

“Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer which crushes a rock?” –Jeremiah 23:29

Most of the points below are derived from Greg Scharf’s book, *Prepared to Preach* (Christian Focus, 2005), and Gary DeLashmutt’s paper “Authoritative Speaking” from the Xenos Homiletics Class notes (<http://www.xenos.org/classes/homiletics/authorit.htm>).

Burden- your *passionate conviction* of the *great need* of your hearers to *be transformed* by the truths you are teaching.

A burden is an essential element of effectively teaching the word of God. As a Bible teacher, part of your role is both (1) to develop and (2) to communicate your burden to your hearers. These two steps are fleshed out below, but first let’s break down the above definition.

It starts with “your passionate conviction.” Your burden for a teaching is not simply the fact that you *know* that your hearers need these truths from the word of God; it is your *felt sense of urgency* based on that knowledge. Thus, with a burden, you will pray, prepare and preach from the stance that this material is important to your hearers, and it is important to you that they really get it.

The content of this conviction concerns “the great need of your hearers.” Those who will sit under your teaching may be spiritual giants, infants, or spectators. Regardless, they need this particular content from the Bible to challenge, encourage, or instruct them. They are in need of divine intervention, and you as the teacher are the chosen conduit for this occasion. If only they really understood the teaching you are going to give, what would be the result? Couldn’t the fruit born from this teaching be the type of thing you are already asking God to accomplish in their lives? You are teaching the incredibly potent word of God after all! Consider what the word does: it makes us fruitful (Psalm 1:3), lights our path (Psalm 119:105), makes us wise (Psalm 119:98-100), teaches us, corrects us, equips us (2 Tim. 3:16-17), and delivers needed truth into our inmost being where we are most mixed up (Heb. 4:12-13). Your teaching is part of God’s answer to your prayers for the people he has called you to serve.

Your hearers need these truths you are teaching, but to what end? “To be transformed” by them. A burden is incomplete if your great desire for your hearers is that they be impressed, entertained, or even inspired. If they walk away unchanged, then nothing has been accomplished. Your burden ought to be concerning what is going to happen in their lives throughout the rest of the week, not what is happening in them as they sit and listen. Consider God’s words to Ezekiel about his hearers’ response to his ministry:

“As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, ‘Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.’ My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, *to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well*, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice. (Eze. 33:30-32)

Ezekiel got positive feedback from his hearers, but that was not enough for him, and it shouldn't be enough for us either. Our passionate conviction must be that people are drawn to Christ and sanctified, not merely stirred! Here we see that a burden for our teaching ought to go far beyond our earthly hopes (that we would do a good job) to supernatural expectations, that God will bring life change of eternal significance through our words.

Developing our Burden

Just like everything else that is beneficial to our ministry, our burden for teaching comes from the Holy Spirit. It is futile to try to whip yourself up into a zealous state, to try to cause a supernatural result by earthly efforts. God will come through, just as he promised to give us "everything we need for a Godly life" (2 Peter 1:3). However, just like in all other areas of spirituality, God invites us to cooperate with him as he is at work in us, and he has provided us with three channels through which we can receive a burden for our teaching.

The first is *from the word of God*. How incredible it is that the God who spoke the universe into existence with a few words has given us thousands of his words to help us! This is why you should be teaching *scripture*, not something else. The passage that you are teaching has immense power—just interacting with it yourself ought to grow your desire to help your hearers understand it. Therefore, that is exactly what you can do to start to develop your burden: read it, reread it, and reread it more until you are convinced of its truth and value. Pray through the passage, thanking God for its various lessons and asking God for understanding and wisdom to apply it. Try memorizing all or part of it to get it lodged securely in your mind.

Try meditating on the passage. This can look different for different portions of scripture, but it always involves examining it closely, like a diamond that reveals new radiance with every slight change in your viewing angle. A simple way to get started meditating is to isolate and concentrate on each individual element from a passage of scripture. If it is a narrative or a parable, you can dwell on each key feature in the story, putting yourself in the story with your imagination as you read, asking yourself what each feature of the story adds to the experience. Another way to understand each element is to ask what difference it would make if that piece was missing. Let's say you are teaching Genesis 22. How does Abraham and Isaac's three day journey up the mountain add to the story? What if the part with the ram caught in the thicket was missing? For a more didactic portion of scripture, you can isolate each claim in the same way, sometimes even isolating each word of a key verse. You can read the verse over and over again, emphasizing a different word each time. 2 Peter 1:3, the verse referenced above, would be perfect for this approach:

- *His divine power* has given us everything we need for a godly life... (that's a lot of power!)
- His divine power *has* given us everything we need for a godly life... (past tense...)
- His divine power has *given us* everything we need for a godly life... (as a free gift!)
- His divine power has given us *everything* we need for a godly life... (really? everything?)
- His divine power has given us everything we *need* for a godly life... (but not everything we want?)
- His divine power has given us everything we need for a *godly life*... (but not an easy life?)

