

Preaching That Pleases God, Part 2

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 January 2026

Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0 : 0 0] . . .

. . .

. . . Last week we talked about performative speech. We went all the way back to the initial words that God has chosen through His divine providence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the words that He has chosen to present to us as His first words.

And we went there because we want to start asking questions about preaching based not on preaching texts per se, which often fall into questions of best practices or format, and the Bible, just as a hint, doesn't give us any kind of firm format for how preaching should manifest.

What we need to do is we need to just ask, well, how does God talk? And then pattern preaching after the way that God talks. And so we talked last week about how God's speech in Genesis 1 is performative.

[1 : 4 9] It is meant to produce something. We see that God speaks reality into existence. He's not merely describing something.

He's making something happen with His words. Creation happens. Chaos is ordered. Life emerges. Judgment is rendered. And crucially, this pattern does not end with creation.

The same logic governs God's speech in judgment, in restoration, in creating a people, in exiling a people, in going to the Gentiles, in healing, in salvation.

And throughout the rest of Scripture, God's speech is performative action. We saw that when God speaks through His prophets, through Christ, through the apostles, His words do things.

They raise the dead. They steal storms. They forgive sins. They summon obedience. And they call new creation into existence. God's word is never entirely descriptive.

[2 : 4 7] It's always active in some sense. It always accomplishes the purposes for which He had sent it, sometimes in salvation, sometimes in damnation, sometimes in hardening, but never merely informing.

From there, we argued that preaching, when it pleases God, participates in a derivative way anyway in this same divine grammar. Preaching does not, of course, invent authority. It simply steps into the authority created by God and given to the preacher.

It's not creative or coercive or autonomous, but it is declarative and accountable and commissioned, and it is, for certain, authoritative if it is done so in faith.

God remains the actor, of course. The preacher is sent, of course, under His authority. But there has to be, if preaching is to be faithful, a clear sense of authority that is manifest in the speaking itself.

Now, we want to be careful here because there's obviously abuses all around in this sort of thing. But there are abuses in all forms of speech. I mean, it would be really cool, for instance, if anyone who wanted to take some time and monitor their own speech very carefully and ask, is it biblical?

[4 : 0 8] The reality is we all have problems abusing speech in one way or another. So there are abuses abound in preaching, but not just preaching. And we want to be as careful as possible, so I worked up some affirmations and denials about this concept.

I want to affirm that God's speech is intrinsically performative, that when God speaks, reality conforms to His Word. We affirm that Scripture consistently presents God's Word as effectual, not merely informative, motivational, or inspirational.

It actually does stuff. We affirm that God has ordained preaching as the normal means by which His already performative Word is addressed to people in time and space, such that God remains free to act through it according to His purposes.

Preaching is... This affirmed that preaching is a commanded act of delegated authority, precisely because God wills His Word, not merely to be preserved in writing, but confrontationally addressed through sent witnesses.

Preaching would affirm that preaching, when is faithful to God's Word, becomes an instrument through which God acts. Convicting, calling, judging, forgiving, creating life without transferring divine authority to the preacher.

[5 : 35] The preacher is simply acting in the authority of God and His Word. I would deny that human preaching possesses intrinsic or autonomous power. Only God's speech is performative in that way.

I would deny that preaching functions mechanically, predictably, or manipulatively, as though you can just get the right technique or the right form of preaching and be assured that your preaching is pleasing God.

I would deny that the written Word of God is intended to operate as a self-sending or self-addressing instrument, apart from proclamation. What do I mean by that? Well, I mean, how will they hear unless they have a preacher?

The foolishness of preaching is, of course, it is foolishness, but it's God's foolishness. And he has chosen, rather than simply to stand and read God's Word out loud and allow that to be the sufficient means of salvation and sanctification, he has chosen to step inside of a preacher's personality, into a preacher's persona, if you will, and communicate his Word through individuals invested with the authority that God has given them as they're called to be preachers.

So you might ask this question, how would you say that it is obviously better for God to send a preacher to a people rather than just his Word?

[7 : 08] And if you say, well, to explain his Word, well, then I would say, okay, back up one. Why did God write his Word in such a way as to require explanation?

See, your answer to the question has got to be a first principle kind of answer. Why is it that God ordains preachers, has set aside preaching as a thing to communicate his Word?

You need to be able to answer that question before you have firm opinions about what preaching is and what it isn't. And it can't be to explain his Word. All you're doing there is you're just extending one step above where the question needs to land.

Why does God decide to use personalities, human beings, to present his Word to a congregation of people and work through that to produce salvation and sanctification, judgment, condemnation, and so forth?

