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SPIT POLISH YOUR PREACHING

By Rick Malm

In the "good ole days" it could be dangerous to sit in the front rows of a church. It was rumored that "real preachers" would holler and spit so much that after service the first three rows could count themselves as baptized. I am not 100% sure why that style of preaching isn't as popular as it used to be – OK, it's no great mystery - but I'll bet a little s.p.i.t. could still improve your preaching. Here is why.

Four techniques used by many well-respected speakers to improve their presentations can be remembered by this crude, but effective, acronym - **S.P.I.T.**

S - State your topic

In a quest for cleverness and creativity we can sneak up on people with confusing titles. I confess. I'm guilty. "Seven Ducks in a Dirty River" sounded like an awesome title for a message on the healing of Naaman the leper (2 Kings 5). What I discovered was people were so focused on trying to figure out what my title had to do with the story that they missed the whole point of the message. Come to think of it, I'm not sure there was much of a point. I just had to use that totally cool title. Most people won't work very hard to follow you so laying out ahead of time where you are going makes it easier for them to keep up or catch up if they get distracted and lost along the way.

I was advised as a young preacher to follow these three steps: "Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them." Few of us "get it" the first time. Repetition is the price of knowledge. By clearly stating your topic at the outset, explaining your main points and

then summarizing what you just said, people are more able to track with you and take home the message the Lord has put on your heart.

P - Parallel Illustrations

Throughout Scripture God illustrates truth using parallel thought. The parables of Jesus are great examples but parallel thought is also abundant in the wisdom book of Proverbs.

Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. - Proverbs 26:20

By “seeing” the image of a campfire slowly fading we can imagine how a quarrel will also grow cold if we don’t keep fueling it with gossip. That physical picture gives me a hook upon which I can hang the spiritual truth. It slowly moves me from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

I believe it is by Divine Design that such illustrations are abundant in our world. God constructed many things in our visible, physical world to provide a key for us to see into the invisible, spiritual world. As those trying to communicate spiritual truths we need to take advantage of these keys and follow the example of the Master Teacher. He spoke in parables which gave insight to even common people into great spiritual mysteries. What things are your audience familiar with that illustrates the truth you are trying to help them grasp?

While considering this it also becomes crucial to remember the framework from which your congregation operates. Do they really remember where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated? Or were they even alive then? Jesus used many illustrations related to farming because those were pictures His followers could relate to. It is quite possible your congregation has never set foot on a farm or planted a seed. Use illustrations they can relate to.

I - Inspire Hope

While much of the world fights hunger and starvation, America struggles with obesity. But there is a great hunger in America. People are starving for hope. When I served on the mission field I learned it is hard for a man to hear the gospel when his stomach is crying out from hunger. Once you feed

the physical need it often opens a heart to hear about the deeper spiritual need.

Many today are crying out for hope. They need to believe things *can* get better before they can have faith it *will* get better. If we can build a foundation of hope within them it can lead to them embracing faith as well.

But hope is rare today. A 24 hour news cycle pumps out fear, a sense of helplessness and inevitable doom. If global warming doesn't get us, genetically modified food will, or corrupt politicians, or terrorists or zombies. Let's face it, none of us are going to get out of this world alive. People today desperately need hope and the church has the only answer for hope eternal.

Faith is important. Without faith we cannot please God, but in our quest to share our faith we must not ignore the power of hope. It is a foundation that enables faith. It is one of the three eternal elements and it lifts me to be able to believe. If we want to see our listeners grow in faith it is often necessary that we start by inspiring hope. Faith is the substance but it is the substance of things first hoped for. Give 'em hope!

T - Tell Stories

Young and old are engaged by stories. Concepts that can be difficult to communicate with mere words can sparkle to life with an appropriate story. Stories bring connection and often help the listener bridge the gap between information and application. Jesus referenced true stories as well as parabolic ones that simply illustrated the point. Nathan the prophet used a story to pierce the heart of David and bring him to confession. Personal stories of both successes and failures, told with discretion, carry the added benefit of building rapport between you and your listeners. They say, "I understand your struggles. We are on this journey together."

Years ago I attended a marriage seminar put on by this seemingly perfect couple. During the presentation it was obvious that, due to some wise choices they had made, they had been blessed with a rather smooth relationship. It was like they were saying, "We understand your pain

because once we had a fight, too. Didn't we dear? I seem to remember some sort of disagreement some years ago." Sorry, I couldn't relate.

In the early days of West Point military academy they were trying to instill virtues such as courage, decisiveness and self-sacrifice into the cadets. They were having little success until they tried a "new" teaching style. Instead of defining and doing a study on courage they simple began to relate stories of how others had demonstrated courage under fire. They told stories of men whose decisiveness saved the day, won the battle. Suddenly the future Army officers could understand and "see" themselves being courageous, decisive. We will remember stories long after facts have faded from our memories. As demonstrated by Jesus, stories are a powerful teaching tool.

Leadership is influence and there are many ways we influence others but one of the most profound is through the messages we communicate both formally and informally. Adding a little spit to our teaching will polish our message and make it shine – sorry, couldn't resist the metaphor. It will help us choose better titles, illustrate more clearly what we are trying to say, send our listeners away encouraged and let them know that they are not on this journey alone.