See how the passage comes to life? The key here is to take time with the word of God to let it sink into your own heart before you try to turn it into a teaching for others. In other words, *before you break the passage down, let it break you down*. While it's helpful to get your outline done early, resist the temptation to create your outline at the beginning of your teaching preparation. That is skipping an essential step! Even if you came up with an immaculate outline, if you aren't speaking it from a burning heart, then you are not being faithful to the text.

The second source of a burden for your teaching comes *from your own experience*. This is necessarily subordinate to the role of the word itself (since truth from the word is more certain than our experience, see 2 Peter 1:18-19), but it still plays a key role. This is a similar principle to what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 1, where he says that he was comforted by God in such a way that he could turn around and offer that same comfort to others. In other words, his experience was helpful to others who would go through similar experiences.

This is the way it should be when we teach. We should be able to look at how the truths in our passage have changed our lives. It ought to fill us with gratitude and an eagerness to usher others into a similar experience, especially considering that the change in our lives was by the grace of God and not by self effort. What I have experienced is available to others, and it was so awesome that I want them to experience it, too! Do you remember what it was like before you understood the main theological points in this passage? Before you found out that Christianity is not a list of rules? Or before it really dawned on you that God's love is permanent? Or before you experienced what it was like to be honest with others? Or before you were free from the overwhelming fear of death? Let it sink in! Before *you* understood the truths in this passage, you were lost! When we have this clear before-and-after sense, then we can say from the heart, "[God's] statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart" (Psalm 119:111).

Therefore, part of your preparation to teach a passage should be to ask yourself: "How has grasping the main point of this passage been vital to my own life and ministry?" If you don't know the answer to that question, then one of two things are probably true. Maybe you are trying to teach something that is not worth your time. More likely, you have been asked to teach others a topic that you yourself have neglected. If that is the case, don't lose heart and don't fear being disqualified. Remember that "since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart" (2 Cor 4:1). You don't need to cower or ask someone else to cover your teaching—you just need to repent! Don't be afraid to repent on a topic and then teach it to others. It can actually lead to a powerful teaching as long as you humbly and faithfully lay out what the passage teaches instead of posturing as some kind of expert. You ought to know better than anyone how important it is that they understand it because it was recently the very thing you needed to learn.¹

This process—getting a burden for your teaching from your own life experience—is not the same as using your own testimony in your teaching. It can be helpful to include some personal reflection in your teaching itself. However, it is *always* helpful to include some personal reflection as described above in your preparation to teach, whether or not you actually express it to your hearers.

¹ If you legitimately think you might be disqualified from teaching, you should ask those co-leading with you or overseeing you in your teaching role for their input.

Spend some time thanking God and rejoicing over the change he has brought (or will bring) in your life as a result of understanding the truths in your passage. Then as you prepare your teaching, that gratitude can turn into eagerness to see your hearers experience the same.

The third and final source you can draw upon to develop your burden is your *love for your audience*. This is much easier if you are teaching to a group of people with whom you are relationally involved (as it should be most of the time). After thinking through the main point of the teaching, look over a list of names of the people who will be listening to it and pray for each one of them to have an opening of the eyes regarding the truths you are teaching. Then, you will naturally want to speak with greater clarity and power out of a genuine desire to see them convinced.

It can also be helpful to think through the potential positive and negative outcomes that could hang in the balance of whether or not your hearers will grasp the essential truths you are going to teach. Ask yourself, or even your co-leaders, questions like these:

- How amazing would it be if they really get it? How will their lives be transformed as a result of this very teaching, if only they really grasp the truth and its importance?
- How terrible would it be if they never realize this? How could their lives or prospective ministries languish or fall apart as a result of missing out on the truths from this very teaching?

This second type of question hits on a key element of speaking with power, and that is the use of *antithesis*. Your thesis is the point you are making, and your antithesis is the opposite point. The truths you are reflecting on, and the results they can bring about in people's lives, are magnified and brought into color when they are seen in contrast with their opposites. For example, if you are teaching on living honestly before God and others from 1 John 1, you may be better able to develop a burden if you reflect not only on the freedom of living in the light, but also on the repulsive and soul-destroying nature of hypocrisy. That's quite a contrast! Seeing the enormous gap between an idea and its opposite can bring its importance into focus, especially when you consider people you care about and what their lives could look like if they took one path instead of the other.

