THE GREATEST TOOL IN YOUR TOOLBOX
Some mothers prefer to give birth naturally, enduring the pain for the benefit of the baby’s health or to honor the idea of motherhood. Others prefer to see the anesthesiologist, choosing to mitigate the pain as much as possible. That choice is extremely personal, and women have strong opinions.

Giving advice on sermon planning is a little like that. Every pastor has a personal process – whether it’s good, bad, effective or ineffective. Our goal is not to affirm your process or tell you it’s bad – it’s to give ideas and insights to make it better.

Before we dive into techniques, we need to give you two foundational principles.

PRINCIPLE #1: START WITH THE SCRIPTURE.

First of all, sermon preparation should start with the Scripture. Take a look at this list of the seven Preaching Rocket rules.

1. Start with the Scripture.
2. Keep it simple.
3. Make it portable.
4. Show it, don’t just say it.
5. Find common ground
6. Finish early in the week.
7. Preach with the end in mind.

See the first rule? Start with the Scripture.

When you deliver your sermon, it’s wise to start with the audience or yourself – to find common ground and build tension. But when you begin your sermon preparation, you always want to start with the Scripture.

A tall building is only built after the ground is sufficiently excavated. Structures must be built on solid foundations, even if it means sinking pillars deep into the bedrock below the ground.

In other words, dig before you build.

Before you write an outline, search for illustrations or create a call to action, you need to wrestle with the text of the Bible. Dig into the Scripture before writing your message.

Preach the message of the text, not a message from the text. If you preach clever messages derived from texts you will get lots of affirmation. If you actually preach the message of the text, and you preach it well, you will be a gem of inestimable value in the church! – Peter Mead
Sermon prep should start with the scripture, not with a graphic, song or someone else’s sermon. These might be helpful resources or provide content for illustrations, but they are not primary sources to replace the Bible. Don’t search the Scripture to find a text to back up a point you want to communicate; start with the text and build your message from that foundation.

“A man cannot hope to preach effectively without first having worked diligently and thoroughly through the biblical text,” writes John MacArthur in *Preaching*.

Whether you preach on topics or preach systematically through books of the Bible, your message should give priority to the text. In 2 Timothy 4:2, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy to “preach the Word.” In *Preaching*, Fred Craddock reminds preachers that studying the text is “an act of obedience” and cautions that our confidence in preaching with the arrogant confidence of personality but from a confidence born in study.

While today’s pastors often have other pastoral and leadership responsibilities, there’s no substitute for preparing and delivering a Bible based, Gospel-soaked message.

**PRINCIPLE #2: DON’T LOOK FOR SHORTCUTS**

The second foundational principle we need to discuss is about hard work. Too many times, we look for shortcuts.

The bulk of your preparation should be interaction with God’s Word. Resist the temptation to turn to the latest book or listen to a sermon on the same subject by one of your favorite pastors in an effort to find content. These are shortcuts to hearing from God.

Wrestling with a tough passage or staying focused on what God says in an age of constant information flow is hard work. It’s too easy to Google “sermon on ______” and go there. It’s too easy to head to a membership website full of other people’s sermons and start there.

Sermons that are true to the Bible require a great deal of preparation and study, so it is best to begin many weeks out.

Arnold Palmer, the famous golfer, once said, “I have a tip that can take five strokes off anyone’s golf game. It’s called an eraser.” His point was there’s no shortcut to reducing your golf score. If you want to get better, you need a coach and you need practice.

Have you ever purchased an “As Seen on TV” product? Many people buy these products, but very few people use them. People see how much time a product will save or how easy and action will be and make an impulse purchase. When they receive the product, they are usually disappointed, and the product winds up in the back of a cabinet or a storage bin in the garage. Shortcuts rarely work.

When it comes to preparing a sermon, don’t look for shortcuts. Embrace the process, and recognize the fact that hearing from God, crafting a message, and communicating with clarity is hard work.
“The temptation to find Internet sermons and shortcut sermon preparation poses a real challenge. After all, what pastor-preacher does not have an overloaded brain circuit, a full calendar and a host of people-needs calling for counsel, hospital visits or have another funeral sermon waiting?” writes John. D Duncan, pastor of First Baptist Church of Georgetown, Texas.

When it comes to sermon prep, there is no substitute for work. Downloading and preaching other people’s sermons is a shortcut that will not have long-term benefits. It’s a short-term fix that doesn’t honor God.

