

TheWordWorks

Expository Preaching Module 1

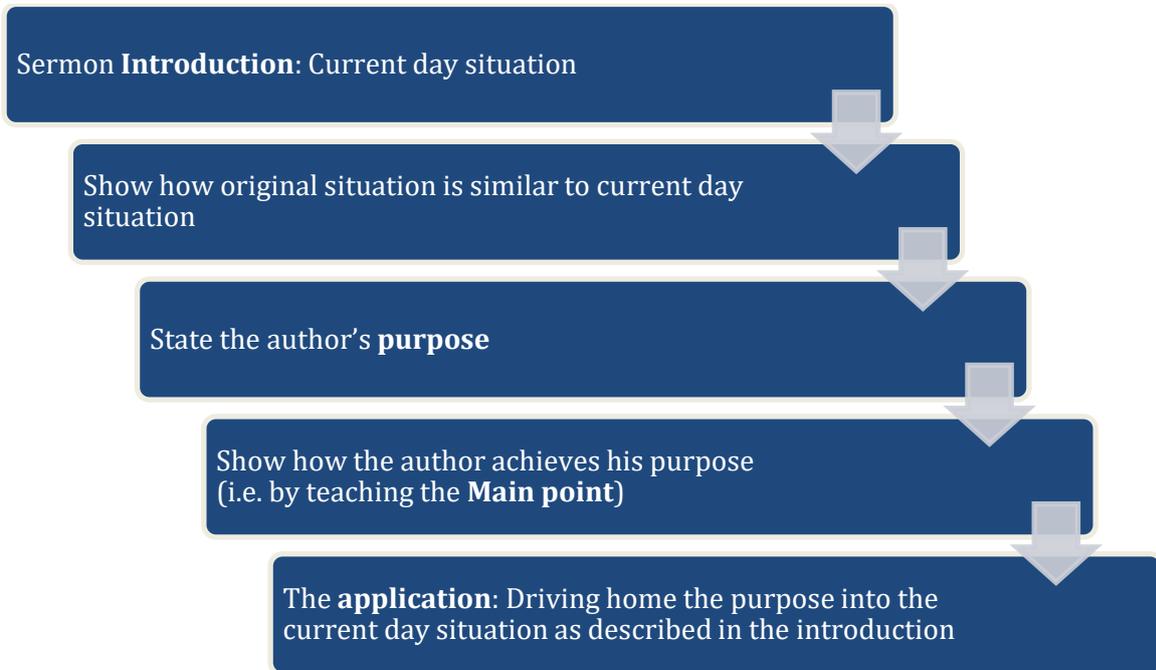
What makes an illustration effective?

Aim of this module:

To understand the function of an illustration and what makes illustrations effective

Recap:

From the Module “The basic shape of an expository sermon”



What is the function of an illustration?

1. Makes a point easier to understand

An illustration does this in a variety of ways (see types of illustrations below and the basic shape of an expository sermon above). It can make the *current day situation* your sermon introduction describes easier to understand. It can make the *sub-points* within your main point easier to understand. It can make the *application* you're trying to drive home easier to understand.

2. Gives your listeners a mental break before moving on to the next point

A sermon is sometimes information rich. It might be a 3 point sermon with tight logical connections between sub-points. It might be based on a long narrative with many characters and episodes. In such information rich sermons, illustrations can serve as a pit stop mental breather, allowing your listeners to catch their breath before the next point.

The types of illustrations in a sermon

1. Illustrations in the sermon introduction that flesh out the current day situation¹

These type of sermon introductions describe the current day hearer's situation (a situation similar to the original hearers) and in so doing, raise a live issue that the main point and purpose then addresses.

An illustration here makes the current day situation concrete and real. It could be about an actual person you know who is in this situation (person can remain anonymous). It could be a live issue your church is grappling with. It could be a current event that impacts your listeners.

Example: A Galatians 5:1 sermon introduction with an illustration (in italics) might look like this:

“Have you ever felt like you had to prove yourself to God before he accepts you? Yes, you've put your trust in Jesus. But that seems almost a bit too easy doesn't it? Don't I have to prove myself by being a good person or by serving God in church?

I once had a conversation with a brother. He was distraught. Because he felt that he could live up to what God required of him. On the outside, he was the model Christian: active in church, loving family man, responsible at work. But he could never shake off the feeling that it was not enough for God....”

2. Illustrations in the body of the sermon that makes the main point (and the sub-points within it) easier to understand

The main point is the main truth the biblical author is teaching. Illustrations here serve to make potentially abstract concepts easier to understand.

Example: A Hebrews 7:11-22 sermon. The main point: Jesus, the Melchizedek-type priest, makes the Levitical priesthood obsolete because the Levitical priest couldn't solve the problem of sin. Illustration in italics.

