

The Positive Side of Negative Preaching

Much of the preaching we hear these days is man-serving rather than God-pleasing. It is designed to elicit an emotional sigh, impart a little common sense, or provide a chuckle. Don't get me wrong—many good sermons make an emotional connection, or provide practical advice, or contain a little humor. Some even manage to do all three.

But, like eating veggies before dessert, or finishing algebra homework before Googling kitten videos, it is important to balance such fluffy fare with “negative” preaching as well.

Actually, I wouldn't label all “positive” preaching fluffy. One of my favorite sermon outlines is simply to list all the amazing promises that God makes to His children. There's nothing in that outline that could remotely be called “negative.” It is extremely uplifting. I love to preach on Heaven, and on grace. But these sermons are not at all fluffy!

Fluffy is what I call the stuff I find on Joel Osteen's website, for example. You can listen (for a small donation) to sermon #681 entitled “Think

Big!” which is summarized: “when we pray and release our faith, our asking opens the door for His great work in our lives.” Or sermon #679 “Sooner Than Expected,” which is summarized: “No matter what your circumstances may look like, God has a sudden breakthrough with your name on it. Don't stop believing!” Or #678 “Acceleration,” which is summarized, “Do you have situations in your life where ... it looks like it's going to take years to happen, years to get out of debt, to overcome an illness, or build a better relationship or business? God...can speed things up. God wants to take you further and faster.”

This drivel is not the gospel; it is self-affirmation. It appeals to the flesh, not the spirit. I certainly intend to preach positive sermons, but I hope I am never guilty of preaching such empty, saccharine-laced, Biblically-devoid trash. Such sermons are about as nutritious as Styrofoam peanuts.

At the same time, I'm not sure that I'd call a challenging sermon “negative” either. I might call it “pointed and direct” preaching, or maybe just “true” preaching. Whatever you call it, we need to give it a place in the New Testament church, and appreciate the God-intended benefits it brings to our lives.

It Challenges Doctrinal Error

False teaching will cause people to be lost. Not just misled, not just incorrect, but lost! “If a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Luke 15:14). “There will also be false

teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1). “You tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond servants astray” (Rev. 2:20).

Sure, sermons that challenge doctrinal error don’t necessarily cause a person to leave the auditorium with a bounce in his step. But they provide something very necessary—instruction in the truth, and inoculation against deception. Sermons addressing specific false teachings like once saved always saved, the sinner’s prayer, the worship of Mary, and the faux-Jesus of the JW’s, sharpen the sword of the Spirit.

This is definitely something that the Apostles emphasized in their preaching. Paul warned in 2 Tim. 4:3-4:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

It Addresses Sinful Behavior

Imagine this scene: a hulking, burly man dressed in a T-shirt suddenly tackles a petite, well-dressed woman on the street and pins her to the ground. She is frightened, and angry. But then she notices the truck that just sped past with a ladder swinging out of the side at head-height. Now she begins to thank the man for his bravery.

The Bible says, “The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9). Sermons that address sin are designed to save our souls. They may require getting knocked down, but it’s worth it to go to Heaven. No one wants to be told that fornication is wrong, that adultery is wrong, that stealing is wrong, that lying is wrong (Heb. 13:4, 1 Cor. 6:9, Eph. 4:25-28, etc.). But we must admit that the Bible contains as many “Thou Shalt Nots” as it does “Thou Shalts.”

Sometimes these sermons can become uncomfortably personal. That doesn’t change the needfulness or worth of the teaching. It always catches me off guard when a person who last week compliments a sermon for doing a great job of pulling no punches and stepping on toes, suddenly gets all bent out of shape and ornery because this week’s sermon stepped on his toes. “Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (Gal. 4:16). “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy” (Prov. 27:6). “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27).

I need sermons to challenge the worst aspects of my character. I need someone to hold the mirror of the gospel in front of my face. Only then can I mature in Christ. Many will not believe me, but I can assure you that the preacher steps on his own toes hardest and most often of all.

It Stirs Us Up For Action

Peter said,

I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me (2 Peter 1:13-14).

Some of the best sermons I've ever heard taught me little that I didn't already know, but exhorted me to accomplish something that I have been putting off. This too, can seem negative at the time—to be prodded for not being busier. But faithfulness and diligence result.

Conclusion

Of course, sound preaching that identifies error and confronts sin and demands work does not always produce numerical growth; at least not as quickly as we might like. But fluffy preaching produces fluffy Christianettes, whose doctrine is at the mercy of the winds, and whose conviction is flaccid. Fluffy preaching builds on the foundation of Christ with “wood, hay, and straw” and a day of fire will “test the quality of each man's work” (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

I wanted to see for myself the approach Jesus took most often in His preaching. So I read the entire gospel of Luke and analyzed all His teaching. Jesus, by our modern standards, was an overwhelmingly negative preacher. In one day he went from being praised (Luke 4:22) to being violently attacked (4:28). Yet, we would agree He was perfect love. Negative preaching produces positive results! —John Guzzetta