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WHAT IS THE REAL VALUE OF GOOD SERMONS?

Listening to sermons is a major part of our religious lives. Anyone who has been in the Church for twenty years or longer has in all likelihood heard over 1,000 sermons, not to mention additional Bible Studies, which for all practical purposes are also sermons. And many of us have now been around the Church of God for 40 years or more. **We have heard a lot of sermons.** When we go to Church services every week we look forward to hearing a good sermon. And when we attend the Feast of Tabernacles then we hope to hear a number of good sermons, right?

Many sermons are recorded, and then they circulate amongst God's people as tapes, CD's or DVD's. A number of Church groups also broadcast their sermons live over the internet, so that people in other areas are able to listen in at the same time. Irrespective of where we are, we all feel the need for hearing that weekly sermon. So if we cannot physically attend a service somewhere, then we can at least listen in to a webcast from some or other Church of God group, seems to be the thinking of some people.

Then there are also some other people who today still get most of their spiritual diet by listening to tapes of sermons given by Mr. Herbert W Armstrong, a man who died more than 26 years ago. In fact, a few ministers have devoted themselves to trying to keep the memory of Mr. Armstrong alive by building their entire ministries around Mr. Armstrong's tapes, and by endless appeals to Mr. Armstrong's writings.

There are also still other people who avoid direct membership in any one specific Church of God group. Instead, they rely on taped sermons from a range of different sources. If they come across a good speaker who gives good sermons, then they get the taped sermons from that man. Their main criterion is that they get to listen to some really good sermons. And obviously, they themselves are the judges regarding what constitutes a "good" sermon.

In some groups there is only one man available to give the sermons and so he speaks all the time. In other groups there are several speakers available, but the man in charge feels that his messages are the most important ones for people to hear, and so the leader gives the lion's share of all the sermons in his group. And at Feast time it is important that his sermons are broadcast live to his various groups around the world. In other groups again there are many different men who freely share the speaking responsibilities.

Yes, **listening to sermons** is a major part of our religious lives. But we should also ask the question: what is the **REAL** value of **GOOD** sermons? What do good sermons actually do for you? Would you be any different if you hadn't heard those good sermons? Would your relationship with God be any different? Are people who hear good sermons better off than those people who didn't hear those good sermons? Do good sermons actually cause people to change?

[**COMMENT:** I have used the expression "good sermons" repeatedly because here I am not talking about sermons that are worthless, inaccurate and a waste of time. We've had plenty of those as well over the years. And it is easy to find fault with sermons that promote heresies, sermons that rehash the things we have heard fifty times before, sermons that are "stuck in the 60's", or sermons that exhibit other problems. At this stage I am speaking primarily about sermons that we would agree are good, sermons that give us useful information and understanding, sermons that make clear the teachings of the Bible in a way we had not fully understood before. Later I will also consider some sermons that are not really "good".]

WHAT DO GOOD SERMONS ACTUALLY ACHIEVE?

We are now speaking about good sermons, without for the moment worrying about the differences in our personal perceptions of what constitutes a good sermon. So what does a good sermon actually achieve?

The answer depends on **your perspective** in asking this question.

1) Seen from one particular perspective a good sermon can have **an edifying effect** on the hearers.

2) But seen from another perspective **IT ACHIEVES NOTHING AT ALL!**

People will generally focus on the first perspective, the one that can have an edifying effect. And that is certainly very valid. But most people don't really understand the second perspective, which in fact is just as important and just as true as the first perspective.

PERSPECTIVE #1:

Typically when people first come into contact with God's Church their understanding is very limited. Almost everything needs to be explained to them from scratch. **This learning process is very exciting.** It is exciting to learn the truth about God's plan for mankind. It is exciting to come to understand one new teaching after another, and to be able to follow the explanations in one's own Bible. It is exciting when it all makes sense, and when everything falls into place.

The main effect of such good sermons during this stage is to **help us to GROW** in knowledge and in understanding. See 2 Peter 3:18 in this regard. The purpose of the sermons is to edify the members of God's Church by increasing our understanding.

A good sermon is like **sowing good seed**. So let's look at the parable of the sower. We are all familiar with this parable and we can thus deal with this fairly quickly.

And He spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, **a sower went forth to sow**. (Matthew 13:3)

The seeds in this parable fell on four different types of ground:

1) Some seeds fell by the way side (Matthew 13:4).

2) Some seeds fell on stony ground (Matthew 13:5-6).

3) Some seeds fell among thorns (i.e. weeds) (Matthew 13:7).

4) Some seeds fell on good ground (Matthew 13:8).

Jesus Christ Himself then explained these four categories in Matthew 13:18-23. Thus there is no ambiguity regarding the intended meaning. Jesus Christ very clearly identified the main component for each category. However, there is one thing we should keep in mind:

THE SEED is always exactly the same! This means that each category is given exactly the same information and the same potential opportunity to bear much fruit. In our context, they all (especially the last three) hear the same sermons!

The distinctions between these four categories are due entirely to **the ground** which is provided for the seed. That "ground" is not the product of some outside source, and neither is it preordained. That ground is something that every single human being himself or herself determines. To express this in modern terms:

THE SEED is what GOD brings to the table. And THE GROUND is what WE bring to the table.

