

“Dr. Jesse L. Nelson’s *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons* is a crisp, power-packed book with six rich chapters that will help any preacher—lay or trained—in the preaching of God’s Word. Dr. Nelson carefully instructs his readers to pray, to select a text, to study the text thoroughly, to structure the sermon carefully, to speak with the power of the Spirit, and to share the gospel with grace. The various examples provided and encouragement gained from reading and practicing the wisdom found in these pages will set any preacher on a path to preaching power.”

—Scott M. Gibson, DPhil,
Director, PhD Program in Preaching,
Truett Seminary, Baylor University

“Dr. Jesse Nelson is the real deal. His experience in the pulpit, passion for preaching, keen theological insight, and practical tools for communicators make this book a treasure. *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons* brings God’s Word alive in the heart of the preacher and the worshiper!”

—Rev. Margot Starbuck,
speaker, editor, and author of *Small Things with Great Love*

“Why do preachers spend countless hours preparing individual sermons and sermon series? Surely, they must have a clear target in mind! Not necessarily, argues Jesse Nelson in *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons*. This book reminds us that preachers are called to a holy task of proclaiming a biblical message that evokes transformational discipleship in our listeners through the power of the Holy Spirit. Having known him personally, Nelson not only aspires to preach life-changing sermons, but he also models it with his life.”

—Matthew D. Kim,
George F. Bennett Professor of Preaching and Practical Theology,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary;
author of *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence* and *Preaching to People in Pain*

“In a simple, practical, easy-to-understand writing style, Jesse L. Nelson fulfills his promise to the readers of his new book: *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons, Six Steps to Developing and Delivering Biblical Messages*. This book certainly blessed me, and I also appreciated the Foreword by Dr. Robert S. Smith. Nelson’s book teaches preachers how to develop and deliver biblical messages in any cultural context, giving good information and wise instruction to preachers with or without a seminary education. I highly recommend this new book for all those who write, teach, and deliver life-changing biblical sermons.”

—Denise George,
author of *Called to Forgive: The Charleston Church Shooting,
a Victim’s Husband, and the Path to Healing and Peace*

“Jesse Nelson’s book, *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons*, gives a homiletical recipe to help serious biblical preachers prepare a solid meal to feed God’s people. His recipe consists of total dependency on the Holy Spirit, solid biblical content, practical and creative delivery, and cultural intelligence into the African American preaching tradition. Biblical preachers everywhere need not only read this book but, more importantly, put this recipe into practice.”

—Dante D. Wright I, PhD, DMin,
Associate Professor of Christian Studies,
Clamp Divinity School of Anderson University

“It’s been rightly said that preachers can’t get up and say ‘Thus saith the Lord!’ until they first know what the Lord saith. My brother and co-laborer, Jesse Nelson, reminds us that transformational preaching begins with the diligent study and right interpretation of the supernatural, inspired text of Scripture. But he doesn’t stop there. In *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons*, he goes on to equip us with the best practices of expository sermon-making and delivery, all served up with the flavor and fervor of the rich African American preaching tradition, to which all preachers are deeply indebted and from which we have much to learn. Glean from this book the simple profundity of saying what God says with anointing, conviction, authority, and passion. And then use it to train others on your watch to do the same.”

—Jim Shaddix, PhD, DMin,
W. A. Criswell Professor of Expository Preaching,
Senior Fellow, Center for Preaching and Pastoral Leadership,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“An effective sermon is not intended for entertainment or even instruction; it is intended to produce change in the life of the hearer—and the preacher! Jesse Nelson’s book *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons* brings both pastoral experience and scholarly insight to the process of sermon preparation, from the illumination of the preacher to the delivery of the message. The book will be valuable to the novice preacher and a refreshing reminder to the pulpit veteran.”

