

Sermon Preparation: An Interview with Pastor Paul W. Martin

By Julian Freeman (with Thomas Gee)

1. What is the role of preaching in your church?

o How common do you think that thought is?

Central. I'd say the pulpit drives any church, so the strength of your church will be directly correlated to the strength of the pulpit ministry.

You can two bad ways with it. You can go to where you elevate pulpit ministry above everything else to the point where you neglect, or you elevate everything else so that pulpit ministry becomes a lame conversation by someone sitting on a stool with a mic.

But my own spiritual observations is that the healthiest churches are ones that are driven by a vibrant pulpit ministry, and if that is coupled by real pastoring then you are forced to deal with all the other stuff. So I can identify amazing pulpit ministries that I've been witness to that have in my view neglected real pastoring and then half floated in "preaching centres", that's all it is, it's not church. Obviously the more dominant example would be churches that are caught up in all the external peripheral things that pulpit ministry is not there.

2. How do you structure your overall preparation time? Do you begin months in advance?

If I prepare a sermon any sooner than a week ahead, I forget it. It is not fresh. It is very frustrating for me in the pulpit. Really disliked it.

And I find by working through books of the Bible, you're always looking ahead. If you're really doing study, and paying attention to things, you're always working ahead. Phrases that are going to appear later, or phrases here in chapter 15, in chapter 4. You're not doing the same level of study ahead, but because you're textually driven, your author is textually-driven, and he has trajectories he's on. So you're working really hard. Even though you're only on chapter 3, you're already doing all kinds of work for chapters 4-16. You don't know yet how that is going to relate, but by the time you get to chapter 12, you're preaching with strength.

You could say "study the whole book in advance." I know some guys do that, they study the book out, they do all the diagramming, they read all the commentaries, and then they think they're ready to preach the book. That sounds fantastic to me, but realistically I have no idea how to make that work in my life. I have no idea how I could do that.

I study Tuesday afternoons and Wed afternoons, and all day Thursday, and I try to write my sermon on Friday morning, be done by noon. The perfect week, I send the sermon out, get input over the next 24 hrs from my elders and EITs, and then I'll look at it again Saturday night. I find my brain, just go through it very carefully Saturday night, and then I go to bed. I get up Sunday morning, I do the same thing. I

print out my 80% manuscript, and I have a lot of things written in, things crossed out. When I go to the pulpit with this [hand-annotated notes]. .. if all it was was the printed page, I need to see things. I just different coloured ink, and little things, I'll make my illustrations, my applications. Sometimes I'll just flip through my notes quick and say man that's 3 pages with no ILL, so I've probably gone too long [without an illustration]. I like preaching with bullets, so when I'm seeing my page ... That's what I'll take into the pulpit.

And I'm curious to get back into John because I was doing this a little bit with John but not a lot. I think I've finally found a way to do it that works for me in the pulpit. That's the key. How can you get the most freedom and clarity. Freedom and clarity, and yet at the same time I really want to aim at getting elder involvement in the preached word. I just want to do a season of that, it may not last forever. I've already seen the value of vetting my sermons; another set of eyes sees things that I don't see. It's really good for my humility to have guys go "I don't think that's necessary" and I do. Am I right or are they right? And then comes delivery. Drink lots of water. In advance.

3. How much time do you schedule for sermon prep?

- **How is it divided between study and writing?**

It depends on the text and my familiarity with it as well as the themes and doctrines present in it. But I usually schedule around 20 hours per sermon in study and writing. I spend 13 hours or so in studying and 2-3 in writing.

4. Is your prep from week to week the same / consistent?

- **What causes weeks to be different from each other?**

I try to keep my time in the languages and the general "grunt" work the same each week. I think the best study is when you have time to let it simmer for a while, after you've actually studied and thought through the grammar and the details. The schedule and the busy-ness of that particular week impacts how that works itself out.