Now here is something all of us need to understand very clearly:

The seed does not in any way influence the quality of the ground! The seed cannot turn bad ground into good ground! And if the ground is bad, then the seed doesn't really stand a chance of bearing fruit. **The best seed in the world cannot change bad ground into good ground.**

AND THE GROUND IS WHAT WE OURSELVES BRING TO THE TABLE IN THIS INTERACTION WITH GOD!

So let's restate our earlier point:

1) IF the seed falls on good ground, THEN it can have an edifying effect on the person.

2) But IF the seed falls on any of the three bad types of ground, THEN it achieves nothing at all, even when at first it seems to produce fruit.

The key in this process is NOT the quality of the seed. In other words, the key is **NOT the quality of the sermons**. The real key is always, always the quality of the ground upon which the seed falls. In other words, the key as to whether or not good fruit will be produced is **always the state of mind of the hearers** and NOT the state of mind of the speaker (i.e. not the man who gives the sermon).

To state this in the plainest terms:

No sermon-giver is ever able to create "good ground" in the mind of any other human being! Good sermons do not create good ground in the minds of the hearers. Good sermons can only produce good results in people if those people already had "good ground" in their minds before they ever heard those good sermons.

Very few people really understand this matter correctly.

So note!

We ourselves determine whether "the ground" in our minds is stony or overrun with thorns and weeds, or whether it is highly fertile. That is totally and completely **under our own control**. Nobody else establishes how we will respond to God. And unless our minds actually do provide "good ground" for the truth of God, even the best sermons in the world will be totally worthless.

So ultimately the value of even the best sermons is only minimal at best! It is easy for us to make the mistake of grossly inflating the actual value of any sermon, even the best ones. It is of questionable value to get overly excited about "good sermons" or "inspiring sermons" or "powerful sermons"!

That brings us to the second perspective.

PERSPECTIVE #2:

In one sense good sermons achieve nothing at all! How can I say that? Am I somehow against good sermons, or perhaps even envious of people who give better sermons than I do? Not at all! To paraphrase 3 John 1:2, I wish above all things that every minister in the churches of God would always give only good sermons. But such a wish cannot remove the **profound limitations** that all sermons always have.

The reason I say that in one sense even good sermons can achieve nothing at all is because **no sermon is capable of producing godly changes** in the mind of any person! This is a limitation that most people in the Church do not fully understand. They really don't!

Have you ever said (or heard other people say): That is a sermon my son (or daughter or parents or friends) needs to hear. If he (or they) can hear **that sermon** (or read that article!), then he (or they) will understand ... (whatever the issue may be)? Or people may say: That is a really good and clear sermon. If only all the people in God's Church could hear that sermon. We need to do everything we can to get that sermon to as many people as possible, so that they will also understand. So let's send it out to as many people as possible.

What are people in these situations saying?

They are saying: If we give people **the right information**, then they will also respond the way we responded to that information. But it just doesn't work that way. And if you ask "why not?", then the answer is: it doesn't work that way because no sermon is capable of producing godly changes in any single person!

You want proof?

You are familiar with the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. There is a lesson at the end of that parable that is often overlooked.

The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers (Luke 16:27-28). Abraham responds by saying that it is enough that the rich man's brothers have Moses and the prophets to instruct them (Luke 16:29). Now notice the rich man's reply.

And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but **if one went unto them from the dead**, they will repent. (Luke 16:30)

In our context that would be like asking God to bring Mr. Armstrong back to life in order to stir us up to really repent. So what about it? If God really did raise up Mr. Armstrong tomorrow, and Mr. Armstrong then excoriated the Church for having accepted so many heresies in the past few years, would that get the Church back on the right track? Would **those sermons** (the ones the resurrected Mr. Armstrong would give) really achieve anything?

Jesus Christ says to us: NO, **THEY WOULD NOT ACHIEVE ANYTHING**!

And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, **neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead**. (Luke 16:31)

In this parable Jesus Christ has Abraham saying these words. But it is obviously Jesus Christ Himself who is making the point that sermons never really achieve anything in the long run. There can hardly be a more powerful sermon than one that is given by a person we ourselves buried, and which person is

then resurrected by God to give us a very specific message. Such a sermon would without question be good! Yet Jesus Christ plainly said that such a sermon is no more effective than simply reading the law of God as recorded by Moses. Think about what Christ said.

A sermon given by a person who we know had been dead is still not capable of making people change. That's Jesus Christ's point at the end of this parable!

Thus unless we ourselves provide "good ground" for the sermons we will hear, the sermons will not achieve anything at all, even if they are given by people who we know have been resurrected by God to bring those sermons to us.

Think about that!

Over the past 20 years a number of men who had been influential in one or other Church of God group have died. You yourself can no doubt think of a few names in this category. Now what if those people, whom you know to be dead, walked into church services next Sabbath and then delivered the sermons ... how would that affect you? What if they told you to repent of certain things? Do you doubt that Luke 16:31 would be true for you?

Let's try to understand this on the practical level.

THE CHANCES ARE THAT YOU DON'T REALLY PRAY REGULARLY

Perhaps you are one of the minority of people in the churches of God who do actually pray on their knees before God on a daily basis? However, since the majority of people in the Church today don't pray on a daily basis, statistically the chances are actually fairly good that you are a part of that group that does not pray regularly. But if you are indeed one of the minority who do pray regularly, at the very least you surely know that vast numbers of other people throughout the churches of God today don't pray regularly. That is just the way things are!

