

What Kind of Preaching Pleases God? Part 1

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[0 : 00] Thank you.

Greetings and salutations.

Long time no pod. Welcome to the Providence Podcast. This is Chris Oswald. I'm the senior pastor at Providence Community Church. And the long hiatus was due to a number of factors, including some dental issues I've been dealing with.

But we are back on the horse today, introducing a multi-part series, amongst other things. I've got other podcasts to do as well, but I wanted to get started on this series that the leadership team asked me to produce on answering one, just a series on preaching.

That was kind of the general request, a series on preaching or some teaching on the nature of preaching itself. And so I started thinking through how to do that.

[1 : 27] That's what we'll do today. And, you know, before we get started, do you know how hard it is to think about abstract things? I wonder if most people realize how hard it is to think about abstract things and then to think about abstract things that have some bearing on you personally and so on and so forth.

So this has been, you know, a process for me to even feel like I've arrived at a place of sort of biblical clarity and understanding how I should even talk about some of this stuff because it does hit close to home and I want to be faithful and not teach simply an agenda and so forth.

So anyway, all that to say, it took me a long time to even know how to frame the question. The question is almost always, I'll tell you right now, framed incorrectly and way too contemporaneously into questions of what is expository preaching, what is topical preaching, what is textual, critical preaching, so on and so forth.

All the wrong questions to ask and at least not the most important questions to ask. The most important question to ask is simply this, what kind of preaching pleases God?

That's the question for this series. That's the title of this series, What Kind of Preaching Pleases God? Now that question may sound obvious, even maybe pious, but I'm really convinced that it's the right question and the one that we don't ask nearly often enough.

[2 : 54] In conversations about preaching, we tend to move to the other concerns. What kind of preaching grows a church? What kind of preaching connects with people? What kind of preaching is faithful or relevant or effective or winsome or clear?

What kind of preaching has been popular for the last hundred years? And so on and so forth. But those are not unimportant questions. They're just not foundational. I think the foundational question is much simpler and much more demanding, to be honest, and that is what kind of preaching pleases God.

This question forces a very much needed reorientation on this entire topic. It shifts the center of gravity away from the preacher and the audience and places it squarely on God himself.

And then, you know, once we make that shift, we're able to answer the question, all the questions about preaching with a much deeper level of clarity, much deeper than mere instinct, preference, good intentions, and so forth.

So that was kind of groundbreaking for me as I was asked to talk about this. The first question I had to come to terms with was, what's the right way to frame all this? What questions should I be asking?

[3 : 59] So many of those questions downstream seem to be the place where people want to think at the level they want to think. But I really think you need to go much further upstream, as Paul tells us in Ephesians, to figure out what pleases the Lord and then do it.

And I think the right question to ask here is, what kind of preaching pleases God? So to answer that, I then began to work on, well, what do I need to know in order to answer that?

And in spite of all of my chaos in general, I don't appear to be a very systematic guy, I suppose, but I am a very systematic thinker, and I tend to break things down into how to think about things before I go about answering those questions.

I learned that approach, I think, largely from the Puritans that I read. But so I've realized that in order to answer the question, what kind of preaching pleases God, I need to have data from three different categories.

First of all, and most importantly, the most obvious place to begin, what does the Bible say? It's the most obvious place. It's also the most demanding place.

[5 : 08] And Scripture does not merely give us, if what we did, we're going to do this in two episodes from now. But if all we did was just look up all the words used for preaching and studied passages about preaching or studied biblical sermons, we wouldn't have asked enough questions or gathered enough biblical data.

We need to actually start at a particular place, and that is, how does God speak? We need to start with the grammar of divine speech. Before the Bible tells us to preach or how to preach, it shows us how God speaks.

And as Peter tells us, we are to speak as if we have the very oracles of God. We're supposed to imitate God's speech. So in order to answer the question, what kind of preaching pleases God, we need to do some thinking, not only about the way that the Bible talks about preaching, but more directly, how does God talk?

Any answer to the question of God-pleasing preaching must be anchored in the patterns and the purposes and effects of God's own word, the way he speaks. So that's one pile of data we need to work from.