5. How do you create a sermon that seeks to change people?

I'll start with a book that helped me with that, which is Jay Adams' *Preaching with Purpose*. I think that book nails it. Every sermon ought to have a point, and it ought to drive to change because that's its purpose in the church, to change. If I'm doing my study correctly, I'm trying to ask of the text all the time what difference does it make, or the so what. Why, if everything in the Scripture pertains to life and godliness, then why is this Scripture here? How does it pertain to life and godliness in my life, and how does it pertain to life and godliness in my sheep.

Having that question in mind in all of your study is going to help you decipher in the study what things are of import. So, I may need to know that this is a continuative gar or an explanatory gar, but they may not. Sometimes they do because for them to be, for the change to be effective, they need to see that this is absolutely essential for whatever reason. So I think having that question in the back of my mind, is very helpful.

And then I think that's what drives illustration. So looking for ways to illustrate things that are cloudy, that are essential, for the ongoing change. And then, I think, prayer. As you prepare and as you preach, praying that the Lord will direct and knowing that the Spirit of God is the only agent of change.

And I find that often, I chuckle now, I was shocked earlier in my ministry, I find it kind of enjoyable now, to hear how the preached word brought change in someone's life and 90% of the time it was nowhere in an area that I intended. People say, "you said this" and blah, blah, blah, and you just think well the Lord has his designs, I mean you laboured to do something, and no good, and that's fine.

6. What do you do to "exegete" your congregation, to understand how to speak to them and what to speak?

I'll reference another book, which is Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*, in which he makes the excellent observation that we need to study men's souls near as much as we study the word of God, study how to get the word of God into them, so I feel I'm always exegeting people when I'm with them, now you can go down again in a bad direction where you are just mining data or finding ways to manipulate or looking for sermon illustrations. I don't want to go there, but I do just want to listen carefully to what my people say, whether that's over lunch or Fellowship Lunch or playing squash with a guy or in meetings like this, I mean, what I'm always looking for generally is heart motivations, what really drives the persons talks, listening carefully to what they say. And not becoming hypercritical, I just want to listen carefully to how people think, I want to listen carefully to how I speak, how I talk and how I act, and say am I centered in the word of God, are my thoughts reflective of truth, when I talk about this area, am I reflecting biblical truth or am I just in my own la-la land. I think you just learn to pick that up.

So basically what we do in a TAG is listen to people, helping reflect back this, but I think you can do that all the time, just talking to people, hearing them, listening to what they have to say, looking for patterns. [Gave an example of talking to one person, noting what they said 4 different times.] You realize [person x] is not alone, [person x] is representative of males of his generation; they are easily swayed, very poor life plans, depend functionally much more on their gut than on the word, so now you bring that into your preaching. If your passage has some form of applying to that, then you do.

In my mind, you have to be constantly building in both areas. You can't take every conversation of the week and relate it to your sermon. And you might wait 3 months before you have a way to apply that conversation. What's interesting, probably part of that 90% thing, that is by the time you get to it in a text and sort of start thinking in that way, and you might be thinking about somebody in particular but you should try to avoid that, in some ways, I find that it's textually-driven, and you apply it in that way, oftentimes that person's not there anymore they've moved on but somebody else is, because the problems are overlapping, peoples issues. I might be tempted... no temptation such as is common to man.

7. How do you choose a text? How do you choose what series to do next?

Well, everything's expositional, unless it's the current series. We go book by book, and that is really dependent on a host of factors. One is the maturity levels of the congregation, another is the size of the book you just finished. Sometimes what testament you've been in a lot. I'm careful not to just be always NT. Then I think prayerful consideration coupled with consultation with the elders. So Julian and Murray and I had long discussions about what to do after Romans. We were really leaning to Hebrews for a while, then at the last moment, some of that just being impression, we went with John. I've depended on my elders more than ever for that choice. Before it was more just an independent thing.

8. How do you exegete the text? Do you use original languages?

I'll tell you what I do for John right now, and how that differed from Romans.

