

“Harmful Half-Truths”

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Years ago, a man wrote a letter to a newspaper claiming that it did not make sense for people to go to church every Sunday. He said he had been a regular attender for 30 years, and had heard about 1500 sermons, yet he really could not remember a single one of them. He concluded that he had been wasting his time listening to sermons, and that Pastors certainly waste time by preparing and delivering them. That started a controversy in the letters to the editor column that went on for a few weeks until someone wrote this clincher: “I’ve been married for 30 years and in that time my wife has usually prepared 3 meals for me each day... Yet, I cannot recall the full menu for a single one of those over 30,000 meals, But I do know this: They all nourished me and gave me strength. Without my wife’s cooking I would be physically dead. Likewise, without sermons I suspect I would be spiritually dead.”

Sermons: I preach one almost every Sunday, and many of you listen to one almost every Sunday. I am convinced that these sermons are not a waste of time. In fact, I believe preparing and giving sermons is one of the most important things I do all week. And, whether you realize it or not, sermons can be very important to your spiritual health. Friends, this is kind of a transition Sunday. Last week we finished our series in the gospel in Luke – we spent 95 Sundays going through that book. Next week we will begin a sermon series entitled, “Harmful Truths” which will take us through most of the summer. What I am going to do today is something I have never really done on Sunday morning. This will be a sermon on “sermons.” Now, I cannot help but give a preacher’s perspective, but my focus is to help you realize how God desires to use sermons in your life for the glory of God and for your ultimate good. Let me add that if you are part of another congregation and are a guest here this morning or listening online, this message is for you as well. Our topic is not just sermons I preach at Chisholm Baptist Church, but is about what happens whenever or wherever God’s word is proclaimed. Let’s pause and pray that the Lord would use this time to encourage and challenge each of us.

Let’s start with some foundational truths.

First, He is there and he is not silent. That is the title of a book by Francis Shaeffer that God used in a huge way in my life. It is also the most basic theological truth. The infinite, personal God, the God described in the bible, really does exist, and He chooses to reveal Himself or speak to us. He does that in a variety of ways. For example, Psalm **19:1a** says **The heavens declare the glory of God**, but most important He speaks to us through His written word, the bible.

Second, The bible is the word of God. **2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.** We believe the bible is completely trustworthy or inerrant. It is the sole and sufficient authority for our faith and practice. What we believe and do as Christians is to be guided by what the bible teaches. It is also important to correctly interpret and understand what the bible says. That comes through diligent, Holy Spirit guided study. It is what rightly handling or dividing the word of truth (**2 Timothy 2:15**) is about.

Third, A sermon is an important way for Christian believers to receive spiritual nourishment. Personal bible study, individual quiet times, devotional times are all very important. Small group bible studies provide a lot of spiritual nourishment. But hearing a sermon is an essential part of a healthy spiritual diet. But, Pastor Dan, why isn’t it good enough to study the bible on my own? Well, first of all the Lord has called and gifted certain individuals to be pastors and teachers (**Ephesians 4:11**). They are to preach sermons and equip other Christians by helping them interpret and understand the bible. Second, throughout the New Testament we see Jesus preaching sermons and the apostle preaching sermons. Paul’s exhortation to Timothy and other pastors is to, **2 Timothy 4:2 Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.** In other words, be ready to preach good sermons. Third, the Lord often speaks to us through sermons in a different way than He does through our personal bible study. There are a variety of reasons for that, and it doesn’t mean that sermons are more important than your bible study. It just means

sermons are an essential part of our spiritual diet. Listening to and responding to sermons helps us be the men and women God calls us to be.

Fourth, The purpose of a sermon is to communicate God's word. The goal of a sermon is that those listening would hear God speak to them... not in an audible voice, but through the bible. That is why we have an adult Sunday School class here at Chisholm Baptist, entitled, "What did God say today?" The idea is to talk about things people heard God say to them through His word. This means that a sermon needs to be about the bible, bible centered, bible saturated. A sermon must not just be an opportunity for the preacher to share his beliefs and opinions. Now, obviously there is a human element in every sermon. Every Sunday you hear some of my beliefs and opinions from this pulpit. However, my job is not to let you know what I think about a topic, but rather to help you better understand the meaning and implications of what God has said. Whenever I preach and my words obscure what God says in the bible, whenever they become the focus, rather than the bible text, whenever they get in the way of hearing what God is saying to us, then it is not a good sermon. That is true no matter how profound the logic or eloquent the delivery.

Okay, those are foundational truths about sermons, now let's consider some practical implications...