So let's consider this example of personal private prayer.

Do those people (or you, if you are in this group?) not pray regularly because they (or you?) haven't heard a good sermon on prayer? Would they suddenly start to pray regularly if next Sabbath they could hear a really inspiring sermon about the need for us to pray regularly on a daily basis? Would they commit to praying regularly if their deceased minister suddenly appeared at services next Sabbath and urged them to change and to start praying regularly? Would they commit to praying regularly if they could hear FIFTY good and powerful sermons on the subject of prayer? **Just what will it take to get the majority of the people in the churches of God today to start praying regularly on a daily basis?**

The answer to this question is the answer regarding the value of all good sermons on all subjects.

So what is required to get people to pray regularly? Unless there is actually "good ground" in their minds to start with, they will never get to the point where they will pray regularly, dozens of good sermons about prayer notwithstanding. And that is why I say that in one sense good sermons don't achieve anything at all. Can you understand this?

The people themselves will have to provide that good ground, already before they hear that good sermon. **The ground must be good BEFORE the seed falls on it!** And when they do provide that good ground, then they will also commit to praying regularly, irrespective of whether the sermon they heard on

prayer was excellent or whether the sermon they heard was mediocre and "old hat". The ground was good and therefore the seed will bring forth fruit.

The real value of the sermons in this process is actually only minimal! It is the quality of the ground that determines whether the sermons will have any real value or not.

I myself have given well over 1000 sermons and over 1000 Bible Studies. And the things I am saying here apply to all of my own sermons and Bible Studies (and articles, for that matter) just as much as they do to the sermons of every other man, Mr. Armstrong included. Our sermons can never create "good ground" in the minds of any other people.

Let's try to understand this.

THE PERFECT SERMONS DURING THE MILLENNIUM

During the millennium "sermons" will be given by Jesus Christ and by the 144,000 people in the first resurrection. And when spirit God beings give sermons, then it is safe to assume that those sermons will be perfect. They will be the best sermons that any human beings could ever hope to hear. Those sermons will literally be God speaking to man.

So is everybody during the millennium going to be inspired by those sermons to whole-heartedly submit his life or her life unconditionally to God? Hardly! That will be because even those perfect sermons will not be able to create good ground in any single person's mind. Whether or not good ground exists in the minds of people during the millennium will depend on the people themselves, not on the sermons they will hear.

What the Prophet Ezekiel predicted was true for his time, it is true today, and it will also be true during the millennium. As long as human beings have free independent minds this will always be true for some people.

And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and **they sit before thee *as* my people**, and they hear thy words, but **they will not do them**: for with their mouth they shew much love, *but* **their heart goeth after their covetousness**. (Ezekiel 33:31)

For the expression "they will not do them" in this verse we can read "**they will not commit to praying regularly on a daily basis**", as just one specific application amongst many others for this statement.

Now in spite of perfect sermons a huge number of people will rebel against Jesus Christ during the millennium, even without Satan being around (Ezekiel 38-39); and an even larger number of people will rebel at the end of the millennium when Satan is released for a short period of time (Revelation 20:7-9).

Think about that!

Perfect sermons for hundreds of years didn't achieve anything at all in the minds of the people who will rebel at the end of the millennium. That is because even perfect sermons cannot change bad ground into good ground.

So how much are any of our sermons today likely to achieve for people whose minds do not already have "good ground"? Very little.

The key is never the quality of the sermon.

As far as imparting **understanding** is concerned, a sermon delivered by one man can certainly do much more than a sermon on the same subject delivered by another man. But as far as influencing a person's **commitment** to God is concerned, it is never a case of a sermon given by one man somehow achieving a better result than the result achieved by a sermon given on the same subject by a different man. Our sermons simply do not influence the level of people's commitment to God.

When it comes to establishing a person's commitment to God, then the man who gives the sermon is insignificant in that process, as is also the manner in which he delivers his sermon. From this commitment perspective it doesn't really make a difference whether the speaker is more or less inspirational, whether he is more or less humorous and approachable, etc. From this perspective the only thing that really matters is the quality of the ground in the minds of his hearers. [COMMENT: Here I am obviously assuming that what the speaker says is sound and correct. I am not talking about someone who preaches heresies. We are still talking about good sermons, remember?]

Perfect sermons given by spirit beings during the millennium don't necessarily achieve better results than good sermons given today by weak and imperfect human beings.

And **you alone control the quality of the ground in your mind**! No minister and no spirit being is able to change bad ground in your mind into good ground. And IF the ground in your mind happens to be bad, then even God will not be able to change it into good ground, because God will never take your free will away from you. If the ground in your mind is bad, then it is that way because **you have decided that it be so**. It was "the one talent man" himself who decided to bury the opportunity he had been given (see Matthew 25:18); that was his own decision. The same applies to all of us; if we don't seek regular direct daily contact with God, then that is the consequence of decisions we have made along the way.

Now "one talent people" frequently don't see their own responsibility for their lack of a meaningful relationship with God. [And anybody who does not pray regularly cannot possibly have a meaningful relationship with God, though people in that situation are likely to vehemently disagree with this assessment.] And so such people will readily blame others for their shortcomings: their problems are the minister's fault, or they are the Church's fault. In the parable the one talent man blamed Jesus Christ directly for supposedly being "a hard man" (Matthew 25:24).