The second one is, how has the church handled this question historically? How has the church handled this question historically? And this is really interesting and kind of what got me to the question I'm asking, you know, what kind of preaching pleases God?

[6 : 34] Because as you do a church history search of preaching modes and methods, they vary greatly. They've varied wildly throughout the centuries. But I think we could say that everybody that was preaching the way they were preaching thought they were pleasing God.

And that was the primary aim. And so we need to be able to begin to ask questions like, how has preaching differed throughout the ages? And what can we learn from that?

In a book I was reading a couple weeks ago on the atonement, J.I. Packer said, every theological question has behind it a study, a history of study.

Every theological question has behind it a history of study. And a narrow eccentricity in handling it, the theological question, is unavoidable unless the history is taken into account.

So the theological question we're dealing with, what kind of preaching pleases God? Packer says, you need to know how that question has been handled throughout history so that you don't develop a narrow eccentricity in your own understanding.

[7 : 42] What he means is that not that tradition replaces Scripture, but that Scripture is rarely misread in isolation. When we refuse to listen to how the church has wrestled with a question over time, we almost always wind up absolutizing our own moment, our own assumptions, the errors that we're responding to in modernity that are shaping our definitions and solutions.

So we need church history. We really do to help remove our blind spots and so on and so forth, or help us at least to see our blind spots. Church history doesn't guarantee correctness, but it does provide ballast.

It helps us distinguish between what is essential and what is merely fashionable. I think that'll be episode number four, probably. And then finally, so we've got two buckets of data that we need.

We need the biblical data. Not only how does the Bible talk about preaching, but how does God talk, which is the main thing we're going to deal with today and the next episode. And then we need to have a sense of church history.

What is, how has this question been answered throughout the ages? And we can see that by studying sermons and sermon form and sermon type from centuries.

[8 : 54] We have sermons going all the way back pretty much. And we can also study it by creeds and confessions in particular, as they've discussed what preaching is and what it ought to do.

And then there's a third category of data. And that is, you've got to have some self-awareness as you enter into this. If we are going to discover what kind of preaching pleases God, we've got to come to terms with a deeply unfortunate reality.

And that is, just more broadly, we have to say this is true. What pleases God and what pleases us are often not the same thing. What pleases God and what pleases us are often not the same thing.

And unless we account for that disparity and understand what drives that disparity in general, we will quietly substitute one for the other. The gap exists for multiple reasons.

Sin distorts our loves. Cultural pressures shape our tastes. Socialization trains us to reward certain kinds of speech and prefer those over others. But over time, we can become very adept at calling good preaching whatever reassures us, flatters us, or aligns with our desires or preferences, and not whether or not it pleases God.

[10 : 10] So that's kind of what we're going to be doing. In this series, we're going to be trying to understand what kind of preaching pleases God. And we're going to look into all these data sets.

And I would say that right from the beginning, you can see, I would want you to see at least, that anyone who's not really taking it seriously enough to have good information from all three data sets, self-awareness, church history awareness, biblical awareness, biblical theological awareness, how God speaks.

I don't know why I would listen to anyone's opinion about preaching unless it's well-earned and seriously devoted into these various categories, particularly the third one.

I find that many people who are the most critical preaching are the most diuretic in their own speech, the least self-contained and self-controlled in their own speech, and frankly, have way too many opinions considering the number of calories they've burned to understand all the information we've talked about from these three categories.

So that's kind of what we're going to do today is we're going to start by asking, how does God speak? That's our first level of way to evaluate this.

[11 : 28] What kind of preaching pleases God? It would be the kind of preaching fundamentally that speaks in a way that He speaks. So before we move into a more systematic or lexical or categorical study of preaching, which we will do, I want to begin with something more foundational, and that is just how does God speak?

Rather than starting with definitions or methods or homiletical categories, I want us to take a biblical theology of speech, tracing the way that God uses speech from the very beginning of the Bible all the way through.

And the assumption driving this approach is simple, but I think it's weighty, and that is before we should ask what preaching ought to be, we ought to ask how God uses speech.

