

4.   Are different people sent to different audiences to begin with? In what ways is this true or not true in your experience? Are there ways we could facilitate this as an organization?

5.   Why should one know what to leave in or leave out of a sermon? How can one know which is which?

6.   Do you have a favorite among the three design schemes? Which one and why?

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Group Activities

Activity 1

Purpose: To practice outlining effectively.

Preparation: This is a very simple activity, requiring only places to write and materials with which to write.

Assignment: Divide the group into pairs or very small groups no larger than four. Ask each participant to write simple one-level outlines for a full-length sermon on their Anchor Texts. Then let them trade outlines with no verbal explanation. They will silently read through the other's outline and give feedback on the following questions:

1.   Is it clear? Can you see where it is going?

2.   Do you think you could preach from this outline (assuming you studied the text)?

3.   How long do you think it would realistically take to preach from this outline?

Participants may then give each other pointers and help in refining their outlines, if they wish.

Time: Allow a couple of minutes to divide up, and ten minutes to write the outlines. Then allow ten more minutes for trading feedback. Bring the group back together for ten more minutes of discussion and sharing.

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Activity 2

Purpose: To practice the three design schemes.

Preparation: You may ask participants to bring their notes from the three minute sermons they did in the last session, or they may use the same one or quickly choose another. You will need places to write, materials, and a timer. On three tables, put tent cards with one preaching design scheme on each. If you have more people than three tables can accommodate, you may double or triple the number, but have equal numbers of design schemes.

Assignment: Explain the tent cards and have everyone choose a table. Try not to let any one table have a big crowd, while another is sparse. Following the same rules (ten minutes prep time and precisely three minutes preaching time), each person will craft and preach another three minute sermon on their Anchor Text, using the design scheme at their table.

Time: Again, be strict. When the timer rings, the sermon is over, mid-sentence if necessary. Total time will depend on number, but you should be able to begin the preaching portion within 15 minutes of asking them to find a table. Then it's three minutes per person, and 15-30 minutes of sharing and discussion.

Debrief: Was it easier this time? Are you getting better and more comfortable distilling the essence of a Bible truth into a concise time frame? What are the difficulties, advantages, disadvantages?

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Handout 1

Three Sermon Design Schemes

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1. Presidential soapbox

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2. Explorer's quest

The explorer's quest does exactly the opposite of the presidential soapbox. You keep them guessing 'till the end. In this design scheme, the guiding question takes over. You guide the audience through a string of discoveries that lead them ever closer to that eureka moment when they find the biblical answer. The entire sermon still builds toward a single, simple point but the listener doesn't know how the pieces fit together until the end. Suspense is the strength of this scheme because it keeps interest. Its weakness is that it takes more work to keep your purpose clear. The audience needs constant reminders of what you are searching for (i.e. what question you seek to answer).

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Which one to choose?

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Handout 2

Do It Yourself

It is your turn again. Look at the outline you made of your practice text in the last session. Which design scheme—presidential soapbox, explorer's quest, test-led sermon—does it most resemble as written by the Bible writer? Could you preach it well through this design scheme? If so, look no further. Refine and touch up the outline you made in the last session. If not, organize its content to fit the scheme that best fits your audience.

Before the next session, write your sermon outline clearly, with verse references.

Make certain these three elements are clearly defined:

1. The life question

2. The biblical answer

3. The life application.

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