Do you know the answer to that? Well, that's a pretty important question to know before one has an opinion. But, of course, you could just be a consumer who says, like, well, I like my milk with chocolate in it.

[8 : 24] And, yeah, that would be one way you could navigate the entire Christian life. Navigate church life is just to let your preferences become God's will.

That won't mess any of us up. That's going to be fine, I'm sure. Anyway, so I would deny that God's Word, the written Word of God, is intended to be the only or the main, or I don't know how you'd describe it here.

I think that would be a matter of, you know, some theological refinement. But we would just say that, you know, sola scriptura doesn't mean solo scripture. And it certainly doesn't mean that God intends for us to simply stand up in the pulpit and read the verse and go on from there.

Why did he write it in such a way as to require explanation? Is it because he was limited by time and space and language so that he could not produce a document that was intelligible to all people of all places and all times and all languages?

No, he's choosing to operate within those particular rules. Why is it that God has chosen? And here's where I'm leading you with that. There's an inevitable aspect of personality associated with the concept of preaching.

[9 : 35] There's an inevitable aspect of opinion associated with the concept of preaching. Of course, those things can go too far, but you have to acknowledge that God has chosen to embody his word through the service of preaching in flawed human beings.

And that must mean something. There must be something there. So deny that the word is just, you know, that what preaching is supposed to be is just reading the Bible out loud to people.

It's obviously not that. We deny that the effectiveness of preaching should be measured by immediate compliance, emotional response, or visible success. In other words, you can't measure the effectiveness of preaching or God's word in general by immediate markers, visible success. We deny that preaching fails when it provokes resistance, discomfort, or offense. Scripture presents these responses as well within the range of what God's word accomplishes.

God's word is both a rod and a staff. It is both a knife and a band-aid. It heals and it kills.

[10:51] And we'll get into some of that a little bit more today. So we can't measure God's word by its immediate response, and we certainly can't measure it by whether, you know, is it offensive?

Obviously it is. And that's something that God's intended to be a part of the ministry of preaching. In short, God's word is always effectual.

Its effects are not domesticated. We don't get to own those effects or describe them in a particular, condition them in a certain way so that they have to stay within our prescribed boundaries.

The word always accomplishes God's purpose, and we don't always know what God's purpose is.

Sometimes that purpose, by the way, produces exposure, resistance, judgment, and so forth.

So that's the kind of first section of thinking about God's speech is it does stuff. And he has, you need to figure out how you think about this is going to, this plays out, but it's undeniable there is a connection between that performative speech of God and then it inhabiting or working through human agents.

[12:03] That's all over the Bible, and that's what preaching is. Okay, so that's the first thing we notice about God's speech in Genesis. The second thing we notice is that it is fundamentally divisive.

It's fundamentally divisive. It divides one thing from another. It separates. It sorts. It taxonomizes in some sense. If God's speech is truly performative, if it truly does stuff, it can't leave everything as it was before it was uttered, right?

It has to do something. God's word does not merely affirm or describe or motivate. It separates. It distinguishes. Light from darkness, water from land, heaven from earth, truth from falsehood, life from death, man from woman.

It names things and declares what they are and where they fit. That means that division as a fruit of preaching is not a failure of preaching but a feature of preaching.

Once we understand that, we're finally in a position to ask some uncomfortable but necessary questions. Why does clarity so often feel harsh? Think about it this way.

[13:24] When God said, sea, you go over here. Land, you go over here. Sea and land don't have an ego, and so they're not thinking, well, why do I have to be over here and he gets to be over there?

Tell a woman you're not allowed to preach. Tell a man with two wives you're not allowed. If you start telling people what to do and where to stand and what they are, well, they have an ego.

And so you're doing exactly the same thing God's doing to the land and the sea. It's just that people have an ego. They are sinful. And so, but the reality is is that sound preaching will follow God's speech patterns and the way that God speaks and why God speaks and one of those things will be that it creates divisions.

So that's what we're going to, that's what we're going to talk about next. It's not, it's not divisive in a sense of I'm trying to be mean. It's just divisive in a sense of that's what it does.

God separates light from darkness, waters from above, from the waters below. He gathers the waters so that dry land may appear. He appoints lights in the heavens to separate day and night and to mark times and seasons.

[14:37] The repeated language of separation in Genesis 1 isn't accidental. It's not a stylistic redundancy. The narrator is insisting on something fundamental about the nature of God's creative work.

God's word doesn't merely produce action. It creates differentiation. It does not create a vague, blended, undifferentiated reality.

It creates a structured world, a world in which things are distinct and bounded and named and properly related to one another. Division is not a secondary feature of creation. It is the very means by which order replaces chaos.