As you are thinking and praying for your group, it might be helpful to narrow in on the person or two that needs to hear these truths the most. What blessings are right in front of them that they haven't taken? What prison could they escape if they only believed the truth instead of a lie? If anyone comes to mind as you look over your passage, prepare your teaching and deliver it in order to try to convince them. They are dying of starvation and you are urging them to eat! They are killing themselves and you are trying to convince them to stop! The abundant life is right there at their fingertips! *Plead* with the people that came to your mind, as we'll describe below.²

Does drawing zeal from your love for the people you serve seem difficult? Do you feel like you are in a season where "lov[ing] one another fervently from the heart" seems like a chore (1 Pet. 1:22)? If so, keep in mind that love cannot be faked, but it can be provided by the grace of God. Thus, our common theme here is that it is God himself who provides a burden for our teaching, and he does it through his word, our testimony, and the love he gives us for his people.

² Please note: this does not mean that you should always teach primarily to the least spiritually-minded people in the room. Rather, you should consider who seems to need these truths the most and allow their need to kindle your burden.

Also, be careful not to stare at the person you are trying to convince! That could backfire.

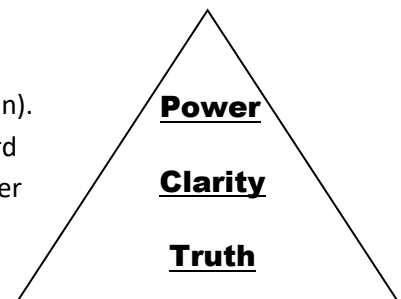
Communicating our Burden

While it is most essential that our heart is in the right place as described above, it is also important that we don't put a bushel over the fire God has stoked! We must communicate the burden that God has instilled. There are two keys to doing so, one that occurs before the teaching and one that occurs during.

The first key to communicating our God-given burden is to *plan*. There is an idea floating around that associates powerful speaking with spontaneity, and dullness with careful planning. My experience and observation has revealed the exact opposite, that power of speech increases with more preparation. First of all, the better prepared you are for your teaching, the less you need to focus on remembering your outline as you teach, and the more you can focus on the people, on your delivery, and on God. You might have seen this principle play out if you do karaoke. Your friend with the voice worthy of *American Idol* takes the stage, but it sounds like nails on a chalkboard! What happened? They probably picked a song they didn't know well, so their pitch was off and their affect was flat because they were focused on reading words off the screen rather than singing. When your content is well-prepared and embedded into your mind, only then can you give adequate focus to your delivery.

There are many helpful ways to get your outline memorized, and they all have one thing in common: repetition. Whatever you do to memorize your teaching, do it until your teaching is memorized. For myself, it doesn't matter how much time I've spent writing out, thinking through, and praying over my teaching. The only thing that really prepares me to speak it is to practice speaking it out loud. Putting sound to words has a way of shaking things into place and clearing up what is still murky. Practicing your teaching with a friend who will give you feedback is extremely helpful, especially for newer teachers. Watching a recording of yourself teach can also be very helpful. If you struggle with getting your thoughts clear, you also might benefit from writing out your teaching word-for-word (although I would recommend still using a simple page of notes when you actually teach, and not the script you wrote out).

Another reason that planning is essential for communicating your burden is that your teaching must have clarity to have power (see illustration). The foundation for a Bible teaching is that the content is truth from the word of God. Without that, it doesn't matter how clearly and forcefully you deliver it—it's not going to be effective. Similarly, if you have the truth and speak with great force, but the teaching is unclear, the results are disastrous. You missed your primary responsibility, which was to deliver those truths to the people. What good is passion without focus? It's worse than useless. At best it's confusing and uncomfortable; and at worst it trains people to seek out content-less spiritual highs, where the actual point of the passage is a mere afterthought.



Planning can also help you communicate your burden by sharpening your focus about what you are most passionate about. If you are equally high-energy about every point in your teaching, then you are equally low-energy about every point in your teaching as well. Some teachers' zeal is like a roaring jet engine: it gets your attention at first, but listen for more than a few minutes and you start to hardly notice it. What shakes people up more than a constant fire-hose blast of zeal is passion delivered with pinpoint precision, and this is only accomplished through careful planning. As you are preparing your

teaching, pick out one or two points where you will really bring the most heat. Make sure you mean it, make sure you have set up for it, make sure it's clear, and make sure you land on it with everything you've got.