Yes, it always comes back to the same point. **People don't like to take responsibility for the bad ground in their own minds.** The stones and the thorns and weeds in their minds are always somebody else's fault.

But good sermons can never turn bad ground into good ground!

So to summarize what we have considered thus far:

1) From the perspective of growing in knowledge and in understanding, good sermons can certainly have a very positive and edifying effect.

2) But from the perspective of actually influencing a person's relationship with and commitment to God, good sermons usually achieve nothing at all. Good sermons cannot change a person's relationship with God. The positive effect that good sermons do have for many people is due ENTIRELY to the presence of good ground in the minds of those people. The good ground had to be there before these people even heard these good sermons, because if the good sermons would fall on bad ground, then they would not produce good fruits.

Now lest you misunderstand:

We ourselves can decide to change our minds from bad ground to good ground. We can decide to remove the stones and the thorns. A mind that at present represents stony ground can make the active decision to change. And the trigger point for initiating the change of mind could well be hearing a sermon from some or other minister. Something in that sermon pricked the conscience, as, for example, was the case with Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:37), and so the person then initiates the process of changing the mind from bad ground to good ground. But here is the point:

The same sermon which may trigger the process of repentance in one person does nothing at all for another person. So is it the sermon that is the key? Or is it something in the mind of the hearer that is the key?

Two people hear the same sermon. One person is moved to repentance and the other person is totally unimpressed. There are two things involved in both of these cases: 1) a sermon, and 2) the free mind of an individual. Now since the sermon is the same in both cases, therefore the difference in results cannot be attributed to the sermon. The only possibility therefore is that the difference in results is due to differences in the respective minds of the two people involved.

So are good sermons actually worth anything?

Most certainly good sermons are very worthwhile. And, as already stated earlier, I wish that every minister in every Church of God group would always give good sermons. There is enormous value to good sermons falling on good ground. But we should never lose sight of the major limitation that will also always be there, that limitation being that the sermons don't change the quality of the ground.

Good sermons inform people and instruct people, but good sermons do not change the ground in the minds of people. Good sermons cannot overcome the obstacles posed by thorns and weeds and stony ground. We ourselves have to first remove the thorns and the stones, and then the good sermons stand a chance of producing good fruits.

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST'S PREACHING

I believe it is safe to say that in dealing with us human beings God will always use the approach that is likely to produce the greatest number of positive results. If one approach is better than a different approach, then God will use that "better" approach.

To state this another way:

During His ministry Jesus Christ used the approach to speaking that would produce the greatest number of positive results in people. So if "**inspirational speaking**" or "**stir to action speaking**" or "**a focus on prophecies**" or "**compassionate speaking**" would cause more people to repent and to submit their lives to God, then THAT is the way Jesus Christ would surely have conducted His ministry. At no stage did Jesus Christ ever deliberately use an approach to preaching that He knew was less effective in influencing people towards a real commitment to God than the results a different approach would have produced. Jesus Christ was doing the job God the Father had given Him in the best possible way.

So let's consider how Jesus Christ preached His "sermons". What type of "sermons" did Jesus Christ

give?

Jesus Christ's approach in all His speaking was **TO TEACH**! His focus was on presenting information and understanding, not to the world at large, but to His followers. Specifically, **Jesus Christ did NOT try to "inspire" people to follow Him.** He did not try to pressure anybody into making a commitment to God based on feelings and emotions. He was not what we today would think of as "an inspirational speaker", where the crowds were moved to want to submit their lives to Him, where the crowds were swayed by the feelings and emotions that His speaking had aroused in them. The crowds followed Him because they wanted food, and they wanted to see miracles performed (John 6:26; etc.); and when Christ presented teachings they didn't like, then many people ceased following Him (John 6:66).

But emotional and inspirational appeals were never a part of Christ's ministry. No, all of Jesus Christ's speaking throughout His ministry consisted of one thing: **teaching people** to understand the truth about God's plan and God's purposes (i.e. not the world at large but those who became His disciples). The word "disciples" (Latin "discipulus") means "students". And for His entire ministry Jesus Christ was primarily **a Teacher of the truth of God**.

Now here is the point:

IF "inspiring" sermons would have resulted in more people making binding commitments to obey God than simple teaching sermons, then Jesus Christ would surely have focused on presenting all of His messages in the way that inspirational speakers today present their sermons! But Jesus Christ didn't preach that way.

So let's consider the best sermons and the worst sermons. This will no doubt surprise you. We'll start with the worst sermons.

POWERFUL INSPIRATIONAL SERMONS ARE THE WORST SERMONS!

Does this heading perhaps disturb you or even anger you? You need to understand that powerful inspirational sermons that move whole audiences are **the worst possible sermons of all**! Such sermons are a total waste of time! They really are! Inspirational speakers lack real understanding.

Let's see if you can understand this.

How did Mr. Armstrong start his ministry? By preaching fire and brimstone, as other men were doing back in the 1920's? By scaring the living daylights out of people? By moving people to such a degree that they impulsively "gave their hearts to the Lord"?

You already know the answer.

