

# 10 Rules for Teaching the Text of the Bible

*Appalachian Bible College*

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I don't have a sermon for you this morning. This will not be a sermon. In fact, it should be most appropriately called a lecture: 10 Rules for Teaching the Bible. In fact, what I would submit to you is this is the fundamentals. Everything that I'm going to tell you is simple, in fact, it's insultingly simple. In fact, I'm going to suggest to you that as you see how simple I've presented it, you're going to say, "I can't even believe he's talking about that." Coach, it's almost like talking about blocking and tackling to a football team or dribbling to basketball players and the students are insulted that you're actually talking to them about passing. I'm afraid that sometimes we get so concerned about doing things in a grand way that we miss the rules, the fundamentals, the essentials, the basics.

So, our memory verse or the devotional verse that we looked at this morning really sets the conditions for us: distinctively, sense, understand. Wait a minute, what's going on here? Ezra and the Levites are making sure that as the word of God is being read to the people of God that they understand what they're reading, the text. Not a biblical idea, the actual text and this is what I'm afraid of: I'm concerned – I've been involved in fundamental churches for 25 years – I'm concerned that nearly every single fundamental church if you ever asked them the question: do you teach from the Bible? They would all say, "Yes, of course. In fact, why are you even asking me such a ridiculous question? We opened the Bible, we read a verse. Of course, we teach the Bible. Of course, we do." This is kind of what I think is going on: I think sermons are being prepared, lessons are being prepared and then we occasionally reference a verse. That is remarkably different from teaching the text.

Now, I'm well aware that there are a number of ladies in this auditorium and ladies, what I want to suggest to you is that once you graduate and even now, you have an incredible teaching ministry in the body of Christ. An incredible teaching ministry. In fact, when pastors find out that you have a degree from ABC, there is going to be an expectation that you teach in their churches. In fact, they will be surprised if you're not volunteering to teach children and women and young adults the word of God in churches. And those pastors will be exceptionally remiss in not taking advantage of you as an asset so while we may be thinking what you're talking to us about this morning is preaching, I'm not talking about preaching this morning. I'm talking about the collective teaching of the word of God in the body of Christ by all those who have the honor and privilege of

opening a Bible and communicating that to 4 year olds, 14 year olds, 44 year olds, 64 year olds. I'm afraid that what's happening too much in the church is we decide what we want to talk about and then we go and find a Bible text that supports what we want to talk about and we're upside-down. That's what I want to communicate. I hope I can do that this morning.

So, rule #1: always choose a text over a topic. Always choose a text over a topic. If what you're doing is delivering a teaching of the word of God: you orchestrate a Bible study, you are the weekly teacher, you are the preacher, you are the youth pastor, you are the missionary, you have a responsibility to communicate the word of God to a group of individuals without regard to their age or gender, I would submit to you that on a routine regular basis, your job is always to select a text versus a topic. So, you're a youth pastor, you're a young lady teaching a Bible study and you want to talk to the ladies about temptation. You're very tempted to go, my topic is temptation, let me do a word search for all the number of times "tempted" is found and then you'll piece together a message of various verses and think that you delivered something spectacular. Stop. Instead, choose a text where a temptation is, then start at the very beginning and work through it. This is what I'm going to suggest to you.

In Matthew 4, I would begin with verse 1 and I would make sure that I address each and every verse in a systematic way and my goal is to show them how Christ overcame temptation in this text. I'm going to use that word throughout the entire lecture: text, the text, the text, the text. We've got to be text driven preachers and teachers. Text driven. You see, what often happens is we want to build the authority into ourselves as the teacher or the preacher. That's not what we want to do. We want the student to see that the authority is the text. The text derives how I think. The text effects my motive operation. The text determines how I vote. The text drives the sermon, not me. When you do that, the pressure comes off of you and onto God's word. When you're young, you're 25, 26, and you're preaching to adults and you're preaching to many men that are older than you and ladies that are older than you and you think to yourself, "What in the world do I have to offer to these people?" The answer is: you may not have much life experience, take them to the text. It's God's word. It has the authority. Take the authority off of yourself and put it on the word of God.

2. Very simple, overwhelmingly simple. I mean, almost ridiculously simple but if you want to listen closely especially to a pastor, you can determine whether they are text driven or they are topic driven by the number of times they communicate to their people words "look at your Bible, notice in your Bible, underline this phrase, look at the way the author is constructing that." What they're doing as preachers and teachers is they are teaching their people to look at their own Bibles and become students of the word of God. They're showing their people where did the pastor come up with this idea at? Did he pull it out of thin air? Was he reading a commentary? Did he listen to a great lecture? Is he pulling a sermon from someone famous? No, he derived his thesis from the text. So, you show it to them. "You look at this. Underline that in your Bible. Take your Bible out right now and notice how we transition from verse 11 to verse 12. See how the author is

using the conjunction?” Those are words that alert your people that the text is important. Very simple.