So John is narrative, and I try to be reading the whole gospel a lot, because John is specific I think, I think all the gospel writers have a very definite flow to their books, and thoughtful flow that has to be discovered, and the only way I know of doing that is just to keep reading it, and of course as you study, every time you inch forward in your study, you add this mass of understanding that now as you go back and read it you see more and more links and you're getting into the mind of the author, so just reading the English bible is very important.

Then I will try to discern units of thought, which in John has been very difficult, since some of them are massive. So I cannot preach them as big as they are, they're just big honkin' sections there. I want to try to distil those down into smaller, preachable sections. So my closer study is coming into effect there. I don't always work in the Greek in John. I'm at a point in my ministry where I have a pretty good sense of when I need to get into my Greek in a narrative. I can't justify the time it would take me to diagram such large sections, because I'm trying to preach big sections of John. In order to do diagrammatical analysis in the Greek, that would take up massive amounts of my study time, which doesn't yield the fruit. So the same thing in the OT, if I do Genesis, I'm not doing a lot of Hebrew work, but I will try to isolate what words I think I need to look at, sometimes you just say I need to know that phrase, Jesus says this, and I need to know what that means. And then I find the commentaries catch me if I miss it, so I'm commentary-dependent in that way.

I want to understand what the text says, that is my primary objective, from reading and diagramming out looking for outline, what are the units of thought, a combination of arcing and different things. Now my study is different, I usually just use one sheet of paper, or a couple of sheets in my book, and I'm just writing things as I'm going, it's kinda a whole jumble of notes and reading in certain areas. Then I'll formulate an outline of the passage. That's generally the hardest part of the passage for me. By "outlining a passage" what I mean is finding the outline that's in the passage, and lifting it out of the passage and (re?)packaging it in sermonic form. So, propositional statements, and understanding what the main point is the, the big point. This is what I want to preach, I want to preach on humility from this text, but I need to have these 4 sub-points, and they're going to have two points under each of them, and this one is going to have another 2 points. Getting that enables me to say ok that's the sermon.

In order to get this big point, I have to go quickly through points 1 and 2 because the big point is really nestled in point 3, and that's where the weight of my sermon is going to fall, and some of that just comes out as I write. So at that point, usually I'll write out my outline in very rough, awkward form. Not looking for presentable form, but something that says what the text says. Just getting it out that way. I call it "birthing a camel." It's, "Waah!" Get it out. Clean it off. Let it walk a bit.

I really find that the hardest thing, whether that's in narrative or in proposition. But once I've done that, then I can start writing. So I'll write the sermon. I'm trying to do manuscript or semi-manuscript which I can send out to you guys. A lot of times illustrations come to me as I'm writing so I put them in. But I like to go back after a day, I like to get my sermons done by Friday, then Saturday night and Sunday morning I go over it again, just trying to think illustrations, illustrations, illustrations. Can I illustrate more? Can I apply more? ILL line. ILL line. I call it "colourizing." I don't want just a black-and-white sermon, I want colour. That is always something I have to work at. I feel very, very week at it. I want it to go down easy.

Now, where that may differ from say Romans, is Romans I start with my Greek NT, and I diagram the passage. And I love that. It's my most comfortable form, much easier than narrative. Then you have an outline. You just lay the pages out. I'll put them on my desk and then main point, proposition, proposition, proposition, subpoint, subpoint, subpoint, birth the camel, give it some words that say what it says.

At times, I'll preach with that with me in the pulpit. I'll have preaching notes but I'll just take my outline because I'm a visual thinker and it can be helpful for me just to see where I am in the midst of a sermon.

That forces me to deal with every Greek word, so for Romans I did every single word in the book, I have diagrammatical analysis of the whole book, which is precious to me. Because it's a lot of labour, but it's a joy. When I go to preach from that book again, I just pull out my file, I lay out the pieces of paper and I can instantly see where I am. I put all my notes on my diagram, so syntactical issues, grammatical issues, quotes from commentaries, I just jam them full of those.