Mr. Armstrong started his ministry by **EXPLAINING one Bible teaching after another**. He explained that the righteous don't go to heaven, that we don't have an immortal soul, that God requires us to keep the Sabbath and not Sunday, that Christmas and Easter are pagan customs, that there will not be an ever-burning hell fire, that God is not a trinity, that the Holy Spirit is not a person, that Jesus Christ was not crucified on a Friday and that He was not resurrected on a Sunday morning, that we really need to keep God's annual Feasts and Holy Days, that there will be a second resurrection, that Jesus Christ will rule on this Earth for 1000 years, etc. Mr. Armstrong really explained a lot of things, the knowledge of which had been lost.

The foundation of Mr. Armstrong's ministry was based on teaching people what the Bible really means.

However, he also lived at a time when there were numerous powerful speakers around who made a living by scaring people into obedience to their particular personal teachings. Some groups were predicting the end of the world. And inspirational preachers would draw crowds that numbered into the hundreds and even into the thousands. A preacher's effectiveness was measured by the size of the crowds he could draw and influence. And so later, after starting Ambassador College, Mr. Armstrong was unfortunately also somewhat drawn into that line of thinking, that powerful speaking is an effective way to preach.

I don't mean to imply that Mr. Armstrong's manner of preaching was like that; it wasn't! While he would raise his voice, he never made emotional appeals. He raised his voice while trying to explain things to us. So what I mean is that, even though he didn't do it himself, he accepted this type of preaching by other men as being appropriate. In those years Isaiah 58:1 ("cry aloud and spare not") was frequently quoted to endorse this approach to preaching to the people in the Church (I am also not talking about radio broadcasts to the world).

Anyway, God blessed Mr. Armstrong's teaching approach with growth. When Mr. Armstrong realized that he would need helpers, he started Ambassador College. One primary purpose for the college was to train future ministers. And so there was a fairly heavy emphasis on teaching the Bible. That was good!

But there was an almost equal emphasis on teaching the men to become powerful speakers. One of the most sought-after attributes amongst the men at college was for a man to be seen as a powerful speaker. It was the powerful speakers who were ordained upon graduation, and who quickly rose in the ranks of the ministry. They were the men who had the best chances of becoming evangelists. **The ability to move an audience** was very highly prized, even if that speaker couldn't really teach the truth.

The fact that some of the most powerful speakers in those early years were not even converted slipped under the radar. After all, the powerful speakers appeared to be major contributors to the Church's rapid growth in those years. One result of sending out powerful speakers was that large numbers of unconverted people came into the Church. By the mid-1970's Mr. Armstrong himself frequently questioned publicly whether even 50% of church members were converted, though in private conversations he sometimes speculated whether even 20% were really converted.

The exact percentage is neither here nor there. The point is that Mr. Armstrong himself understood that at least half of the membership growth, and more likely even 80% of the membership growth, was phony! **The wrong people had come into the Church**, the people Jesus Christ during His ministry referred to as "tares", pointing out that those "tares" would remain in the Church until the time of "the harvest" (see Matthew 13:24-30). The tares were the product of the powerful speakers!

Now, more than a quarter century after Mr. Armstrong's death, they have mostly disappeared, a clear sign that all along they had not really been "of us" (see 1 John 2:19). Specifically, where have all the powerful speakers gone, long time passing? And the people who came into the Church through these powerful speakers have likewise mostly disappeared.

The point is that "the fruits" of powerful speaking are pathetically paltry at best. So if we are to evaluate the powerful speakers of the 50's and 60's and 70's "by their fruits" (Matthew 7:20), then there are almost no fruits at all to speak of. It doesn't count if fruits "hang on" for a few years and then drop off. As the Apostle Paul explained regarding ministers in the Church:

Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire;

and **the fire shall try every man's work** of what sort it is. **If any man's work abide** which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. (1 Corinthians 3:12-14)

The fruits have to "abide" if they are to have any value. The large majority that dropped off had in reality been seeds on stony ground and amongst thorns. Without any good ground they "withered away" (Matthew 13:6), where some just took longer to wither than others.

Powerful preaching, designed to move an audience, has not really produced any significant fruits. **It never does!** So much for WHAT has happened. Now let's understand WHY this has happened. Let's understand WHY powerful and emotional preaching is the worst kind of preaching.

THIS IS WHY POWERFUL EMOTIONAL PREACHING IS BAD

Do you know what actually happens with an audience when a powerful charismatic speaker gets into full flight in his sermon delivery, with lots of shouting, flailing arms and lectern-thumping? Do you know WHY such "effective" speakers resort to such powerful deliveries?

The most common purpose for emotionally charged speaking is to circumvent the need for logic and sound reasoning! A powerful speaker doesn't need logic! And frequently he doesn't actually WANT logic, because quite often logic will only call into question the emotional appeals he is making.

Consider a speaker addressing an audience of 1000 people (e.g. at a Feast service in years gone by). His goal is to have the audience believe something or do something **or just to be impressed by his sermon**. Now relying solely on logical reasoning to make his points may convince a few people in that audience. But there is no way that for most subjects a speaker would be able to convince such a large audience by strict appeals to logic, without large numbers in that audience rejecting or not understanding his logic. Logic seldom moves people in any major way. (An exception here is if the majority of people in that audience already have a considerable bias in favor of the things the speaker wants to present. Then large numbers will gladly accept his explanations, whether they really understand his logic or not.)

