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Transforming Sermon Communication: A Practical Guide to Making Changes that Make a Difference

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Lori Carrell

Calvin Symposium on Worship 2014

A7: Transforming Sermon Communication:

A Practical Guide to Making Changes That Make a Difference

Preaching That Matters

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS &
LISTENING ENHANCEMENT RESOURCES FOR PARISHIONERS

Selected Reflective Practice Challenges

These selected Reflective Practice Challenges (RPCs) provide opportunities for self-analysis, spiritual introspection, conversation with a trusted other, or implementation of research-based preaching recommendations. You'll find even more RPCs in the book!

For maximum benefit, complete the reading that precedes each RPC before you begin the activity and finish the RPC before continuing your reading of *Preaching That Matters*.

- Brainstorming Barriers
- Sermon Preparation Log
- Spiritual Transformation and Preaching: Pushing Your Buttons
- Transformative Sermon Response Goals
- Pick a Pathway
- Supportive Material Development

Remember, these activities have been used by hundreds of other pastors, and each RPC has been carefully selected for its potential contribution to the process of transforming sermon communication.

Listening Enhancement Parishioner Resources

Most adults have never had instruction in listening. Consider adding a new Listener Resources section to the church website or library. You might begin to raise listener awareness by distributing these two reproducible resources:

- Preaching Partners: How to Be a More Powerful Listener
- How to Talk with Your Pastor about Preaching-Related Concerns

Because these handouts cite *Preaching That Matters* as the source of the information, listeners will not perceive that these ideas are a directive from you; instead, your sharing of these materials can warmly invite further interaction about sermon communication. If your congregation is like most, this topic has previously been taboo.

See the "Listening to Your Listeners" chapter in *Preaching That Matters* for more practical listening enhancement ideas.



Brainstorming Barriers

Barriers hinder or block progress. Think Great Wall of China, crime-scene caution tape, or booms blocking oil from the beach. The left-field “Green Monster” fence that keeps well-hit balls confined to Fenway Park comes to mind. For heroin addicts, the vast barrier between a new life and their current destructive habit is a horrific period of painful withdrawal. A Google search for *barrier* leads to glorious underwater images of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, the only living structure on earth large enough to be seen from space. That find fascinates me most as I think about barriers. All estimates suggest this massive underwater barrier has been building in size for centuries, yet there it lies hidden beneath the surface.