You see, the problem with the old priesthood was that it could not perfect people. Look at Vs 11. Perfection in this verse refers to a person's sins being forgiven. So, the Hebrews author is saying: “The old priesthood couldn't solve the problem of sin. It couldn't cleanse a sinful person. Couldn't bring forgiveness.”

That's why a new type of upgraded priest had to emerge! One that could do what the old priesthood couldn't do!

It's a bit like my previous car. We owned a Hyundai Trajet from 2012-2017. We needed a big car cos of our growing family. Hyundai advertises it as a MPV (Multi-purpose vehicle) that can move 8 people. BUT, it just wasn't capable of doing what was advertised! You see, the problem is that it was underpowered! It only had a 2 litre engine! Like putting a motorcycle engine in a tank! We drove up to Cameron highlands once. Engine overheated. Smoke coming out. It just couldn't handle 7 people going up a mountain! That Hyundai Trajet was like the Levitical priesthood. Weak and unprofitable!

The car I drive now (Toyota Estima) is like Jesus' Melchizedek priesthood. Completely different make and model. Got a 2.4l engine. Able to do what the Trajet couldn't do. Can go up slopes. Cars like the Toyota Estima have made the Hyundai Trajet obsolete. That's why Hyundai discontinued production of the Trajet in 2008. You won't find any on the roads now!

¹ See Module “What makes a good sermon introduction”

In the same way...Jesus makes the old priesthood obsolete! He is able to do what the old priesthood couldn't do: Perfect sinners. Deal with their sin.

3. Illustrations in the applications that shows what the application looks like in practice

In the application, the preacher exhorts the listener to apply the purpose of the passage. Illustrations here serve to give the listener a mental image of what the application looks like in actual situations.

- a. The illustration can be a description of likely scenarios the listener will face in the coming week and what application looks like there

Example: A Colossians 3:8-11 sermon. Illustration in italics.

This coming week, you might be tempted to sin in one of these ways: Lustful, impure thoughts as someone walks across you or you see an image on the internet. Blowing up at someone who offends you in church. Over ambitious greed for that thing that will make you the envy of everyone else. You reach that fork in the road where you can either KILL it or FEED it. What do you do?

Today, we've learnt that the root problem is identity. We forget who we are. That's the key thing we need to recover. This is how I think we recover it.

This coming week, when you find lustful, impure thoughts arising, say to yourself: "I don't have to do this. This belongs to my past. The old me is dead to sin. I've the power to say NO! God has raised me up with Christ!". When I find myself getting angry, take a moment to think: "I'm dead to that behavior. That isn't me. This isn't who I am in Christ. I'm a new person". When I find myself greedy for the glory of that promotion and I say: "My future depends on this next project/deal", remind yourself and say "My future is already guaranteed. I'll be presented in glory before God. I'm free to give up my greedy ambition"

New identity drives new behaviour.

- b. The illustration can be an example of someone you know that has lived out the application

Example: A Philippians 1:1-11 sermon. Illustration in italics

Will you press on in the gospel partnership from this day on to the day Jesus comes back again?

Some of you might know Mr ABC. Husband of Mrs ABC from the 1st service. He's a man who will have a full harvest on the day Jesus comes back. Mr ABC passed away earlier this year. 80+ years. He was a man who loved others with the affection of Christ. He was a lifelong gospel partner. At his wake service, many people came forward to tell of his impact on their lives. How he would encourage them with the gospel. And be always praying for them.

In his last few years, he was really sick. Bed-ridden. I went to visit him one time last year. A couple of months before his passing. I wanted to bring some comfort and encouragement. But I was far more encouraged by him I think than him by me. He asked about my ministry. He asked about my family. Told me to keep my eye on Jesus. He encouraged me to keep on in the gospel, to keep preaching Christ fearlessly. He prayed for me at the end. Mr ABC loved me with the love of Christ. He wanted for me the things that Christ wanted for me. It was a profound moment for me. This 80+

year old man didn't take his foot off the pedal. He was a loving gospel partner to the end. He looked forward to that bumper crop on the day of Christ.

Friends, are you a gospel partner or a passenger? Will you press on till the end?