God’s Word is worthy of your best effort as a pastor. Your goal should not to be an average communicator delivering average messages. When you read the life of the Apostle Paul, you walk away with the idea that he was compelled to give his best, to not be put to shame by God. As a pastor, your goal should be to deliver the best sermon you can deliver.

When it comes to sermon prep, there’s also no substitute for time.

Dorthy Parker said the art of writing is applying the butt to the seat. Sermon writing is a little bit like that. You can attempt to shortcut the process, but there really is no substitute for time.

If you want to preach sermons that impact people for eternity, you must find time. That might mean saying no to other opportunities or letting someone else handle some responsibilities.

I talked to a pastor who was struggling to find time to prepare his messages because of other pastoral responsibly on his plate. In addition to preparing the sermon, he also had to print the handout and the entire church bulletin. This task ended up taking a couple of hours each week.

It may sound radical, but there’s no rule that says you have to have a bulletin. In this scenario, I’d argue that extra time devoted to sermon preparation is more important than printing a handout. Just don’t do it. If you can’t find someone else to handle this responsibility, go without a bulletin. Eternity is not going to be impacted by church bulletins, but preaching the living, active Word of God has the potential to change lives.

Devote time to your sermon because the longer you have to let it sink into your heart, the more authentic and effective it will be.

Your sermon needs to cook in a crockpot not a microwave, and that takes time.

With those two foundational principles understood, let’s turn our attention to how to study the Bible for preaching.
FOUR STEPS TO BIBLICAL SERMON PREPARATION

Step 1: Read the text.
If you’re preaching through passages of the Bible in sequential order, you already know where you’re going. If you’re preaching through a topical series, prayerfully choose a main passage. Once you’ve selected a main text, it’s time to get to work.

First, read the text out loud.
Researchers consistently tell parents that reading out loud to their children has beneficial impact on their vocabulary and memory. It’s fun and educational to read to your children. But the benefits of out-loud reading don’t stop when children grow up.

There are many benefits to reading out loud. Studies have shown that reading out loud actually increases comprehension. When you read a Bible passage out loud, it forces you to slow down, since you can read faster in your head. Slowing down and interacting with a passage helps you understand the meaning.

Secondly, read the text from multiple versions.
As you start to read and think about your main passage, read from several transitions. Choose a scholarly, word-for-word translation like the ESV. This is an extremely accurate, carefully researched translation. But you will also find it helpful to read alternate translations, or thought-for-thought translations like the New Living Translation. A paraphrase like The Message might help you understand the text.

Third, summarize the text in your own words.
After you’ve read the passage several times from at least two translations, you might find it helpful to take out a sheet of paper or open up a blank document and summarize the passage in your own words. In school, summarizing something showed the teacher you understood the meaning. Likewise, when you summarize the text in your own words, you help it sink into your soul.

Fourth, read the text in context.
After you’ve read the passage and can summarize it effectively, it’s time to branch out.

You need to read the context surrounding the text. This is really important. If I handed you a novel, you wouldn’t open it to page 200 and start reading. You wouldn’t make assumptions about the plot or meaning from a couple of paragraphs in the middle of a book. The same is true for the Bible.

Every Bible passage must be understood in context, because a failure to understand the context could lead to a misinterpretation of the text. Here’s a common example.

Many pastors and worship leaders have referenced Matthew 18:15-20 in a corporate worship setting or a small group environment. This passage says “where two or three or gathered, God is in the midst.” It’s commonly talked about in church services or Bible studies to talk about how the presence of God is with people as they worship or study.

But if you read the context of this passage, it’s all about church discipline. It’s actually about kicking people out of the church! The context of this passage gives it a different meaning. While it’s true that God is present in a church service or a Bible Study, using this passage in this way isn’t accurate. The context matters.

The old adage is true: Text without context is pretext.
Fifth, outline the text.

As you come to understand the meaning of the text, you might find it helpful to outline the text. This isn’t a sermon outline or a communication tool, but another way to understand the meaning of the original passage.

It’s also worth noting that you might find it helpful to carve out a set time in your weekly schedule and find a specific place to do your study.

There are many helpful books written on how to exegete or study the Scripture. *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*, by Gordon Fee is a great starting point. I also recommend a 2-hour seminar from Matt Chandler and Josh Patterson called “How to Study the Bible.” You can find this at thevillagechurch.net.