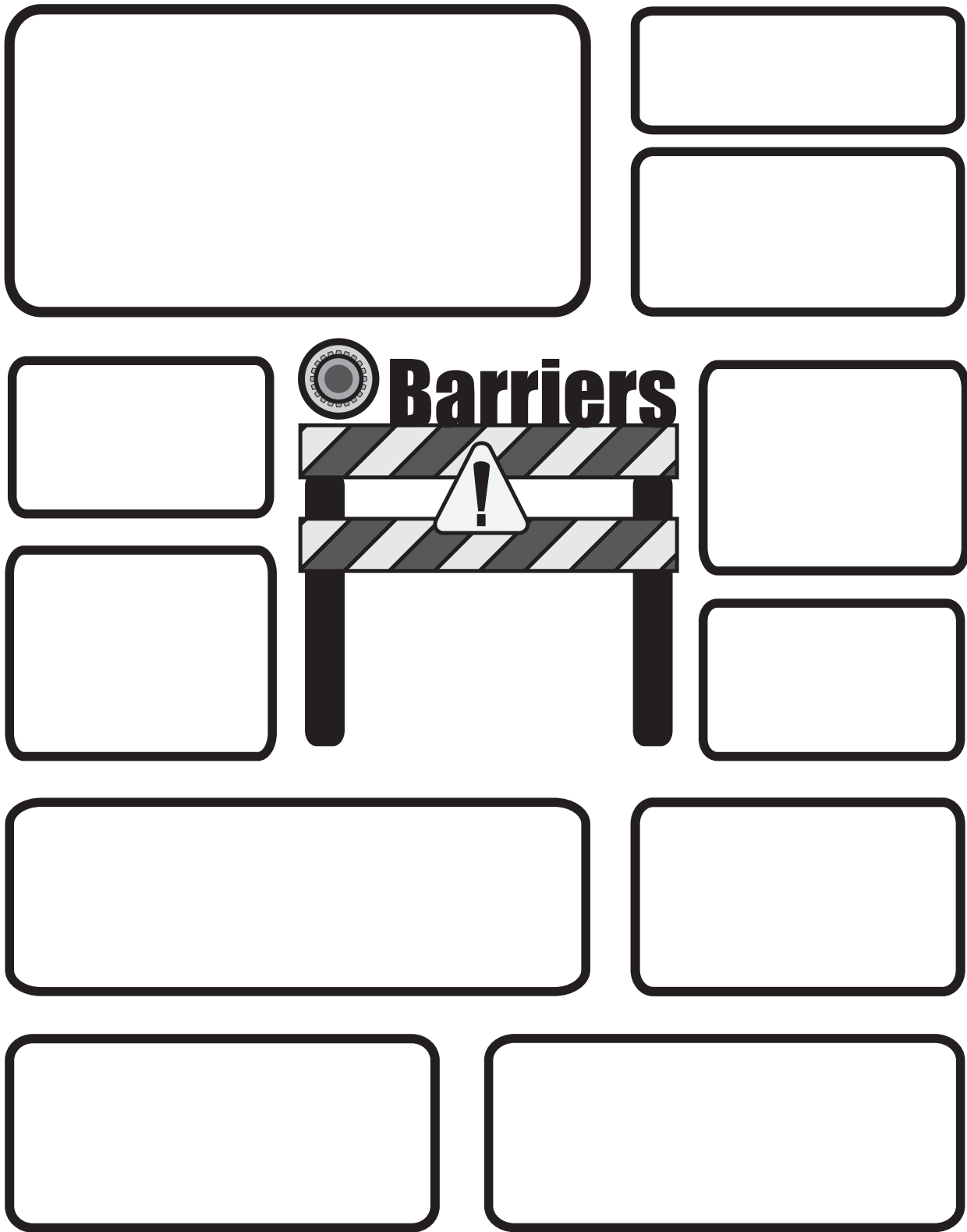
The spoken word is a powerful shaper of thought and action, and the gospel is as powerful a message as will ever exist. Each opportunity to speak the Word is ripe with the potential to create radical, lasting change. Yet, some barriers—even those you cannot see—may hinder progress toward such transformative results.

Use the diagram on the following page to brainstorm all of the barriers pastors may experience as they seek to preach sermons that lead to spiritual transformation for individuals, congregations, communities, and culture. If you choose to submit your brainstormed responses on the website, you’ll be able to see the barriers to transformative preaching generated by other readers.

Now, select one of these barriers that is currently affecting your preaching. Create a detailed word picture or sketch of the barrier. This reflective challenge is designed to help you explore how this barrier developed and how it may be hindering your progress toward higher impact preaching. A pastor from the Southwest is allowing me to share his barrier metaphor as an example to spark your thinking:

If I’m honest, I have to say that it’s a group of my longtime parishioners who are the barrier to the kinds of transformation I desire for God to do through my preaching. On the other side of an enormous barbed-wire fence I can see the congregation I imagine—loving, warm, full of mercy—even joyful. . . . But on this side of the fence I see those resistant church members standing guard . . . grimacing. They have bayonets and shields—and they are committed to standing between my preaching—and any significant change. As I’m imagining this scene, they are very tall and strong compared to me—my words about the changes our congregation needs to make come out of my mouth and bounce off their shields. At this point, I really see their resistance as a barrier that cannot be overcome.