—Michael Dudit,
Executive Editor, *Preaching*;
Dean, Clamp Divinity School of Anderson University

“If there was ever a time we needed a book that would affect lives, it is now. Our communities and our families are in turmoil. From political divide, the pandemic, racial tension, and crime that is out of control, many are looking for answers. I believe the answer will not be found in politics, but from the pulpits! This is why Pastor Jesse Nelson’s book, *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons*, is so timely! If preachers would apply and put into practice the principles of this book, I have no doubt we would see noticeable change. I pray that we all would see what could happen in our society when we start *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons!*”

—Fred Luter, Jr.,
Senior Pastor, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans;
Former President, Southern Baptist Convention

“Jesse Nelson’s pastoral approach to expository, whole-book preaching offers a practical guide to moving our hearers toward being conformed to the image of Christ with every sermon. Filled with contemporary examples of faithful expositors, Nelson simplifies the process of listening to the biblical text for hearing words that give life. The workman who learns from this book will not be ashamed when standing to preach.”

—Eric C. Redmond,
Professor of Bible, Moody Bible Institute

PREACHING LIFE-CHANGING SERMONS



Six Steps to Developing
and Delivering Biblical Messages

JESSE L. NELSON



Preaching Life-Changing Sermons: Six Steps to Developing and Delivering Biblical Messages

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FOREWORD

In his inspiring and pragmatic work *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons: Six Steps to Developing and Delivering Biblical Messages*, Jesse L. Nelson approaches his task from the posture of a *hermeneutic of assumption*. He assumes his audience—pastors and preachers with no formal theological training, lay persons, and formally trained practitioners—begin their pulpit work with the understanding that the biblical text undergirds both the development and delivery of the biblical message. In essence, this is a book that implicitly and explicitly stresses the indispensability of a marriage between substance and style, content and contour, development and delivery concerning what to say and how to say it in sermons that are life-changing.

In what is most likely the first homiletical textbook in church history, *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine divided his treatise into two sections: hermeneutics (the interpretation of the biblical text) and homiletics (the presentation of the biblical text). The section on hermeneutics occupies three of the four books, while the section on homiletics comprises one book. Augustine, a rhetorician himself, stressed hermeneutics over homiletics. To promote life change, the preacher must have something substantive to say while at the same time say it well in order to engage the audience. This book ultimately serves as a bridge that connects textual responsibility to effective delivery. Like a ferryboat, the book takes the reader back and forth between the shores of the biblical text and the contemporary world.

Jesse Nelson is not just a preacher who goes into his sermonic laboratory and emerges from it offering theoretical gems that enrich preaching. Rather, he is both a formally trained pastor/preacher who presents principles and concepts he has tried in the crucible of his pastoral and itinerant ministry. He weighs the concepts and principles in the balance of his listening audience and finds that they are not wanting.

Jesse Nelson has written and released this book to assist preachers on this mighty long journey in order to encourage solid biblical content with effective delivery—the veritable union of revelation and relevance. I highly commend this work to all who desire to preach well!

—Robert Smith Jr.
Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity
and Professor of Christian Preaching,
Beeson Divinity School

PREFACE

Five Reasons to Read This Book

Why another preaching book? I am sure this question popped into your mind when you picked up this book. With so many preaching books on the shelf, why should you read this one? I believe you should read this book for the following reasons.

First, this book will fill a cultural gap on your bookshelf, as it includes information on African American preachers—a subject missing in most biblical or expository preaching books. During my final doctoral seminar, I read a chapter on the history of expository preaching as I completed a book review assignment. “What happened to the black expository preachers?” I wondered. I was appalled, upset, and confused. I was appalled because no history of expository preaching written in the twenty-first century should omit black expository preachers. I was upset because I felt my culture was erased from the annals of expository preaching. I was confused because I personally knew the author, and I was aware of the fact that he knew black expository preachers.

Second, this book will expose you to a few nuances of African American expository preaching. This book will not teach you how to preach “black.” This book is not written to argue for black preaching. The nuances learned from African American preachers will prepare you to develop and deliver biblical messages in any cultural context.

Third, you should read this book because it simplifies the approach to preparing biblical sermons. This book will teach you six essential skills for developing and delivering biblical messages.

Another reason you should read this book is because you can use this book for group study too. (You can even invite me to lead a preaching workshop in person or online.) Oftentimes, pastors of smaller congregations and associate ministers are not formally trained with skills to preach biblical messages. This book solves that problem. It can be used as a training manual in churches. It can also be a primary or supplementary textbook for Bible college and seminary preaching courses.

