

# A LETTER FROM DR. SEAN LUCAS

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My dear Friends:

Thank you so much for the many kind comments on the last two Pastor's Letters on how I go about planning my preaching and how I work to Sunday morning. It is heartening that many of you are interested in this process. Today, I wanted to finish describing the sermon preparation process through to Sunday morning.

Let me go back to Wednesday and writing the sermon. As I mentioned, the most important step in the entire sermon writing process is coming up with an outline. But as part of developing an outline, I'm also thinking about three other things as I look at the text—and I've done this so long now that it is almost second nature. I'm looking for the need step, the solution step, and hope. The need step is quite simply, "Why does the listener need to listen to this sermon?" In Bryan Chapell's book, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, he calls this the fallen condition focus—how does this text speak to the fallen condition of human beings? I generally think in those terms, but my question is a little broader than that. For example, this Sunday, the need step is this: "We can't extend mercy to ourselves; our family/friends can extend mercy to us, but it doesn't satisfy the deep need of our heart; where do we turn to find the mercy we most desperately want and need?" That's not really a "fallen condition," per se; but it is a human condition, a deep need that we all have.

The solution step will be found in the text. In fact, the entire sermon is the solution step; the points of the sermon are the unfolding of that solution. I'm trying to help us see how this text meets our need, whether it is a "felt need" or not. In fact, we may not even realize that we need this solution—perhaps we are not in a present place of suffering or difficulty or struggle where we think we need mercy. That's okay. Part of my task is to prepare you for those seasons that inevitably come so that you will have places to which to turn. Finally, in every single text, I'm looking for hope: and that hope is found ultimately in the God who has met us in Jesus Christ. When we talk about "Christ-centered preaching," it is not necessarily that every text leads to Jesus. All too often, preachers seem to figure out ingenious ways to pull Jesus out of the text. That's not what we mean—rather, how does God show himself in this text to be our only hope? And how does he anchor our hopes?

My big goals when I preach are to explain the text and to apply the text as sincerely as possible—I want to be present and lose myself in what I'm saying so the real me is there. I think people can tell when a sermon is a performance and when it's real. My deep prayer is to always be real as I explain and apply. You've probably noticed that I'm not a big illustrator. Illustrations are present, but I tend to do shorter illustrations: various biblical texts, hymn texts, short cultural references. The places where I might be a little longer are at the beginning and end of the sermon: at the beginning to engage your attention, at the end to sum up and finally apply the sermon. But when I only preach for about 25 minutes after I've read the Scripture text, there's not a lot of time to do the main things, which are explain and apply the Bible.

After the sermon is written, I set it aside. In fact, I generally don't look at the sermon again until Sunday morning. Early that day, I essentially preach my sermon out loud with no one around. This kind of oral and aural outworking is really important—because what I often find is there will be things that occur to me when I work out verbally that didn't hit me when I was typing it silently. Different verbal and rhetorical rhythms, an illustration or two, a line of application that I hadn't thought about previously: all of these will come up as I work through this. I also need to hear how certain things work when I say them out loud—did that sound right? Was that paced right?

Of course, the most important preparation is that which I do every day: the hour or so I spend in personal morning worship. But that's necessary not simply for preaching, but for survival as a Christian. It is the case that from Thursday to Sunday morning, my thoughts and prayers turn toward preaching God's Word: asking God to be present, to get into your hearts, to do his work, to pastor you. Unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain (Psalm 127:1). May God continue to use his Word to build us up as God's people!

In the grip of God's grace,



Dr. Sean Michael Lucas  
Senior Pastor  
Independent Presbyterian Church  
Memphis, TN