The opening description of the world is its formless and void and that formless void gives way to order through God's dividing word.

And the formless and void becomes a cosmos with boundaries and rhythms and roles and distinctions. And in a highly individualistic environment where people are suspicious of authority, certainly suspicious of people who speak with the authority that they believe God has extended to the office of preaching, this sort of here, not there, you're this, not that, this sort of boundary making, rhythms, roles, and distinctions provokes the flesh of those who want to leave all of that up to their own moods and instincts.

[16:04] and so you will begin to see some people who resist boundaries in general, whether that be in their own marriage, in their home, or whatever, you will begin to see a particular approach or struggle with preaching that is following after what God does all over the Bible, clean and unclean, separate worthwhile from worthless.

That's what Jeremiah, the preacher, is told by God to do. You'll begin to see a reaction to that style of preaching and, of course, if there was just absolute sincerity, that reaction would be, well, this offends me because I want my own way and I don't like being told what to do, but people aren't that sincere and so they begin to make other kind of evaluations for why they are not pleased with the preaching.

But the truth is that the dividing work of God's speech also establishes meaning. Light has meaning precisely because it is not darkness and land has meaning because it is not sea and meaning requires distinction.

Without separation, there's no intelligibility, only sameness and confusion. God's word creates a world that can be known only because it is differentiated.

Division also establishes identity. Things are the way they are because they are not everything else. This creational logic becomes foundational for the rest of Scripture.

[17:37] Later biblical distinctions, holy and common, clean and unclean, Israel and the nations, church and the world, those don't arise arbitrarily. They rest on a creational pattern that we see God setting into motion with his own first words.

And all I'm saying here is calling balls and strikes is a fundamental aspect of preaching. Division, you know, it creates identity and meaning and differentiation.

It also establishes moral space. By the end of Genesis 1, the world isn't merely ordered, it's evaluated. We're going to get to that next. Once reality has been created and distinguished, God renders judgment upon it.

And that's the third thing we see in preaching. Judgment. Evaluative judgment. What's the first thing we see God do? We see him creating, performative speech.

What's the second thing we do? We see him dividing that which he's created, differentiation, identity, boundaries, markers. And what's the final thing he does is he evaluates.

[18:41] God looked at this and it was good. God looked at that and it was not good. Now, we're 18 minutes in and I think I'm just going to continue on the evaluations or on the, yeah, the evaluation side of this because one of the most beautiful things about God's evaluation is I want you to see what he does when he sees something negative.

Okay? So let's go ahead and get into evaluation. So first, he's creating, his speech performs, it acts, it does, and then it's divisive in the sense that it divides this from that.

It separates boundaries and creates categories and so forth. And the third thing it does is it renders a verdict. Now, of course, because God's doing all the work, he's mostly saying it was good.

God saw that it was good. God saw that it was good. But take a moment and step back and just think, you know, more philosophically about this. One of the things we see God saying is, he's teaching us how to talk here.

And one of the things he's teaching us is evaluation is helpful, actually. Language is not ornamental. It's not merely descriptive. But when God declares something to be good, he's not expressing a personal preference or an aesthetic impression.

[20:04] He's issuing an evaluative judgment, a divine verdict that names what conforms to his will. And this judgment is in its most basic biblical sense an authoritative declaration about the moral and creational fitness of reality.

He's saying, this is good, this is not good, so on and so forth. It's important to recognize that judgment takes place before the fall. There's no sin to condemn, no guilt to expose, no punishment to assign, but it does happen before the fall.

God is the judge before the fall. That's the problem, really, is he's always been a judge. He's always been an evaluator, and when sin enters the world, his holiness sees that sin for what it is.

So just remember, in Scripture, judgment precedes sin. God judges creation before he judges rebellion. And this alone should recalibrate how we think about judgment in preaching.

The judge isn't first to punish, isn't to punish. It's actually first to name what is good, fitting, and right. But then, of course, we get to that moment where God sees Adam alone, and he says, this is the first negative judgment, he says, it is not good for man to be alone.

[21 : 22] Now, what I think we need to understand about preaching is that fundamentally, we need to be able to say, such and such is good, such and such is not good.

Such and such is good, this is not good. We need to be able to do that. That's following God's faithful, you know, pattern, that's faithfully following God's pattern. But, you can't just leave it there because there's a beautiful thing happening here and that is, what does he do after he says that is not good?

He fixes it. He fixes it. And that's fundamentally what it means to be a gospel preacher is, you gotta call balls and strikes. You gotta say this isn't what it ought to be.

