

SELF-PREPARATION FOR BIBLE PREACHERS AND TEACHERS

Before any Bible preacher or teacher begins to construct a sermon or Bible study there are some necessary spiritual steps that must be taken. Teaching and preaching are spiritual tasks, requiring spiritual tools, a spiritual text, and spiritual preparation. It also requires a knowledge of several fields of study. To attempt to engage in a spiritual task in the power of the flesh is like trying to run a gasoline engine on sand. It doesn't work.

Tragically, many Bible preachers and teachers study and deliver the truth in the power of the flesh, not the Spirit. God has even been gracious at times to bless His Word even when spoken by unbelievers. However in failing to have proper training and to spiritually prepare to preach and teach you rob yourself of power, play fast and loose with the souls of men, and steal glory from God. Though God may compensate where you lack, you should never neglect your spiritual preparation in hopes that God might use you in spite of yourself. Let's consider some of the basic ways every Bible preacher and teacher must prepare themselves to study and delivery of the Word of God.

You Must Be Saved

This may seem very obvious, but there are unbelievers filling pulpits, leading Bible studies, teaching Sunday Schools, at Christian universities, and seminaries all over the world. Think of what a catastrophe it is to have a child of Satan (Jn. 8:44), a person held captive by Satan to do his will (II Tim. 2:25-26), a person who can't understand the things of the Spirit of God because they are spiritually appraised (I Cor. 2:14), someone who can't please God and who is hostile to God (Rom. 8:5-8), a person who is marching in Satan's army and flying Satan's colors (Eph. 2:1-3), preaching and teaching the Bible! It is an all too common occurrence that Satan loves and God hates.

So I ask you this very simple question, "Are you born again?" Jesus said to Nicodemus the Pharisee in Jn. 3:3 & 7, "You must be born again" if he wanted to see the kingdom of God. Have you been transformed by God's grace into a new creature in Christ (II Cor. 5:17)? I am sure you are probably saying, "Yes, yes, I am a Christian." Please don't think I am being combative or unkind, when I say what I am about to say, for I only have the eternal welfare of your soul in mind and merely direct you to the Scriptures. Jesus spoke of the "many" in Mt. 7:21-23, who are in the church, who call Jesus Lord, who do good deeds, even miraculous deeds in His name, and are rejected and cast into hell on judgment day because Jesus never knew them. Could that be you? Surely, being God, Jesus knows everything, but the word "knew" means to have an intimate knowledge and relationship with someone. Jesus doesn't have a saving relationship with "many" in the church who profess to be His followers but are not. Yes, you may be highly involved in your local church and profess Jesus as Lord. Yet, having lived your entire life professing Jesus as Lord and serving in the church you can be rejected at last and end up in hell. Could this be you?

Paul in II Cor. 13:5 exhorts us to "*Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith, examine yourselves.*" Why did Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, say this to people *in the church of Corinth*? The Corinthians professed to be believers in Jesus Christ. They were involved in the church. Why would Paul exhort them and us to examine ourselves to see if we are truly in the faith? The answer is simple, many professing Christians are

not possessing Christians. They aren't "in the faith." They don't have Christ, the Holy Spirit, or eternal life. I ask you as Paul commands you, are you "in the faith?"

You need to be diligent to make sure of God's calling and choosing you to eternal life (II Pet. 1:10). But how do you do that? Is the fact that you pray, go to church, read your Bible, give, serve, a sure indication you are "in the faith?" No! People all around the world in false religions do these things. So let me ask you -- how did you become a Christian? Go ahead, think about it, answer that question in your mind right now before the Lord. Say to yourself, "I became a Christian . . ." Did you have the question answered? Good.

Now let me ask you about your answer. Did your answer search your mind for the various things you have done in the past? Things like going to church, reading your Bible, trying to be good, serving in church, giving to the Lord, etc.? If so, then most assuredly you are *not saved*. You are deceived, deluded into thinking you are something you are not. I do not want to be mean, I am striving to help you, please consider what I say. Why would I say you are almost assuredly not saved? Because no one becomes a Christian by their own works and what *they do*.

If you answered the question in your mind by reminding yourself of the works you have performed, there is a very high probability that you are like one of the "many" who Jesus speaks of in Matthew 7:21-23 that know who Jesus is, call Him Lord, do good works in His name, in the church, but perish in hell for not being known by Christ. Could that be you? Let's consider searching out your true spiritual condition a bit further. Be not afraid of testing yourself. Do not be concerned about investigating the true condition of our soul. It will not harm you if you are truly born again, but it may help you realize you are right now in peril if you are deceived. Bear with me.

