

Series and Sermon Development

Northwest District New Lead Pastors Cohort

October 8, 2025

Pastor Joe Wittwer

1. Understand _____ of your voice.

2. Craft _____.

3. Prepare _____.

A. Study _____.

B. Think _____.

C. Map _____.

D. Story _____.

4. Craft _____.

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Introduction:

“Most pastors underestimate the value of their preaching. They are just doing laps from week to week, not taking their church anywhere. One of the best gifts you can give your church is to become a better preacher.” I remember when I heard that over 30 years ago, I was deeply convicted. I was doing laps. I went home and changed and got better. I want share with you what I did, and more importantly, why I did it. Never do the *what* if you don’t know the *why*! This may feel overwhelming. Scale this to fit your needs; eat the chicken, spit out the bones.

1. Understand the value of your voice.

What’s the most important thing you do each week? (My best contribution as pastor of Life Center was two things: lead and teach).

Understand the value of your preaching/teaching. I consider this the most important thing I do all week. Dozens, hundreds, thousands of people gave me an hour of their time to listen, hoping to get something life-changing or at least beneficial. For many of them, it may be the only time they hear or read God’s word all week. All of them are flooded with competing voices that are discipling them differently than Jesus. Many of them arrive hurting, hopeless and confused, and are desperate to hear from God. It’s the most important thing I do.

This high value is reflected in my behavior: I prioritize my preparation. This is the most important thing I do all week.

- **Annually:** I go away for a week at a time to craft a long term preaching schedule for the year.
- **Weekly:** And I schedule the first two days of the week to write the weekend message. Monday I study; Tuesday I write.

This single activity gets more of my time by far than any other because it reaches more people by far than anything else I do. By writing on M-T, I have all week to let the message marinate, to improve it. On Thursday morning, I (or whomever is teaching) give the message to our teaching team; they evaluate it and make it better. (This practice was started by my son, Michael—it’s brilliant!) Also I’m not scrambling Saturday night or early Sunday morning to come up with a message! I don’t let other things interfere or interrupt my preparation (emergencies excluded)—this is important, sacred time.

The quality of your teaching directly affects not only all those individuals, but your church as a whole. The health and growth of your church depends in part on the quality of your teaching. Don't underestimate it. Get better! And then keep getting better.

Please use your platform to take your people somewhere. Too many pastors just do laps. They take their best devotional thought from the week and expand it. Or they preach a message they heard online. Or they preach some idea that just came to them—Saturday night...or Sunday morning driving to church. You can do better by prayerfully leading your church somewhere, carefully discipling people with God's word. Be purposeful. Cast vision, embed values, make disciples.

What vision do I want to cast?

What values do I want to raise and celebrate?

What practices do I want to encourage?

What truths do I want people to believe?

I realize that if you're bi-vocational, you may not be able to give two full days to sermon prep. But give it your best—whatever that is. This is your first and most important contribution to your church. Do it well. Give it your best.

So first: understand the value. Treat this like it's important. It is!

2. Craft a plan.

How do you decide what to teach?

Let's start by zooming out on the long term and then zoom in to next week's message.

I mentioned to be purposeful and take your church somewhere. To do that, you need a long-term plan. I try to plan one year out. I would go away for a week to pray, read, think and write. This week, my son Michael is out of the office all week creating his sermon plan for 2026. I'd come home with a year-long plan broken down series by series. I would write a synopsis for each series that included week by week titles, Scriptures, and big ideas. But how do you know what to put in the plan? (I've included a sample of a year-long preaching schedule, and a synopsis or two in your resources.)

I want the long-term plan to offer a balanced diet—not all one thing.

*For example: should you teach **expository or topical**? Why?*

Expository is verse by verse through a book of the Bible. This was your Bible college class on John or Romans.

Topical is verse *with* verse. This was your Bible college class on systematic theology.

It's not either/or; it's both/and. Both are valid ways of teaching the Bible.