First, The sermon should play a central role in our worship times. Focusing on "the ministry of the word" was part of the protestant reformation, and it's a tradition that shapes evangelical churches in general, and Chisholm Baptist Church in particular. That is why this pulpit is located in the center of this platform. If you go to some churches the pulpit or lectern is off to the side, with the alter in the center. This pulpit reflects our belief that the sermon is a most important part of the time we spend together. Now, that does not mean other parts of worship are unimportant. A friend once referred to the songs, scripture reading, etc. as the pre-game show, with the sermon being the main event. Wrong!! When we gather for corporate worship, giving praise and thanksgiving to the Lord is so important. But hearing from God through His word is a big part of why we gather on Sunday mornings. A few weeks ago I was with some pastors from various denominations...One said he gives an

extemporaneous, 5-10 minute "Homily" each Sunday reflecting on the gospel text that was part of the liturgical reading that day. Another said his sermons are 15-20 minutes in length. Some of you may be thinking, that sounds like the kind of church I's like to attend, but trust me it really is not. Now, the bible doesn't tell us the ideal length of a sermon. I would note that in Acts 20 the apostle Paul kept preaching until midnight one evening. In most evangelical churches today a sermon is between 30-40 minutes, which I think is probably a good length, though for a variety of reasons I stick to 30 minutes. If you are one of those rare folks who think my sermons should be longer, give me a call. We can chat about that.

Incidentally, I believe the sermons is an important part of our time together, I devote considerable time to preparing sermons. A five-minute talk, reflecting on a passage from the gospels, can probably be done with little or no preparation. However, I recall what President Woodrow Wilson said when he was asked to say some words at an event he was attending. "If you want me to speak for an hour, I am ready now, but if you want me to speak for 10 minutes, I will need some time to prepare." Friends, one of the biggest problems we preachers have is "rambling" saying many words, but not saying much. When I first started as a pastor I would simply have a brief outline of the sermon in front of me and then I would preach. I soon started writing out sermons word for word and preaching from that manuscript. Why? First, it helps me not waste words, not ramble. I say more, with fewer words, if I have written out the sermons ahead of time. Second, I say things more clearly, once I have written the sermons and go back over it, I almost always realize that the way I have worded something is confusing. I am then able to make changes, to make it clearer. So if you get confused by some of the things I say, just think of how much more confused it would be if I was preaching from an outline. Third, I write out sermons so I don't forget what I want to say. This has become more important in recent years as my remembering doesn't get better with age.

Now, I suspect some of you are a little disappointed, because you thought I just get up here on Sunday and speak the words the Holy Spirit gives me. Some preachers claim to do that, and maybe a few of them actually are doing so, but not many. The reality is that Holy Spirit inspired and anointed preaching almost always flows from

diligent study and preparation. Most pastors find that they are more likely to be inspired when they are in their study on Tuesday afternoon, then when they are standing in behind the pulpit on Sunday morning. Prayerful preparation is what God most often uses to speak clearly to His people.

Second, Because sermons are important to spiritual health, because God speaks to us through them, those who listen to sermons need to take that responsibility very seriously. In other words, I need to be earnest in preaching sermons, and you should be earnest in listening to sermons. That begins by praying that God would enable you to hear Him speak to you through the sermon. It also involves being an active listener. That means paying attention to what is being said, thinking about what is being said, thinking about the implications of what is being said. For some taking notes is the key. That is not for everybody, but you need to do your best to make sure you are not daydreaming or actually dreaming during the sermon. Talking about the sermons with family members or friends is another important part of processing what you have heard. That is why the “What Did God Say Today?” class is so good, because it provides a great opportunity to do that. And if Dave Arndt’s Ephesians class or John Barrett’s theology class weren’t such great opportunities I would encourage everyone to be part of “What Did God Say Today?”

Keep in mind that sermons are not meant to satisfy intellectual curiosity. “Oh Pastor Dan, I heard a great sermon on the radio the other day. I learned so much about Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire.” Well, that is good. It is good to know about Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire. But a sermon needs to do more than inform. It should encourage and challenge believers to live in a way that honors the Lord and serves other people. Yes, that starts with forming right beliefs, understanding what is true, but it also includes putting that truth into practice. **James 1:22** tells us to **Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.** Memorizing scripture is wonderful. But obeying scripture, doing what the Lord tells us to do, is clearly the priority.

It is also important to focus on what God is saying to you through a sermon, rather than what you think he should be saying to other people. Now, when we care about the spiritual welfare of family

member and friends, we do want them to know what God says to us through His word and to be encouraged and challenged by that. Yet as Jesus says, (**Matthew 7:3**) we need to get the log out of our own eye, before we worry about a speck in someone else’s. I need to first discern what God is saying to me in His word before I ever think about what He is saying to others. Whenever we are listening to a sermon, we need to ask the Lord to enable us to hear what He is saying, to understand those words, to believe them, and then to apply them in a way that honors Him.