Finally, you should read it because this book will help you preach the Word. Some preaching books are more philosophical than pragmatic. This book is designed to be practical, not theoretical. At one time, the ability to attain the skills for developing and delivering life-changing sermons was limited to the preacher who went to seminary. For the minister unable to attend seminary, *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons* brings the seminary classroom to the minister's study.

For the love of preaching,
Jesse L. Nelson

INTRODUCTION

Preach the Text!

It's Sunday morning, and you are standing in the pulpit before a waiting congregation. You are a little nervous but excited to deliver the sermon you prepared. You read the Scripture and announce the title of the sermon. You open your mouth and begin to deliver your message. As you envision this moment, reflect on this question: What is your primary goal when preaching a sermon?

Some of us preach to inform people. Our sermons are loaded with facts and statistics about people and places in the Bible. Some of us want to inspire people. We preach sermons that infuse hope in hearts full of despair. Some of us preach to instruct. We want people to know how to do something like pray, forgive the unforgivable, or live a godly life in an ungodly world. And some of us most likely do not have a primary goal at all; we just preach.

I asked myself this same question about fifteen years ago. After thinking about it for a few days, I discovered my primary goal for preaching: to deliver life-changing sermons. Although I like to think my sermons are a balanced mix of information, inspiration, and instruction, my ultimate purpose is to change lives. I hope people will conform to the image of Christ. I pray people will look, live, and love like Jesus Christ when they hear my sermons. I asked one church member how my sermons had changed her life. She replied with the following statement: "Your sermons help me see who I am in Christ

and how much God loves me. Your sermons help with my self-esteem and discovering my purpose in life. Your sermons encourage us to grow and thrive in our relationship with God. You also give tools so we can read the Bible and understand it for ourselves.” So how do I preach life-changing sermons? The secret is simple. I preach the text!

Have you ever heard a preacher read a passage of Scripture but preach an unrelated subject? This type of preaching is confusing for the congregation. Confusing preaching is the number-one reason Christians give me when they are searching for a new church to attend. At different times, we’ve probably all been guilty of preaching confusing sermons. There is a surefire way to avoid this, however; that is to *preach the text*.

Why do some preachers read a text but preach a different subject? I think the primary reason is because they are not trained in preparing sermons that focus on the text. Therefore, they focus on preaching a topic instead of the biblical text. But oftentimes this results in sermons that are scattered, unfocused, and unconnected to the Word of God. Each time I stand before my congregation, I want to preach the text I read with *understanding* and *application*. Tony Evans, Jim Shaddix, Martha Simmons, and Beth Moore are effective communicators because they focus on the biblical text.¹ Preaching the text is the key to preaching a life-changing sermon.

How, you may be asking, can you learn to preach the text? How can you prepare a life-changing sermon? The answer is in your hands. This book will teach you the six steps for developing and delivering a life-changing sermon. If you read this book, you will learn how to seek the Spirit, select your Scripture, study the Scripture, structure your sermon, speak in the Spirit, and share the Savior. Each chapter includes personal illustrations, a profile of a preacher who demonstrates that step, and words of wisdom from a preacher on how to

1 See *The Power of Preaching: Crafting a Creative Expository Sermon* by Tony Evans; *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* by Jim Shaddix; and *Doing the Deed: The Mechanics of 21st Century Preaching* by Martha Simmons for their approach to preaching biblical messages.

implement it. As a pastor and scholar with more than twenty years of ministry experience, I am bringing the seminary classroom to your study. If you are ready to change your church and community, this book is for you! Turn the page and take the first step to preaching life-changing sermons.

SEEKING THE SPIRIT

What is the first step for preaching a life-changing sermon? Is it thinking of a great idea? Is it choosing the perfect Scripture? Is it preaching your favorite preacher's most popular sermon?