Step Two: Understand the Text

The next step in studying the Bible for preaching is moving from reading the text to studying the text. We’re talking here about interpretation. The seminary word for this is hermeneutics. It’s the science of interpreting the Bible. James A. Sanders defines hermeneutics definition as “interpretive lens[es]” through which one reads the Bible.

“Trying to apply a text you haven’t understood well is like hitting a nail at an angle. You can put all the raw strength behind it that you want, but it’s never going to go in clean,” writes Mark Dever in *Preach*.

As a preacher, you need to know what the text says but you also need to know what it means. Dr. Tony Merida, a preaching professor at Southern Seminary calls this “responsible interpretation.” What the text meant to the original hearers should shed light on what it means for us today.

The Bible is a mysterious and spiritual book. But we need to understand that it was written at a specific time, often to a specific audience. Paul’s letters to the churches at Ephesus, Philippi and Thessalonica were actually letters. They were received by a group of Christians and read out loud.

As someone read the letter of Paul to the group, the people were confronted with the meaning of Paul’s words. The specific message was delivered to a specific people.

In God’s wisdom, these writing were inspired and preserved for us, and they still have meaning today. As we seek to understand the meaning of the text, we cannot negate the historical value of a passage. In order to provide responsible interpretation, we have to work hard to know what was happening then, not just what people say now.

When you interpret Scripture for a modern audience, you will undoubtedly come in contact with difficult passages. I don’t know if this makes you uncomfortable, but there are passages in the Bible that are confusing and hard to understand.

In these moments, use other passages to illuminate the text in question. Let the clear passages shed light on the unclear passages.

Dr. Nelson Price writes: If in studying Scripture there is a verse the meaning of which is cloudy, turn to a text on the same subject which is clear and interpret the unclear one in light of the clear one. When a passage standing alone seems to have one or two meanings always accept the one in harmony with other texts.

A good practice is to interpret Scripture with Scripture. Jesus did this when he was tempted by Satan after spending 40 days fasting in the wilderness. Satan actually quotes Scripture to him, but Jesus responded with Scripture as well, quoting Psalm 91:11.
Much damage is done by preaching one verse out of context or failing to interpret passages with others. H.B. Charles, Jr. warns young pastors: “If your interpretation of a passage is not found elsewhere in the Bible, you’re interpreting it wrong.” This quotation speaks to the fact that Scripture is its own best commentary.

This article from J.I. Packer is an excellent resource on the interpretation of Scripture.

**Question the Text**

In college, I majored in English Literature, a degree that doesn’t have much practical use in the real world. However, I did learn to think critically about writing. I learned to ask basic questions to determine what was really happening.


These common questions helped me understand British fiction a little better, though I confess, I’m still not a fan.

When it comes to understanding the text, questions still come in handy. As you read and work through a passage, ask key questions. Here are some helpful questions that might help you understand Scripture better.

a. Is there a command to follow?
b. Is there a promise to cling to?
c. Is there a characteristic of God?
d. Is there a principle to live by?
e. Is there an example to learn from?

Working through these questions as you study a text for a sermon can help you understand the meaning. And when you understand the meaning of the text, you’ll be better equipped to preach God’s message to God’s people.

H.B. Charles Jr. begins his sermon preparation process by opening up a blank document on his computer and simply writing observations from the text. At this point in his study, he’s simply looking to learn what the passage says. He calls this “sanctified brainstorming.”

**Step 3: Use other resources.**

After you have read the text, studied the text, and have worked through what God wants us to know and do, it’s time to look at other resources.

There’s nothing wrong with using books, websites, commentaries, tools and more to help you prepare a sermon. You already know not to start here, but now that you’re ready, there are excellent resources at your disposal. These resources can make your messages better.

Commentaries are excellent resources for sermon preparation. Think about this: one preacher spent more than a decade preaching through the book of Romans on Thursday nights. All of his research and messages are compiled in a book. One pastor spent twenty years studying and teaching the book of Ephesians in a seminary setting – you can purchase his entire life’s work on Amazon for $19.99.

There are two types of Bible commentaries you will find useful.

- Exegetical commentaries provide verse-by-verse exposition of books of the Bible
- Homiletical commentaries are built from sermons. R. Kent Hughes’ Preaching the Word commentary is an example.
It’s wise to lean on the careful research and expert experience of other gifted communicators. Every experienced craftsman in any trade has tools, and books and commentaries are good tools for a preacher. Bible dictionaries, lexicons, topical Bibles, study Bibles, and commentaries are useful tools. Here is a list of a few sermon prep resources that can help.

