Motivation or Manipulation:
The Use of Illustrations in Preaching

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Selected Resources and Source Material

Adams, Jay  
Preaching With Purpose

Broadus, John  
On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons

Chapell, Bryan  
Using Illustrations to Preach With Power

Chapell, Bryan  
Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon, 2nd Edition

Edwards, Jonathan  
The Religious Affections

Frame, John M.  
The Doctrine of the Christian Life

Heath, Chip & Dan Heath  
Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die

Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn  
Preaching & Preachers

Stott, John R.W.  
Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century

Sunukjian, Donald R.  
Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance

Vines, Jerry  
A Guide to Effective Sermon Delivery

Willhite, Keith  
Preaching with Relevance

Agenda

1. Introduction and Overview
2. Definitions and Viewpoints
3. Purposes of Illustrations
4. Guidelines for Effective Illustrations
5. Emotions and the Use of Illustrations
1. Introduction and Overview

- Why should we illustrate in the communication of our sermons?
- How should we illustrate our sermons?
- Are there dangers in using illustrations in our sermons?
- How should “emotional” content be connected to our sermons?
- This is not an attempt to “outdo” the work of the Spirit in preaching.
- The desire is to be as effective as possible in the communication of truth so the listener can understand it and act on it.

Historical/Biblical Precedence (Chapell, Using Illustrations, p. 21ff)

- The Apostle Paul:
  - Armor of God, Ephesians 6:10-17
  - Running a race, I Corinthians 9:24; Hebrews 12:1
  - Altar to the unknown god, Acts 17:23

- Jonathan Edwards: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”
  - http://edwards.yale.edu/research/major-works/sinners-in-the-hands-of-an-angry-god
  - “We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth; so 'tis easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that anything hangs by; thus easy is it for God when he pleases to cast his enemies down to hell.”

- William Jennings Bryan: delivered a political “sermon” at the Democratic National Convention, July 9, 1896
  - http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/
  - “Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”

- ML King: civil rights speech: “I have a dream”
  - “I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat and injustice of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”
  - “Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

Currently we have been in an age of visual literacy, so this must be acknowledged

- Prior to this time (1890’s), men led with stories
- Illustrations have been used for quite sometime
- Response of crowds to great speeches results in “applause like the firing of artillery.”
  (e.g. the response of the crowd at the DNC speech of William Jennings Bryan)
2. Definitions and Viewpoints

General Definition:

**illustrate**

*obsolete a*: enlighten  
b*: to light up  
*archaic*: to make illustrious  
*(1)*: to make bright  
*(2)*: adorn  
to make clear: clarify  
b*: to make clear by giving or by serving as an example or instance  
c*: to provide with visual features intended to explain or decorate  
*<illustrate a book>*  
to show clearly: demonstrate, to give an example or instance  
(from: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illustrate?show=0&t=1287485819)

Sermon Illustrations:

Illustrations are “life-situation” stories within sermons whose details (whether explicitly told or imaginatively elicited) allow listeners to identify with an experience that elaborates, develops, and explains Scriptural principles.  
--Chapell, *Using Illustrations*, p. 21

Viewpoints (both positive and negative)

Jones, *Preachers & Preaching*, p. 232ff

- Do not become a professional with your illustrations:
- Dangers:
  - Collecting and filing illustrations
  - Using them to entice people is wrong
  - Building a sermon around an illustration
- Illustrations should proclaim truth and are to be the servants of truth (p. 234)

Chapell, (Class notes from “Christ-Centered Preaching,” TEDS, July 2009)

- Should be cautious about its use
  - 1 Corinthians 2:4, 6: not speaking in man’s wisdom
  - 1 Thess 2:5: not flattering speech
- Does not mean that a sermon that appeals to an audience or is readily understood is somehow inherently flawed.
- It is possible that illustrations can be used to manipulate or misunderstand a text.
- Ought not to pander to worldly pragmatics, but not ignore age-old tool (Chapell, *Using Illustrations*, p. 21)
  - We may be entertainment driven, but we don’t want to ignore a legitimate way that the mind functions and processes information
  - Illustrations are not supplemental, but are necessary to good exposition
  - This is not an attempt to replace propositional truth with simple narrative alone. This is not some kind of replacement, but rather an understanding of how to properly use illustrations (p. 15)
John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, p. 179,

“[Its] function is solely auxiliary, coming to the support now of one and now of another of the principle elements.” These principle elements are explanation, argumentation and application. “Whether we like it or not, most of us preach to the “moving picture mind.” It is the mind accustomed to images, pictures, scenes, rapidly moving. It is certainly not accustomed to deep thinking or sustained argument.”