In fact, it is none of the above. When I was preparing to preach my first sermon, I did not know the first step for preaching a life-changing sermon. I acknowledged my call to preach when I was twelve years old. A couple of years later, my pastor asked me if I was ready to preach. I sincerely and naively said yes. As a fourteen-year-old high school freshman, I was not ready to preach my first sermon, but I had four weeks to get ready. I knew the basic Bible stories from Sunday school, and I knew how to write essays on biblical topics. I had won a few statewide biblical essay contests when I was in middle school. However, I did not know anything about preparing or preaching a sermon. So I began seeking the Spirit of God through prayer. After a week of prayer, the Spirit directed me to my preaching text, Luke 4:18–20. I continued to pray, and the Spirit revealed the outline and points of emphasis for my sermon the next week. After more prayer, I wrote the introduction, body, and conclusion of my sermon. I was ready to preach my first sermon, “The Spirit of the Lord Is upon Me!”

Returning to the initial question, What is the first step for preaching a life-changing sermon? It is *seeking the Spirit*. I began by seeking the Spirit as a young preacher, and after years of seminary training and a doctoral degree in expository preaching, seeking the Spirit is still my first step in sermon preparation.

WHY SHOULD WE SEEK THE SPIRIT FIRST?

There are four primary reasons we should seek the Spirit first when preparing a sermon. First, the Spirit is the author of the Bible. According to 2 Peter 1:20–21, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” The Bible is often called God’s Word. This is true, but the Bible is also God’s words. The Holy Spirit inspired men to write God’s words. So the Bible is not a human book. The Bible is God’s book written by humans.

In 1 Corinthians 2:10–11, we notice two additional reasons for seeking the Spirit. The apostle Paul wrote, “For to us God revealed [his thoughts] through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.” The second reason we should seek the Spirit is because the Spirit is God and knows the thoughts of God. The Spirit knows exactly what God meant when he said it and men wrote it.

The third reason we seek the Spirit is because he reveals the wisdom of God. This wisdom is called illumination. Church history has yielded different views on illumination. Augustine believed illumination was a “part of the general process of gaining knowledge.”¹ Daniel Fuller described illumination as “the process by which the Holy Spirit turns the human will around to accept God’s teachings.”² For John Calvin, the Holy Spirit works in the life of the believer by witnessing to the truth and countering the effects of sin so the meaning of the Bible can become apparent to the believer.³ I believe illumination is when

1 Augustine, *The City of God*, 9.16.

2 Daniel Fuller, “The Holy Spirit’s Role in Biblical Interpretation,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, eds. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 189–98.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* 1.7, 9.

the Holy Spirit opens a Christian's spiritual eyes so they may see and understand the Word of God.⁴

Illumination and revelation should not be confused. Revelation is the communication of God's truth through his written Word (the Bible). Illumination is the understanding of biblical revelation. Through illumination, the Holy Spirit teaches us all the truth and glorifies Christ. However, abiding sin in our lives can hinder the Spirit's ministry of illumination.⁵

Finally, we should seek the Spirit because he is at work in our preaching. How does the Spirit work in your preaching? The Spirit encourages the preacher to live the Word. The Spirit empowers the preacher to proclaim the Word. The Spirit opens the hearts of those who hear and receive the Word. The Spirit applies the Word of God to the listeners' lives. The Spirit produces lasting fruit in the lives of Spirit-filled believers.⁶

HOW DO WE SEEK THE SPIRIT?

Now we know *why* we should seek the Spirit, but *how* do we seek the Spirit? We seek the Spirit of God through spiritual disciplines. Five common spiritual disciplines are prayer (supplication), study, solitude, service, and submission. While all of these disciplines are necessary to a well-rounded spiritual life, I consider prayer and personal Bible study the most important disciplines for ministers. When I begin discipling a new Christian (or an old one), I encourage them to pray and read Scripture daily. If you are going to preach life-changing sermons, prayer and personal Bible study must be essential and foundational in your life and ministry too! I will focus my discussion on prayer because I believe prayer is the most neglected discipline for preachers.

4 I agree with Paul P. Enns on this view of illumination; see his explanation in *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 175.

5 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 47.

6 Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching: The Holy Spirit's Role in Sermon Preparation and Delivery* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 4.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

What is your definition of prayer? Talking to God? Communication with God? For me prayer is simply *expressing my heartfelt desires to God*. Let me explain. Prayer is *expressing*. This means I am communicating something. I am making something known. I can express my prayers through speaking, thinking, singing, or writing. The Psalms are full of these expressions.