1. **The ESV Study Bible** is one of the best study Bible’s on the market. When you purchase a printed copy, you get access to the online version, complete with searchable text and notes. This is an excellent study Bible. Other good study Bibles include The NIV Study Bible and the Ryrie Study Bible.

2. **The Blue Letter Bible**

3. **Precept Austin.** This website is full of excellent and searchable commentaries and study resources.

Websites like

4. **Biblestudytools.com** and keepbelieving.org are two good reference websites.

5. **The Tim Keller Sermon Store.** You can search this site and find sermons that Dr. Tim Keller has preached all the way back to the 1990s. There are several free sermons on the site as well.

6. **Logos.** This is one of the most comprehensive digital Bible study tools on the market. And you can continue to expand it and add more modules. Contact Kaplan@logos.com for discount pricing. Just tell them you’re a member of Preaching Rocket.

7. John MacArthur’s manuscripts and sermons are available for free at Grace to You. There is an excellent search tool.

8. You can listen to all of John Piper’s sermons, dating all the way back to 1971 at the [Desiring God](https://www.desiringgod.org) website. Dr. Piper has faithfully taught the Bible for decades and you can learn from his messages.

9. Podcasts and other sermons. Listen to sermons from other preachers on books and passages you’re preaching. Don’t preach their sermons, but learn from their wisdom.

There are lots of tools to help you do word studies and interact with the Scripture in it’s original language. Years ago, in order to understand the original languages, you had to learn the original languages. And while you can still do this at seminaries, we’re blessed to live in a day where you can type a word into a computer program or website and lean on the careful research of so many others.

**Step #4: Internalize the text.**

After you study the text, understand the text and consult relevant resources, it’s time to preach the sermon. *But not to your congregation.* Before you preach to the people, preach to yourself. I’m not talking about practice, though that’s a good idea. Ernest Hemmingway said the first draft of anything is no good. (He said it a little stronger than that, but you should get the idea). And if you’re going to preach a bad message, it’s better if you preach it to an empty room.

Practicing your sermon is a good idea, but I’m talking about internalizing your sermon. The process of internalization is important for any message. Sometimes, before you preach the text to the people, God wants to preach it to you.
Preaching the sermon to yourself will deepen your own relationship with God. It will also position you to deliver a message from a place of authenticity.

Find something that works for you and make it a part of your pre-game routine. Greg Gilbert takes a sermon walk on Saturday afternoon. Louie Giglio rides his bike. Dr. Charles Stanley sometimes takes a nap.

“The preacher who handles the Word must first be touched by that same Word,” writes Dr. Robert Smith, Jr of Beeson Divinity School.

Dr. Robert Smith writes a manuscript each week, though he doesn’t preach with any notes. He’s able to do this because he’s internalized the message. “I like the word internalize rather than memorize,” he writes, “even though memorize might be kind of a preliminary step to internalization. I believe in writing every single sermon word for word, not only to retain the written sermon in the file, but also to retain it on the screen of the mind.”

This is another reason to plan ahead and finish early in the week. The longer you have to marinate on the message, the more authentic and powerful it will be.

**WHEN YOU GET STUCK**

Writing a sermon, or birthing it, is a hard process. It takes time and work. Undoubtedly, you will come to a point when you feel stuck. Maybe not every week, but it will happen.

When you do feel stuck, here are two things to do.

**When you get stuck, think about the Gospel.**

The Bible is a book about God, and Jesus is the hero. Connect your passage to the person and work of Christ. Find the larger story. Paint a picture and proclaim the Gospel. Preach who Jesus is and preach what God says.

When you’re trying to find the meaning of a passage or connect a truth to a modern audience, it’s always good to focus on Jesus. The good news of the gospel is always relevant.

**When you get stuck, think about the people.**

You’re not preaching to a faceless congregation. You are preaching to single mothers, truck drivers, schoolteachers, business owners. You’re preaching to people who are tired, discouraged, or worried. You’re preaching to people running from God and people trusting in their own goodness to make God happy.

What do people need to know about God? What action does a person need to take? What worries and fears do people have? What misconceptions do people believe?

Think about the people sitting in church on Sunday. Put yourself in their shoes and show them how they are a part of God’s greater story. ■