

Lesson Plan & Study Guide



Preaching

Part Two: Study the Text

Working with Jesus

iFOLLOW

The iFollow Discipleship Series

Version 1.0 - 11/23/10



About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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iFOLLOW

www.ifollowdiscipleship.org

Effective Preaching, Part Two: Study the Text

This is the second in a series of five units.

Learning Objectives

1. How to be intentional about your interpretive scheme
2. How to let the Bible interpret itself
3. How to ferret out all the facts
4. How to keep your preconceptions from blinding you
5. Learn four keys that will enrich your Bible study

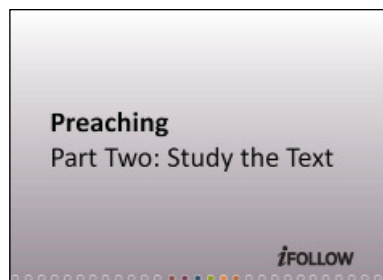
Content Outline

1. Be intentional about interpretation
2. Look at all sides of the text
3. Four keys to Bible interpretation
 - A. Start broad
 - B. Collect all the facts
 - C. Outline the text
 - D. Condense the point
4. Study until the text matters.

Background Material for the Presenter

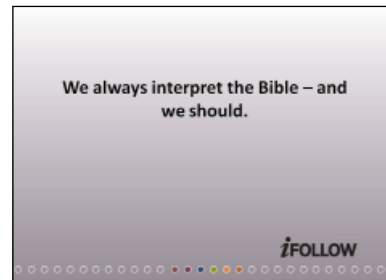
“You can’t just read the Bible and do what it says.” His words are a bit shocking but he has a point. Dr. Donn Leatherman, an Old Testament professor, is a master at word craft. He knows just how to frame an idea to make it notable. What he means is that we always interpret Scripture. It is true. You read the story of David’s adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11) and you interpret David’s behavior as bad. If you just read the story and did what it said, you would commit adultery. We always interpret the Bible—and we should.

Someone might object and point out that the text itself shows the reprehensible nature of David’s choice. Yes it does but in the next chapter, 2 Samuel 12:1-14. If you are



looking at the story for the first time, it takes some extra study to find this moral framework—you have to read the next chapter. Many stories get misjudged.

The point is that you always interpret the Bible, either through the goggles of your own belief system or through the panorama of Scripture itself. If you don't admit that you have an interpretive scheme, it is destined to run in the background and be driven by your own belief system. This leaves you vulnerable to misinterpretation. The goal is intentionality.



Look At All Sides of the Text

Maybe you have read the story of the former POW who temporarily lost his mind. It follows the pattern of a hundred other stories. After years of starvation and torture, he became paranoid. Even after release, he thought the friends that came to see him were just enemy soldiers dressed up to trick him.

His own experience kept him from seeing the facts. It was only after extended exposure to a different reality than the one fixed in his mind that he began to see things as they really were. It's like that with biblical interpretation. Your past experience with religion, however good, can keep you from seeing certain truths in the text. Only after extended exposure to the text can you be sure you've seen the truth.

There is good news, though. If you follow a careful checklist, to insure that you collect all the facts, you can make great strides in breaking past preconceived notions and unlock the living world of Scripture. Four keys will be shared next which can be used to make sure that we preach sound truth and not personal opinions. These guidelines seek to remove blinders that keep the preacher from fully seeing the text. We are often told to study our Bibles, but rarely told how. Now you are going to be told how to study the Bible.



Four Keys to Bible Interpretation

1. Start Broad—The first key is to start broad. To understand this principle, let us resurrect the presidential speech analogy from the previous chapter. How much will it tell you about the president's speech if you hear just one word of it? Not very much.

If it is an especially loaded word, like “genocide” or “terrorism,” you might guess a bit of

what he said but only because you have heard him speak on these subjects before. You wouldn't learn anything new.

If you hear a whole sentence from the speech, if it is a key sentence, like, "Yesterday, we invaded Norway," you will learn more. But, not until you hear an entire paragraph, and preferably the whole speech, can you be sure of his real message.