Prayer is *heartfelt*. This means my prayers are genuine. We must pray sincerely and honestly. Jesus said, “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matt. 6:7–8).

Prayer includes my *desires*. Desires are the yearnings and longings of my heart. My desires are twofold. My desires are what I want from God and what God wants for me. Some people tell us not to pray for the desires of our heart; however, God promises to give me the desires of my heart (answer my prayers) if I delight myself in him (Ps. 37:4).

My prayers are directed *to God*. I do not pray to an object. I pray to God. I can pray with boldness and confidence because my prayers are to the Sovereign God. He is the Creator, Sustainer, and Controller of all things. When I pray, I must make known to God the sincere and honest yearning of my heart. In other words, prayer is *expressing my heartfelt desires to God*.

After expressing my heartfelt desires to God, I look and listen for his answer. Over the years I have identified ways God answers my prayers. God responded through His Spirit by bringing a particular thought to mind as I reflect on my issue. He answered my prayer through the Scripture while I am reading and meditating on it. God spoke through sermons that I listened to during the week. Sometimes God used spirit-filled people to provide wise counsel. I have heard answers through Christian songs. I have also seen God speak through special circumstances like an accident or a miraculous blessing.

WHY SHOULD WE PRAY?

Why do you pray? We all pray for various reasons. Some of us pray because we feel obligated. Others of us pray when we feel overwhelmed by our ministry. I pray for several reasons. I pray because Jesus expects his disciples to pray (Matt. 6:5–7). I pray because I cannot receive certain things until I pray (James 4:2). I pray when I want God to reveal the unknown (Jer. 33:3). I pray because I will receive the peace of God (Phil. 4:6–7). I pray because I want to walk in the footsteps of Jesus (Mark 1:35, Luke 6:12). I pray because I want to be filled with the Spirit and speak with boldness (Acts 4:31). I pray because prayer is a weapon for spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:18–20).

WHEN AND WHERE SHOULD WE PRAY?

We should pray at all times! Paul told the Thessalonian Christians to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 4:17). Praying without ceasing does not mean we should be walking around talking aloud to ourselves all day. Instead, praying without ceasing means we should be walking in the spirit of prayer. This keeps us in constant contact or communion with God. Although you may say “amen” after your morning prayers, you should never stop praying or communicating with God. When you live a life of constant communion with God, you can pray anywhere. You do not have to confine your prayer life to a prayer closet. You can pray in your car, office, break room, or outside because you carry your inner prayer closet with you everywhere you go. We can pray anytime and anywhere.

HOW DO YOU PRAY?

How do you pray? As a child my grandmother taught me to pray the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is the model Jesus gave his disciples for praying sincere prayers. Although I have learned various prayer techniques, the Lord’s Prayer is still a model for me. I use the acronym PRAY to move through the Lord’s Prayer: Praise, Repent, Ask, and Yield.

I start my prayer with praise (Matt. 6:9). I *praise* God for being my heavenly Father. I praise him for my salvation through the death

and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the gospel). I praise him for the Holy Spirit who seals and secures me until the day of redemption. I praise God for his compassion, grace, patience, lovingkindness, and truthfulness. I also pray through the names of God and praise him for the characteristics or attributes those names identify. For example, I praise God for being Jehovah Jireh, my provider. I praise God because he is Jehovah Shalom, my peace. I praise God as Jehovah Rapha, my healer and Jehovah Raah, my shepherd.

After praising God, I *repent* of my sins (Matt. 6:12). Sometimes my sins are obvious, so I confess and repent of those first. Sometimes, if the burden of sin is heavy, I confess and repent first in my prayer and then I praise God for forgiveness. When my sins are not so obvious, I think through the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, or my daily devotional Scripture and confess the sins where I feel the Spirit's conviction.

Once I finish confessing, I begin to *ask* God for provision and protection for others and myself (Matt. 6:11, 13). When I was a young boy, I was taught the acronym JOY for prayer: Jesus, Others, and Yourself. Based on this principle, I prayed for myself last. But by the time I began praying for myself, I was so exhausted from praying for others that I would basically say "Lord, bless me." However, when studying prayer during seminary, I began reading Dr. John Piper, the retired pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the author of many books, including *Desiring God*. In one article I read, Dr. Piper said he prayed in concentric circles.⁷ This method has become my primary way of praying for others and myself. How does it work?