9. What role does prayer play in your sermon prep?

I try to pray throughout my study. I try to develop an authentic communion with the Lord that is based on both petition and delight. I really love running into hard texts and stopping to beg clarity from the one who inspired them. He has answered remarkably on many occasions! It makes God "feel" very close and real even in the study and sermon preparation.

10. Talk about outside resources. At what point in studying a passage do you look to commentaries / other preachers (i.e. Piper, Spurgeon, MacArthur, etc.)?

- **What role does their input play?**

It can depend. The pat answer is that you do your own study first and then turn to commentaries last. I try to do that. But the reality is, sometimes I am stuck on a verse, and I need a little help. I pastor a growing church, which means that there is limited study time. So I am not ashamed to say that I will sometimes begin with a quick read of a reliable commentary. This does not determine what I preach, but it helps to get my head around the passage and saves some valuable time. But 75% of the time, I would say I never crack a commentary until I have done the brunt of my own work in the text.

11. Do you have a typical type of structure you like to use for sermon outlines?

- **If so, what does it look like? Where did you come up with this framework?**
- **What are its benefits?**

I hope that my sermon structure is always a strong reflection of the structure of the text. So however many points and sub-points an author makes should be identical in my sermon. This framework was developed from diagrammatical analysis of the passage in the original language. That discipline gives you an outline right from the text. I like that. I want to say what the Bible says, not what I feel like saying. It also helps to ensure that I don't come up with a certain number of major points and sub-points just to fit a preconceived notion of what a good sermon outline looks like. I want to say what the book says and no more.

12. How many drafts of a sermon do you usually have?

- **What usually changes between the first draft and the final one? What types of things are you looking to improve?**

It depends. I'll usually end up with 2 or 3 drafts. If I am really struggling to get my thoughts together, I may begin writing the actual sermon earlier in the process just to clarify my own thoughts. Sometimes writing it out helps crystallize what I'm thinking, but that would result in more drafts. Then there are times when I'm so tight for time in the study that I just sit down, write, and I'm done.

13. How do you develop illustrations? Do you gather material ahead of time?

I'm probably the worst person to talk to about that. I try to catch things I think might work, but I always forget that I have them. So I have a big file on my computer, that I'll go to when I'm desperate. For me it's a memory issue, I live in a 72 hour window all the time.

So, my goal is always to have at least two illustrations which are aimed at kids. I don't always get it, but I want to have two times I can call out to kids in the sermon. Try to get into their world a little bit.

I just try to think of what's happening in life, in news, read Google news every day. I've been working lately trying to use biblical examples more. Some people say you should only use OT stories, but it seems to me the Lord used a lot of things, fishermen, sheep, plants, I think we have liberty there to talk from the issues we know about. Whatever is going to make something clear; like the whole boomerang / arrow thing, I knew it had to be illustrated somehow. I still don't like it, but at least it was weird enough to make people think about the issue, like if they didn't get it, they're like "Huh?" But, that's a good example of something that needs something to make sense, so it's not just a thought out here where everybody can go "yeah, yeah" without really thinking about it.

What really helped me were those Walter letters. When I wrote those, I had a goal of illustration or word play or simile every sentence. I couldn't always do it. Sometimes you need a sentence to build into it, but at least every paragraph. It got to be surprisingly easy. It really got my brain functioning in a different area. So I'm trying to pull that into my preaching. I can't become Walter while preaching John, and that's where it's a little bit tricky, because it's so tied to this imaginary character.

Biblical allusions... if you read the Puritans, they are always alluding to texts, they didn't quote them, and I'm trying to work on that as well. You realize that young Christians are going to miss it completely, but phrases, not saying turn to Phil 2, but saying "he didn't regard equality with God something to be grasped", some people are going to think wow he just made that up, because they've never read it, but read the Puritans. Constant allusions to the text. When you start hearing it it really adds to your understanding.

14. Are there topics or types of things that you will intentionally use or not use for illustrations?

Illustrations are the servants of the truth. I will use anything that is not inherently sinful or offensive in the wrong sense, so long as it serves the purpose of conveying and applying truth.