But then you've also gotta say, but God has provided a solution in Christ. He's provided a solution in Christ. So even when we are saying something's not good, we are not in the situation where we declare things, well, that's sin and oh, too bad.

No, we're like, that's sin? Jesus has shed his perfect blood to make atonement for it? If you will repent, God is faithful and just to forgive your sins and purify you from all unrighteousness?

[22 : 35] It's a credible thing when the very first time we see God say, no, this isn't good. He doesn't walk away from it. He's just identifying where he needs to work further to remedy something that isn't quite what it needs to ultimately be.

I think you really have to think deeply about God's personality and making the choice to create in this particular way. I think it really informs your understanding of what gentleness is and also what progressive sanctification is and this sort of one degree of glory to the next idea.

Sometimes God puts commas in his creative work. He's not done. He's left something undone here. But of course when he says it's not good he goes ahead and acts on it. So I think we've talked a little bit now about division and judgment and I think at this point let's just talk about how these things it's not just God who does this.

I'm not pulling out God's speech as if there's no implications down the road to humans. The reality is that everybody following him who's called to talk for him does these things.

[23 : 53] They act in a way they speak with authority. They speak with divisional intent. This not that. And they speak in judgment and evaluation and we could talk about Moses or the prophets or the wisdom teachers or Jesus and say that over and over again and then we could go to the apostles and say that over and over again what it means to be a faithful preacher is to be a person of authority expecting the words he says to produce action or consequences not because he has any authority of himself but that he is in an office that God has created and performing a function that God has commanded.

So he is speaking with authority God's authority and he's speaking with a sense of discernment and division of this and not that and separation and boundaries and demarcations and taxonomies and finally he's evaluative he's saying this is good that is bad so on and so forth.

So just most broadly speech that pleases God looks like this and I think that one of the things that we should always really understand is that the degree to which our speech our personal speech is not in conformity to God's is going to have a downstream effect with how we evaluate preaching because we've stopped asking the fundamental question what kind of preaching pleases God?

Well, what kind of speaking pleases God? Well, how does God talk? That's the kind that pleases him. We know that for sure. And what you'll see is that people that become less and less concerned about sort of speaking this way in their own lives, like when they're raising their own children, when they're communicating to others, there should be a level of authority when I am speaking because I have, you know, there should be authority if it exists.

For instance, you know, if you're in a situation as a superior, as an elder, as, you know, so forth, there should be authority. You should speak the word of God with authority to others, not apologetically, but clearly and truthfully, with humility, not over the word itself, but just over the fact that you're you, there should be, though, a confidence that you're saying stuff that does something.

[26 : 26] You're wielding an active sword, living an active sword. It should be divisive, I don't mean divisive in a disunity perspective, but it should be, it should demarcate, it should separate, it should notice, it should create boundaries and so forth, and then finally, it should evaluate, it should sort of make moral sort of conclusions based on God's word, not our own preferences.

So taking together, I think, the idea of this section, and we were just wanting to look at how God talks from the beginning and track that through the rest of the Bible. Taking together the Bible, the biblical data presents a coherent and demanding picture of how God uses speech from the opening chapter of Genesis onward, God's word functions in three inseparable ways.

First, it's performative. When God speaks, reality changes. His word does not merely describe what it is. He brings it into built being. Second, God's speech is divisive. It orders reality by making distinctions, light from darkness, truth from falsehood, faith from unbelief, man from woman. God clarifies rather than blurring lines. He clarifies lines rather than blurring them. Third, God's speech is evaluative, having created and ordered the world.

He renders verdicts upon it, declaring what is good, pleasing, and fitting according to his will. These three functions belong together. Performative speech creates a world that can be known.

[27 : 58] Divisive speech orders that world so that it can be understood. Evaluative judgment names whether that world accords with God's purposes. Preaching that pleases God participates derivatively and humbly in that same pattern.

It announces what God has done, clarifies what belongs to him and what does not, and declares God's verdicts on human responses. Whenever all three are present, scripture recognizes that speech as faithful.

Whenever one is absent, preaching begins to drift from the divine pattern. all right, that's probably a good enough chunk of all the stuff that I've written over the weeks or last several weeks, I suppose. We'll return to look at at least a couple of pretty well-known preachers and evaluate how they speak and how they preach.

We'll use these standards to sort through that. I'm only going to pick positive ones, by the way. Just because why not? If I could take the time to commend good things to you, I'd do that.

[29 : 06] I think you all know who the turkeys are supposed to avoid, or at least mostly. Anyway, all right, well, I'm going to let you go, and we'll return probably in a few more days to do that sermon analysis.



The Army Blues!