

PREPARING AND DELIVERING BIBLE STUDIES AND SERMONS

Lesson #5 Outlining Talks and Sermons

So far in our series we have studied how to write and teach inductive Bible studies. Now we turn our attention to writing and delivering talks or sermons. While the same Bible study principles apply for both inductive Bible studies and sermons, writing inductive Bible studies is very different from writing sermons. The goal of an inductive Bible study is to help others discover the meaning and application of a text through questions and answers. The teacher supplies information the students can't discover from the text and the students are guided to find what is observable from the text.

The preacher, on the other hand, supplies all the information. As in preparing inductive Bible studies, the preacher has to study a text to discover its meaning and application but unlike preparing inductive Bible studies, the preacher is the only one talking. The preacher is responsible to accurately communicate the meaning and application of the text in an accurate, understandable, engaging, and practical way so that the hearers are able to understand, remember, and apply the truth. If the preacher fails to accomplish these goals the sermon has failed. So, the principles for studying a text for either a sermon or inductive Bible study remain the same, but there are great differences between writing inductive Bible studies and sermons. In this lesson we will discuss outlining, which is the first step in writing a sermon.

I. THE DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF OUTLINING

- A. **Webster defines an “outline”** as, *“a general plan showing essential features but no details.”* Each point of an outline summarizes the main idea of that particular section. If we were to compare outlining to building a house, the outline would be the framing of a house. When building a house, everything is built upon the foundation. The foundation for every sermon is the text of Scripture. Everything is built on the text of Scripture. The foundation supports the framing of the house just as the text of Scripture supports the outline. The framing is then built upon the foundation giving the house its height and appearance. When framing the walls you must rest everything on the foundation. In creating a sermon outline you must also rest your outline on the text of Scripture.

- B. **The purpose of an outline** is to organize the major points of your sermon so that the information in the sermon is organized and understandable. Just as the framing of the house gives it its shape and strength so the outline of every sermon is what gives it its strength and shape. When building a house, after the framing is completed, widows, siding, electrical wiring, plumbing, dry wall, trim, paint, light fixtures, flooring, and appliances can be installed. And all of these other things make a house more visually attractive and functional, but they do not determine its shape. The shape is determined by the framing which rests on the foundation. Nevertheless, all of the other steps of construction rely on and are built upon the frame. It is the same in sermon preparation. The foundation of the Scriptures must be studied and the outline built upon that foundation. After

the outline is constructed on the foundation of the text, everything else can be built upon it.

II. THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT OUTLINING

- A. **Some people try to teach and preach without an outline.** They may have read and studied a passage diligently, but they don't have a formal outline that they can use to construct their notes and thoughts. When they preach they just speak about things that come to mind from their study of the text. This is paramount to building random walls on the foundation of a house.

The result is that you have windows on the inside walls, rooms open to the outside, hallways leading to dead ends, and all sorts of anomalies. No one would want to buy a house like this for all its problems. It wouldn't be as functional as a house built according to a well-designed plan, nor as visually pleasing. In constructing random walls you would create all sorts of structural problems too. These structural problems might go unnoticed by the untrained eye, but to someone skilled in construction, they may pose a significant hazard to anyone who might dwell in the house.

Some, for sure, might be able to do a pretty good job at framing without plans, but they would never be able to do as well as those who had accurate, detailed blueprints. In like manner, many sermons and talks not based on a well organized outline are a mess and often run the risk of teaching something from a text which God never intended to teach. This of course brings shame upon the teacher, reproach upon God's Word, and teaches bad Bible study habits by example. It might even cause someone to teach false doctrine.

- B. **Everyone uses outlines whether they realize it or not.** Having noted the dangers of not using an outline, there is a sense in which every preacher or speaker has an outline. It may not be written out or thought through, but everyone organizes their thoughts into groups or units. We naturally speak about one thing and then move on to the next. In other words, we create an outline in our mind as we speak.

People who do not organize their thoughts before speaking are difficult if not impossible to understand. I am sure we have all encountered people who speak in sentence fragments, switch from subject to subject frequently, leave out necessary contextual detail, leave out direct objects, have poor transitions, etc. These people are hard to understand because they either do not care to be understood, and hence, make no attempt to be clear, or they do not have the ability to construct and/or communicate logical and complete units of thought.

