

Every once in a while, someone will ask me where I get my sermon ideas from. It’s a good question, and one I like to talk about, because, on one hand, I don’t really know the answer. The ideas come from everywhere and everything. There’s a sermon illustration in just about every movie, book, song, play, podcast, sporting event, or life experience, if you’re looking for it. On the other hand, there’s another way to answer the question, and it sounds like a total cliché, but it’s true. Ideas for preaching come from Jesus, and I mean, very specific ideas. The clear, laser-focused point of preaching is something that Jesus taught.

I’ve had people ask, sincerely, “Do you have books in which they tell you (as the preacher) what to say?” And the answer is “Yes! I do have a book like that. It’s called the gospel of Luke.” That sounds like a “gotcha” or a flippant comment, but it’s not. When I look at the end of that gospel, ‘what a preacher should say’ is all spelled out by the risen Lord Jesus.

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples and this is what He said: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” This is God’s Word, and did you hear it? Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name, to all nations. That’s what proclaimers are supposed to proclaim. That’s the clear, laser-focused point of Christian preaching. At some point, it has to be about the Christ’s suffering and resurrection and what those events mean to the person hearing the message. It has to explain how you receive what Jesus made available. To be sure, Christian preaching can be this message and other things the Bible says, but it cannot be other things the Bible says and not this.

How do we pastors know what to preach? Jesus tells us: “Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed.” Jesus knew the result of his finished work on the cross would meet the real need of every person in every generation. Now, we want many things, and do have valid needs. But what we need most is the forgiveness of sins. There are many reasons why that’s true, but simply speaking, we are under God’s wrath for sin. We suffer the consequences of sin, such as guilt, fear, and shame. These have shaped our character, society and culture in many ways. The trouble is, there is no earthly solution to this problem. Education, money, and legislation won’t solve this problem. We try to treat it through temporary measures to find peace. We try to escape this problem by indulging in pleasures. We try to “do something about it” by harnessing our ambition, employing a strong work ethic, thinking there must be some achievement, some accolade, some recognition by which I can justify my own existence. But nothing really satisfies. What is worse, our pride tells us we can do it alone.

Repentance is reaching the conclusion, "I thought what I was doing was a good thing, but now I know it's not."

Repentance is to stop running after everything else; to see that God is running after you, and to finally let Him catch you.

But it's quite possible for someone to say, "What I want out of Jesus is help for this life. If He gets me out of a jam, or cures my sickness, or keeps me wealthy and prosperous and out of most trouble, well, that's the spiritual help I'm looking for. I'm not really concerned with those abstract concepts like final judgment, resurrection of the dead, heaven or hell or eternal life. I want a god who's going to show results." But you see, that's a safe god created by human imagination. The real God has not come to help nice people get even better, but to save sinners from hell. If you do not see yourself as one of those sinners who needs rescue, number one, you don't really understand yourself, and number two, God's Word, God's Son, and God's Spirit will challenge you at the deepest level.

Do you remember the story of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples? If so, do you remember what happened when he got to Peter? Peter, at first, declines this service. At this first refusal, Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Peter then pivots and says, "Well, then, not just my feet, but my hands and my head." This is a picture of repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is not so much creating a list of itemized, individual sins committed, as it is accepting that I must let Jesus wash away my dirt. I must let Jesus cleanse me if this relationship is going to work. What I cannot do is act like I'm clean without Him. Repentance is me saying to Jesus, "Please do my feet, my hands, my head, but especially my heart."

And when you are moved to this humble acceptance, you're ready for the greatest news. What is that news? Listen to the way it was preached by Lutheran pastor C.F.W. Walther, who said:

*It was not enough for God to send His Son into the world to become man for us. It was not enough for Him to offer His Son into death for us. With burning love for us sinners, God did not wait for us to ask Him for His grace in Christ. Instead, He hurried to give us that grace through the resurrection of His Son, to absolve us of all our sins, and to declare publicly, before both heaven and earth, that we are redeemed, reconciled, pure and innocent in Christ.*

Repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins. That's the clear, laser-focused point of Christian preaching, taught by Jesus Himself. Every day you're alive, turn around and let God catch you. Let Jesus wash you, and become a witness of the God who saves.