In addition to planning ahead, the other key principle for communicating your burden is to *urge*. Plead with the audience! This doesn't mean act like someone else, like that other teacher who always brings a lot of energy. Instead, think about times when you have pleaded with someone you love about something important, and speak in that tone. If you are in the business of following God and serving people, then you *do* know how to plead with others, because you've certainly had to do it before! Don't you love the people God has called you to teach? Aren't these truths important? If so, then you are just being honest, not showy, by intentionally urging these truths upon your hearers. That means you should take your tone, your gestures, your whole mode of communication, and *amplify* it. Don't be someone else; just be more of you. Here is a rule of thumb that you could probably confirm for yourself by getting feedback or by watching a recording of yourself teach: for most of us, if you feel like you have brought an adequate level of passion to your teaching, you probably didn't bring nearly enough. If you think you took it way over the top, then you probably had *almost* as much energy as you should bring. You can check with your co-leaders to see if you really did come on too strong, but most teachers never do. This should also be in proportion to the age of your audience—the younger they are, the wilder you can be (and need to be) in order to get and keep their attention.

Practically speaking, you should look around at your audience, pausing to make eye contact with individuals around the room. When you do so, don't just give a presentation—speak the truths to the person you are looking at! Also, as the one person in the room who has the floor, you should be ready to use one of your greatest weapons: silence. If you make a point that you want your group to think about, give them a second to think about it, and keep making eye contact with people around the room as you do. Don't stare down at your notes during an intentional pause, or everyone will just think you got lost and the effect will be diminished. Remember, the pause seems much longer to you than it does to everyone else, because you are feeling the mounting pressure to fill the air, while everyone else is just feeling like they ought to consider what you just said, which is a great thing.

Try to urge in a way that suits both your personality and the truths you are communicating. If you get loud about football, then get loud about the word of God! If you tend to speak with quiet intensity when you are deeply moved, then do so as you teach. Our culture, especially Gen-X and younger, is obsessed with the idea of authenticity, and nothing is more discrediting than disingenuousness. You can avoid this by using your own tendencies of how you express yourself when deeply stirred, and you can avoid putting your hearers to sleep by amplifying those tendencies.

Also, the way you urge your audience ought to be informed by the text itself. Earlier we made the point that your burden ought to arise from the text. In addition to that, the way you communicate your burden also ought to be informed by the text. Although it's not always possible, the best scenario is if the key phrase or idea that you urge upon your readers is something more or less directly stated in the text. If your hearers are going to walk away with a key phrase stuck in their head, it might as well be God's words rather than yours! For example, if you are teaching Galatians 5, after explaining the central concepts, why not cycle back around to verse one and make that the part you hit the hardest? "You are free! Do NOT let yourself be bound as a slave again to legalism!" For narrative sections, you can hone in on the big moment in the story that best demonstrates your main point. The more your burden is

grounded in the words of the text, the more it will focus your audience on how amazing the passage is rather than how great your teaching is. After all, you want them continually seeking to be fed by the word, not by you.

In general, with a little analysis of the text, it's not difficult to find a fitting emotional response. After all, there is not a scrap of dead theology in the entire Bible. Are you teaching a passage from an epistle that explains important theological details? Then press upon your readers the importance of getting these details right. Your main tool you would want to bring out from your wheelhouse in that teaching would be *persuasion*. Is your passage about false teachers or the rich oppressing the poor? Then be *angry*! Be sad for the lost, and be exuberant when inviting people to experience the joy of the Lord. If your passage describes a miracle, put yourself and your audience in the story with lots of sensory details and be in awe of what God has done. Here's the point: you should vary the way that you express your burden, and it should be tailored to each teaching by the passage itself.

Conclusion

Keep in mind that it is the Holy Spirit's job to convict hearts, both yours and the people who will sit under your teaching. Your job is faith expressing itself through love: trust God to use you, let his word dwell in you richly, and invite those you teach to see its glory so they can be transformed. As you speak, try to keep an ongoing dialogue with God. This is not easy to do! The idea is that you are conscious about looking to the Spirit for his provision and passing that onto your audience. As Charles Spurgeon put it:

“It is well to be pleading evermore with God—when sitting down in the pulpit, when rising to give out the hymn, when reading the chapter, and while delivering the sermon—holding up one hand to God empty, in order to receive, and with the other hand dispensing to the people what the Lord bestows.”³

Most of all, remember that God delights to use broken vessels to accomplish great things, because it shows with stunning clarity that everything good comes from him rather than us. For myself, the biggest hindrance to developing and communicating a burden is self-consciousness. I end up thinking more about how the audience will receive me than about how they will receive God's instruction. If you can relate, remember that every good work done on this side of heaven is done with mixed motives. It would be taking a position of pride, not humility, to shrink back from what God has called you to do because your motives aren't pure enough. A true act of service would be to offer yourself to God, mixed motives and all, to be used for the good of your hearers, and along the way to allow him to ignite your zeal so you can teach the word faithfully.

³ Thielicke, Helmut, *Encounter with Spurgeon*. Lutteworth Press, 2016. p. 26.