The point I am trying to make is that people naturally outline their thoughts, some better than others, but everyone does it. I say these things to put you at ease. Outlining is nothing new to you. You have always outlined your thoughts, whether you realize it or not. When constructing sermons or talks you must make a conscious effort to outline *according to the text of Scripture*. Notice the

example paragraphs below and the outlines which follow them. Notice how the first example is clear and accurately represents what the text is saying while the second example destroys the meaning of the text though it uses the same words as the first.

- C. **Acts 20:1-3.** *After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece. And there he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.*
- D. **Chronological Outline of Acts 20:1-3.**
1. Paul sent for the **disciples**,
 - a. After the uproar had ceased, [in Ephesus]
 - b. and when
 - (1) he had exhorted them [the disciples]
 - (2) and taken his leave of them, [the disciples]
 2. he left to go to **Macedonia**. [on the other side of the Aegean Sea]
 - a. When he had gone through those districts [between Ephesus and Macedonia e.g., Troas, Phillippi, Beorea]
 - b. and had given them much exhortation, [the people in the cities between Ephesus and Macedonia]
 3. he came to **Greece**.
 - a. And there he spent three months, [in Greece]
 - b. and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews [in Greece]
 - c. as he was about to set sail for Syria, [Which is located at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea, principle city in Syria is Antioch]
 4. he decided to return through **Macedonia**. [in other words he would not sail across the length of the Mediterranean sea, but travel by land through Macedonia visiting all the cities between Greece and Syria]
- E. These three verses have quite a bit of detail but the detail is easy to understand because Luke explains things in clear, logical, progressions of thought. We understand: **first**, that Paul was in Ephesus but was forced to leave because of persecution and so before leaving he gathered his disciples there to give them some words of final exhortation; **second**, that he went to Macedonia and its districts preaching; **third**, that he moved on to Greece where he stayed for three months and was forced to leave because of persecution again; and **fourthly**, he was going to set sail for Syria but decided to return by land through Macedonia.

- F. **The data of Acts 20:1-3 shaken and stirred.** *Paul sent for the disciples and when he had exhorted them for three months he returned through Macedonia. He took his leave and he set sail for Syria. And he formed a plot against the Jews. After the uproar had ceased, he decided to give them much exhortation and he left to go to Macedonia. He decided he was about to come to Greece. When he had gone through those districts and had given them much, he spent time there, and when he came there, he left them.*
- G. **Attempt to outline the above paragraph.** Notice that all the information from the above paragraph comes from **Acts 20:1-3** with the exception of a few words. It is the same data, but the data is poorly constructed. It is randomly strung together and doesn't come close to representing the truth that Luke wanted to communicate. This is the consequence of not having a clear, accurate, logical outline. Notice how the outline below, based on the paragraph above, differs from the first example.
1. Paul sent for the disciples [we don't know from where]
 2. and [Paul] exhorted them [the disciples] for three months
 3. he returned through Macedonia. [from where, we don't know]
 4. He took his leave [from Macedonia or someone in Macedonia?]
 5. and he set sail for Syria. [on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea]
 - a. And he formed a plot against the Jews. [probably at Antioch]
 - b. After the uproar had ceased [from his plot against the Jews], he decided to give them much exhortation
 6. and he left [Antioch?] to go to Macedonia. [on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea]
 7. He decided he was about to come to Greece. [at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea from Antioch of Syria]
 - a. When he had gone through those districts [around Greece or between Syria and Greece?]
 - b. and had given them much, [much what?]
 - c. he spent time there, [where?]
 - d. and when he came there, [Greece? The districts around Greece? The cities in between Syria and Greece?]
 - e. he left them. [Who did he leave?]
- H. As you can see, the above outline does not come close to representing the truth of **Acts 20:1-3** though the same words and pieces of data are used. Yet, without a clear outline and information from the context, the facts that Luke intended to communicate are hidden and replaced with error. This is why outlining is necessary, since it helps the preacher be accurate and understandable.

III. TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF OUTLINES

As mentioned above, outlines are written to show essential features but no details. This does not mean that you cannot create a detailed outline from a text. But even if you do create a detailed outline of a specific text, each point of that outline will only list the essential features and not the background, context, interpretation, illustration, and application of that specific point. The details are still left out of even a detailed outline. Texts are outlined in two primary ways. Don't worry, this does not mean that the text is built on moving sand. Let me explain using our building illustration again.