Those who listen also have a responsibility to try and discern whether a sermon truly reflects God’s word, or whether it is basically full of a pastor’s opinions. **Acts 17:11** says **Now these Jews** (in the city of Berea) **were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.** This is a reminder that there is no conflict between eagerness and examining. You should be eager to hear what the Lord has to say to you through a sermon, but you have to be careful. You have to check it out and make sure what you are hearing really reflects the word of God, and not just the preacher’s opinions. How do you do that? Well, that is another sermon, but the main thing is to compare what a pastor says to what the bible actually says. Now, pastors, like everyone else, can have opinions that are very sound and we may agree with them. For example, another pastor may say, “The Green Bay Packers are the best football team in the history of the NFL.” I would agree with him and think he is correct. Yet, I hope I would also realize that he has not spoken God’s word, but has simply shared his opinion. When a pastor wades into politics, and says, “I think you should vote for this candidate, he is sharing his opinion. You may agree with his opinion. His opinion may be correct. But it is his opinion. Not the word of God. When listening to a sermon what you want to hear, what you need to hear for the good of your soul, is God’s word.

Third, the best way for a preacher to communicate God’s word and for people in a congregation to hear God’s word, is through “expository sermons.” These sermons focus on the bible text, rather than a certain topic. A pastor will choose a particular book or part of a book in the bible and devote his time to describing what the text says, explaining what it means, and then

exploring what it means to us, what the implications of the text are for our lives today. The most common alternative to an expository sermon is a “topical sermon.” Here the pastor chooses a particular topic and then usually gives biblical support for what he is saying by quoting and referencing various bible verses. Another way of putting it is that an expository sermon focuses on one particular bible passage, maybe Luke 24:36-53, that was last week’s sermon. A topical sermon might be on “How a husband should honor his wife” and will include looking at verses maybe from Proverbs 31, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 3. Now both types of sermons can be very good. They can both be very biblical and very faithful in communicating God’s word. And both types of sermons have the potential of being full of the preacher’s opinions and very little words from the Lord. Yet, I believe the expository sermons are less likely to stray from God’s word. That is why here at Chisholm Baptist Church about 90% of the sermons I preach are expository. We tend to go through a book of the bible Sunday after Sunday, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. That’s why there were 95 sermons from the book of Luke. That is why this past winter there were eight sermons from Jonah. I believe expository sermons help me more clearly communicate God’s word to you. As we were going through Luke, the topic of the sermons was determined not by what I wanted to talk about, but by what the Lord says to us through Luke’s gospel. Expository sermons help a pastor to be faithful in proclaiming God’s word, not his own ideas to the people.

Fourth, Sometimes, however, it is good for a pastor to preach topical sermons. Why? Because sometime things are happening and folks really need to know what the bible says on that particular topic. Next Sunday we begin a series entitled, “Harmful Half-truths.” The focus will be on various ideas and thoughts about God and Christianity that people today, both outside and inside the church are embracing... That are “half true.” By that I mean there is some truth in these ideas, but there is also significant error that can poison our souls. Often what happens is that folks come up with an idea that helps people avoid a ditch on one side of the road, but drives them into a ditch on the other side. Or perhaps, a truth from one side of a coin is clearly articulated, but the truth from the other side of that coin is totally ignored. For example, here is a half-truth, “a person doesn’t have to go to church to be a

Christian.” If that true? Yes, kind of. One can certainly become a Christian without ever setting foot in a church. Salvation is by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ alone. One becomes a Christian by trusting in the Lord Jesus, not by attending a church. At the same time, however, the Lord commands His followers to be part of a church. A believer in Jesus who does not participate in a church is not faithfully following Jesus. It is simply dangerous for a Christian to not go to church. That is why I would call the statement, “a person doesn’t have to go to church to be a Christian,” a half-truth, a half-truth that can be harmful to one’s soul.

Friends, I think the sermons this summer will address some very important issues. I think you will find them helpful for your own spiritual growth, and I think they will often be something you want to share with others. But, because they will be topical sermons I am going to have to work especially hard to make sure I am not presenting just my opinions, but am proclaiming to you the words of God. And you folks will have the responsibility to receive these sermons eagerly, and then check it out, to make sure what I say is true.

Well, folks in 36 years as a pastor, I have never preached a sermon about sermons. I probably will never preach another one, but I trust these words will help you be more receptive to hearing God’s words today and in all the days ahead.