Answer this question, "What is the gospel?" or "What is the basic message that must be heard, read, and believed in order for a person to be rescued from the wrath of God to come, to become a born again believer?" What is the gospel? Answer the question right now in your own mind, "The gospel is . . ." what? Okay, did you answer the question? Good. Now consider your answer. Did you say to yourself, "The gospel is the Bible?" Or maybe that the gospel is that "God has a wonderful plan for your life?" Or maybe you answered that the gospel means, "God is love." Though these things are true in some respects in that the gospel is found in the Bible, God has a plan for your life, though it isn't a wonderful plan unless you are born again, and yes it is true God is love, but these things though related, are not the gospel.

The gospel is that simple message of Jesus Christ the sinless Son of God, born of a virgin, crucified for our sins on the cross, buried, and risen again on the third day for our justification (e.g., Rom. 4:25; I Cor. 15:1-4; II Cor. 5:21; I Pet. 3:18). Is this what came to your mind when you answered the question, "What is the gospel?" If not, then there is a very good chance you are not born again. You may profess to be a Christian, but if you do not know the gospel you cannot be saved. Now if you said something like the gospel is that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, or that we need to believe in Jesus' shed blood on the cross, or something about Jesus Christ and Him crucified, then that is a better answer. You may not have had as detailed a definition of the gospel in your mind when you answered the question, but that is okay as long as your definition included Jesus' person and work on the cross, which would include His resurrection. You see the gospel is "*the power of God for all who believe*" (Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 1:18). You cannot become a Christian apart from the gospel. Therefore if you don't know the gospel, you can't be a Christian, even if you call yourself a Christian and are highly involved in a local church doing things "in Jesus' name" and "calling him Lord."

The Bible teaches that the only way a person can become a true, born again believer in Jesus Christ is to *repent of their sins and place their faith in Jesus Christ*. Repentance is the negative aspect of faith. Repentance speaks of what we turn away from, in order to turn towards Jesus in faith. If you want to leave one city and fly to another you can't get to the other city unless you leave the other behind. It may sound like a two-step process, "Leave Los Angeles and fly to New York." However, the fact is you can't fly to New York without leaving Los Angeles. The two tasks are inseparably linked. This is why sometimes the Bible merely tells people to "repent" (e.g., Lk. 24:45-47; Acts 17:30-31), other times it says, "repent and believe" (e.g., Mk. 1:15; Acts 20:21), and still other times to "believe" (Jn. 1:12; 3:15-16). Thus in turning to Jesus Christ in saving faith you must turn away from "repent" of whatever it is you are living for before believing, trusting, and laying hold of Christ in faith. In believing in Jesus Christ unto salvation you are saved from the just judgment of Christ by His grace alone, through faith alone, in His person and work of Christ alone. Both faith and repentance are granted by God to the sinner and are not a work of man, but a work of God's grace within man enabling Him to turn from His sins (Acts 5:31; 11:18; II Tim. 2:25) to embrace Jesus Christ by faith (Jn. 6:29; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29).

If you are at all uncertain about the state of your soul, I would encourage you make becoming sure the number one priority of your life. I think one of the best chapters I have ever read on testing the true condition of our souls is from J. C. Ryle's book, *Holiness*. The chapter is entitled "Do you love me" and can be found on line for free. Find it, read it, and talk to the Lord about the condition of your soul. Here is a link to one of the places it can be found: <http://www.gracegems.org/Ryle/holiness16.htm>. If you are going to give glory to God as a preacher or Bible teacher, you must be born again.

You Must Walk In The Spirit

There are two texts Gal. 5:16-23 and Eph. 5:18ff that speak of "walking" or "being filled" with the Holy Spirit. There is another text Col. 3:16 which speaks of "*letting the Word of Christ dwell richly within you*." The outcome or fruit of obeying Col. 3:16 is identical to Eph. 5:18, which tells us that walking in the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit, and letting the Word of Christ richly dwell within us are in many respects synonymous. I don't want to go into this in great detail here, but will provide other more detailed content on the subject of walking in the Spirit Lord willing.

