

Garlock, JohnKeys To Better Preaching

8. What Goes Into a Sermon?

This chapter is a glossary of the building blocks of a sermon. It defines each element a preacher works with, from the Scripture text through to how the message is delivered, so the vocabulary of preaching is clear before the practical work of building a sermon begins.

Key takeaways

- Text: the Scripture a sermon deals with — usually one main text; the sermon and its text should call each other to mind. Using several equal passages ('complementary texts') should be done only occasionally.
- Subject: a sermon must be about one definable thing, not everything. Trying to cover more than one subject (Genesis-to-Revelation preaching) is a common beginner's mistake.
- Title: the sermon's 'name.' It can be mysterious to spark interest, but must not mislead or make promises you'll be held to (e.g. 'Who Is the Antichrist?').
- Proposition: the whole sermon boiled down to one sentence — a discipline that forces clarity before preaching.

- Outline (structure): a simple ordered list of the main ideas, like a trellis. Points are ideas, not scriptures or illustrations. Keep it brief to aid the listener's memory; avoid complex sub-points.
- Notes: brief written memory aids, arranged vertically, no bigger than a Bible page. Never be ashamed to use them — better to have and not need than need and not have.
- Illustrations: anything that creates a mental picture (story, comparison, object, poem, etc.). They are necessities, not decoration — plan at least one strong one per main point. The best come from your own reading, seeing, hearing, and experience, so stay alert and carry pen and paper.
- Context: the cultural, situational, and literary setting of a passage. Meaning often depends on it; Scripture taken out of context is easily distorted.
- Exposition explains a text's deeper meaning and applies it to life. Exhortation urges action ('Repent!') but should be offered with love, not constant scolding.
- Content is the message's ideas and truth (the cargo); delivery is how it's presented (the vehicle). Both matter — good content with poor delivery still fails.

Passages worth keeping

| *“Content is the cargo, not the vehicle.”*

Crisp distinction between what a sermon says and how it's delivered — the chapter insists both must be strong.

“*Illustrations are absolute necessities, not just decorative extras.*”

Central claim of the chapter's longest section — pictures are how truth enters the mind.

How it connects

The whole chapter takes its cue from how Jesus taught — leaning on parables and concrete stories rather than definitions — as the model for what makes a message land.

Scripture referenced

- **Matthew 13:34-35** -- Jesus taught only in parables — cited as strong support for using illustrations
- **Luke 10:29** -- 'Who is my neighbor?' — Jesus answers with the Good Samaritan story instead of a definition
- **Hebrews 6:10-12** -- Context example: order love-hope-faith, climaxing on faith
- **1 Thessalonians 1:3** -- Context example: order faith-love-hope, climaxing on hope
- **1 Corinthians 13:13** -- Context example: order faith-hope-love, climaxing on love
- **Revelation 3:18** -- Sample outline text ('What the Church Needs')