Because Scripture doesn't treat God's Word as mere information. When God speaks, things happen. Reality is created, ordered, judged, redeemed.

That divine grammar deserves special attention. Now, I'm about to take a break, gather my wits for the next section, but it's true that all human speech, in some sense, this is important.

[12 : 46] In some sense, all human speech, this is from 1 Peter, ought to be patterned after God's speech, right? All human speech ought to be patterned after God's speech.

Christians should speak truthfully, clearly, lovingly, courageously, blah, blah, blah, etc. Preaching really rightly occupies a unique place in the category of speech.

It's not casual speech. It's not merely instructional speech. It's speech undertaken in God's name, under God's authority, for God's purposes. And for that reason, preaching really ought to be the most intentionally imitative form of human speech.

It ought to be the most imitative of God's speech, in certain categories, anyway. And if any kind of speech can reflect the way God speaks, it should be, I think, obvious that, in some sense, what we're doing when we preach is we are imitating God's speech and also giving instruction to the congregation on how to speak.

And these are standards, by the way, as I've worked on all this, I see places where I feel like I have succeeded in that, in all this, and places where I have failed. So I've been to keep myself out of a lot of this. Preaching does not invent its authority, and it borrows it.

[14 : 06] And it borrows it not only by speaking what the Word says, but also speaking the way God speaks. Now, that data set, it requires a special tool called biblical theology, where we, before we talk about techniques or categories or even texts that deal explicitly with preaching, we look at this question of speech through the lens of how God's story begins, progresses, and ends.

And we'll develop some conclusions based on those observations. Quick break. Okay, I'm back. These breaks won't appear as real breaks to you, I realize this, but I'm taking a little moment to get some other work done.

And also, I had these two teeth extracted, and my jaw just gets sore from talking too much. But anyway, let's get into this discussion of God's speech, and understanding that preaching should be the ultimate imitation of God's speech patterns, and how God speaks.

So when we, it shouldn't just be preaching, should just not be preaching, you know, God's Word, because then we'd just be reading God's Word. But in addition to reading God's Word, we're explaining it and making application to it.

But all of this needs to be done in a way that is aligned with God's speech, the way He talks. And to get that information, you'd want to start at the beginning, because you've got this marvelous section at the very first chapter of the Bible where we see God speak.

[15 : 47] And what I did was a study on His speech there, and then pulled what I found there throughout the whole Bible. That's kind of what you do with biblical theology.

And I've come up with a couple of markers of God's speech. And the first one is something I'm just calling performative action. And what I mean there is something kind of similar to maybe you've heard of speech act theory.

But what I mean here is just that when God speaks, things actually happen. It's not just that He's talking. He's talking things into existence. And that's obvious, right, in Genesis chapter 1.

When He speaks, things just happen. God said, dot, dot, dot, and it was so, right? So God's words in Genesis 1 are not descriptive commentary on an unfolding process.

He's not describing what's happening apart from Himself. His words are actually producing reality. When God speaks, reality conforms to His Word. Light exists. Waters divide.

[16 : 50] Land appears. Life emerges. And once God has spoken reality into being, He then renders judgment on what His Word has accomplished. And God saw that it was good.

This is the most basic biblical claim about God's speech that I could get to in a first principles approach. God's Word does not merely describe reality. It creates it.

Divine speech is inherently active, authoritative, effectual. And the creational pattern of God's speech becomes, I think, foundational for how we understand God's speech throughout the Scripture.

And by extension, to some degree, what preaching is. And the preaching that pleases God is supposed to be rooted in. It's not an isolated deal, this idea of God speaking reality into existence.

It's not even confined to the divine. I mean, it certainly is articulated concerning the divine. Like Isaiah 55.10, So shall my word be that goes from my mouth.

[17 : 53] It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose. That's what I mean by performative action. God actually, His speech actually makes things happen.

But then, of course, we see an example, for instance, in Ezekiel 37, where God makes a diagnosis. And we're going to get more into that in a moment. But look, these are dead bones, right?

Right, Ezekiel? These are dead bones. Ezekiel agrees. Yeah, these are dead bones. And then he says, speak, prophesy over to the bones, over the bones, and flesh appears, breath enters, life returns.

