

Title: Preaching to the Spiritually Exhausted
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I remember receiving a letter a few years ago from one of the leaders in our church's youth ministry. Darrin was an outstanding, mature, godly young man and yet in his letter, he informed me of his recent decision to renounce Christianity. What was his reason? While he had a few fairly common theological questions and doubts, the root issue was much deeper than all of that. He was spiritually exhausted. He had spent years doing all the things Christians are supposed to do and yet was not experiencing any real change. He felt that his only option was to renounce his faith.

How many of the people that listen to our teaching every week are very much like Darrin—sincerely wanting to follow God and yet growing tired of trying? Some are perhaps unaware of their exhaustion as they continue on a treadmill of spiritual busyness. Others carry a deep sense of failure: "Everyone else seems to be getting this. Why is it not working for me?"

Creating Exhaustion?

The ultimate irony is that we as pastors and teachers often contribute to their state of spiritual fatigue. It's nothing intentional. We simply want to help apply God's word to their lives. So we fill every sermon with good Biblical principles: four strategies to improve your prayer life, five keys to a healthy marriage, three ways to be more loving, etc. etc. All of this is helpful information, but imagine the long term impact in a person's soul when they know they haven't come close to mastering last week's application points and are now getting three more to add to their list.

While this kind of principle-centered preaching seems to resonate with so many people, it actually can lead to two equally dangerous paths. One path is spiritual pride. Those who are working hard to keep these lists feel really good about themselves. They feel close to God because of how well they are doing...sort of like the Pharisee in Luke 18 who rejoiced in his own moral goodness and despised the sinner praying next to him. How convenient that pride and self-centeredness weren't on his list! If we as pastors are not careful, we can end up creating a culture filled with Pharisees—good, moral people who are striving to do the right thing and yet blind to their own real need.

The other dangerous path toward which principle-centered preaching can direct people is the path of disillusionment and despair. Each week those in our church hear more things they are supposed to be doing—good, spiritual, Christian things—and they know deep down that they can't do it. They've tried to change. They've knelt at the altar, making promises and commitments and resolutions, but each time the end result is the same. No change...except for the added guilt and shame. Some resolve to try harder. Others give up all together.

A "New" Kind of Preaching

So what's the answer? How can we as pastors and teachers help people avoid the trappings of the principle-focused path? How are we to preach to the spiritually exhausted? The answer may surprise you: **Preach the gospel**. Preach the gospel not just to the lost but to the found. Often we as pastors see the gospel as the entry point into Christianity. We preach the gospel to lost people, but we fail to realize that the saved need the gospel just as desperately. The gospel is not simply the starting line for Christianity. It is the race itself. (See how Paul talks about the gospel in Colossians 1:6, Romans 1:15)

If this is the case, how does one go about preaching the gospel to those who have already embraced it? The answer is very simple: Preach repentance and faith as **continual** activities rather than as one-time, initial responses to the gospel. The mistake we often make is in not realizing that repentance and faith are critical aspects of a person's on-going experience with Christ.

Preaching Repentance

Often we as pastors shy away from using the "repentance" word too frequently. We realize that many Christians view it as an oppressive, negative thing or as something we do when we *really* mess up. Part of our role as pastors and teachers is to help people understand that repentance is anything but oppressive. It is life-giving! When Jesus began his ministry of preaching the gospel of the kingdom, he laid a crucial foundation with these words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3). Guess what He's talking about? Repentance.

To be poor in spirit is to see the depth of our brokenness, to see the depth of our need. This, like the other beatitudes, is not a one-time event but rather a continual response. When we as believers truly understand the gospel, it forces us to face the truth that we are a lot more sinful than we realize. When God began to open my eyes to see the gospel in this 'new' way, He started by showing me how much I needed it—even in the most spiritual of activities.

I remember one Sunday afternoon reflecting on the morning worship services and feeling really good about my message, having heard lots of positive comments from people who were there. As I was enjoying those reflections, I started to think about specific people in our church who weren't there that morning—some key leaders who I thought really needed to hear that message. I found myself getting angry...righteous anger of course. In the midst of all this, I sensed God asking me a question: *Alan, is this anger really about Me and My glory, or is it about you and your desire to have people hear your "great" message?* Ouch. That hurt. I saw with painful clarity how my motives—even in preaching—were for my own glory rather than His.

This is us. We need the gospel every moment of every day because our flesh instinctively is drawn toward self-absorption and idolatry. In light of this, one of our key tasks as teachers is in helping all of our people see the depth of their need for Christ. We all need our eyes opened to see how self-absorbed and self-centered we truly are, how often we look for life in all sorts of things rather than God.