The same is true of Bible study. Even though Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), it is written in the form of human communication (2 Peter 2:21). You should seek to understand it on these terms. At present, that means understanding the whole before trying to explain the parts.

In the case of James 3, you should read the whole book to see how this discourse on speech fits into James' broader message. As you do, keep a notepad handy to record your findings.

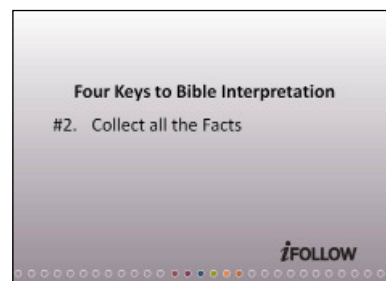
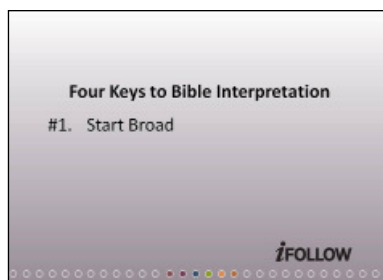
Without getting too specific, we can quickly observe that two grand themes of the book meet in chapter three. First, James argues that faith must show up in your deeds (2:14). Second, he contends that these deeds should include kindness to each other (4:11). It is a message of practical godliness—the good deeds of a Christian must include kind words.

No doubt, there are many other helpful connections between James 3 and the rest of the book but don't confuse yourself with too broad a study until you have written two or three sermons. The goal is simply to understand the larger framework of your anchor text enough to be sure you won't distort it.

2. Collect all the Facts—The second key to careful study is to collect all the facts. With notepad in hand, begin to read just your anchor text. Read it like a story and see what facts jump off the page. If the text is a story, then it won't be hard to read it like a story—obviously. But, if you have a text like Paul's dissertation on sin in Romans 7:14-25, it might not seem so obvious.

Yet, every text is a story, whether or not it is written like one. There is a story behind key words the author chooses and the people he addresses and why he says what he does. Quite often, these "hidden" stories are indirectly told in the text—you just have to dig for them.

As you collect your facts, to uncover the story, begin by listing the characters. Include all the names, of course, but other key players (like the tongue in James 3) are also characters in the drama. List them among the cast, since they play leading roles in the story.



After you have identified all the actors, note what is said about each one. Next, record any other facts you can see, like when the “story” happened and where. Finally, list key words—words that repeat or seem loaded with meaning. As you reflect on these facts, with a little imagination, a drama will begin to play out in your mind. Let your imagination run.

A young preacher likens this process to attending his first ballet. He writes: “No, I didn’t dance in it. I just sat in the audience. The whole affair came about when a friend and I devised a brilliant scheme for wooing our wives.

We told them to dress in their finest for a mystery date on the town. Then, to throw them off track and increase the surprise, we stopped at a cheap fast-food joint for dinner. But, the evening finally carried us to a stately old opera house and *The Nutcracker*.

As a son of the eighties, I had always frowned at the thought of ballets, so I expected to gain nothing more from the excursion than a pleased wife. At first, I didn’t understand the art form. The words in the songs seemed pinched, I couldn’t follow the dances, and the plot escaped me.

Then, I started to see patterns. After more exposure, its shapes and moods began to rub a crude image on the canvas of my brain. Before long, I was fully engaged and it made sense! It’s like that with careful Bible study—your story perception ability grows with exposure to the details.”

It’s time to practice. Let’s read the practice text (James 3:1-12) and see what facts we find.

Since the text is a case of direct address, we should list both audience and author as actors in the opening scene. They mostly pop up in pronouns like “my,” “you” and “we.”

Next, the hypothetical “perfect man” is introduced by “if”—he’s blameless in speech. Ships and forests and beasts all dance onto the stage, with fire and poison to boot.

Then, there is the fascinating fig tree that refuses to make different fruit and the spring that is also stubborn about the kind of water it gives. At center stage is the lead actor: your tongue. And, of course, there are the characters that play in almost every story: God and humanity.