In summary, when a person comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ they are baptized, submerged, or placed into the spiritual body of Christ, the Church, by the Holy Spirit. This is often referred to as spirit baptism (Rom. 8:9; I Cor. 12:13). Once you receive the Holy Spirit upon believing the gospel of Jesus Christ by faith you are permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit who never leaves you (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). Yet having the Holy Spirit indwell you is not to be confused with having the Holy Spirit empower you for ministry. It is not synonymous with walking, being filled, or having the Word of Christ dwell richly within you. The latter three are commands to be obeyed, but the former, receiving the Holy Spirit, is an act of God that happens at salvation.

Thus Paul lets us know in Gal. 5:16-23 that we need to "walk by the Spirit." When we are walking by the Spirit or being "led by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:18), we are not sinning, we can't be sinning, for we are submitting to the Word of God which is dwelling richly within us and giving glory to God. The flesh and Holy Spirit are antithetical to one another (Gal. 5:16-17). Thus sinning and walking in the Spirit are mutually exclusive. If you are walking in the Spirit, you are obeying the Word of God, for the glory of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. However, if you are sinning, you are not obeying the

Word of God, not giving God glory, and the Holy Spirit doesn't empower you to sin and rebel against God. It is clear from Gal. 5:16-23 and Rom. 8:1-17 that walking in the Holy Spirit and walking in the flesh are north and south, water and oil, black and white, up and down. They are two different, antithetical, and mutually exclusive acts.

But why is this an issue when it comes to being a preacher or Bible teacher? Because if you are not walking in the Spirit, you are sinning against God. Since preaching and teaching the Word of God is a spiritual task, if you are not walking in the Holy Spirit you are trying to perform a spiritual task without God's blessing. The spiritual electricity, so to speak, isn't flowing for your sin has turned off the switch. You can't show love to God or glorify God unless you are walking in the Spirit (Rom. 8:5-8). The Holy Spirit is needed to help you understand the Word of God and illumine you to the truth (I Cor. 2:10-15). The Holy Spirit is needed to energize you, empower you for the task of preaching or teaching. Thus to be in unconfused sin is walk in the flesh, not the Spirit. Sin sabotages powerful preaching and teaching.

This is not to say that the Holy Spirit leaves us when we sin. As I said earlier and as the Word of God makes clear, once saved the Holy Spirit never leaves us. And it is not to say the Holy Spirit turns His back on us. No, it is the other way around. When we sin we turn our back on the Holy Spirit. We choose to submit to our fleshly desires rather than the Word of God. We choose not to love God, because we choose not to keep His commandments (Jn. 14:15; I Jn. 5:2). We choose to not give God glory (I Cor. 10:31). Thus we turn and walk away from the Holy Spirit when we sin.

Our hearts are desperately sick and very crafty (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9; Mk. 7:21-23). We often compartmentalize our sins. We delude ourselves into thinking that we can be 75 or 85 or 99 percent right with God. This is a lie. We can't refuse to confess our sin in one area and yet be right with God. We are either right with the Lord and have all our sins confessed, or we are not right with the Lord. There is no middle ground, no fence straddling position when we have unconfused sin that gives glory to the Lord or enables us to walk by or be led by the Spirit.

The solution is quite simple – confess your sins, all of them (I Jn. 1:9). John makes it clear in I Jn. 1:9 that all we need to do is admit to God that we have blown it and God is faithful to keep on cleaning us from all unrighteousness. Confession implies repentance, which is to have a change of mind that results in a change in direction. We can't just say, "God I am sorry I am sinning" and keep on in that sin. That is not confession, that is having a seared conscience (I Tim. 4:1-2). Trying to do spiritual work in the power of the flesh is to turn off the Holy Spirit's power in our life.

This means you need to walk in the Spirit so that you do not carry out the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). You need the Holy Spirit to illumine your mind to the biblical truth you are studying to preach or teach (I Cor. 2:10-15). You must avoid being in the flesh while preparing, preaching, or teaching the Word of God. Therefore we must keep a short leash on our sins. When we do sin, and we will sin, we must learn to confess our sins quickly to the Lord so that we are facing in the right direction, so we can receive the blessing of God, so we can have the Holy Spirit's power working in and through us. Thus every study session, every act of preaching and teaching time should include complete confession of sins and a request that God empower us by His Spirit so that we are walking by the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, and have the Word of Christ richly dwelling with in us. This then will enable the spiritual power from on high to enable us to give glory to God in our preaching and teaching.