Your goal, at least in my opinion, this is purely my thought: your goal is to create a culture where people feel uncomfortable if they don't have their Bible. Now, I know, I am well aware that the seeker sensitive movement would say, “Are you kidding?” But you know what? Quite frankly, I don't give a rip what the seeker sensitive movement thinks. I'm trying to build disciples of Christ. “What if a visitor comes in?” Give him a Bible. Show them the priority of the word of God. You want your Bible study, your sermon, your church, your culture, your Awana group, whatever it is, your youth group, to be different. You want them to notice that everyone has a Bible, that they all have their Bibles open, that they're looking at their Bibles. Ladies, if you're teaching, have the students read it. Have them read the word of God. Make them follow along. Take their fingers, “Take your finger right now and put it on verse 5.” Those are words that I use when I'm speaking in my own chapel so that my students are connecting with what's going on.

3. Find the correct starting points. “What do you mean, find the correct starting point? Why are we even talking about this? Find the correct starting points?” I'm afraid I've listened to far too many messages – men, I'm talking to future pastors, a handful in this room perhaps – they're starting at the wrong place with the text. They don't know where to start. They seem to think that the word of God can be extracted anywhere. It's almost as though: open the Bible and put your finger down and that's a good starting point. In our ministry, our starting point on nearly all sermons is the first verse in the first chapter of a book and then we just systematically preach through that book of the Bible. “You mean you can do that in an enthusiastic way?” Yes. “You mean you can do that in a way that captures the hearts and minds of people? That you don't deliver a topical message week after week?” Absolutely not. We're trying to build a culture in which the word of God is seriously studied, that it drives our thinking, it impacts our thinking, it affects how we are.

Let me show you what I mean, a real simple example: many sermons start with the great verse, “But as many as received, to them he gave power over sin.” Wonderful verse. I've heard preachers say that this means that you will receive Jesus in your heart. Do you know where that comes from? A failure to properly study the text. This is not talking about Jesus coming in your heart. This is comparing and contrasting the Jews who received him as the Messiah and the Jews who did not receive him as the Messiah. Look at the previous verse: “He came unto his own and his own received him not.” Contrast, but... “See, this is ridiculous that you're even talking to us about it.” I'm afraid it's not. I'm afraid that there are far too many sermons that start as though the reader understands the context. If I was preaching this verse in my church, I'd start with verse 1 and I'd read all 11 verses before we ever got to here. “You're going to read that much Scripture?” I want to read and read and read Scripture. Remember, chapter divisions, verse numbers, punctuation marks are not inspired. Don't use them as the means of division. Study the text. I believe many times the chapter division is just not great, that that previous verse

from the prior chapter is absolutely essential to understand the first verse in the next chapter. But somehow we think that that derives how we should divide them.

4. Determine the main points of the text and drive it home. Let's be clear: if at the end of your sermon, your Bible study, your whatever it is, if your audience can't tell you what the main point is, you failed. You, the teacher, failed. But here's what I see: men, future preachers, there are a lot that don't even know what their own main point is so there's no way in the world you can drive the main point home if you don't know what it is. If you teach in this college – how many papers have you seen where the student doesn't even have a thesis? I guess you're not going to offer up any because it would be embarrassing unless you guys all get it right.

It's critical that you figure out what is the main point. It's critical. If you don't know what the main point is, how is the person listening to you going to know what the main point is? For example, in our text of the temptation: the main point of the temptation in Matthew 4 is that Christ overcame the devil's temptations by the truth of the word of God. So, I'm going to keep coming back to that point, coming back to that point, coming back to that point, coming back to that point over and over again if I am delivering this lesson to ladies who are struggling with temptation or if I'm the youth pastor and I've got students in front of me or I'm a pastor of a church. "How in the world do I overcome temptation, Pastor?" By the strength and power and truth of the word of God. Let's look at Christ's example for an example.

5. Halfway there. Study the historical context. You have to know the historical context. You have to know: who is this written to, who wrote it. Then you must derive what was the author's main point: why did Paul write this, what was John's intent, why did Joshua record this, what was Moses communicating. You must determine that before you get to anything for your people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many independent fundamental Baptist preachers decide on Monday what they want to preach on and then they spend the entire week finding illustrations and sermons to support what they want to preach on. That is completely backwards. Completely backwards. This Bible that we hold in our hands was written within an historical context and you cannot understand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if you do not the context that it was written in.