So I want a balanced diet of topical series and book series. Both are teaching God's word. Each have unique value. *What would those be?*

The balanced diet also includes some other ideas. I want series on what God does and what we do—**grace and faith**. Not all one or the other—both.

There are recurring themes that our people need to hear regularly. Some of these are necessary for their growth; some are felt needs—where they are living. (It's important to speak to where they're living. I'm always evaluating preaching by asking "So what?" If you can't answer that, your teaching is irrelevant.)

- Vision: at least once a year.
- Relationship with God: every year (Jan).
- PBJ/Spiritual practices: every year.
- Relationships with others: every year. (Marriage, parenting, friendship, communication, forgiveness)
- Money: every 2-3 years.
- Sex: every 4 years. *Why?*
- Work: every few years.
- Emotions: every few years. People struggle with fear, anxiety, anger, depression.
- Future: every few years.
- Apologetics and theology: every few years.

I always want to be flexible and change when something comes up in our church, community or nation that needs to be addressed—usually a hot topic. I've done series or single messages on:

- Race.
- Me Too movement.
- LGBTQ issues, gay marriage, gender dysphoria.
- Politics.
- Abortion.
- Poverty.

Sometimes these are part of the long-term plan, but often they are responses to what is going on in our world and questions our people have. These are very difficult and need to be handled with care—I've included some examples and we can talk more about this later if you have questions.

Big Idea: craft a plan—a long term plan. I keep a folder of ideas that I collect all year long. And I have a teaching team that I meet with and ask for their ideas—always rich. Gather ideas, then get away and craft a plan.

So...let's assume you have a long term plan. Good news: when you wake up Monday morning, you don't have to start wondering, "Oh great, what am I preaching on this weekend." You already know. You've already been collecting ideas. You've already got a text and theme. You're ready to get started.

As we get started, here **three important values** to remember.

First, pray first. Ask God to speak through you, to give you the ideas and resources and words that your people need. *What does God want to say?* Spend some time in prayer with that so that you come out with a goal.

Second, whether you are doing a book of the Bible or a topical series, you are teaching God's word. Not your own ideas or the latest fad. Your job is to bring God's unchanging word into our contemporary culture. The best book I've ever read on preaching—and I recommend every pastor read it (and anything else he wrote)—is John Stott's *Between Two Worlds*. Preach the word! Ground your people in the Word of God.

Third, the goal should always be about life change. Our goal is to help people find and follow Jesus and become the new creations He intends. You can't follow Jesus and stay where you are. What do you want them to take home? To know? To believe? To do? To experience?

Craft a long term plan. That sets you up to prepare a message on Monday (or whenever). It starts with these preparatory steps: **study, think, map, story.**

3. Prepare the message

Here are four practical steps that will help you prepare solid and helpful Biblical teachings: study, think, map, story.

A. Study deeply.

Expository

If I'm teaching a book of the Bible, I start by going to the selected passage and **reading it through slowly in several translations**, making notes as I go. I pray first and ask God what He wants to say.

There are three common steps to basic Bible study:

- A. **Observe**: what does it say?
- B. **Interpret**: what does it mean? Start with what it meant to the original author and audience—context.
- C. **Apply**: what will I know/believe/do?

My pastor, Roy Hicks Jr. used to say that there is one correct interpretation and many applications. The correct interpretation is what the original author intended the original audience to understand.

As I read, I'm asking these three questions: what does it say, what does it mean, what will I do?

I'm also **writing down questions** I have about the text. For example, I just preached on Zacchaeus from Luke 19. I wrote down, "How did Jesus know his name?" *What are the possibilities?*

I also like to **live inside the text**, particularly narratives, by assuming the role of different characters and trying to imagine the scene from their perspective. Use your imagination! Have fun with it.

After a thorough reading and re-reading of the text, and jotting down my ideas and questions, I'm ready to **use some resources**.

- I'll check cross-references on verses that stood out.
- I'll do word studies. I use Logos and have a host of excellent resources. Ask your church to invest in your preaching by paying for a robust version/subscription to Logos (or something similar). Be careful to align your ideas with true experts in the language (I'm not one).
- I'll read commentaries. I never do this first—only after reading the text, questioning, jotting my own ideas, etc. I want to see if my thinking matches others, and not just copy theirs.