You Must Let The Word Of God Work On Your Own Heart

When you are busy, and most people are, it is easy to act as if sermon or Bible study preparation is a task, a series of steps, to get truth from an old book, and then to communicate that truth clearly and accurately to others. And that does account for some of what it means to study in preparation to preach or teach. However it is not all that is involved. A critical element in the preaching or teaching of God's Word is to let the Word of God affect your own life. When studying, ask yourself, "What does this text have to do with me and my own life?"

James describes reading and studying the Word of God as looking into a mirror. He says, "*But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.*" (James 1:22–25)

Notice that James says we are deluded when we merely become students of the Word and not doers. We look into mirrors to see our blemishes so we can fix our appearance. We look into the Word to see Christ and in contrast our blemishes appear so we know what we need to repent of and what we need to pursue (II Tim. 2:22). This is why all students of the Bible should guard against mere mechanical processes to produce mechanical content in order to perform the spiritual task of preaching or teaching God's Word. We must study the Word first and foremost to know God and to improve our own soul. Then having let the Word of God work on our own soul, from an experiential context, we teach and preach to others.

We must remember that the Bible is different than any other book in the world. The Scriptures are living, active, razor sharp, piercing, and able to judge thoughts and intentions of the heart. The Scriptures are both inspired and energized by the Holy Spirit. The Word of God saves, sanctifies, judges, convicts, and will never pass away until heaven and earth pass away, which is never. There is a passion, a realism, a sincerity that comes from a preacher or teacher who has first looked into the mirror of God's Word for themselves, before they attempt to get other people to look there. Thus every Bible teacher or preacher who desires to preach with true passion, conviction, and heart felt desire will strive to let the Word of God work on their own soul first.

You Must Soak Your Preparation Time In Prayer

This is another obvious, but often neglected discipline. The student of God's Word should begin the day with prayer. Should begin their study time with prayer. Should continue to pray as they read, meditate, study, make observations, read commentaries, write, etc. The Bible student should strive to commune with Christ all through the process of preparing to preach and teach.

There have been times in my ministry when I was very busy. I would get to the office, mind racing about all the things I needed to do that day. I developed a disciplined routine to spend time with the Lord first, then engage in my studies. But there were times that emails, telephone calls, and other distractions would interrupt my routine. I would then get to my text, get my Bible software up and running, open my sermon note template, paste the text in to be preached, start outlining the text, trying to figure out the best way to title the sermon and phrase the main points or how to write an accurate and helpful proposition. Then it would dawn on me – I hadn't talked to the Lord! I hadn't asked for help. It is not that I had gone apostate, but I had forgotten, neglected to stop,

be still before the Lord, confess any known sins, and ask for assistance in the spiritual task of preparing to preach or teach.

Spiritual tasks, require spiritual resources, and spiritual resources come down from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (James 1:17). I put reminders on the edge of my computer monitor to “Pray!” But still, there were times when I would get into a rush and neglect prayer. I guess this is why they call prayer a “discipline.” Its like working out and is one of the two things Satan doesn’t want you to do the most. Satan doesn’t want you praying or reading and studying the Word of God. He knows if he can keep you from those two simple tasks, he can keep you a spiritual dwarf and rob glory from God.

I have learned and other preachers and Bible teachers have confirmed a unique occurrence. There are times when God’s providence prevents you from preparing adequately for a sermon or Bible study. People die, end up in the hospital, relationship issues, car problems, sickness, etc. And though you are committed to always be prepared, sometimes you can’t do what you are convinced must be done. Yet Sunday approaches like the rising of the sun. There you are, not nearly as prepared as you wanted to be and so you pray! You plead! You beg God for mercy! You enter the pulpit or head for Bible study feeling very low, unworthy, ill prepared, desperately clinging to God. You teach or preach and afterwards you feel like jumping off a cliff. But then someone comes up to you and says, “I think that was the best sermon or Bible study you have ever taught.” Shocked, you mumble out, “Praise the Lord.” Then another, and another, and another after that affirms “your work” and faithfulness. Ha! But you know it wasn’t you, it was the Lord blessing you. You prayed hard, didn’t trust in yourself, desperately clung to the Lord, and He blessed you in your weakness (II Cor. 12:10).

