

Preaching: Balancing a Word about God with Application

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Preaching is challenging. Preaching done well is an art. A problem in preaching is balancing the “ought” and the “why”. Too many sermons are long on the “ought” and short on the “why”. Lives are changed little by moralizing (you should, we must, we need to....). I know what I ought to do, but I just can’t do it. Lives are changed by the renewal of our minds so that we are more and more focused on God. It is easy to identify things Christians ought to do—it is hard to do them without adequate foundations sunk deeply into the nature of God as revealed in his word. Preaching must be balanced—theological foundations and practical applications. The minister is a theological practitioner or a practical theologian. The first task is to say something about God—to clearly speak the word and will and way of God.

If preachers are to err on one side or the other, let us make certain our preaching is “long on God”. Let me illustrate this concern from the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30.) This narrative from Jesus (chapters 24-25) involves preparation and anticipation, both of which come from keeping God and the goal in mind. Seeing God clearly motivates faithfulness and develops worthiness. The one-talent man misunderstood God. He apparently missed faithfulness—he does not receive the accolade and description of “faithful servant”. Even worse, he missed worthiness—the text describes him as worthless. The text does not overtly say that the two-talent and five-talent men understood God’s nature, but the textual contrast implies such. The one-talent man thought he could please his master with a short-list of “oughts”, a risk-free response. The text not only applauds the faithfulness of the first two servants, it reveals why the one-talent man failed, and suggests the components of faithfulness. The most significant lesson of the text may be that the goal is not faithfulness but worthiness. The ultimate judgment was that the one-talent servant was worthless. There is no value in being “faithful” if we are worthless. One person observed, “Faithful focuses on human actions—worthless focuses on God’s goals.”

To think that frail, sinful human beings can be worth something to God is a great leap of faith, but the text suggests such. How can I be worthwhile to God? Let me suggest some goals from the text, ideas which are more focused in our being than in our doing. Let us....

- seek to become like God, understanding what God is like and imitating him
- be fully-devoted to the things that matter to God
- be partakers of the divine nature, living lives consistent with the nature of the Master
- reflect the Master’s nature and will

Faithfulness often says “look at me”. Worth says “look at God.” Is who we are and what we are doing worthy of the great and glorious God we serve? Are we reflecting God? If we get “why” of Christianity right, the applications and the Christian life are a lot easier and become a part of our nature, not something we have to be constantly reminded of.