Now if that speaker, instead of appealing to logic, makes a powerful emotionally charged and frequently extremely loud appeal to his audience, **giving a performance** peppered with anger and zeal and indignation, THEN there is a good chance that **most of the audience will be spellbound** by this performance. Emotions are contagious, just like a catchy tune that everybody spontaneously picks up. Also, **loud outbursts of anger** are somewhat intimidating. We don't like to confront an angry man. And **a considerable part of powerful emotional speaking revolves around expressing anger**. But such anger mostly does not come from God, and in most cases it is not a good anger; in most cases it is just a performance.

And like the catchy tune that we spontaneously hum without ever thinking about the perverse words that go along with that catchy tune, so also an emotional appeal can sweep us along without ever stopping to notice the total lack of logic underlying that emotional appeal. And obviously, the most effective emotional sermons are those that appeal to the existing biases of the audience. We easily endorse any ranting and raving against anything to which we ourselves are also already opposed.

Now the point is this:

GOD DOES NOT WANT OBEDIENCE BASED ON AN EMOTIONAL IMPULSE! AND THAT IS WHY JESUS CHRIST DIDN'T PREACH THAT WAY!

When the mind is not involved, or when the mind is not thinking clearly, then obedience is meaningless. As an example, there is no value at all in worldly people having a Monday-to-Friday job where they never work on the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath in ignorance or accidently or because it is convenient is not of any particular value before God. This is where the principle of James 2:10 applies.

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all. (James 2:10)

Keeping one or other law without actually being concerned one way or the other about keeping that law is meaningless because there is no commitment. The only obedience that is of value is obedience that is based on a firm commitment. So IF people are emotionally coerced, by means of powerful sermons, to do certain things that are right before God, then God STILL needs to find out if those people will also do those "certain things" when there is no emotional coercion.

God is looking for **obedience** that is **initiated by a sound mind**! Towards that end God gives us the spirit of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). But obedience based on emotional intimidation and coercion is never acceptable to God.

It is Satan who wants people to respond emotionally to everything. When Satan tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, Satan did not appeal to Eve's sense of logic. No, Satan appealed to Eve's emotions, the idea of being like God (see Genesis 3:5). This appeal caused Eve to ignore a logical assessment of Satan's suggestion.

God has never attempted to emotionally sway a large group of individuals to follow Him, getting them to ignore the cold hard facts in favor of listening to their feelings. No, God just doesn't work that way. But Satan does! It is Satan's strategy to attempt to influence a large group in one go, getting them all to respond based on feelings that have been aroused. That's what Satan did with the group of angels God had placed under his leadership on this earth.

And **that is what Satan still does with human beings**. Satan is interested in maximum returns in the minimum of time, rehearsing as it were for that short time at the end of the millennium. Swaying a whole crowd in one go to follow him is always preferable to Satan, when compared to having to work with every single individual on a one-on-one basis. Thus **mobs are one of Satan's all-time favorite methods** for influencing humanity. History is filled with **Satan's use of orators** to sway large groups of human beings to do his (Satan's) bidding.

But it never works that way with God! Repentance doesn't work on a "whole group" basis. Repentance only works on a one-on-One basis, or not at all! Our repentance cannot be a part of a group; it has to be on an individual basis in a direct relationship which we establish individually with God. We need to seek God as individuals.

Simply stated, trying to sway large groups of people by means of emotional appeals is ALWAYS a bad thing! That is simply not the way God has ever worked! And it is likewise not a good way of preaching to God's people!

By contrast, **TEACHING large groups** of people by appeals to facts, knowledge and sound reasoning is usually a good thing. The reason here is that appeals to the mind are never contagious. Appeals to sound reasoning must always be processed by each individual himself or herself. We are never swept off our feet and emotionally overcome because of some line of logical reasoning that we can understand and follow. No, logical sound reasoning requires every individual person to use his or her own mind to comprehend the understanding that is being presented by the teaching situation.

Even though **teaching** can be done in a group situation, **comprehension** of such teaching must

nevertheless always be on the individual level.

Furthermore, we should be able to understand that when preachers **shout** at their congregations, when they get worked up with **anger** and **indignation** in speaking to the people Jesus Christ refers to as "My sheep" (see John chapter 10), then they are clearly being influenced by the wrong spirit! That type of performance is intended to impress people and to sway people, but it is not even remotely the way Jesus Christ deals with His sheep. So beware of seeking to become "a powerful speaker" in a Church situation. And beware of being impressed by powerful speaking.

Let's look at some examples from Jesus Christ's ministry.

CONSIDER THESE SITUATIONS

Consider the occasion where Jesus Christ had fed a group of 5000 men with nothing more than five loaves and two small fishes available (John 6:9-13). That miracle of multiplying the food was the thing that convinced all those people that Jesus Christ was "THAT PROPHET" (John 6:14). It wasn't the teaching He had presented and it wasn't even the miracles of healing that convinced them. No, it was the fact that Christ gave them what they really wanted, free food! That is what Jesus Christ Himself plainly said.

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but **because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled**. (John 6:26)

In plain language: the people didn't follow Jesus Christ because He had inspired them with a deep sense of commitment to God. They didn't follow Him because they were profoundly impressed with the teachings He presented. No, **they followed Him for totally selfish reasons**!

