

“One Year to Better Preaching will help preachers improve their preaching not just in one year but in every year, month, or week they seek to follow Daniel Overdorf’s insightful advice.”

—*Scott M. Gibson, Haddon W. Robinson Professor of Preaching and Director of the Center for Preaching, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*

“The only thing worse than listening to a dry, tasteless, colorless sermon is preaching one! That is why I am so glad that an effective communicator like Daniel Overdorf has taken the time to identify some creative ways to sharpen the tools we preachers turn to in our study each week. Thanks for the book, Daniel, and I’m sure my congregation will thank you as well!”

—*Gary Brandenburg, Lead Pastor, Fellowship Bible Church, Dallas, Texas*

“If you are a growing preacher, then you should be better at your craft a year from now than you are today. Here are some exercises you can do each week that will help you grow stronger as a communicator of God’s truth.”

—*Haddon W. Robinson, Harold John Ockenga Distinguished Professor of Preaching and Senior Director of Doctor of Ministry Program, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*

“The gospel is ever fresh and renewing, but many preachers fall into ruts when speaking about it. Even preachers who make a conscientious effort to keep up with new developments in preaching are not always able to find the newest insights or to keep up with recent approaches to preaching. Daniel Overdorf’s *One Year to Better Preaching* puts into one volume many of the most exciting themes to emerge in the preaching ministry in the last generation. Each week this bright new voice in preaching introduces the preacher to a new perspective on the sermon, offers practical exercises for putting that perspective into practice, and adds a bibliography for further reading. Subjects range from how we interact with Scripture to paying attention to listener tendencies to bringing children into the process of sermon preparation. Preachers who follow this plan will not only find that their sermons will become more vital witnesses to the gospel, but that their own worlds will enlarge and they will have a lot of fun in the process.”

—*Ronald J. Allen, Professor of Preaching and Gospels and Letters, Christian Theological Seminary*

“Daniel Overdorf is creative, thorough, and practical—a great combination! These insightful exercises, combined with the books, articles, and websites he mentions, will greatly impact anyone’s preaching.”

—*Donald R. Sunukjian, Professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership, Homiletics Chair, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University*

“Put these exercises into practice and you will not, you cannot, fail to improve in your preaching. These steps are practical and within reach of anyone ready to apply themselves. Daniel Overdorf, one of evangelicals’ leading young homileticsians, has given a gift to those who take seriously Paul’s admonition to let ‘our progress be seen by all.’”

—Jeff C. Magruder, Associate Professor of Bible and Church Ministries,
Southwestern Assemblies of God University

“Daniel Overdorf has written a practically simple, one-year guide that will strengthen every preacher. Whether you have preached for over twenty-five years, or you are just beginning, you’ll need a coach to guide you from time to time. This book includes a year’s worth of spiritual workouts that will help keep all preachers at their sermonic best.”

—Mike Baker, Senior Pastor,
Eastview Christian Church, Normal, Illinois

“Veterans and beginners in the art of preaching will benefit from Daniel Overdorf’s creative and unique approach to improving communication skills. His experience in both the church and the academy give Dr. Overdorf an especially helpful perspective, and it will be well worth your while to spend a year with him. The exercises are so fascinating that you will be tempted to move even faster.”

—Mike Shannon, Professor of Preaching,
Cincinnati Christian University

“Every growing preacher senses the need, in Stephen Covey’s words, to sharpen the saw. Rust happens, and both pulpit and pew join voices in calling for a resource that encourages growth in preaching and the preacher. Daniel Overdorf has done us all a great service in supplying such a resource. Sensitivity to the preacher’s person, skills, and context sets this book apart from the rest. Daniel knows his craft and has given both the seasoned preacher and the anxious novice a helpful tool to sharpen their preaching ministries. Highly recommended!”

—Blayne Banting, Pastor, Caronport Community Church,
Caronport, Saskatchewan,
Adjunct Professor, Briercrest College and Seminary

“Preaching is both an art and a skill. Many preachers, teachers, and other communicators, young and old, lack a clear understanding of the basic techniques of oral communication. Daniel Overdorf is both a gifted preacher and teacher and has a deep well of knowledge to offer his readers concerning the craft of preaching. Without a doubt, *One Year to Better Preaching* is a must read for anyone who wants to hone their skills as a preacher.”