Other facts fill in the set. The reference to “teachers” reminds us that these instructions apply especially to communicators. The word “stumble” carries the image of accidents, emphasizing again just how easy it is to slip up in speech. Other words, like “judgment, perfect, boast, iniquity, hell, tame, unruly, bless,” and “curse” render similar insights.

But, the word the story hangs on is that main character, the “tongue.” The extremity of the other words— especially “perfect” and “hell”—show the intensity of a person’s struggle with his or her tongue. The chief characters in this drama are you and your tongue. The plot grows from your intense struggle to tame it.

3. Outline the Text—The third key is to outline the text. This is not a place for creativity. It is like looking over the terrain to draw a map. In this case, the map shows how the biblical author gets from his starting-point to his real point. To preserve the stage metaphor, we might also say it is like cataloguing the scenes in a play.

In the best stories, one scene leads to the next and no scene is really expendable to the plot. If you miss a few scenes, you might not get the full force of the story's end.

As you write your sermon, this catalogue of scenes from the text may serve as the framework of your sermon. Whether it does is your choice, but the story's end—the point of the text—must always be the point of your sermon. An accurate text outline helps insure this. (This is a good point in the presentation to provide Handout 1.)

Viewed as a story, there are three broad scenes. The first scene shows the great power of words over the people who speak them. A horse's bit acts the part of words and directs a massive Clydesdale across the screen. Then, a ship's rudder dons the same costume and steers a tanker through the docks.

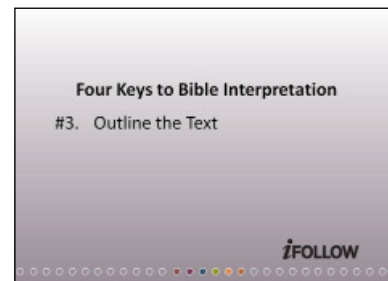
The second scene thickens the plot by showing that words are not only powerful but also destructive. A spark from a careless camper falls on some dry twigs and soon the flames are roaring through the treetops. The spark also acts the part of words. Next, wild beasts—lions, elephants, badgers, and others—take up the act, resisting the tamer's tactics. But, as they fall under his control, they are forced to relinquish the costume because words can't be tamed.

When all is despair and it seems this evil force called words cannot be stopped, the third scene opens with a peaceful, gurgling spring. The audience begins to relax but is keenly aware that the villain still lurks. This spring is the clue to his defeat. Its power lies in the fact that it wears no costume. It is a freshwater spring, so it gives freshwater.

Another figure of similar character elaborates on the clue. It is a fig tree that gives only figs. The fog is lifting. The audience has been obsessed with the result of evil, the words themselves, but the key is the source. The spring, the tree—it all makes sense.

If the power of words has any hope of serving the cause of good, their source will make the difference. As long as the speaker is evil, her words will be also. The words are really a neutral power, long used for evil but waiting for a goodhearted master to wield them.

4. Condense the Point—The fourth key is to condense the point. Seeing the text as scenes in a story brings it to life. We can grasp its meaning because we have translated it into our language—the language of story, the language of life. But, one task remains. You must put your finger on the point.



You don't fully understand the text until you can pack its message into a single, simple, memorable statement. Haddon W. Robinson, one of the great preachers of our time, explains this process very simply. According to Robinson's formula, you should ask two questions of the text: First, what is it talking about? Second, what is it saying about it? Memorize these two questions and learn to ask them of every text. (Robinson, page 41)

The answer to the first question should be just broad enough to include the whole passage, and no broader. For example, it might be accurate to say that James 3:1-12 is talking about the Christian life but that is not very helpful because it is not specific enough. Likewise, it is true that James is talking about the tongue's relationship to beasts but that is too specific. Rather, James is talking about the power of words.

The second question naturally follows—what is he saying about the power of words? Again, the answer should be just broad enough to include the whole passage, and no broader. To say that words are powerful enough to change things is too broad. And, the statement, "words are a power for evil" misses half the story. The best answer is two-sided: their goodness or badness depends on the source.