And please make sure you get the words right. Please make sure you define them right. Let me show you an example of what I mean: here's Philemon 6. I preached through Philemon a couple of Wednesdays ago so it gave me the opportunity to remember this: if I look at the word "communication" in this text, I immediately in my modern understanding of the word "communication" think about words going back and forth so I think, "Look at this great verse, 'That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you.' Wow! What a great soul-winning verse. Let me use this to talk about sharing the gospel." Sharing the gospel is good, everyone agree? But wait a minute: am I concerned about communicating a truth or am I concerned about figuring out what did Paul mean when he was writing this? My first priority is to figure out what Paul meant and if I have this word "communication" because people have the King James Bible in front of them, then I must show them that

your modern day understanding of “communication” is not what Paul had in mind here and that words change in their understanding and there are alternative words that we could use today to get a better understanding of what that Greek word means. “You mean you’re going to use the word ‘Greek?’” Yes. Yes. We’re going to teach our people that this Bible was written in Hebrew, that it was written in Aramaic, that it was written in Greek and that we must use that as our authority to gain a greater appreciation of what the author meant.

6. Interrogate. Interrogate the text. Interrogate the text. “What do you mean, Pastor Sean?” Put yourself in the place of the student. You’re the preacher, you’re the teacher, set yourself in the pew and ask yourself, “What are all the questions I would ask if I was in that sermon? What would I want to know?” Let me show you what I mean. Let me give you an illustration, how about this one? “If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask and he shall give him life for the sin not unto death.” There is a sin unto death. I do not say that he should pray for it. Now, I do not recommend this to be your first sermon in the church on Sunday morning. This is an exceptionally difficult task, this verse is difficult. Let me show you some of the questions that I derive out of this: what is the sin unto death? Is this death physical and premature or this is spiritual death? Is this sin in particular or does it case-by-case basis vary from person to person? Will the Greek help me out? Can I study the Greek? Or how about: this was written by John, is there anything else that John wrote that would help me understand this? Or, does the word of God in other passages expand on this and would help me?

I’m afraid that far too many times we look at difficult things and we gloss over it. Let me explain to you what happens: you as a teacher, lose credibility. You as a preacher, lose credibility. You’re afraid that because I can’t come up with an answer, I don’t deal with it. I would submit to you that in the post-modern world that we’re living in, you need to address the question and don’t be afraid to say, “I’m not sure what the answer is.” Young future preachers, your people do not expect that you have the answer to every single question. They know that you’re young but be a man or woman of integrity. Address the issue and say, “There are two solutions, there are two possibilities here: I’m not sure. This man believes this, this one believes this, I’m not sure.” Challenge your people to study it for themselves. Let’s go on.

7. We already touched on this briefly: read. Read the Bible out loud. We are so struggling on this. Dr. Anderson, I will not mention any names but I believe you’ll know exactly who I’m talking about. I came into fundamentalism as a private in the United States Army in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I did not attend a Baptist church as a kid. I had never been so involved in fundamentalism as I was there in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I can remember sermons delivered by one of the most famous preachers in the circle in which we’d go to an Old Testament passage, we would read four words and this is what he’d say, “Close your Bibles and look right at me.” Then the rest of the sermon would be nothing but stories and illustrations about his life and thoughts and things like that. I cannot tell you how anti-biblical that is. You cannot be anymore wrong than when you’re doing that. That would be like me writing a love letter to my wife from Desert Storm, Iraq and in other places that I was deployed, she opens up to the middle of the letter,

reads four words and closes it up. Wait a minute. Hold on. I started off with Dear Sweetheart. That's a salutation. I developed an introduction. I created a body. I closed. It's a letter. I expect you to read the entire thing.

You are making a critical mistake as a teacher of the word of God if you think it's boring to read sections of the word of God to your students. You need to as a youth pastor, a teacher, get your people used to reading and hearing entire sections of the word of God. If I'm preaching on Ephesians 2:14, 2:16, 2:17 this coming Sunday, I'll start reading from verse 1 of chapter 2. "What are you doing?" You're letting them hear the word of God. Letting them hear the word of God. You want them to get used to hearing the word of God.

Look what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:27, "I, Paul, charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto the holy brethren." "What do you mean?" Paul's expectation was that when this letter arrived at the church at Thessalonica that someone will read the entire letter to them from start to finish. That's your job. Or how about this one: do we really believe that faith comes by hearing? You go into a typical church and listen to how little the word of God is read and you would think nobody believes that the word of God has the power to create faith in the hearts and minds of unregenerate people. But it does.