A contractor pours a concrete foundation for a house which becomes hard and immovable. This represents the fixed inspired text of Scripture. Then he puts on the floor joists and sub flooring and is ready to build the walls. Obviously, walls will be built around the perimeter which is determined by the foundation. But knowing where the foundation is and that the walls must be supported by the foundation still allows for different framing options. It allows for different wall thickness, different wall height, placement and size of windows and doors, steepness and design of the roof, etc. The framer might even cantilever different parts of the floor beyond the footing radically changing the appearance of the house. An infinite number of framing designs might be faithfully constructed on a single foundation. The same thing is true of outlining a text. The text is fixed, but outlines built on the text may vary in wording and emphasis.

- A. **Outlines can be based on sentence diagramming (syntactical outline).** Some people like to make detailed line diagrams from the sentences in a text (often in the original languages) and then create an outline from the line diagram. This works best for smaller texts and certain kinds of literature found in the Bible like the New Testament letters to the churches (Romans through Jude). In order to line diagram you need to have a solid grasp of grammar and diagramming works best if you know the original languages. This puts diagramming out of the reach of most people, but even if you only understand English grammar you can still diagram the English text and often come up with the same or similar outline as you would by diagramming a Greek or Hebrew text.

There are some draw backs to forming outlines from a sentence diagram. Some people don't know grammar well enough to diagram or how to diagram. In addition to this, diagramming often encourages preachers to be overly technical. Sermons can become grammar and syntax lessons which bore people to death. But even if a preacher learns to avoid sounding like a grammar teacher, outlines based on sentence diagrams encourage the preacher to spend time explaining every article, preposition, conjunction, word, phrase, etc., creating a mountain of technical detail. This attention to detail can actually distract from the main idea of the text.

This might be compared to looking at the bark of a tree with a microscope. Every minute detail is observed and explained but in the process people forget they are looking at a tree. By the time you finish looking at every spec of detail in the bark of the tree trunk and move your way out into the branches, and then to the leaves you die from old age never able to finish examining the tree. Also, if you

look at the sermons of the prophets, Jesus, the Apostles and other great preachers of the past, you will discover that they didn't line diagram when they preached either. I point this out because some people believe that every sermon outline must come from a diagramed text.

- B. **Outlines can be based on key words or themes in the text.** You may be studying a text and notice that there are series of commands, prepositions, infinitives, verbs, participles, themes, blocks of thought, a key word, etc., and decide to base your outline on these. This may produce an outline very similar to an outline based on sentence diagramming, but not always. Yet in both cases, the major points of the outline are derived from the text. In one method an outline is produced from a sentence diagram and in the other method it is produced from key words or themes.

At first, creating an outline from key words and themes may seem like a less accurate way of outlining. And it is a less accurate way of creating an outline if sentence diagramming is the standard of accuracy, but it is not. Accuracy of an outline is not determined by faithfulness to adhering to a sentence diagram but *faithfulness to accurately communicate the truth which God intended the human author to teach the original audience in a given text.*

Hard core diagrammers will argue that the truth of the text is always contained in the grammar and sentence structure and that the grammar and sentence structure is what determines the truth of the text and which truths are primary and which truths are secondary. This is true as long as the context of a given sentence is not ignored. If a sentence is removed from its context, the meaning is often lost. But how can we justify not creating an outline based on every detail of a line diagram or even the major points of a line diagram in favor of randomly picking and choosing key words or themes?

If you have studied the Bible for long you know that there is so much truth packed into any given text of the Bible that no preacher or speaker can ever exhaust the riches of any given text in any single sermon. This forces the preacher to "randomly" pick and choose what he is going to say *every time he preaches*. This is true even when forming outlines from a line diagram.

Let's say a text mentions angels. Now, the preacher might just mention the word "angels" and move on, or he can give a brief definition of what an angel is and move on, or he can give a more detailed explanation of angels, both holy and fallen, and move on, or he can give an even more detailed explanation of the kinds, ranks, and the ministry of angels both to believers and unbelievers and move on. The preacher might know that his congregation has many misconceptions about angels and decides to preach a twenty-five week series on angels from a single mention of angels in a specific text. He might say something like, "In the text before us we come to the first mention of angels in this book. There are many television shows and books being written today about angels but most are not based on the Bible. For this reason, I am going to take the next twenty-five weeks to explain the doctrine and theology of angels so that every

time we encounter angels in the text, we will have an accurate understanding of who they are and how they relate to us.