Now, we are ready to craft the preaching idea. Start by putting the answers to your questions together. What is it talking about? The power of words. What is it saying about words? Their goodness or badness depends on the source. Put the two together and we have a summary of the text: the power of words for good or evil is determined by their source.

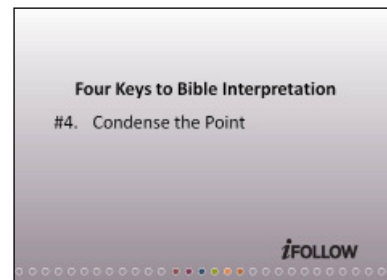
This would make a clear and somewhat compelling statement to repeat in your sermon but you can do better. Make it catchy, memorable, punchy, and make it speak directly to the life of your listener.

How would you say it to someone who is struggling to clean up his mouth? The statement I settled on when I preached this text in my first sermon was, "When your heart is pure, pure words will follow." It is fairly good but feels too long.

The preaching idea must be both clear and memorable because the whole sermon will rally around this one statement, packing its entire message into these few words. Today, I would choose a statement like, "The wise will speak wisely" or "Wash the heart, not the mouth."

Study Until the Text Matters

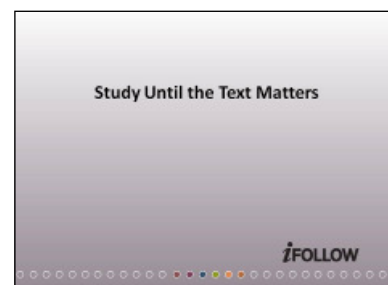
The work of studying the text and the art of crafting a preaching idea that breaks through to the listener's mind is like a group of five college students on Christmas vacation who



set out from Tennessee toward their homes in Washington State. One of the guys in the group had never seen Yellowstone National Park, so the group charted its course through the east side of the park. They hoped to see wildlife in the snow and they were not disappointed. As the two-car caravan passed a restroom facility, one colossal buffalo lumbered across the road in front of the lead car. Then, he ambled toward the restroom parking lot.

Following at a distance, the cars turned in, passing the sign with big letters that read “Warning! Buffalo Gorings!” Three of the giant creatures eyed the students from the other side of a small wooden barrier fence. The young men cautiously piled out of their cars and walked to about thirty feet from the beasts, a breathtaking experience.

They students knew that people were sometimes ripped apart on those towering horns or bludgeoned to death by that two-thousand-pound mass of the animals but they felt pretty safe. That was until one bull casually stepped across the fence that stood between him and the group. Suddenly that lumbering mass seemed relevant. “I never ran so fast,” said one young man in telling the story.



This is what a preacher must do for the listener; remove the fence. Most of the biblical ideas you preach are familiar to them. They have lived with the idea long enough to be unmoved by it. A goal of careful study is to know the text enough to make its truth fresh, packaging it so it breaks past the fence that makes your listener sleep.

There is also the boundary of time that separates the stories of Scripture from today. Bringing its pages to life in your own mind will make it able to live in your sermon. Knowing the story of the text and shaping the punch line breaks the fence down.

Take a pen and paper and find your way to the anchor text you chose in the last session. If you don't understand everything yet, don't let that stop you. The process will make more sense as you practice. What you do understand will be enough to let you mine the text and find its treasure. Apply each step discussed above and you will revel in God's Word as it comes to life.

Today we have given you some tools to help interpret Scripture and bring it to one memorable statement. We're on our way to becoming great preachers.

Handouts in this Package

1. Four Keys to Bible Interpretation
2. Do It Yourself

Additional Resources

- Bresee, W. Floyd (1997). *Successful Lay Preaching*. Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
- Cox, Sherman (2007). *You Can Preach: Seven Simple Steps to an Effective Sermon*. Open Source Books: www.archive.org/details/youcanpreach07
- Craddock, Fred B. (1990). *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Erdman, Chris (2007). *Countdown to Sunday: A Daily Guide for Those Who Preach*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Jones, R. Clifford (2005). *Preaching With Power: Black Preachers Share Secrets for Effective Preaching*. Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
- Lowry, Eugene L. (2001). *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Robinson, Haddon W. (2001). *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, 2nd Edition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Wibberding, James Richard (2006). *Learn to Preach Before Next Weekend*. Telford, PA: Big Fish Publishing, Inc.
- Willimon, William H. (1994). *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Willimon, William H. (1992). *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.