In regard to asking for provision and protection, I pray for myself first because if I am not in a good place spiritually, I am no good to anyone else. Then I pray for my household and immediate family by name. Next, I pray for my staff, deacons, and other church leaders by name. I pray for the congregation as a whole—all the members. I also

7 "How Do You Structure Your Prayer Life?," interview with Dr. John Piper, DesiringGod.org, November 22, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-you-structure-your-prayer-life>.

pray for pastors, missions, the missionaries we support, and Christians around the world. I pray for leaders of Christian organizations, the community, city, and country. So I begin praying for myself and keep revolving my prayers until I reach the ends of the earth.

Finally, you must pray to *yield* or submit your will to God's will (Matt. 6:10). After I finish praying through my circles of needs, concerns, and desires, I say, "Not my will, but your will be done." Although I express my genuine desires to God, ultimately, I want his will to be accomplished in my life because he can do abundantly more than I could ever think or ask of him. I am also asking for his kingdom to come so that we may have a taste of heaven on earth.

HOW DID PREACHERS PRAY IN THE BIBLE?

Let's review the New Testament and see the connection between prayer and ministry. Jesus, a preacher of life-changing sermons, modeled prayer in his life and ministry. Jesus did not stay in bed after a long day of ministry. Jesus got up early the next morning and went to a secluded place to pray (Mark 1:32–35). Jesus prayed all night before choosing his disciples (Luke 6:12–16). Jesus taught his disciples how to pray (Luke 11:1–12). Jesus prayed for his disciples and future generations of Christians (John 17:6–26). Jesus prayed before he was arrested in the garden (Matt. 26:26–46). Jesus prayed while he was being murdered on the cross (Luke 23:34). Jesus is praying for us right now (Rom. 8:34). If Jesus prayed at all times, we should too!

The apostles were men of prayer. Prayer was foundational for their ministry. Jesus taught them how to pray (Luke 11:2–5). Jesus encouraged them to pray at all times (Luke 18). They were praying in an upper room in Jerusalem after the ascension of Christ (Acts 1:14). The apostles prayed when the chief priests and elders released Peter and John from jail (Acts 4:23–31). According to Acts 6, the apostles did not want to neglect the ministry of prayer and the Word. So the apostles appointed seven men to oversee the distribution of food to the widows so that they could remain focused on prayer and the Word. How often have you neglected the ministry of prayer to do something you thought was more important?

Another preacher of life-changing sermons, Paul, also modeled prayer in his ministry. Paul included prayer in every letter he penned to the churches. Paul's prayers serve as a guide for me when praying for my congregation or ministry. Not only am I praying God's Word over my church, I am praying God's Word that was for the church. So if you ever wonder what to pray for your church, Paul's prayers are a perfect place to start.

These men preached life-changing sermons because they were praying preachers. Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Peter preached a sermon, and three thousand people were saved (Acts 2). Paul preached a sermon and people began to believe in the “unknown God” that Paul made known (Acts 17). Since Jesus, the apostles, and Paul were praying preachers, we should be devoted to prayer too.

A PRAYING PREACHER

Dr. Fred Luter Jr. is a life-changing preacher who exemplifies prayer in his preaching. Dr. Luter's ministry began as a street preacher in New Orleans, Louisiana. Within a few years, he became pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans.

Before the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church was the largest Southern Baptist Church in Louisiana with more than seven thousand members. Since Katrina, his church continues to see more than four thousand worshippers gather on Sunday morning. Pastor Luter, who became the first African-American president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 2012, frequently preaches at Bible conferences, city-wide revivals, and seminary chapel services.

In April of 2015, Dr. Luter was the guest preacher for my church's missions conference. As the host pastor for the conference, I was the head of Dr. Luter's hospitality committee. One day after lunch, I asked Dr. Luter what was the key to his success as a pastor and prolific preacher. Dr. Luter smiled knowingly. “My answer will probably disappoint you,” he told me. He went on to explain that the key to his success was his daily devotion with God. He said no matter how

busy his pastoral and preaching calendar became, he always took the time to pray and spend time in God's Word each day.

