

## Taking the Stress out of Sermon Prep

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It's Monday. You still haven't fully recovered from the physical, emotional; and spiritual energy that Sabbath demands, along with the stress of Sunday's board meeting. Therefore, you take the day off. It's essential to have a day to relax and be refreshed, but in the back of your mind you know that Sabbath will be here again before you know it, and your responsibility to deliver God's word to his people still remains. For many pastors the mere thought of preaching and sermon preparation for yet another Sabbath is cause for a miniature panic attack. Here's a strategy that will take a lot of the anxiety out of sermon preparation.

Here's the system that helps me to see the next Sabbath long before it comes and thus removes a great deal of the pressure of preparation.

It's often been said that, "he who fails to plan, plans to fail." What follows is the basic framework for preaching plan, that will save you stress and time.

### **The Big Idea**

It all starts with a big idea. In the fall of every year, I begin a process of spiritual seeking for myself and the church with the help of the leadership team. I begin with an informal inquiry, asking the elders what they believe ought to be our focus for the following year. I pose this same question to the other key leaders/board members. I listen carefully to the concerns of members, and observe the issues and challenges that are present in the church. Often times the answer is staring us right in the face. Other times it requires more reflection and prayer. After careful prayer and reflection the elders and board select a theme that will be our focus for the approaching year.

It's important that I clarify here what this is not. This is certainly not asking your members what you should preach about. That might yield responses that we're not even equipped to address. That could go left really quick. I can see it already. "No Sister Williams I will not preach a sermon series on which grocery stores and gas stations have the best prices." Selecting a theme for the year helps the entire leadership team focus on creating a concentrated ministry focus which promotes unity and synergy amongst the various ministry auxiliaries.

The added bonus is that the pastor is able to use that same concept to take the church on an amazing journey of discovery and growth with the same focus.

After the theme is selected a great deal of the work is done. This means that the preaching and also the ministry focus can be centered around this one grand concept. We simply have to identify key issues, concepts and ideas that are contained in the larger concept. For example, this year our church's theme is "Family First." The key issues surrounding family are fairly obvious: parenting, dating and marriage, divorce and remarriage, generational curses, forgiveness, adultery and fornication, unconditional love, acceptance, trust, reconciliation and restoration, adoption, abuse and betrayal, etc. There's so much to tackle. Then the challenge becomes to mine the text of scripture to determine what God has already said about these issues.

### **Big Idea to Smaller Series**

The preaching calendar then is comprised of a selection of the smaller concepts within the wider theme. The entire year becomes one grand series of sermons. And (theoretically) each month is set aside to tackle one smaller concept. So if the theme is "Living a Healthy Lifestyle" each month we will address one aspect of healthy living: Healthy relationships, financial health, emotional health, spiritual health, etc. After I see the theme for the entire year then I can break down each month using the small mini-themes into mini preaching series.

So for the next four to six weeks we'll talk about the keys, steps, principles of emotional health. I'll attach a basic sample calendar below.

This systematic preaching calendar acts as a guide that takes the guesswork and anxiety out of preaching. You still can leave room in the calendar for special days and guest preachers. That's why we do this work in the fall and early winter. It's a part of the larger planning process that the church board is engaged in. It can be a little taxing, but it makes the year so much smoother and lessens the stress of preaching.

### **Tips and Tricks**

There are also times throughout the year when a certain series hits really close to home and demands a closer look. There's enough space in the year to move things around and push back a series to accommodate the needs of the congregation. I'm currently in the middle of a series about the life of Joseph. This series has made me aware that we need to talk a lot more about forgiveness, so I'm currently shifting my calendar to make room for an additional series about forgiveness.

This systematic approach to preaching also helps to build the anticipation of the members. I will often produce promos to introduce an upcoming sermon series weeks before it starts. We share it online and encourage members to promote it as well. Also, at the end of a sermon, or just before the benediction I'll often give a little preview of next week's sermon.

This is easy to do even if the sermon isn't 100% complete because I already know where we're headed next. "So listen up folks, you don't want to miss next week because we're going to be talking about Joseph in prison and what you need to know when you hit rock bottom."