Discussion Questions

1. Would you agree or disagree that everyone always has some kind of “scheme of interpretation”? Why or why not? What are some of the things that shape yours?
2. Share your reactions to the author’s compelling picture of James 3. Have you heard this topic or passage preached in quite this way?
3. Discuss and cement in your mind the four keys to Biblical interpretation.
4. What are some of the ways in which one’s Bible study methods, past experiences, and unintentional preconceived ideas affect one’s preaching?

Group Activity

Purpose: To practice and realize the role of imagination in Bible study and the enrichment it can bring.

Preparation: You will need an open area with room to move around.

Assignment: This activity may be difficult for some people, but as you describe it, pay attention to those who will immediately show themselves to be interested, eager, and already imaginative. Let them have leadership roles in helping others to loosen up and get involved in the exercise. Explain that one way to engage a text you are trying to understand deeply is to act it out physically, rather than merely intellectually. Say you will be having a skit or charade, with no speaking parts.

Below are four paragraphs reproduced from the materials in this unit. Read the first three sentences of paragraph one and ask for a volunteer to play the part of the Clydesdale and another to put an imaginary “bit” in its mouth. Allow these two to act out the brief scene in the way they think James meant it. (For example, the “horse” may be lively and uncontrollable until the “bit” is inserted, then calm and obedient.) Next, read the last sentence of that paragraph and ask for a volunteer to be a ship and one to steer the rudder. Again, allow them to act it out. Continue, reading a paragraph or part of a paragraph at a time, and allowing volunteers to act out the various scenes as described here. People will play the part of fire, animals, even the spring and fig tree.

1. Viewed as a story, there are three broad scenes [in James 3:1-12]. The first scene shows the great power of words over the people who speak them. A horse’s bit acts the part of words and directs a massive Clydesdale across the screen. Then, a ship’s rudder dons the same costume and steers a tanker through the docks.
2. The second scene thickens the plot by showing that words are not only powerful but also destructive. A spark from a careless camper falls on some dry twigs and soon the flames are roaring through the treetops. The spark also acts the part of words. Next, wild beasts—lions, elephants, badgers, and others—take up the act, resisting the tamer’s tactics. But, as they fall under his control, they are forced to relinquish the costume because words can’t be tamed.
3. When all is despair and it seems this evil force called words cannot be stopped, the third scene opens with a peaceful, gurgling spring. The audience begins to relax but is keenly aware that the villain still lurks. This spring is the clue to his defeat. Its power lies in the fact that it wears no costume. It is a freshwater spring, so it gives freshwater.
4. Another figure of similar character elaborates on the clue. It is a fig tree that gives only figs. The fog is lifting. The audience has been obsessed with the result of evil, the words themselves, but the key is the source. The spring, the tree—it all makes sense.

Debrief: You will find that some people are overflowing with excitement about the new insights they have learned from a simple and familiar text. Others may have found it a waste of time or not enjoyed it. Not everyone will have taken part. Discuss all these feelings and their implications. Is this one of the ways God uses the Scriptures, at least for some people? Are we missing out on some important ways some of us learn? Could even preaching, as verbal as it is, make some use of this sort of engagement with a Bible passage? How could you use some idea you've learned today to liven up your Anchor Text?

Time: Allow about a half hour for the acting out of the scene, and another 20-30 minutes to discuss.

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Group
Activities

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Handout 1

Four Keys to Bible Interpretation

These four keys come partly from the book *Unlocking the Scriptures* by Hans Finzel as well as from a number of others too numerous to mention.

1. Start broad

Even though Scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16), it is written in the form of human communication (2 Peter 2:21). You should seek to understand it on these terms. At present, that means understanding the whole before trying to explain the parts.