But Jesus Christ didn't really want people to follow Him for selfish reasons! That is not the type of obedience God ever wants from us, doing what is right because of a totally selfish motivation.

Understand the following:

Immediately following this account Jesus Christ explained the need for the Passover sacrifice, where Christ was going to lay down His life for our sins. But there are different ways in which we can explain the need for the Passover, as for example in the way Paul explained it in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. There Paul clearly explained the need for the bread and the wine at the Passover without ever being in any way ambiguous.

However, that is not the approach Jesus Christ took in John chapter 6. In John 6 Jesus Christ explained the absolute need for the Passover in **very provocative** and controversial terms! And He did so **DELIBERATELY**!

Look, it is quite provocative to tell people that they must eat your flesh and drink your blood (John 6:54). Such a statement is hardly going to "inspire" people to submit their lives to God. It is a confrontational statement! And it is without question a teaching statement, one that expects the hearers to use their minds to understand the intended meaning. It may well lead people to intellectually come to submit themselves to God, but not based on "being inspired" to do so.

The point here is: we need to understand that in this situation Jesus Christ was **deliberately confrontational** with His audience. He was deliberately blunt! And Jesus Christ also knew that **nobody**

in His audience, including all of His apostles, **really understood what He was talking about**. At that point Christ had not yet changed the Passover emblems to the bread and wine, and none of His apostles anticipated that change. So even the apostles didn't know what Christ meant by eating His flesh and drinking His blood.

You need to understand WHY Jesus Christ chose to speak in such a blunt fashion to people who had been following Him for days, if not weeks.

Here is the point:

People were following Jesus Christ for totally selfish reasons, reasons that are never acceptable to God. The people asked Christ: "what sign do You show that we may see and believe You?" (John 6:30), hinting at wanting more free food (John 6:31). Because of this selfish approach by the people Jesus Christ said: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), continuing to say that He had come down from heaven (John 6:38). **The Jews then got upset** (i.e. "they murmured", John 6:41) because He wasn't giving them real physical food, as He had done previously. The Jews continued to disparage Jesus Christ by saying (paraphrased): "who does He think He is anyway? We know who His parents are, so what is this fancy idea about coming down from heaven?" (John 6:42).

Now at that point Jesus Christ had the opportunity to calm the people down. Had He been concerned about keeping together all these people who followed Him and looked up to Him, He could easily have said something like: "listen, I am not speaking about physical food. I am speaking about the SYMBOLICAL significance of the bread and the wine at the Passover, which I will introduce at My last Passover observance. I am not talking about cannibalism." Or words to that effect.

But Jesus Christ didn't do that!

He was not about to appease people. He didn't make any emotional appeals. But He did calmly make some very confrontational statements about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, **WITHOUT ANY KIND OF EXPLANATION**! See John 6:54-56. Jesus Christ knew full well that the people, including His apostles, didn't really understand that He was speaking about the bread and the wine at the Passover. This was deliberately confrontational, and thus many of His disciples said: "**THIS IS A HARD SAYING**" (John 6:60), continuing to say (paraphrased) "we're not really sure that we can accept that".

When the people took this approach, instead of trying to clarify His statements, Jesus Christ then continued His blunt confrontational approach by saying: "**does this offend you**?" (John 6:61). He continued to say (paraphrased): "in that case I'll just tell you that you haven't seen anything yet" (John 6:62).

The result was that "from that time many of His disciples walked no more with Him" (John 6:66). And Jesus Christ made no attempt, none whatsoever, to stop anyone from leaving. That (not trying to stop people from leaving) is not what inspirational speakers do. They always try to keep people.

And neither did Jesus Christ make any appeals to His 12 apostles to please stay with Him. Instead, He asked them just as bluntly: well, men, are you also leaving? (John 6:67). Simon Peter answered for all of them: "Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Now do you understand what happened?

Verse 61 is a major key here. When Jesus Christ said: "does this offend you?", He was referring to a very specific group of people. Back in the parable of the sower Jesus Christ had pointed out that the people with **stony ground** are the ones who sooner or later **take offence** (Matthew 13:21).

So here in John 6 Jesus Christ was deliberately creating a division between people with stony ground and people with good ground.

IT IS **THE STONY GROUND** THAT SAYS "THIS IS A HARD SAYING" AND THEN THEY BECOME OFFENDED!

IT IS **THE GOOD GROUND** THAT SAYS "YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE, SO WE ARE STAYING WITH YOU"!

The point here is that after these people openly showed their selfish motivations, in only being interested in free food, **Jesus Christ** very deliberately **wanted to achieve a separation from these people** with stony ground. His truthful but blunt and confrontational approach was intended to give them the opportunity to take offence, and **to motivate all those with stony ground to just go away**! His question to the 12 apostles was likewise aimed at testing the ground in their minds.

This is extremely important to understand! So note!

PEOPLE WITH STONY GROUND SAY: "We are with you all the way as long as you say and do the things WE like. But the moment you say something that we don't like, then 'we're outa here'. We ourselves are the final judge as to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable."

PEOPLE WITH GOOD GROUND SAY: "We don't really understand what you have just said. But you have the words of eternal life, and therefore we are sticking with you, in spite of not really understanding everything you have said."