The text goes out of its way to show that resurrection does not occur apart from the spoken word. The word is the instrument of the restoration. That's key. The word is the thing that is making action happen.

That's the Genesis 1 logic applied in Ezekiel's instance. Jesus often will say things like, I say to you, this is from Mark 22, 11, rise, take up your bed, and go home.

[18 : 55] And the sense of the text is that he speaks a command that creates the obedience it demands. The man walks because Jesus spoke. This is that idea of performative action in the New Testament.

In Mark 7, 34, Jesus looks at a man who cannot hear or speak and says a word, be opened.

No technique, no explanation, no delay. The word itself there is just an echoing of the Genesis 1 performative speech, performative action speech.

He says a thing that makes a thing happen. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of performative speech in the Gospels is when Jesus stands at Lazarus' tomb and says, Lazarus, come out, in John 11.

Another example, Jesus rebukes the storm. Peace, be still. In these instances, Jesus is not describing what is about to happen in advance or predicting it. He's speaking and a thing happens.

[20 : 02] Now, that is a well-established pattern in Scripture and not only for God. He will extend that kind of authority into his chosen vessels to speak in this way.

From Genesis to the prophets, from Jesus, apostles, you've got the Bible consistently presenting God's speech as performative action.

God's word creates and restores and commands and judges and saves. And it doesn't wait on anything. It just does what it wants to do. If preaching is to please God, it has to figure out the appropriate human derivative of that particular exercise.

It has to be at the very least, if not creational in the same sense, as I don't believe that that's the case.

And certainly, you know, we've got ex-nihilo conditions with God that aren't true of man. And also God's perfection in man's not perfect and no preacher's perfect and understands the will of the Lord perfect or so forth.

[21 : 13] But there has to be some sense in which this performative speech is manifested in the life, in the preaching of God's word.

And it has to be something united by faith that expects that God's word will accomplish its purposes. I would say that there's almost something like maybe authoritative expectation.

The kind of preaching, I think, that pleases God is that it takes up the authority God has delegated to accomplish his intended purposes.

That authority doesn't create. And it's not coercive or autonomous, you know. But it is declarative. And it is, you know, really ultimately accountable to God.

And by the way, we're getting way ahead, but that reality alone explains why faithful preaching so often unsettles hearers. Performative speech does not ask permission. It confronts reality and reshapes it.

[22 : 10] And whatever God speaks, whenever God speaks that way, some experience life and others experience death. So one of the fundamental, I think, I think we have to talk about with performative speech is just that the preacher must be in a particular posture in his heart and in his mind where he views his words as really potent and filled with potential life and death.

There should be just a simple expectation in preaching that things are going to happen as a consequence. And I've got a ton of proof texts that show this, and I'll put those in the show notes.

So we're going to wrap up for today. But before we stop, let's just pull the threads together, remind you what we've gotten so far. We started by finding the right question to ask, which is what kind of preaching pleases God?

We tried to make the case that you can't answer that question responsibly by starting with technique, style, sermon structure, or audience response. You have to start further upstream with the way God himself speaks.

And then instead of jumping immediately into texts and the scriptures that talk about preaching, we're going to begin asking this question, how does God talk? And we're using Genesis 1 as a sort of pace setting or pattern establishing passage that we then move out throughout Scripture and see the same effects happening downstream at various levels of dilution, I suppose you might say.

[23 : 47] We looked at Genesis 1 not necessarily as a sermon, although I would argue that the whole Bible is just a sermon from God to man. But we looked at Genesis 1, not necessarily explicitly as a sermon, but as a window into what we're calling divine grammar.

How does God talk? When God speaks, his word is not merely informative. It does things. It brings reality into being. It orders what exists.

It renders verdicts, you know, so on and so forth. And so we're going to move in from there into something, into the next thing we see in God's speech, which has to do with division.

You could probably, if you think about Genesis 1, imagine where we might go with this. But in addition to creating things with his speech, God divides and taxonomizes, I suppose you might say, things as well.

So we'll get into that in the next episode. Thanks so much for listening. Really do appreciate your attention to these matters.