Broadus originally published in 1898, the first motion pictures were in play just a few years prior by Edison in 1891.

“In 1891, the Edison company successfully demonstrated the Kinetoscope, which enabled one person at a time to view moving pictures. Later in 1896, Edison showed his improved Vitascope projector and it was the first commercially, successful, projector in the U.S.”


*This is a particularly incorrect viewpoint on how illustrations ought to be used and told:*

“In telling a story for illustrative purposes the preacher will want to make sure of slanting. You are perhaps familiar with the use of slanting in news reporting. Such slanting is not considered justifiable when the purpose of the report is to be objective, although it is considered perfectly acceptable in an editorial. A sermon is more like an editorial than a report of a fire or robbery. We are not pretending to be objective in it. To the contrary, we are preaching for a verdict, and it is even necessary that we use slanted language in our descriptions of the characters in our illustrations so that they will come alive for our readers.”

3. Purposes of Illustrations

Willhite, *Preaching with Relevance*, p. 105ff

- Illustrations need to have an objective to it; otherwise it is just a story.
- All illustrations ought to be categorized as explanation, validation, or application.

**Explanation**: expand, clarify, elucidate, make something concrete or contrast

- Analogy: Integrity is to Christian leadership as egg is to omelet
- Concrete: it was a Russian made car about the size of a Honda Civic
- Contrast: this isn’t the kind of knowledge we have when we say, “I know someone at work.” It’s the kind of knowledge we have when we say, “I know my wife.”
- Figure: where there’s light, there are bugs.

**Validation**: gain agreement, prove something, show realistic nature, and make it believable.

(Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, p. 92ff)

*Do they buy it (i.e., Do they accept it; the contemporary connections)?*

- Knowing something does not necessarily mean that we buy it or that we will do it. We must be convinced that it is true and applicable to my situation.
  - Ex: “I know the Bible says wives should submit to their husbands, but my husband is unique.”
Knowledge is not generally people’s biggest problem. Normally, your audience will already know most of what you have to say. Therefore, your biggest challenge will oftentimes be to determine why they are not living out God’s Word and how you can overcome whatever obstacle stands in their way.

- Ex: Children know they are supposed to obey, so why aren’t they doing it?
- People know that God’s will is perfect, so why do they struggle with worry?

**Application** (Willhite, *Relevance in Preaching*, p. 111): these have the most value in terms of impact or feeling. There is no need to apply something if people need explanation. If they lack understanding or don’t believe it is true, there is no need to apply it via illustration. *Many preachers seek explanation when what is needed is application. This is connecting the truth with how it relates to a concrete experience.* This visualizes for people where they need to take this truth and see it in practice in their lives. (emphasis added)

**Further Thoughts on Purpose**
*Broadus, Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, p. 180ff

- To explain
- To prove
- As an ornament: to make truth attractive or pleasing
- Arouse attention
- Make a subject impressive
- *Move to action or persuade* (emphasis added)
- Provide for various hearers: appeals to a broad spectrum
- Retention/memory aid

**Question: How do these purposes fit in with my sermon?**

What are the essential elements of exposition? (Chapell, notes from TEDS, July 2009)

1. **Explanation** – establishes truth
2. **Illustration** – demonstrates truth
3. **Application** – applies truth

*All three must be included for Scripture to be fully unfolded.*

**Illustrative Material =** Show me what the text means.

1. Types of Illustrative Material
   - **factual information outside the text**
   - quotations – poems, hymns
   - imagistic language
   - **true illustrations** – story
2. Sources of Illustration:
   - contemporary accounts
   - Biblical accounts
**Answer: Preferred Approach to Illustrations**

1. **Lived-body detail**
   a. Description (giving specifics to draw the listener into the illustration)
      i. Time
      ii. Place
      iii. People
      iv. Situation
   b. Dialogue (giving depth/body to the illustration)

   This is not just simply an example or an allusion. A lived-body story with detail invites the listener to be a part of the experience.