In doing this a preacher would be explaining in great detail the doctrine and theology of “angels” from many texts in the Bible which inform us about “angels” mentioned in the initial text being studied. Point being, every preacher “randomly” picks and chooses what he is going to say and not say in any given sermon. Therefore every preacher departs from preaching every word, giving its exhaustive meaning, and significance – even when line diagraming.

It is for this reason that a preacher may not prefer creating his outlines from a line diagram of sentences. Maybe he wants to move quickly through a book. Maybe he wants to emphasize certain doctrines taught in the book which he knows are especially important to his congregation. Maybe he wants to preach large portions of narrative. When you do this you are not failing to preach “**every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God**” (Deut. 8:3). Every week, if the preacher preaches different truth from different texts he is working at preaching “**the whole purpose of God**” (Acts 20:27). Every preacher eventually realizes he can’t preach all of God’s Word or even all the truth contained in a single text in any one sermon and is forced to “randomly pick and choose.”

For these reasons, and since most people don’t have a solid grasp on grammar, don’t know how to diagram, and don’t know the original languages, creating outlines based on line diagraming is often not practical. But there is a less technical way of outlining smaller texts without going through the detailed mechanics of line diagraming. A person needs to know a little bit of grammar but not much. We will call this method the **indent method of outlining a text**. In previous lessons this method has been modeled but now it will be explained.

IV. INDENT METHOD OF OUTLINING A TEXT

The indent method indents the text so that the major points are shifted to the left and the sub points are shifted to the right. While we might spend a significant amount of words trying to explain how to do this, the best way is to first work through examples and learn as you go. It is helpful to understand a few basic grammar terms but don’t worry, we are going to keep it very simple.

- A. **The subject** is the person or thing that is being studied or discussed in a sentence.
- B. **The noun** is a word used to describe a person, place, or thing.
- C. **The verb** is a word that describes an action or state.
 - 1. Action verbs describe some sort of action people or things do: Preach, save, repent, walk, run, laugh, cry, etc.

2. Verbs (often referred to as linking verbs, helping verbs, auxiliary verbs, or “to be” verbs) are used to describe different states, such as a state of being: is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been, have, has, had, do, does, will, shall, should, may, might, must, can, could, etc.
- D. **A participle** is most commonly a verb with an “ing” added to the end of it which describes what the subject is doing: running, jumping, diving, preaching, etc.
- E. **A modifying word or phrase** is any word or phrase used to describe any other part of a sentence.
- F. **A conjunction** is a word used to connect sentences or parts of sentences: and, but, nor, yet, or, etc. **Okay, scary grammar lesson is over!** Now lets indent some texts.
- G. **Ezra 7:10** For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.
1. For Ezra [subject] had set his heart [main verb describing what Ezra did]
 - a. to study the law of the Lord
 - b. and to practice it,
 - c. and to teach
 - (1) His statutes
 - (2) and ordinances in Israel.
- H. **Isa. 40:8** The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.
1. The grass [subject] withers, [verb, the first example of something temporary]
 2. the flower [subject] fades, [verb, the second example of something temporary]
 3. But [conjunction showing a contrast] the word of our God [main subject of the verse is the entire phrase “word of our God”] stands forever. [phrase that modifies the subject and tells us about it]
- I. **Jer. 23:29** “Is not My word like fire?” declares the Lord, “and like a hammer which shatters a rock?”
1. “Is [verb] not My word [subject]
 - a. like fire?” declares the Lord,
 - b. “and like a hammer which shatters a rock? [declares the Lord]

- J. **Psa. 119:105** Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.
1. Your word [subject] is [verb]
 - a. a lamp to my feet
 - b. And a light to my path.
- K. **II Tim. 3:16** All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;
1. All Scripture [subject] is [verb]
 - a. inspired by God
 - b. and profitable
 - (1) for teaching,
 - (2) for reproof,
 - (3) for correction,
 - (4) for training in righteousness;
- L. **Heb. 4:12** For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
1. For the word of God [subject] is [verb]
 - a. living
 - b. and active
 - c. and sharper than any two-edged sword,
 - d. and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow,
 - e. and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

V. **HOMEWORK**

For your homework try to indent the following verses as in the examples given above. Start by first circling the main subject and putting a box around the main verb.

- A. Gen. 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
- B. Jer. 17:9 “The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”