—David Martin, Regional Director,
Young Life Europe

ONE YEAR TO

Better Preaching

52 Exercises to
Hone Your Skills

Daniel Overdorf



Kregel
Ministry

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To my homiletics professors:

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Introduction

Left unsharpened, tools grow dull. So do preachers. Like a lumberjack who heaves a blunt blade against a stubborn oak, preachers across the world heave murky, anemic sermons across the rims of their pulpits toward listeners who are about as eager as the stubborn tree. When tools lose their edge, progress stalls, effectiveness wanes, and frustration escalates. If only the lumberjack (and the preachers) would periodically pause from the strain to sharpen their tools.

Many preachers graduated from Bible college or seminary with honed and gleaming homiletical skills. They could exegete with brilliance, introduce with intrigue, move with suspense, apply with conviction, illustrate with vividness, transition with ease, and conclude with passion. Their homiletical toolboxes brimmed with numerous options—deductive and inductive techniques, storytelling prowess, artistry, humor, logic, and an astute awareness of both the ancient and contemporary worlds. Our studies pulsated and our sermons soared.

Granted, our memories might exaggerate the reality, but at least in our better moments we proclaimed God's Word with passion and some effectiveness.

But that was ten years ago. Or twenty-five. Or forty. As the years passed, most of our homiletical tools sank to the rusty depths of our toolboxes, and they haven't seen the light of the sanctuary since. The one or two tools we use weekly lost their edge months ago (or was it years?).

We need to rediscover and sharpen our homiletical tools. The book in your hands will help. The following pages contain exercises designed to sharpen preaching skills. Most of the exercises require an hour or two of effort. This time investment may sound costly—I know few preachers who have an “extra” hour a week. But consider that lumberjack. If he would cease

battering the oak with his dull ax just long enough to sharpen his blade, the remainder of his work would grow less grueling and more effective. Rather than interrupting or delaying the work, the time spent sharpening the ax enhances it, turning monotonous strain into fruitful labor.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Readers can use this book in at least four different ways:

1. Weekly Exercises for a Year

One Year to Better Preaching contains fifty-two exercises designed to sharpen various homiletical skills. The book assumes you will complete the first exercise the first week, the second exercise the second week, and continue in this manner for a year. The process can begin at any time of the calendar year—no exercise is tied to a holiday or particular season.

Different exercises hone different skills. Readers who complete the exercises in order, therefore, will enjoy a process similar to cross-training. One exercise might sharpen your exegetical proficiency, the next might help you understand your listeners, the following week might lead you into more strategic prayer for your sermons.

2. Focus on Your Particular Weaknesses

The exercises in the book address eight categories of homiletical skills:

1. Prayer and Preaching
2. Bible Interpretation
3. Understanding Listeners
4. Sermon Construction
5. Illustration and Application
6. Word Crafting
7. The Preaching Event
8. Sermon Evaluation

Rather than completing all fifty-two exercises in order, some preachers may want to skip to those exercises which focus on their particular weaknesses. The chart on page 13 identifies what particular exercises address what particular skills.

3. One or Two Exercises Per Month

If tackling an exercise every week proves too burdensome, consider completing one or two per month. You might glance through the fifty-two exercises, choose the twelve or twenty-four that will most benefit your preaching, and complete them in the upcoming year.

4. Collaborate With Others

You may find it beneficial to pursue *One Year to Better Preaching* with a few preaching friends. Feel free to organize the group however you feel will best serve the preachers involved. You might consider these two possibilities:

- Gather a small group of preachers who each commit to the weekly exercises for one year. Communicate with each other—and hold one another accountable—through weekly phone calls or electronic communication, and/or meet together face-to-face once a month.
- Assemble a group of four preachers. The first month, have each preacher complete a different exercise chosen from the book’s first four chapters. For example, during the first month Bob completes exercise 1, Joe completes exercise 2, Frank completes exercise 3, and Terry completes exercise 4. When the group meets at the end of the month, each preacher discusses his or her experience. The second month, each preacher completes a different exercise chosen from the book’s fifth through eighth chapters, then the group discusses them at the next meeting. The process continues such that each preacher completes one exercise per month, but gains exposure to three additional exercises through discussion with the other group members.