15. In writing sermons, are you intentional to include humour, to exclude humour, or is it not that important to be intentional about?

It has to fit the text. Jesus used humour, but it always fit and it was not a dominant theme in his ministry; therefore it should not be in mine. There are 12 funny things I do not say for every one that pops into my head. But too much humour does two things: First, it shifts the focus off God and onto me, and second, it lightens the heaviness of truth. Like illustrations, humour must serve the truth, never obscure or diminish it.

16. Are there any particular approaches or tools you have found to be helpful in developing good, biblical, practical applications?

Applications should be self-obvious by the time you've written the sermon. There should be one general application, e.g. "delight in God." But then comes the more subtle level of application, and I'd say there are two forms of that. One is, I talked about pray for your pastors, so in the introduction to the sermon ... It illustrates the overall point, it applies the overall point, it's very particular, very precise sort of application. So that's one type of application.

The second area is almost like TAG-area applications. "Go home and ask your children what does daddy really love?" I think that second level of application is an area I've been trying to work at. In other words, I want application not just to be "do this", I want you to look at your heart, help you hold up the mirror and maybe see things which are uncomfortable.

Application has to be driven by the text. Your application is only as weighty as your exegesis. That's why it will come as you write, and if you're studying people, it should be obvious to you. John MacArthur would never do that. He never applies the text like that. You're expected to apply it yourself. He would argue it's the role of the Spirit to apply it. So he gives you all kinds of fodder for application, and I felt that there was always application for me, but I'm not sure everyone is a self-motivator in that realm.

And I would just through in there too repetition. I don't want to ever get tired of saying "read your Bible" and "pray". If you have a church that is full of people who are reading the Bible and praying, you'll have very few problems. Really. They'll know what to do. Problem is most people fail at that. It's a puzzle.

17. Do you write out manuscripts for sermons or preach from notes?

- **Do you memorize the sermon verbatim?**
- **Do you ever practice it aloud?**

I am currently writing 90% manuscripts; that is, I write out 90% of what I plan to say. I take that to the pulpit and preach from it, but add to it and omit stuff from it as I go. I do not *memorize the sermon*, but I do try to *learn the truth*. Once I forgot my notes at home and did not realize until I walked to the front to preach. It was not my best sermon, but I was able to communicate the meaning of the text and preach from an outline, simply because it was all in the text. I do practice aloud on occasion, especially if there is a phrase or sentence that I want to get just right. I also find it a good way to experiment with my voice and expression.

18. How do you go about evaluating your preaching?

Tuesday staff meeting. I mean, you always do self-evaluation. Most of that happens as I go, as I'm preaching. If people are falling asleep... Like I was preaching the gospel—always try to include the gospel, in every sermon—and this one fellow who is a non-believer was talking in the back corner. So, in my moment-by-moment evaluation, I'm thinking they need to hear the gospel, they're not hearing the gospel, so I start preaching into that corner. I catch each of them by eye, and I stare at them.

Some asked if I get Susan's evaluation, and I don't. I let her if she has something to say, but I remember Larry Crabb talking about pastors who jump in the car and the first they say is "Well?" That doesn't need to be her role. She needs to sit under the word and not listen to me as an evaluator, she needs to be fed. At the same time, she has had some of the most helpful evaluations in my preaching, because she will

see my inconsistencies and my pride faster than anybody else, and she has gently and lovingly identified that and called me out on it on numerous occasions, and it's a great check, because now when I'm preaching I know that she's aware of that, because she just feels that, it's not that she's looking for it, but she'll just think c'mon Paul you're being a kind of arrogant here. And I appreciate that, because I am arrogant and I would be a lot more arrogant in the pulpit if it wasn't for my wife.

19. How have your sermon writing habits changed from the time you first starting preaching until now?

- **Do you take more time or less time to prepare sermons now? Why is that?**

My time is about the same. I thought it would get a lot less, but I am stupid and need a lot of time to say very obvious things! I went into more detailed study early on, parsing every word, jot and tittle, but after a while, you develop a sense for what must be done and your overall bank of knowledge increases. So I would say that there is a little less of the nitty-gritty, but maybe more on the end of application now than ever before. I have really been trying to work at that—and on illustrations as well.