8. I sure hope I'm not getting this wrong but I would just tell you: don't waste your money on these junk books. Don't waste your money. You listen to so-and-so on the radio and he had a great illustration so now you feel like it's your job to go and find an illustration. Dr. Anderson, I'm afraid that preachers spend more time looking for illustrations than reading the word of God. So, here's my thought: there are 31,000 verses in the word of God – use them. Use them. Illustrated the word of God with the word of God. Don't spend any time looking for an illustration. Don't waste a minute of time looking for an illustration. If the Lord lays on your heart an illustration during the preaching of the word, use it. Trust in the Holy Spirit but you do not need to build into your sermons, "I'm going to tell this story." Let the Lord do that through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Here's an analogy I've used with missionaries before. Let me see if I can unpack it very quickly here: preachers, teachers, I want you to think of your primary preaching texts, teaching texts, as the diving board. Matthew 4, for example. Think about my circles as rings in a pool. You can have a lot of fun diving off and into the pool and you find the ring and then you go back to the diving board and then you jump in again. Here's what I want to teach you: start with your main text as the diving board. When you decide it's necessary to illustrate a point, explain to your people why we're leaving Matthew 4 and we're going to run to, for example, Psalm 119:11, "Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee." Show them that what Christ was doing was hiding God's word in his heart and that's exactly what the Psalmist said and then go back to Matthew 4. Then later on, you want to explain why was it necessary for Jesus to be tempted like he was so you go to Ephesians 4 and you explain that he was "tempted in all points" and you use that and then you go back to the diving board and you go back to your text. Then you want to look at Psalm 91 where Satan misquotes the word of God, he twists the word of

God, so you explain, “See, this is the actual text. See how he misquoted it,” and then take them back to Matthew 4. In each case, you’re explaining to your student why we’re leaving the main text, the reason we’re going there, we extract what we need, we go back to the diving board, we continue teaching, we go to that text, we get what we want, we go back to it. Oftentimes, sermons go something like this: here, here, here, here and your people have no idea why you’re going all over the place in the word of God. So they don’t get anything out of their own personal devotions or their Bible study time because you’re not teaching them how you actually teach the Bible.

9. Let the life application come naturally out of the text. Naturally. Don’t worry about life application. “How does this apply? Let me figure out…” Let the Holy Spirit do what the Holy Spirit did. Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest preachers ever to preach, is known to have started on the floor sitting there and when he would go up to the pulpit he would say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit.” So, he’d be here and when it was time, “I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit.” What he was communicating is that the Holy Spirit has the power to lead you and guide you during the study. That the Holy Spirit knows your students. That the Holy Spirit knows your youth group. That the Holy Spirit knows your people. And the Holy Spirit is capable if we will lean on him, depend on him, and be Spirit filled to bring to your attention words and illustrations to drive application at that critical moment. So, learn to rely on the Holy Spirit. You will be thrilled when the Spirit speaks through you. You’ve had it happen and I’ve had it: raise your hand if you can think of a time when you were teaching the word of God and you said, “I had no intention of saying that. It just came to my mind.” Raise your hand. Raise your hand. It’s amazing how the Lord does that. What that does for you is it confirms in your heart that there is a Holy Spirit and what I’m doing is God’s will.

10. I’m running out of time. Teach the text with a Christ-centered meta-narrative. I have one minute to unpack this. If you work with students in any way, shape or form right now as your ministry, would you please raise your hand if you work with students, children? There are a lot. I would encourage you to do this, a simple fun time: buy yourself 10-15 5x8 cards. On those 5x8 cards write the name of many Old Testament characters: Abraham, Moses, David, Nehemiah, Isaac. Just write them. Take those characters, shuffle them all up, throw them down on a table and say, “It’s your job to arrange them in chronological order and tell me the big picture,” and see how your students do. What you’ll find out is that today we are utterly illiterate in understanding the big picture. There is a glorious story of redemption beginning with the first promise in the Garden of Eden with Genesis 3:15, in which God promises Eve that a child will be delivered to overcome this incredible serpent.

There is a scarlet thread drawn through the entire word of God. It is our job as teachers and preachers to make our people aware of this giant picture of redemption, that God has been redeeming his people in a glorious way for his own glory, from the very beginning and we need to be able to tell that story. So, any time you as a preacher, drop in the middle of the story, do your very best – look at me, please – do your very best to set the

context. Lead them through it: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses. Lead them through it. Show them where in the story you're telling fits into the meta-narrative. Challenge yourself to memorize the story of the Bible. The story of the Bible. Be able to move yourself through the errors. Be able to move yourself from creation, to the patriarchs, to Exodus, to the conquest, to 400 years of judges, to the kingdom era, to a divided kingdom, to a northern kingdom, to a southern kingdom, to a reunited kingdom, to 70 years in captivity before that, to 400 years of silence, to the birth of Christ, to the inception of the church, to the mission to the Gentiles. Make sure you know the big story.

Let's pray.

*Father in heaven, I pray that I was able to encourage and challenge the teachers of the word of God in this room. When the hands went up, dear God, and I saw the number of people that are teaching others here, the impact of becoming text driven and text focused could be incredible. It could become incredible. Show these young people and all of us in this room how Christ is all over the pages of the Old Testament, how he said on that road to Emmaus, "that all the things concerning me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the psalms, it's about me." Let us become Christ-centered in our preaching and teaching of the meta-narrative in Jesus' name. Amen.*