WEB LINKS

Each chapter lists suggested resources for additional study. Many of these resources are found on the Internet. Though you can manually type each web address into your Internet browser, you will find it easier to visit and bookmark www.kregel.com/BetterPreaching, where you can simply click on each link.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Three additional suggestions deserve mention:

- You will find it beneficial to read a chapter on whatever day you typically begin work on your next sermon (Monday for most). This will allow time to plan how and when to complete that week's exercise.
- Some exercises might require you to plan a week or two ahead, perhaps to arrange a conversation or a focus group. In these cases, you might make these needed arrangements for the following week, then proceed to the next exercise so that you will not get behind.
- Following the fifty-two weekly exercises, the book includes seven bonus exercises. These will help if, for whatever reason, one of the weekly exercises would be impossible for you to complete. In these cases, choose a bonus exercise instead.

I pray that after completing this year of growth together, you will preach more biblically, relevantly, passionately, and fruitfully. May God bless and empower you as you proclaim His Word for the advancement of His kingdom.

	Prayer & Preaching	Bible Interpretation	Understanding Listeners	Sermon Construction	Illustration & Application	Word Crafting	The Preaching Event	Sermon Evaluation
32. Assign Biographies to Children					◆			
33. Craft Evocative Words						◆		
34. Consider the Text's Literary Form	◆							
35. Include Immediate Application					◆			
36. Teach Preaching to High Schoolers				◆				
37. Analyze a Movie		◆						
38. Swap Pulpits							◆	
39. Illustrate With Video					◆			
40. Conduct E-Interviews				◆				
41. Go to Work With a Church Member		◆						
42. Employ Purposeful Humor					◆			
43. Preach in Dialogue							◆	
44. Pray Through Your Sermon	◆							
45. Make a Bee-Line to the Cross		◆						
46. Illustrate Specifically					◆			
47. Land Smoothly in the Conclusion				◆				
48. Interweave Preaching and Worship							◆	
49. Write for the Ear						◆		
50. Preach With Men in Mind		◆						
51. Read Fiction					◆			
52. Critique a Video of Yourself								◆
<i>BONUS:</i>								
• Incorporate Testimony					◆			
• Fashion Compelling Titles				◆				
• Think Apologetically		◆						
• Seek Illustrations Outside					◆			
• Show Websites						◆		
• Read Classic Preachers				◆				
• Peruse the Newspaper					◆			

EXERCISE ONE

Commission a Sermon Prayer Group

Some weeks I listen to fifteen or more student sermons. Most of them follow the fundamental principles I teach in class, with introductions, outlines, illustrations, transitions, and conclusions arranged well on paper and in presentation. Following a number of these messages, however—not all of them, but a fair number—I offer positive feedback and assign a respectable grade, then return to my office shaking my head. The sermon missed something.

As the student spent weeks preparing the sermon, it digressed into an academic exercise. The biblical text evolved into an object to study; the sermon into an edifice to build. The empowerment of God's Spirit and the magnitude of God's truth fluttered to the wayside somewhere between the commentaries and the pulpit.

We might excuse this misstep in students who are still stumbling through the homiletical maze, but I admit that I falter in the same way. I prepare my sermons—at least some of them—like I'd prepare an academic paper. I research, organize, outline, type, and edit. Then I'm done.

Such sermons fall short because they miss the divine. In truth, a sermon devoid of the divine isn't a sermon—it's a speech, and probably not a good one. Apart from God's guidance and empowerment, our messages dwindle into mere human presentations, lacking the spiritual vitality to effect lasting change.

In contrast, sermons sparked by the Spirit carry the supernatural potential to inflame hearts and lives in Christ Jesus. These messages surpass human potential and invite divine possibility. They concede the pulpit to God, and allow Him to perform His eternal work in listeners.

Effective preachers, therefore, never cease praying for their sermons and for the preaching event. They invite others to pray. They submit every aspect of the preaching process to God's wisdom and empowerment.

To lead us toward divinely empowered messages—sermons that grow beyond academic essays to Spirit-filled proclamations—this book includes three exercises that help preachers immerse their sermons in prayer (Exercises 1, 22, and 44). The first, described in this chapter, involves commissioning a sermon prayer group.