Features of an effective illustration

1. It makes one point

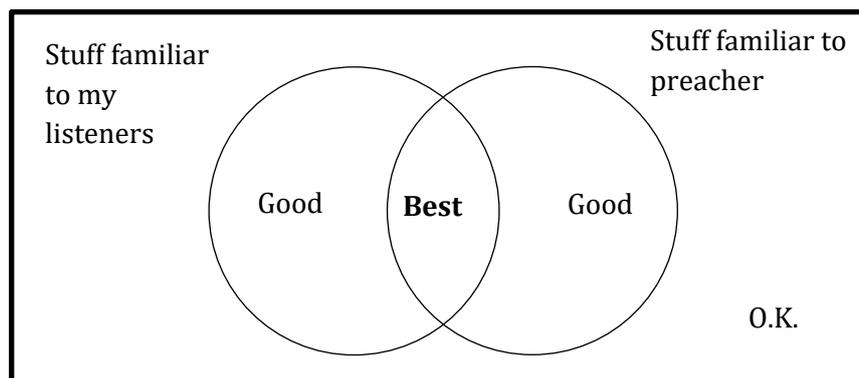
The illustration should have one central point corresponding the point in the sermon it's trying to illuminate.

Example: The Hebrews 7:11-22 illustration above about the MPVs:

The central point of the illustration: The Toyota Estima made the Hyundai Trajet obsolete because it could do what the Trajet could not do

If the illustration brought in, for example, the relative cost of the 2 cars, it would have been unnecessary information that detracted from the central point.

2. It's familiar to the listener and/or the preacher



The best illustrations are those that are familiar to both the listener and the preacher.

It can be a national event that both have experienced and felt the emotions of (e.g. A National Day Parade or the National tragedy). It can be a product/service that everyone has used before (e.g. a phone or the public bus). It can be a local public figure (e.g. a local sportsperson or actor). What makes these the best illustrations is that everyone knows the ins-and-outs of the illustration and thus can see the point very quickly.

A good illustration is familiar to either the preacher or the listener.

An illustration about the preacher's children is good because the preacher can speak with a natural, easy familiarity and people are generally interested to know something personal about the preacher. However, for listeners without children, these kind of illustrations can potentially be alienating after a while because it is foreign to their personal experience.

An illustration familiar to the listeners but not the preacher is good because the listeners can identify with the illustration. However, if the preacher has limited personal experience of the

illustration, it can come across as patronising or superficial (e.g. an overseas preacher using an illustration about local culture but missing the nuances and therefore, presenting a caricature).

An ok illustration is neither familiar to the listeners or the preacher

These are the illustrations taken from published compilations of illustrations sorted by topic. They usually start with “A true story is told of a man in Alabama by the name of Mr Brown...”. Although these kind of illustrations might do the job of making a point easier to understand, they feel remote to the listener² and therefore as a listener, I’m less emotionally invested in the illustration.

3. It conveys the emotional content present in the point it illustrates

This is especially important for illustrations in the application section of the sermon. If the application, say, is to lay down your life for the gospel, then the illustration used cannot be flippant or trivial. If the application is, like the above example in Philippians 1:1-11, to press on in gospel partnership till the end, an illustration like the 80+ year old Mr ABC carries the same emotional content as the application.

4. It doesn’t require extensive explanation

The illustration is meant to make something easier to understand. If it itself needs to be extensively explained, then it defeats the purpose of the illustration.

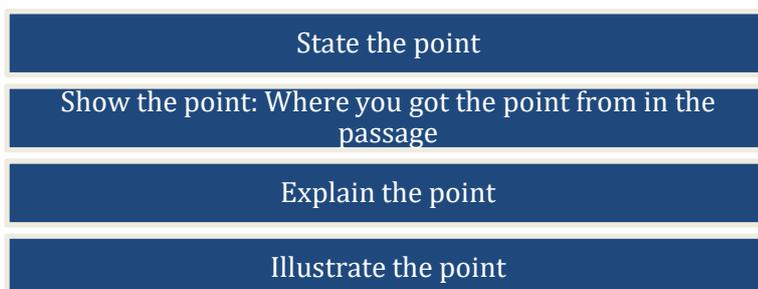
5. It’s not too interesting or emotionally charged

Sometimes, illustrations can be so interesting that the listener forgets the main point being illustrated and focuses instead on other details of the illustration. For example: Stories that end on cliff-hangers leave the listener thinking “What happened next?” rather than “I see the point!”.

Some illustrations use issues that are sensitive and personal for some people (e.g. loss of a child, death of non-Christian loved ones, abuse situations, divorce, sexuality). Using such illustrations might cause the listener to be unable to continue listening because an emotional memory has been awakened and they can’t concentrate. So, avoid these if possible unless the main point or purpose of the text deals with these matters.

6. It doesn’t take the place of explanation but complements it

In the module “What goes into the body of a sermon”, we explained that the way to teach a point follows these 4 steps:



Explaining the point means showing the listener the significance of the verses you pointed out in Step 2. A good illustration doesn’t usurp the place of explanation. It makes the explanation easier to understand.

² Unless of course you are from Alabama and Mr Brown is a well-known figure to you