Topical

The process is much the same, just with a different starting point. I begin not with a single text, but with a global Biblical word study. I want to see what the whole Bible says about this idea or subject. If I'm doing a series on fear, I'll look up every occurrence of "fear, afraid, frightened, alarmed" and related words.

I will read through every verse where they occur, and begin to sort them by theme, idea or subject—grouping common ideas together. Those groups will form the basis for a sermon on one aspect of fear from the Bible.

Then I do the same with those verses that I did with the expository text: read, ask questions, live in the story, check cross-references, do word studies, read commentaries.

Study is a time consuming but valuable process. Do your homework. Your audience can tell if you've done your homework or you're just shooting from the hip.

B. Think clearly.

Have you ever listened to someone speak and you had no idea what they were saying? And you suspected that they didn't either? You could tell they were winging it—hadn't thought it through. To speak clearly, first you have to think clearly.

I have a friend who is so warm and engaging when he speaks that you can't help but like him. But he doesn't think clearly and his speaking comes off muddled, unclear. You leave thinking, "I'm not sure what he was trying to say."

How do you think clearly? Four steps.

1. Think comprehensively.

How does this fit in the big picture? Imagine trying to explain a spark plug to someone who knows nothing about cars. You'd have explain how it fits in an internal combustion engine. You have to do that with many ideas in the Bible.

Is there more than one opinion about this? If there is, know it and acknowledge it. Otherwise smart people will discredit you and stop listening. (*Give me a couple Biblical subjects that there are more than one opinion about.*)

2. Think sequentially.

Progress logically from one idea to the next. Connect the dots: connect your ideas or you'll lose people. Most people are sequential thinkers; they move from A to B to C. Speak to them and the mosaic thinkers can still follow you. (*Age of Rage exercise: how would you think sequentially about a series on anger?*)

3. Think ahead.

Anticipate questions. Put yourself in the audience; be a particular person, someone you know. Imagine them hearing what you say. What questions might they ask? Then answer those questions. "You might be asking..." They'll love you for it.

4. Think practically.

Ask the "so what" question. Often, I'll read through something I wrote and ask, "So what?" and then delete it. Sometimes when I'm listening to someone pound a point, I ask, "So what?" As Steve Martin said to John Candy in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*: "And another thing: when you talk, have a point! It makes it so much more interesting!" What do you want people to know, believe, experience and do?

Think clearly.

Pro tip: Try giving someone a clear 3 minute summary of your message. If you can't do it, you're probably not ready to preach it.

C. Map it: Create a clear outline.

I create an outline for every talk I give—and then I give everyone a "fill in the blank" version of the outline. *Why?*

An outline is a map—here's the value.

- It sequences the talk. We're going from A to B to C. From idea to idea. From text to text.
- It shows people where we're going—and that we're going somewhere, not just wandering.
- It shows that you've put in time and effort preparing—which gives people confidence and makes them more likely to listen.
- It gives people hope: there's an end in sight! It lets them see where we are in the talk, measure our progress. (And I tell them if I'm spending larger amounts of time at one stop or another.)
- It engages different learning styles: visual, auditory and kinetic.

It's good if you can make your points memorable—alliterated, alphabetical, rhymed. The more memorable, the better. But it's even more important that your points make sense and are logical than that they're cute.

Simple is always better, especially if you want people to remember. Often one big idea with a practical application is best.

Big idea: the outline serves as a road map for your people and smart sequencing for you.

D. Story it: Use memorable illustrations.

Do you want people to remember your big ideas? Tell a story. Use an illustration. They'll remember your ideas by the stories you tell. **My rule of thumb is that I want at least one good story or illustration for every big idea or point.** Why is this so important?

First, Jesus taught with stories. Sometimes he answered questions not with a didactic statement, but a story—for example in Luke 10, “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. Sometimes he answered with multiple stories—for example, Luke 15, “Why does he hang out with irreligious people?” and Jesus told the stories of a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son.