DIAGRAM: BARRIERS





Sermon Preparation Log

Increasing the transformative quality of your sermon communication through reflective practice will require that your awareness of precisely what it is that you do as you prepare to preach intensifies. This documentation of preparation processes is a necessary next step. The prep log will be needed throughout the rest of this book, so be sure to construct a detailed record. As you prepare to preach your next sermon, please log the type of preparation activity and the time spent engaged in that activity in the order you do those tasks.

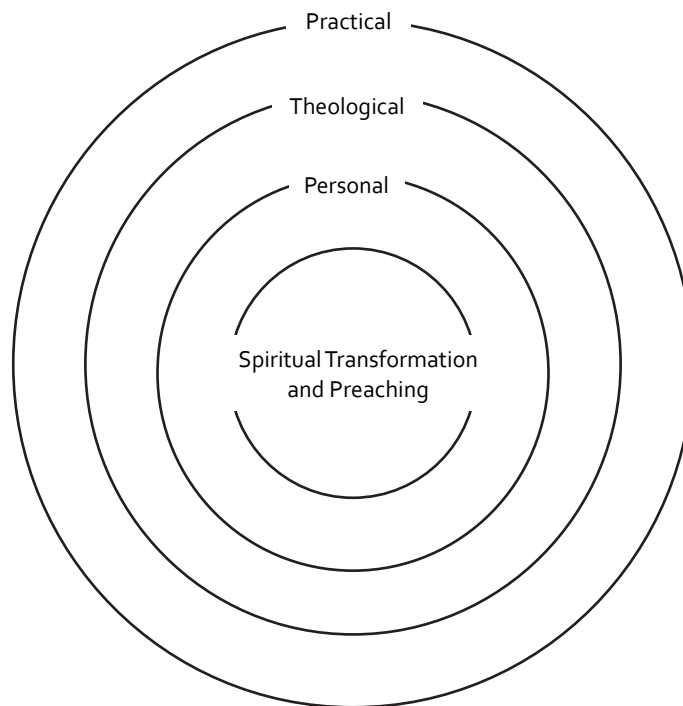
You may copy as many pages of the form on the next page as needed or create your own chart with similar headings. However you proceed, be meticulous. Each aspect of your preparation is important. Previously, some pastors have recognized preparation activities that are nearly invisible or at least hard to quantify. Try to include on the list everything you do to prepare, even if the activity doesn't fit neatly in the boxes on the form. Many find that by the time they sit down in front of the screen to start crafting sermon notes or a manuscript, a considerable amount of preparation has already been done. If you think or pray or converse in specific ways related to upcoming topics or passages, heighten your awareness of those preparation processes by writing them down (for example, ruminating while training for a half marathon, asking probing questions to discover insight while conversing with the custodian, and so forth). Most pastors have well-established habits of preparation that are undertaken in a regular sequence—whether conventional or unconventional. Preparation routines for most clergy also do not vary significantly from week to week, though time constraints created by circumstances in the church are a common reason cited for departure from the regular routine.

Pace yourself. Depending on what day of the week you started this chapter, this first Reflective Practice Challenge may take you a week or so to complete. If you want to continue to read the book as you construct this log, the next few pages may be of interest, but you'll need to finish the log before you get to the end of the chapter.

DATE	TIME SPENT	PREPARATION ACTIVITY	COMMENTS

Spiritual Transformation and Preaching: Pushing Your Buttons

In both adult and childhood education, researchers find that activating prior knowledge is one of the important first components of learning. As we have explored the idea of sermons that aim to transform rather than inform, some of your prior learning buttons may have been pushed. Using the Prior Knowledge Button graphic organizer, free-write in each space as you connect prior learning to the idea that sermon communication should be spiritually transforming. In the Personal section, you might note experiences and models that have influenced your thinking. In the Theological area, your guiding assumptions, authors who have influenced you, or even reactions to the material in this chapter might emerge. And in the Practical space, preparation habits and listener reactions could be considered. As you look at your brief notations about prior learning associations, determine what button has been pushed for you with this concept. Is this a hot-button issue? A panic button? A defense-raising, bright red button? Or maybe a green button, for *Go!* As you activate prior knowledge about spiritual transformation and preaching, name the button or buttons that are being pushed for you.



