

Preparing Your First Sermon

Congratulations! You've been ordained, you've served your church in several capacities, you've ministered to others through different types of ministries, and now you have your first opportunity to deliver a sermon before a congregation. Exciting, isn't it? But how do you do it? Where do you start? How can you insure you're ready to deliver a dynamic and meaningful message without losing track halfway through? These are all questions you're probably asking yourself right now, and many others as well.

This short course of instruction should provide you with everything you need to know to help prepare you for this first exciting sermon. Follow these guidelines, and you should be able to present your message clearly, retain your train of thought throughout the presentation, and give a meaningful conclusion at the end of your sermon.

First Step: Initial Preparation

Your initial preparation should start a full week before you are to deliver your first sermon. As you become expert at preaching, this period of time will lessen, but for your first one, start your initial preparation one week in advance.

What's initial preparation? By initial preparation I mean choosing the topic you're going to speak on, doing your initial research, and making your first notes.

You should choose for the topic for your first sermon a particular passage of the bible that you're already very familiar with. Perhaps you have a favorite bible story, psalm, or passage. Perhaps you've already discussed a particular issue on several occasions, or taught it in Sunday School, or simply studied it a great deal already. This should be the topic of your first sermon. Go back and read this passage again, using a good reference bible or concordance or commentary for additional references. Jot down a few notes about other related passages and verses, and study those as well. Write down the point you wish to make with your sermon and the conclusion you're planning to draw at the end of your sermon. After you've done all this, read the original passage one more time and review all of your notes and conclusion.

Now, put all that on the shelf and walk away. You have planted the seed of your sermon in your mind – now it's time to give the wonderful creative instrument God gave you, your mind, time to nurture that seed and bring it into fruition. As you go about your various duties over the next couple of days, your sermon will start to form itself in your mind. You'll see things in life that you can use to illustrate the verses you'll be teaching on. You'll remember other things from your past that will be useful. You'll start forming a beginning, a middle, and an end to your sermon – while you're working, driving your car, walking down the street, and saying your daily prayers. This is why it's so important that you give yourself a week head start, to allow this natural process to occur.

Second Step: Refining Your Sermon

Okay, you've been tossing your sermon around in your head for a couple of days, and by now you've got a pretty good idea of what you're going to say. Now it's time to refine your sermon a bit. Go back to those original notes you made

and review them. Re-read the main passage and related verses. You may decide some of your original notes aren't what you really need, and discard them. You may have additional notes, and you should jot those down. You've probably developed an introduction to your sermon, and you should jot a few quick notes on that as well. Okay, now let's get this all organized.

First, get yourself some good index cards. Not those little tiny ones, get the big ones. You'll use these for your notes while you're delivering your sermon.

Start with the introduction to your sermon. In nice big letters, write – **Intro:**

followed by the basic idea you have for your intro. Under that list the verses you'll be referring to, and the key points of any stories you'll be using to illustrate your point. There's no need to write everything out word by word, just hit on the key points. From there, go on and do the same with the rest of your sermon. Your sermon should basically be divided up into three or four sections, for instance, Intro, Middle, End, Conclusion or Summation. You should know what you want to say during each of these areas of your sermon. Once you've got your index cards all written out, go back and do a final check over everything, and finally number each card with a small but clearly legible number in the upper right or left hand of the card. Now, put all that back on the shelf and walk away again. You've just done a lot of work – get some rest, and come back the next day for the next step.

Third Step: Practice Your Sermon

Now it's time to practice actually delivering your sermon. First, just do this while you're alone. Do one run through it to make sure you are completely familiar with what you're going to say. Then do it again, exactly how you plan to deliver it before the congregation, and this time use a clock or other timer to time yourself on how long it takes. You may find you've added too much material, and your sermon is too long. Or, conversely, you may find your sermon isn't long enough. Now is the time to make the adjustments necessary to insure your sermon is the proper length for your speaking engagement.

The next step is to practice your sermon in front of a mirror, where you can study your own delivery. Notice how you stand when you're speaking. Notice any gestures you use as you deliver your message. Make any adjustments you need to insure you are neither too "wooden" in your delivery, nor too "busy". Listen to your own voice, as well. Experiment with varying degrees of volume and tonality. These are all important elements to keeping your audience interested and attentive.

Let me take a moment to address the issue of which bible you'll use while delivering your sermon, since you'll probably be reading at least a few verses or passages directly from your bible. Be sure you're completely comfortable with the version you are using. If you find yourself stumbling over some words because they have an awkward spelling or difficult language, perhaps you should use one which is more up to date in things like spelling and language. If you find you're speeding through the passages, you may be using one that is written too simply to demand any concentration from you. You should find the version that is best for you for use while reading before an audience. It should strike just the

right balance of being easy for you to read, while also requiring enough concentration to add drama and impact to your reading. Finally, once you've worked on all this, it's time to practice delivering your sermon before a small audience. This is very important. You should choose for this practice audience your family members and a few friends. There's an important psychological reason for this. You'll find that you'll be more nervous and self-aware before those to whom you are very close, than you'll be before a much larger group of people to whom you're not so close. So practice delivering your sermon before this group of close associates at least once. They'll probably be more than happy to offer comments and suggestions afterwards. Some of these you may wish to take heed to, and some you may wish to ignore. If you think a criticism is constructive and useful, then use it. If the criticism is skeptical or mean, ignore it. After all, you've already put a lot of time and effort into this, your first sermon, and by now you know what you want to say. Don't be distracted by doubters at this stage of your preparation.

Delivering Your Sermon

The big day has come! You've worked hard, you've studied, you've practiced, you've prayed, you're as ready as you're ever going to be, but you're still nervous. That's okay! It's natural to be nervous! But remember, this is what you have been called to do! This is what you have been preparing yourself for from the moment the Holy Spirit anointed you and called you into Our Lord's ministry! All that's left is to make sure you're organized. Have you got your notes? Have you got your bible? You didn't walk out of the house without your shoes or anything like that, did you? Okay! Now, before you actually walk out on that platform to deliver this sermon on which you've worked so hard, take a few moments for earnest prayer to Our Lord. Remember, He is what this is all about, not you. Thank Him for bringing you this far, and trust in Him for everything. Okay Brother! Okay Sister! Now get out there and Preach It!

I hope this brief course of instruction is useful to you as you prepare your first sermon. Remember, practice makes perfect, and the more often you deliver sermons, the more comfortable you'll become with the process. I'd like to add at this point that each sermon you prepare represents to you a great resource. You should carefully file and save all of your notes for each sermon you prepare. There may come a time when you are called on to deliver a sermon at the very last minute. You won't have a week to prepare, or a day – you may not even have an hour! Not to worry. Just reach into that filing cabinet, grab a sermon on a topic you feel like preaching on, and you're set! After all, you've already done the work, prepared the notes, and even delivered it before a congregation. You'll find that going back to an old sermon can be like running into an old friend, and won't represent any cause for worry at all. God bless you.