Prayer is the key to Dr. Luter's success. Prayer is how Pastor Luter determines what Scripture to preach. Prayer is what reveals the truth of the text to him. Prayer is what ignites his fiery preaching in the pulpit. Prayer is what opens the people's hearts to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ through him. Each time I hear Dr. Luter preach, he says this prayer before he preaches:

God, let me decrease as you increase. Father, let them not see Fred, but God, let them see Christ. To the end, God, that you may be glorified, the saints of God may be edified, Satan may be horrified, and all sinners will come to repentance. Therefore God, stand in my body, think with my mind, and speak with my voice. I will be so very careful then to give you all of the praise, all of the glory, and all of the honor. In Jesus's name we pray, and for his sake may the people of God say, "Amen."

How did Dr. Luter go from a street preacher to president of the Southern Baptist Convention? One word: prayer! I am convinced Dr. Fred Luter is a life-changing preacher with a life-changing ministry because he is a praying preacher. As we often say, "I want to be like him when I grow up." So if you want to preach life-changing sermons, you must be a praying preacher!

WORDS OF WISDOM

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a life-changing preacher who exemplified prayer in his ministry. Spurgeon was a nineteenth-century pastor who preached to thousands each week. It is said Charles Spurgeon took a group of visitors to the boiler room to reveal the power undergirding his preaching ministry. When Spurgeon opened the door, they saw a group of church members praying for Spurgeon. Prayer was the source of his power! In the book *Lectures to My Students*, Spurgeon—sometimes called the "Prince of Preachers"—offers words

of wisdom on prayer and preaching to his students. “Use prayer as a boring rod, and wells of living water will leap up from the bowels of the Word. Who will be content to thirst when living waters are so readily to be obtained! The best and holiest men have ever made prayer the most important part of pulpit preparation.”⁸

Another life-changing preacher named Charles is Dr. W. Charles Lewis, the founder and senior pastor of Dothan Community Church in Dothan, Alabama. He is a graduate of Tuskegee University, a historic black college and university in Tuskegee, Alabama. Dr. Lewis received his master’s and doctorate degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary. He is a professor for the Dothan extension of the Birmingham Theological Seminary. He also serves as a church-planting coach, pastoral mentor, and advocate for racial reconciliation. I served on the staff of Dothan Community Church as associate pastor of teens for a couple of years, so I know he practices what he teaches regarding spiritual preparation. Here are his words of wisdom on seeking the Spirit:

The message of God is delivered by the messenger of God, and just as the Word of God is unadulterated, the messenger should be also. Thus, the spiritual preparation of the preacher is vital and begins with a spiritual mindset. As a messenger of God, he must prepare his sermon with the mindset that he has an audience of one to please; that is, the triune God (2 Timothy 2:4). Being mindful that he is God’s messenger (Romans 10:15), the preacher must seek to please God in his study of the Word, his living of the Word, and his delivery of the Word (Ezra 7:10).

He does not want to be ashamed before his audience (of one) so he must be diligent to present himself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

8 C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 44.

Therefore, he must objectively study the text in context in order to receive God's message and deliver it without pretext. This is a spiritual undertaking.

Secondly, he must be aware of the spiritual nature of his human audience. He must be prepared spiritually in order to minister to them spiritually. This includes prayer, reflection, and meditating on God's Word: "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4–5).

Thirdly, he must be a practitioner of the Word that he preaches. His life is to authenticate and validate his message. When the messenger's life matches the message he delivers, it helps to make him a vessel fit for the Master's use: "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).⁹

So, what can we conclude? The first step for preaching a life-changing sermon is seeking the Spirit. I believe the primary, but most neglected way, to seek the Spirit is through prayer. It is never too late to become a praying preacher. Start praying more today . . . right now! After you come back from your time of prayer, turn the page and discover the second step for preaching a life-changing sermon.

⁹ W. Charles Lewis, message to the author, January 27, 2021. Used by permission.