   **Examples/allusion:** refer to an account where the listener supplies the details
   - “This reminds me”
   - “I have observed”

   **Illustration that is lived-body says**
   - “I will take you there”
   - “Join in this experience with me”

   **Inductive approach to an illustration may be the preferred approach** (Chapell, *Using Illustrations*, p. 27)
   - Begins with the particulars of a life situation
   - Points to a principle and conclusion
   - Allows one to lead versus push (does not mean deductive is wrong, inductive can be harder in this regard to maintain clarity/connection, etc)

2. **Demonstrate Truth**

   a. Illustrations are not to clarify truth to the mind, but primarily to the heart
   b. Explanation proves the truth
   c. Illustrations are intended to *root the truth* in the life of a believer
      i. illustrating should primarily be for application versus explanation
      ii. ground listener in the mind, emotion, and will to experience what it would be like to see this truth in their lives.
      iii. It does not have to be contemporary, it could be historical
   d. Life-situations reflect real problems and common emotions

   - The traditional and primary purpose of illustration is to make the abstract, familiar and the principal, particular.

   - Real meaning is not known if truth is not related to concrete life so that it can be applied.
     o Therefore: motivation is greater than clarification
     o *illustrate – is to primarily motivate, not to clarify*
• The Scripture’s confirm the importance of concrete particulars with propositions of truth
  o Mark 4:34 “Without a parable He did not say anything to them.”
  o Paul’s images: sports arena, garden, battlefield
  o Prophet’s symbol/examples: ripe fruit basket, lying on side for months, dry bones

• As much as possible, we ought to be moving toward connecting our audience with the
  truth that is being explained from the passage.

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| Low Audience Connection | “Suppose…”                                           |

Willhite, *Relevance in Preaching*, p. 112

4. Guidelines for Effective Illustrations

Communicate your illustration remembering key aspects to connect with the listener:

• Stories that have “stickiness” to them include: (from Dan and Chip Heath, *Make it Stick*)
  1. Simplicity
  2. Unexpected
  3. Concrete
  4. Credible
  5. Emotional
  6. Story

• Example of Good Samaritan in Luke 10:
  1. Simplicity: the entire incident was set in one verse
  2. Unexpected: who knew the Samaritan would be the helper?
  3. Concrete: the details were clear and easy to grasp
  4. Credible: everyone understood the dangerous route and the potential liabilities
  5. Emotional: the compassion and generosity of the Samaritan
  6. Story: told in the form of a parable

• So memorable that is law in many states (http://definitions.uslegal.com/g/good-samaritans)
  o A good samaritan in legal terms refers to someone who renders aid in an emergency to an
    injured person on a voluntary basis.
  o Under the good samaritan laws which grant immunity, if the good samaritan makes an
    error while rendering emergency medical care, he or she cannot be held legally liable for
    damages in court.
Other Guidelines for Effectiveness

Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 232ff

1. Careful use of words
   - we often don’t give the careful thought we ought to
   - e.g. days of sending a note via cable

2. It is impossible to convey precise message without choosing precise words
   - Ecc 12:10, 11, “The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd.”
   - *Clear thinking demands clear writing which is key to clear communication*

3. Clarity in our illustrations
   - 1 Corinthians 13:1, speak lovingly, clearly
     - *example of doctor “talk” versus plain talk*
       “This elderly geriatric female has multiple joint problems which limit perambulation. Absence of verbal intercourse aggravates her detachment from reality and reinforces isolationism. She is unable to relate to events at this point in time. Psychogeriatric consideration in the context of conceptual distortion and paranoia is also a parameter in the total dimensions of her problems.”
     - *simplicity and clarity*
       “This lady of eighty-three has arthritis, cannot get about, and is lonely, confused, and frightened.”
   - Easy is effortless, but simplicity requires effort

4. Language should be vivid
   Mark Twain, “The difference between the right word and the nearly right is the difference between lightning and the lightening bug”