In the case of James 3, you should read the whole book to see how this discourse on speech fits into James’ broader message. As you do, keep a notepad handy to record your findings.

Without getting too specific, we can quickly observe that two grand themes of the book meet in chapter three. First, James argues that faith must show up in your deeds (2:14). Second, he contends that these deeds should include kindness to each other (4:11). It is a message of practical godliness—the good deeds of a Christian must include kind words.

No doubt, there are many other helpful connections between James 3 and the rest of the book but don’t confuse yourself with too broad a study until you have written two or three sermons. The goal is simply to understand the larger framework of your anchor text enough to be sure you won’t distort it.

2. Collect all the facts

The second key to careful study is to collect all the facts. With notepad in hand, begin to read just your anchor text. Read it like a story and see what facts jump off the page. If the text is a story, then it won’t be hard to read it like a story—obviously. But, if you have a text like Paul’s dissertation on sin in Romans 7:14-25, it might not seem so obvious.

Yet, every text is a story, whether or not it is written like one. There is a story behind key words the author chooses and the people he addresses and why he says what he does. Quite often, these “hidden” stories are indirectly told in the text—you just have to dig for them.

As you collect your facts, to uncover the story, begin by listing the characters. Include all the names, of course, but other key players (like the tongue in James 3) are also

characters in the drama. List them among the cast, since they play leading roles in the story.

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In the best stories, one scene leads to the next and no scene is really expendable to the plot. If you miss a few scenes, you might not get the full force of the story’s end.

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The second question naturally follows—what is he saying about the power of words? Again, the answer should be just broad enough to include the whole passage, and no broader. To say that words are powerful enough to change things is too broad. And, the statement, “words are a power for evil” misses half the story. The best answer is two-sided: their goodness or badness depends on the source.

Handout 2

Do It Yourself

Take the Anchor Text you chose in the last session and study it, making copious notes. This is not the time to pick and choose what you write down. As you prayerfully study, write down everything that occurs to you.

1. Who (and what) are the “characters” that play parts in the story? This means, not only humans who are obvious players, but audience or bystanders if any, as well as important non-human elements. For example: the tongue, animals, and so forth in James 3, the seeds in the parable of the sower, etc.
2. What other words, ideas, insights, phrases catch your imagination and beg to be considered, or ask questions of their own? The harder the questions, the better. Write them all down.
3. Can you divide this story into “scenes”? If it’s an action story, like a parable or a miracle, that’s fairly easy. If it’s Jesus preaching in Matthew 5 or John 6, it’s harder. Keep praying, and tease apart the sections. Write those down, too.
4. Now for the hard part. Repeat this three times: No matter how much it has inspired me, I will not put all of this in my sermon! Just think, you have enough notes for several sermons now! But this is the time to refine, sift, and choose your three points. Here is a sample outline of the practice passage, James 3:1-12, to give you an idea.

Words control people (3:1-2)

Example: a horse’s bit (3:3)

Example: a ship’s rudder (3:4)

Words are a destructive force (3:5a)

Example: a spark in the forest (3:5b-6)

Example: an untamed beast (3:7-8)

Words should carry a consistent message (3:9-10)

Example: a spring’s product (3:11, 12b)

Example: a tree’s product (3:12a)

Can you get your anchor text into a three-part outline like that? The next session will give you more in-depth principles of sermon outlining.

Handout 3

Sermon Evaluation Sheet

Developing your preaching skills requires occasional evaluation. The following evaluation sheet is designed to help. You can use it in one of two ways, give it to others or use it yourself. Listening to or watching a recording of your sermon allows you to evaluate yourself. **For each item, 1 = very poor and 10 = excellent.**

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Was the guiding “question” clear? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 2. Did the preacher avoid tangents? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 3. Was the use of illustrations effective? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 4. Was the “question” answered clearly? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. Was the “answer” clearly biblical? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Was the instruction practical? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 7. Did a summary statement emerge? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 8. Was note use without distraction? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 9. Was body language effective? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 10. What is your overall impression? | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |

Total out of 100: _____