I am not trying to tell you that you shouldn’t diligently study to preach and teach and just pray hard beforehand. I am trying to make the point that we need the Lord to help us preach and teach His Word. We must not fall into the either/or fallacy of either being unfaithful in preparation and praying hard so we can be blessed or being thoroughly prepared and preach or teach in the flesh. No, the best option is to see our neediness all through the preaching and teaching process, to desperately cling to the Lord and be thoroughly prepared. When God’s providence hinders us from being able to prepare as we desire, then we do what we can with what God has given us. If we are faithful to ask for help and cling to the Lord He often bless us even though we lacked being able to prepare. Lesson to remember, every student of the Bible must pray, pray, pray all through the preparation and delivery part of his sermon or Bible study!

You Must Handle Accurately The Word Of Truth

If there was ever a neglected aspect of sermon and Bible study preparation it is failing to learn how to study the Word of God in an accurate, precise, and objective way. The goal of Bible study is *to discover from the text what the original author meant for the original audience to understand by what they wrote*. It is amazing how many preachers and Bible teachers do not know this foundational principle. Others may know what the goal of Bible interpretation is, but thave no idea of how to reach it. Yes, they may have a few Bible study principles in their tool box, but they are like carpenters with a pencil, saw, and two nails. Yes, they have a little of what they need, but don’t have enough tools to tackle any text well.

There are three main areas of study that together enable a preacher or teacher of God’s Word to handle accurately or with precision the Word of Truth (II Tim. 2:15). First, you need to have a good grasp of Bible study principles. This is the field of study called *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics attempts to define Bible study principles that enable the

interpreter to extract from the text, in the most objective manner, without reading anything into the text, what God intended to communicate through the human author to His original audience.

Second, you need to have some training and knowledge in what is called *exegesis*. Think of exegesis as excavating truth from Scripture texts. There is a process to get gold out of gold ore and there are processes for using the tools provided by hermeneutics to extract the riches God has for us in his Word. The process of using hermeneutical principles or Bible study principles is called *exegesis*. Listen to how Solomon describes what must happen to discover the knowledge of God: *“My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will discern the fear of the Lord And discover the knowledge of God.”* (Prov. 2:1–5)

Did you see all the verbs or action words in those verses that describe the labor, intensity, and effort that must be exerted to extract riches from God’s Word? Diamonds are found in mines deep within the earth. Great effort and expense is necessary to dig them up, bring them to the surface, and prepare them for use in jewelry. In like manner the treasures of God’s Word are not always laying on the surface. The Bible student must dig for them, then arrange them, then prepare them for delivery. It is a process and that process is called exegesis.

Third and finally, is exposition. Think of an “expose” where merchandise is displayed. Thus in exposition the preacher or Bible teacher exposes to view the treasure they have mined from the Word and in such a way that it can be eagerly and readily received. Diamonds are not sold to the public uncut, raw, with coal dust clinging to them. No, they are washed, sorted, cut, polished, set into precious metal, and then are “exposed” to the public. Though they are still diamonds in the rough, they wouldn’t fetch much of a price to the average person because they are ugly until worked on. In the same way, the raw data of Scripture, though good, often needs worked on, packaged in such a way that people can receive it.

A knowledge of all three of these fields of study i.e., hermeneutics, exegesis, and exposition are necessary to handle accurately the Word of Truth. Each fields has related subfields that I won’t go into here. A failure in any one of these three areas leads to mishandling or miscommunicating the Word of God. Mishandling the Word of God is a grave sin. The fear of mishandling the Word of God should sober up every wannabe Bible interpreter. In spite of the warnings in Scripture, many preachers and Bible teachers wing it, and in the process play fast and loose with the eternal souls of men. They treat God’s Word and the souls of those people who sit under their teaching with little reverence and respect. They think that good intentions are enough to help them give glory to God in their study and preaching or teaching. But be assured, good intentions are not enough. Every preacher and Bible teacher must strive in their study to be *“approved to God”* (II Tim. 2:15). They must remember that they will *“incur a stricture judgment”* as teachers (James 3:1). Leaders in the church are required to be *“able to teach”* (I Tim. 3:2). Every elder and pastor must be trained in the Word and theology so that they can *“exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict”* (Tit. 1:9). These are not suggestions, but commands from the Lord of the church.

Thus it is required that preachers and Bible teachers get proper training and make sure they prepare themselves to engage in the most important task in all the world, the preaching and teaching of the Word of God!