Prior Knowledge Button

Then, check your preparation log. Begin to think about why you do what you do. Inspect the impact of your prior learning on the development of your current sermon preparation habits.



Transformative Sermon Response Goals

Look Back

Begin this reflective practice challenge by trying to reconstruct the response goal of your last sermon. If you can recall the transformative aim, write it down in various formats—Listener Objective (public speaking or learning approaches); Sermon in a Sentence; or S&R Catchphrase. If this recall task seems impossible, explore the reasons for the difficulty: Were there multiple topics? Was your aim mostly informative? Was there a subject but not an expected response? Did you preach that sermon some time ago, making recollection difficult?

Practice Each Method

Then, using this passage of Scripture from Mark 8:34–37, create a sermon response goal in each of the formats to begin discerning which option works best for you.

[Jesus] said, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?”

1. List subject and response catchphrases.

Subject: Self-Sacrifice

Response:

2. Write a sermon in a sentence that includes subject and listener response.

3. Given your general transformative goal for all sermons, construct a specific listener-driven response goal (or learning objective) for this sermon:

Listener response goal: Listeners will . . .

Move Forward (Partner Needed)

Finally, use your favorite of these formats, or some original method that has emerged as you have practiced these options, to delineate a subject and response as you prepare your next sermon. If possible, before you continue reading, begin another prep log, tracking in the comment section the effect of delineating this aim on other aspects of your planning.

Not only will the pre-sermon process be changed, the sermon communication will also be affected. Ask your accountability partner to listen to this sermon, and then meet to converse about the subject and response as they were communicated, using the following discussion guide. (Other components of the guide will be introduced later in the book.) On this guide, how well the subject and response are communicated during the sermon has been indicated using a continuum for each aspect, with increasing competence from left to right, designated by the terms *emerging*, *developing*, *clearly present*, and *strong*. Descriptions of strong subjects and responses in the far right column come from sermons that listeners identified as spiritually transformative (the top 5 percent, sometimes described in this text as “high impact”).

After the sermon, talk with your accountability partner about your perceptions of how *subject* and *response* came to life during this particular sermon communication experience. For example, if your designated listener could discern a text-connected subject but experienced it as something strictly informative (“Job was a model sufferer”), then the two of you might revisit the transformative goal set during preparation and contrast that with the way the subject and response were communicated during the sermon. Of special note in the subject category is the phrase “spiritual growth fueled by God’s power.” Regular listeners indicate that they can be overwhelmed by repeated requests for change if it seems like they are responsible for making that growth happen themselves (be more forgiving, be a better spouse, and so forth). Said one listener, “Pastor lets us know it’s not just that God wants us to change and be change agents, but God is going to help us make those changes. God gives us the gifts, the strength, the resources, the church community. . . . What a relief.”

Using this discussion guide with your accountability partner will enable you to continue to refine the preparation processes that increase the spiritually transformative meanings made in the minds of listeners.

	EMERGING Transforming characteristics emerging in this sermon	DEVELOPING Transforming characteristics developing in this sermon	CLEARLY PRESENT Transforming characteristics clearly present in this sermon	STRONG Transforming characteristics strongly demonstrated in this sermon
S U B J E C T	Passage, illustration, or main points may be the only discernable theme.	Subject is discernable and connected to text.	Subject is clear, text-connected, and relevant.	Subject is clear, compelling (attention-gaining), text-connected, relevant; spiritual growth fueled by God's power is anticipated.
R E S P O N S E	A desired response may be implied or may be primarily informative.	Response is discernable and connected to text.	Response is clear and text-driven, and moves beyond informing to transforming.	Sermon conveys clear, high expectations for change, extends beyond individual, is text-driven, moves beyond informing to transforming, urges commitment.