Redefining Sin

Part of our problem with repentance is how we define sin. If we talk about sin as “doing bad things”, our people will freely acknowledge that they are not perfect but at the same time will feel they are doing pretty well. However when we define sin according to the first commandment—loving God with all of our being—suddenly we realize that we have a BIG problem with sin. It permeates all we do. How often are we as Christians trying to find life and meaning and significance and security in things other than God? How often are we looking to shopping, or our 401k, or our attractiveness, or our reputation or our success as the thing from which we find ultimate joy and meaning?

When we begin talking about sin in this way, suddenly the room gets quiet. People begin seeing that sin is so much more than doing bad things. It includes the multitude of ways we replace God with self as the center of our lives. The great thing about defining sin in this way is that I can always find lots of personal examples to share in messages—which fosters an atmosphere where it’s okay to admit you’re broken. That goes a long way in creating a culture of continual repentance.

Good News

Now some of you are perhaps envisioning this renewed emphasis on repentance as a real downer—a guaranteed way to decrease the size of your congregation. Actually, the opposite is the case. When people begin seeing the depth of their brokenness, it opens a door for something absolutely amazing—the presence of Christ filling their brokenness. This is the second half of the gospel we proclaim. Repentance AND faith.

I used to preach about faith only when talking about prayer or how to endure times of difficulty. One day, I was reading Romans 1:17 and the light bulb came on. Paul says “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.” I had read that verse literally dozens of times and had never really seen those last four words: From first to last. The *entire* Christian life is about faith. We are to live by faith. In other words, we are to continually place our trust in Christ alone.

Now this is where the brokenness of repentance becomes so important. If a person doesn’t see the depth of their sinfulness and need, how deeply will they live their lives in dependence upon Christ? When our preaching is primarily focused on principles and application points, it’s easy for people to both lose sight of their need for a Savior as well as what an incredible Savior He really is. The focus is on following principles rather than embracing a Person. One leads to self-sufficiency, the other to Christ-sufficiency.

A New Testament Pattern

Once we begin to grasp this continual repentance and faith message, we begin seeing it everywhere in the New Testament. Jesus said in John 7:37, “If anyone is thirsty, let Him come to Me and drink.” That’s the gospel! If someone doesn’t admit they are thirsty, they won’t run to

Jesus for help. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:10, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” In his weakness, he more fully experienced God’s power. In Romans 7:24-25, after being brutally honest about his own brokenness, Paul declares, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

In each of these places as well as dozens of others (including Galatians 2:20, Matthew 11:28-30), the spiritual life is described as being lived in continual repentance and faith. As we see the depth of our need, we can more fully embrace Christ in that moment. Paul’s words at the end of his life are incredibly eye-opening: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.” (1 Timothy 1:15). Notice, he doesn’t say “I was the worst but am beyond that now.” Paul says, “I **am** the worst of sinners.” Present tense! Paul’s lifelong path of spiritual maturity involved him seeing with increasingly clarity the depth of his need for mercy—which made him more in love with his Savior.

Gospel-Infused Preaching

All of this means that in our preaching we have the wonderful privilege of continually encouraging people to embrace these two life giving truths of the gospel: We are far more sinful than we realize AND we have a Savior who is far more wonderful than we ever dreamed. Every message we give should in some way highlight these two realities. We want to help people see with greater clarity the depth of their brokenness and the glorious sufficiency of their Savior.

Often our basic approach to Biblical preaching is a three step model:

1. Here’s what the Bible says
2. Here’s what it means
3. Now go do it.

In this approach, the climax of the sermon is giving people a challenge to try hard to do what God wants them to do—which actually drives them further from the gospel. Christianity becomes a list of things to do in order to please God.

What might it look like to infuse the gospel into this paradigm? It actually is quite simple to do. In step 3, after showing people how they should live, we then remind them of their own inability to do this. Our self absorption and idolatry make this impossible—which then leads to a 4th step. Proclaiming Jesus as our solution. In the midst of our inadequacy, we can look to One who is adequate. In the midst of our weakness, we can look to His strength. So now our basic approach is as follows:

1. Here’s what the Bible says
2. Here’s what it means
3. Now go do it...but you can’t. (Repentance)
4. Look to your incredible Savior, who longs to live His life through you. (Faith)

In each message—no matter what the specific passage or topic—we can preach the gospel in this way. We can expose brokenness and point people toward their Savior. While the first approach only adds to the exhaustion of the hearers, this second approach is music to their souls. They no longer have to continue on the treadmill of performance, trying to make God smile. They no longer have to pretend they are doing better than they really are. Instead, they can admit their weakness and more fully embrace the beauty of their Savior. It really is good news!

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