THE EXERCISE

1. Assemble at least five people who will pray for you and your sermon every day for one week.
2. Each day, email group members specific guidance for their prayers. See suggestions on the next few pages for what they might pray each day.
3. On the day you preach, invite group members to pray with you beforehand. Also, ask at least three to pray while you preach.

DAILY PRAYER SUGGESTIONS

Ask your group to pray each day in a way that best relates to your particular sermon, study habits, and preaching needs. The ideas on the next few pages offer some guidance, but feel free to adjust them to fit your own circumstances.

You might ask group members to pray for:

Monday

- Peace concerning yesterday's sermon.
- Passion to begin a new study of God's Word.
- Persistence to stay disciplined in study all week.

Tuesday

- Strength from the Spirit to complete the difficult but rewarding task of Bible interpretation.
- Guidance from the Spirit toward study resources that will provide the most help.

- Enlightenment from the Spirit to understand the Scripture passage.

Wednesday

- The devotional insight to see God's glory erupting from the text.
- The intellectual insight to connect the sermon text with God's larger story of redemption through Christ.
- The pastoral insight to connect the text with the needs of the congregation.

Thursday

- Clarity in how to structure the sermon.
- Courage to include in the sermon whatever necessary to correct, rebuke, and encourage listeners.
- Conviction to live the truth of the text before preaching it.

Friday

- The development of illustrations that shed light on the truth of the text.
- The development of applications that help listeners understand the difference the truth should make in their lives.
- The development of an introduction that invites listeners into the message, and a conclusion that motivates them to live that message.

Saturday

- A mind settled and clear about the sermon.
- A heart at peace with the message and the task.
- A body enabled to rest in preparation for preaching.

Sunday

- Boldness to proclaim Truth zealously.
- Precision to proclaim Truth clearly.
- Transparency to proclaim Truth authentically.
- Humility to lose self entirely.
- Yearning to exalt Christ eminently.
- Effectiveness to bear fruit immediately.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

- Send the daily suggestions to your group members the prior night (send Monday's requests on Sunday evening, for example).
- The article listed on page 19 from Joe McKeever's online blog, "How to Pray For Your Pastor on a Saturday," contains several insightful thoughts. Group members may benefit from reading it.
- Tell your prayer team what particular hours you plan to study each day—perhaps they can pray at those times.
- If Sunday School classes or other groups meet prior to your preaching, ask them to pray something specific for the sermon. Depending on the topic of your message, they might pray, "Use today's sermon to grant peace to those who still feel burdened by previously forgiven sins;" or, "Empower our preacher to explain the mystery of grace clearly and in a manner that inspires awe."
- Those who pray during your sermon might: (1) gather in a separate room where they can pray aloud together; (2) disperse themselves throughout the congregation and intentionally pray for those seated around them; or (3) gather behind you on stage, in a visible but discreet location, giving the congregation a visual reminder of the prayers that undergird the sermon.

"I TRIED IT"

"I loved inviting others into the sermon writing process. Their prayers and encouragement throughout my preparation brought me confidence and excitement. As the week went on, I felt less pressure and more peace—I couldn't wait until Sunday. And, when I stood to preach, I knew that those who had prayed were all the more eager to hear what God had laid on my heart."

Benjamin Abbott, Prince Edward Island, Canada

"I asked several people to pray for the sermon and sent them daily updates. At first I didn't think anything was different. After the sermon, though—one I felt was just okay—several people told me that the sermon spoke directly to something

they were going through. Their comments were more than the usual ‘nice sermon’ I get every week. Apparently, the Spirit worked in response to the prayers of His people.”

Jason Warden, Knoxville, Tennessee

“One of the men who prayed for my sermon had been struggling in his marriage for some time. Though his wife attended church, she was not a believer. His prayers focused primarily on how the sermon would influence her. After the service on Sunday, she asked her husband to baptize her! The prayers definitely had an eternal impact.”

Doug Krauss, Greenville, Ohio

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- *Praying for Sunday: You, Your Pastor, and the Next Sermon*, by Dr. Michael Fabarez (Michael Fabarez, 2007).
- “How to Pray For Your Pastor on a Saturday,” by Joe McKeever. Access at www.joemckeever.com/mt/archives/001270.html.
- “Praying for God’s ‘Sacred Anointing’ on your Preaching,” by Glenn Wagner. Access at www.crosswalk.com/pastors/11608786.