Second, stories are windows on truth. They flesh out your ideas and make them real, tangible, relatable. When you give an idea, I may wonder what you mean by that or how it works. When you tell a story, I think, “Ahhh, now I see.” It's the truth come alive. The truth with skin on. A window on truth.

Third, stories make ideas memorable. People can rarely repeat my points on the outline, but they can repeat the story and the lesson it taught.

Fourth, stories let people come up for air. Have you ever been swimming and someone held you under water? It doesn't take long before you start fighting to come up for breath. When we go on and on with didactic material—one idea after

another—people start to feel like they’re under water. A story lets them come up for breath. It breaks up the monotony of endless ideas.

This is especially true of humor. Laughing releases tension. Laughing relaxes and makes people ready to re-engage. I’m looking for whatever opportunity I can find to let people laugh.

Pro tip: where to find good illustrations.

- Personal—your own life. I start here because it makes me human, relatable, personal. It invites people into my life. But don’t make all your illustrations about you. And make sure that you’re not the hero of every story.
- Imagination. I’ll say, “Let’s imagine…” and then paint a picture and ask questions.
- Everyday life. Stuff happens all around you. Pay attention. Write it down. Fun quips from your kids. An interaction at the gym. A story from your lunch date. (EG: Nicole)
- Experiences. Stop leading a boring life and have some adventures. I guarantee you’ll have stories that people will love.
- Reading. Books, newspapers, periodicals.
- Media. Podcasts, sermons, news.
- Illustration services. For example, Preaching Today from CT.

You’ve done a boatload of prep. You’re ready to write a message.

4. Craft the message.

You’ve done all the preparation. You’ve got a long term plan. You woke up this Monday morning knowing what you’re going to preach this weekend. You spent all day Monday praying, studying, thinking, mapping, storying. Now you’re ready to actually write the message.

Here are three ways to do it.

First, write an interactive plan. Write out your big idea, an illustration and an application. Take that with you. Read the Scripture, and lead a discussion that gets to your big idea. Then elaborate, illustrate and apply.

This is used primarily in a smaller setting where a high level of interaction is desirable and practical. For example, this is how I taught as a youth pastor when I was doing 15 Bible studies a week. I came to the Bible study knowing my text, my big idea, my illustration and application. But I didn’t want to preach for 15-30

minutes while they just sat there—I wanted to engage them with the text, get them thinking and talking, and then use their discoveries to make the point I wanted them to take home. Highly interactive—very fun!

Second, write an extemporaneous outline. This is how I preached the first 10 years at Life Center. I would have an outline that I filled in with the main points, sub-points, key thoughts, quotes and stories. Usually it all fit on one page or two at most. That’s what I took to the pulpit and then spoke extemporaneously. I think this is how most pastors preach—and it’s good. The better your prep, the better your extemp speaking will be.

Third, write a full manuscript. I started doing this 35 years ago, and it’s been my practice ever since. I write out what I want to say word for word and take it to the pulpit with me. It has improved my preaching by miles. Here are the pros and cons.

Pros to using a manuscript

- You are far more precise. You can say much more with fewer words. You don’t diesel.
- You make fewer mistakes: gaffes, bloopers, inappropriate comments, poorly thought through ideas.
- You can time in accurately.
- You can repeat it accurately.
- You can relax: you don’t worry about losing your way.
- You can imagine how your audience will respond to each idea.

Cons to using a manuscript

- More time consuming to write it out word for word.
- Takes lots of practice to present it without sounding like you’re reading it.

Conclusion: I know I’ve overloaded your circuits with information. But it’s worth it to work hard at this and hone your craft. Keep getting better.

Please don’t be like the pastor who didn’t prepare, but said, “I just trust the Lord and speak. Every message is a miracle.” I wonder if his people thought those sermons were miracles.

Maybe it’s like the truck I saw in Eugene that said, “Miracle Pie Company.” And underneath was their motto: “If it’s a good pie, it’s a Miracle.”

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