20. What are some of the most common mistakes you've seen young men make in the area of sermon preparation / writing?

The basic mistake is this: they try to teach a seminary class in a church. They are more concerned about how they look than how God looks... they use archaic language, the message is sloppy, and ultimately comes out as boring and irrelevant. This is simply a result of arrogance. Humility seeks to magnify God through his revealed truth, not magnify self as the knower and dispenser of truth.

21. What do you do during the dry seasons?

Pray. My prayers increase. If I'm feeling dry or routine or repetitive or redundant, I pray, for mercy. Pray for a fresh taste, to labour, to fight for joy. A great thing about preaching expositionally is that you have to keep on going. And it's truth, so there's always food for your soul. If I'm personally dry or spiritually dull, I find the only cure for my soul is doing the same thing. Because my tendency would be to not do it. Ah, I'm too tired to study, or I don't want to give it a good shot, or I get easily distracted. That's probably my biggest temptation, feeling overwhelmed, or that's there's too much to do. Google news again ... I'm looking for illustrations, really. But it's not. It's an escape valve. It seems that I hit this point in the weak where my time to study is shrinking, and I think "I've got to get on it." So I get on it, and then my soul is fed. I think it's the most privileged position in the world, to be a gospel preacher. Because you are forced to be in the word, and your people don't have that accountability. They can go months without reading their Bibles. And you have to. It's a mercy of God in your life.

22. Can you recall notable moments where the Spirit has worked during sermon prep? How about in sermon delivery?

In my preparation, as I said above, when I've spent time praying for understanding and the Lord sovereignly and quickly gives it. That is always a joy! Sometimes he's done it through bringing to mind a book I had forgotten about. When I opened the book, it's opened right to the right page; that kind of thing. God has his own ways of answering prayers and that's been great to experience.

In my delivery... it so hard to tell. Sometimes when you are convinced the Spirit is working in one way, you find out later that he was working in another way altogether. I think there were some times a few years ago in Romans when the room was frozen and it felt like God was at work. Only he knows. In the

moment it is so hard to tell. The work of the Spirit through the word usually becomes evident over time as people's lives are changed. I can definitely see that now after years of preaching the word to the people of our church.

23. How would you say that God has used *your* preaching in particular?

To humble me.

24. Do you believe the gospel message should be included in every message?

Yes. I wish I could give you a Scripture verse that said so. I try to preach the gospel and call sinners to repentance and salvation in every message, and count it a failure whenever I don't. In many ways, I feel more like an evangelist than a preacher, and I never want to lose that.

25. Do you have any comments or anything you want to add about sermon prep?

It is the best job in the world.

26. Why do you love preaching?

I feel his pleasure. I feel that this was what I was built to do. Qualified for those things. Even physically, I have a loud voice, because that's what I think that's who the Lord made me to be, to be a herald of the gospel. I can remember as a boy preaching at the cottage, with the waves crashing against the rock. I wasn't even a Christian.

I always felt that that was what I was to do with my life. Wasn't even that cognitive. I would say that I love the discovery of truth, and the challenge of packaging it in order to present it. I love the Spirit-attended energy of delivery, and looking into men's hearts, and being given this privilege to speak and they're going to listen, and leveraging the Spirit's power through prayer and attendance and sticking to the word and doing things that are foolish, to see people change. And so I would say the final fruit of my love of preaching is changed lives, watching people alter their course of trajectory to become different people because the truth has come, through the Holy Spirit, to change. And you've been able to be a part of that. What's not to love?

There's even in the physical act of preaching. Lloyd-Jones talked about the electrical energy; not anxiety, but, it's different. It's different than talking. And, there is a pleasure even in that. Not in a sensual way, but, you follow your pleasures. I know for some people it's terrifying to stand in front of people. I don't like crowds. I don't like being with people in that way.