Willhite, *Preaching with Relevance*, p. 114ff

- *Be sure that the illustration illustrates.* An illustration that doesn’t shed light upon something is just as isolated story, statistic, or example. The illustration must connect to the subject in order to shed light on that subject (in order to explain, validate, or apply).
- *Illustrations must be easily understood.* Like a good joke, too much explanation indicates a lack of clarity or a lack of illustration.
- *Illustrations need to be credible.* Make sure that you get the facts correct.
- *Personal illustrations help your audience identify, but the illustration should be modest, true, and discreet.* Moreover, it’s wise to follow the advice of Howard Hendricks: “People will learn more from your struggles than your victories.”
- *Tell an illustration instead of reading it.*
- *Do not use an illustration that has more impact than the big idea of the sermon.* If listeners walk away remembering the illustration and forgetting the point, the illustration may take light away from rather than shed light upon the sermon.
Never twist the text to use an illustration. This guideline is perhaps the most important of all. As preachers, we need to develop an ear for the illustrative story, a good example, a powerful tale, and sometimes we hear something that is so good we think to ourselves, “That’ll preach!” or “Where can I find a text to use that illustration?” Such thoughts may lead us to dangerously compromise biblical authority. The power of the sermon is never in the illustration. The power of the sermon is in the Word of God. (emphasis added)

Illustrations in sermon introductions should introduce the subject, raise a question that the sermon will answer, touch a need, or accomplish other goals of an introduction. This is not the time to tell a story – no matter how humorous or how biblical it may be – simply for the sake of telling it.

Don’t illustrate the unknown with the unknown.

Listeners usually perceive contemporary illustrations more relevant than historical illustrations.

Personal illustrations have much greater potential to apply and convince than “a story I heard”.

Almost any illustration is better than an illustration that comes from an illustration book.

5. Emotions and the Use of Illustrations

- Is it wrong to draw out or point out emotions in our preaching to bring about a response?
- How do we see emotions in Scripture and its connection to action?
- We must not exclude its use, but we must be cautious of abuse.

Biblical Examples:

- Life of Hannah, 1 Samuel 1
  - Facing regular irritations/frustrations
  - Acting/feeling resentful in the circumstance of life
  - Yet still turning to the Lord of hosts and acting obediently
- Example of Christ: being moved to action connected to emotion
  - Crying out over the death of Lazarus (John 11:33ff)
  - Moved with compassion (Matthew 20:34)
- Others:
  - Rahab: “heart melted” at God’s activity for Israel and she believed (Joshua 2:11)
  - Moses: anger resulting in obedience (Ex 32:20) and disobedience (Ex 17:5)

Emotions are a part of connecting the truth with life

Jay Adams, Preaching with Purpose, p. 86

“To experience an event in preaching is to enter into that event so fully that the emotions appropriate to that event are felt, just as if one were actually going through it. When a preacher says what he relates in such a way that he stimulates one or more of the five senses, thus triggering emotion, then the listener may be said to “experience” the event. In that way, the event will become “real” to him, which means it has become concretized (or personalized), memorable, and, in the fullest sense of the word, understandable.”
Edwards in *Religious Affections*, p. 44–45

And the impressing divine things on the hearts and affections of men is evidently one great and main end for which God has ordained that His Word delivered in the holy Scriptures should be opened, applied, and set home upon men, in preaching. And therefore it does not answer the aim which God in this institution, merely for men to have good commentaries and expositions on the Scripture, and other good books of divinity; because, although these may tend as well as preaching to give men a good doctrinal or speculative understanding of the things of the Word of God, yet they have not an equal tendency to impress them on men’s hearts and affections. God has appointed a particular and lively application of His Word to men in the preaching of it, as a fit means to affect sinners with the importance of the things of religion, and their own misery and necessity of a remedy, and the glory and sufficiency of a remedy provided; and to stir up the pure minds of saints, and quicken their affections, by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting them before them in their proper colours, though they know them, and have been fully instructed in them already (2 Pet 1:12, 13).

Chapell, *Using Illustrations*, p. 39

We are striving to stimulate a decision-making response. We are seeking to influence the listeners understanding, experience, and getting them to act on it.

Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, pp. 361ff

**Connecting with people through shared experience:**
Knowledge is gained through experience yet we do not want to be an empiricist. Empiricism says that all human knowledge is based on sense experience. However, Hebrews 5:14 teaches that we can learn discernment through experience.

**Using imagination**

There are dangers in human imagination (Jeremiah 3:17, 7:24, 9:14, 11:8). This is often connected to false worship. Positively this allows you to conceptualize before forming something entirely (e.g. a sculptor). This is certainly a reflection of the image of God in man: creativity

**Nature of emotions**
All are fallen and must be redeemed by God’s grace. Unregenerate hates goodness and loves wickedness. Regenerate loves God, hates evil and these things all belong to God. We are taught to be emotional: Phil 4:4. Our emotions affect and are affected by others. We must not act on our emotions independently of God’s Word.