Pick a Pathway

As you make this next alteration in your preaching preparation, please keep another prep log, so you can determine how your prep time and activities are affected.

Exegetically Driven Sermon-Shape Selection

As you are exegeting and organizing the next sermon you will preach, identify and describe the following:

Passage or Theme:

Spiritually Transformative Response Goal (Sermon in a Sentence or Subject and Response):

Listeners' Position:

Pathway: (Identify the shape you are selecting for this sermon.)

Rationale: (Explain why you have selected this pathway for this sermon.)

Accountability Partner Sermon-Pathway Discussion: Before and After

Discuss your pathway choice with your accountability partner prior to the sermon. If your partner is available at the time you will be preaching, ask that partner to attend church, participate in this sermon communication, and meet with you for a dialogue about sermon structure within a few days after the service. If your partner is a clergy colleague who is preaching at the same time or another reader with whom you connect online, arrange to record the sermon on video and ask your partner to view it. Use the guide below to discuss what your partner experienced. Then expand that conversation, exploring together how your heightened awareness of oral organization affected your sermon preparation process. Record highlights of these before and after conversations.

	EMERGING Transforming characteristics emerging in this sermon	DEVELOPING Transforming characteristics developing in this sermon	CLEARLY PRESENT Transforming characteristics clearly present in this sermon	STRONG Transforming characteristics strongly demonstrated in this sermon
O R A L O R G A N I Z A T I O N	Listening is a challenge in some portion(s) of this sermon because of organization-al issues.	Main ideas clear; intro and conclusion apparent.	Main ideas clear, linked, and organized for auditory processing; intro and conclusion apparent; time well used.	Main ideas clear and organized for auditory processing; focus maintained; transitions used; intro and conclusion well constructed and compelling; consistent integration of text into structure; time well used.



Supportive Material Development

1. Use the bullet points of dos and don'ts on pages 122-123 as self-reflection checklists. List the supportive material mistakes that you make routinely as well as the deepening practices you are using.

2. Then, listen to a recording of a sermon you have preached in the past six months. If you do not record sermons, now is your opportunity to begin that new habit. As you listen to the recording, make a list of the types of supportive material you use and the sources of that material. Use the discussion guide on the next page to think about the contribution your supportive materials made to the spiritually transformative response goal.

3. Based on your work in steps 1 and 2, create one action item related to supportive material, with the aim of contributing to the deepening of your sermon communication content. Record that goal and share it with your accountability partner.

	EMERGING Transforming characteristics emerging in this sermon	DEVELOPING Transforming characteristics developing in this sermon	CLEARLY PRESENT Transforming characteristics clearly present in this sermon	STRONG Transforming characteristics strongly demonstrated in this sermon
I M P L E M E N T A T I O N	Implementation suggestions may be vague, impractical, implied in examples, or left for listeners to create.	Implementation suggestion is stated and listener-relevant.	Implementation process is clearly developed or illustrated, practical, listener-relevant, and translated from the text to the lives of the listeners.	“How to” implementation is practical, clear, listener-relevant, specific, and reasonable; information regarding how long a particular change may take is addressed as appropriate based on topic; any suggestions embedded in the text are translated to the lives and culture of current listeners.
S U P P O R T I N G M A T E R I A L S	Depth of supporting material is just beginning to be tapped; one or more areas need expansion to increase trans-formational possibilities.	Powerful God is proclaimed and theological depth is appropriate for diverse listeners.	Balance of intellectual and emotional content is appropriate, powerful God is proclaimed, nontext sources are listener-relevant, and theological depth is appropriate for diverse listeners.	Balance of intellectual and emotional content is appropriate, clear leadership to inspire change is evident, a powerful God is proclaimed (listeners are not left thinking they should make the changes on their own), nontext sources are listener-relevant, theological depth is appropriate for diverse listeners.