### **The Church on the Move**

The goal of every pastor is to create a thriving faith community. We are thriving, not simply because the pastor preaches great sermons. We are thriving because we have committed to the journey of faith and mission together. Systematic preaching promotes this idea of journey. The preaching event is not just some random, charismatic, entertaining moment in time; it's a strategic step toward a desired destination. We are going somewhere with this. We are seeking God together. We are learning together. We are growing together. We are a church that's systematically pursuing God's purpose for us, not haphazardly bumping into new ideas. We are a church on the move for God.

When I stand up to preach each Sabbath, it's one more step along that journey. But with this system I get there through study and prayer and with a lot less stress.

## Sample Preaching Calendar

Theme: Stewardship is a Lifestyle		
Month	Potential Mini-Series Focus	Potential Sermon Subjects
January	Stewardship of Opportunity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Resolutions &amp; Restarts</li> <li>2. Grace and Second Chances</li> <li>3. Zacchaeus and the power to begin again</li> <li>4. Every man has: Time &amp; Opportunity (Eccl. 9:11)</li> </ol>
February	Stewardship of Relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No Man is an Island</li> <li>2. ...And the greatest of these is love</li> <li>3. No greater love hath no man than this...</li> <li>4. A friend loves at all times...</li> </ol>
March	Stewardship of God's Word	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I desired his word more than my...bread.</li> <li>2. Thy word is a lamp unto my feet...</li> <li>3. The word of God is living...</li> <li>4. Sweet in my mouth and bitter...(Rev. 10:10)</li> <li>5. The Great Commission</li> </ol>
April	Stewardship of Talents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Parable of the talents</li> <li>2. Spiritual Gifts</li> <li>3. Shining for God in a secular environment</li> <li>4. Joseph &amp; Potiphar/Pharaoh</li> </ol>
May	Stewardship of Health	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am fearfully and wonderfully made</li> <li>2. The secrets to a long healthy life</li> <li>3. Daniel and the Hebrew Boys</li> <li>4. Your Body Is a Temple</li> </ol>
June	Stewardship of the Environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The earth is the Lord's (Ps. 24:1,50:10-11)</li> <li>2. Keep it and dress it (Gen. 2:15)</li> <li>3. The entire earth groans (Rom. 8:22)</li> <li>4. Destroy those who destroy earth (Rev. 11:18)</li> <li>5. The End &amp; the Environment (Rev. 16:8-9)</li> </ol>
July	Stewardship of Community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Outside the camp (Num. 15:32-36)</li> <li>2. Render to Caesar what is Caesar's</li> <li>3. Honor the King (1 Pet. 2:17)</li> <li>4. Salt of the Earth; Light of the World</li> </ol>
August	Stewardship of Knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Solomon's quest for wisdom</li> <li>2. With all thy getting get understanding</li> <li>3. Wisdom is more precious than rubies</li> <li>4. Zeal without Knowledge</li> </ol>
September	Stewardship of God's House	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Making God's Property Priority (Hag 1:4)</li> <li>2. Ezra &amp; Nehemiah Rebuilding God's House</li> <li>3. David's Desire to Build for God</li> <li>4. Solomon and the Temple</li> <li>5. A House of Prayer for All People</li> </ol>
October	Stewardship of Money	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Silver &amp; Gold are God's (Hag. 2:8)</li> <li>2. God gives the power to get wealth (Dt.8:18)</li> <li>3. Will a man rob God?</li> <li>4. God will Bless your storehouses (Dt.28:8)</li> </ol>
November	Stewardship of Family	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Except the Lord Build a House (Ps. 127)</li> <li>2. The Family Name (Prov 22:1)</li> <li>3. Train up a child</li> <li>4. I will save your children (Is. 29:25)</li> </ol>
December	Stewardship of Time	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Satan Knows he has but a short time</li> <li>2. In the fullness of time</li> <li>3. I must work while it is day...</li> <li>4. 1st Advent -&gt; 2nd Advent</li> <li>5. Jesus is coming Soon!!!</li> </ol>