In this incident Jesus Christ was showing that people with **stony ground** have a high degree of selfish motivation for everything they do. And that degree of selfishness means that they also very **easily take offence**. Selfishness and taking offence go together like a hand and a glove. Stony ground is also very fickle. One minute stony ground loves you and the next minute stony ground hates you. One minute it wants to make someone their king (John 6:15), and the next minute it wants to stone that person (see John 8:59). [The same thing happened to Paul: one minute people called him "Mercurius", and shortly afterwards they stoned him. See Acts 14:12-19. Paul was also dealing with "stony ground people".]

By contrast, people with **good ground** will not allow anything to offend them. As Psalm 119:165 tells us, "great peace have they which love Your law, and **nothing shall offend them**". This statement applies to people with good ground.

Now the point in this incident in John 6 is that **Jesus Christ actually wanted the people with stony ground to stop following Him**. The things He said regarding eating His flesh and drinking His blood were a test for all the people who were following Him, the vast majority of whom in fact had a selfish motivation. This occasion gave them the opportunity to leave.

That is another lesson.

We have always had some people come into the Church for the wrong reasons. At some point it becomes apparent that those people aren't really "with it", or in John's terms "of us". And these people may even realize this themselves. Sometimes it can become quite awkward for such people. Here they are in God's Church and they don't really belong. But they also don't know "how to get out"; **they need an excuse** or a justification for getting out. And in those types of situations a confrontational blunt approach is frequently the best way to sort things out. Think of Peter's blunt approach in dealing with Simon Magus (see Acts 8:20-23).

In itself a blunt direct approach is not necessarily an offensive approach, even though some people will take offence. I am not referring to being rude and insulting. "**A hard saying**" is often enough to cause some stony ground people to take offence and to leave.

Now let's look at another occasion.

When a Canaanite woman asked Jesus Christ to cast a demon out of her daughter, Jesus Christ said: "it is not fitting to take the children's bread and **to cast it to dogs**" (Matthew 15:26). This was once again a rather provocative statement. The woman understood quite well that in analogy Jesus Christ was referring to her racial group as "dogs". So why did Jesus Christ do that, speak to her in a way that most people would have found highly offensive? Did Christ have a racial bias against the Canaanites? No, He didn't! But neither was it His purpose to conduct His ministry amongst the Canaanites.

With this provocative approach Jesus Christ was testing this woman's faith and attitude **in a very quick way**. Had this woman responded by taking offence, the way most people would have responded, then Jesus Christ would not have healed her daughter. So notice the woman's response:

And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. (Matthew 15:27)

This woman did two things. First, she agreed with Christ's analogy by saying "truth, Lord". And secondly, not only did she agree with this analogy; she actually carried it a step further by herself using the analogy in which she freely accepted the role of "a dog".

This response by this woman showed **a very high level of faith in Christ's position as the Savior**. (She had earlier already addressed Him as a "Son of David", a reference to the Messiah; see Matthew 15:22.) And in no way whatsoever had she taken offence at His deliberately disparaging analogy to dogs. In this way she also displayed a great deal of **humility**.

So the point here is this:

Jesus Christ used a somewhat provocative approach to very quickly assess the woman's faith and humility. And her response showed that she had both, faith and humility. And therefore Jesus Christ then healed the woman's daughter (Matthew 15:28). Note that Jesus Christ was in fact impressed by the woman's level of faith. When He said "**GREAT IS YOUR FAITH**", this tells us that Jesus Christ was most certainly testing the woman with His provocative statement, and that the level of her faith made an impression on Him.

In our context, this shows once again that Jesus Christ was interested in making an objective factual assessment of the woman's state of mind. There was nothing in His approach to suggest that Christ wanted to inspire obedience or a following. Attempting to "inspire" obedience was never a part of Jesus Christ's ministry.

The fruits of "inspiring" people to do something can frequently be led back to Satan. For example, the same multitudes that shouted "hosanna to the son of David" when Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem (see Matthew 21:9) were a few days later easily persuaded by the priests and elders to call for Jesus Christ to be crucified (see Matthew 27:22-23), even though they could not find any fault with Jesus Christ.

Note!

The most powerful evidence against "inspirational preaching" is found in Matthew 27:23.

And the governor said, Why, **what evil hath he done**? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified. (Matthew 27:23)

Pontius Pilate asked a very logical question: if you want this man condemned to death, then tell me what evil He has done. But inspirational speaking hates logic! Instead of providing a logical answer for why Christ should die, the "inspired mob" resorted to drowning out all appeals for logic by chanting "let Him be crucified".

INSPIRATIONAL PREACHERS IN THE CHURCH OF GOD DO EXACTLY THE SAME THING! WITH THEIR SHOUTING AND OUTBURSTS OF ANGER THEY SEEK TO DROWN OUT SOUND REASONING! THEY SEEK TO OVERPOWER BY SHEER FORCE OF VOLUME AND CHARISMA!

The subject may be different (i.e. they obviously don't ask to have Jesus Christ crucified) but **the method is the same**. That's true for most of the inspirational speakers that dominated the atmosphere in the Church in the 50's and 60's.

To state this plainly:

Any speaking that attempts to sway large groups of people in one go by means of passionate emotional appeals is always suspect! It is suspect because **that is contrary to the way God desires to influence people**.

Now lest you misunderstand:

I am not trying to say that there is a problem with the occasional loud and emphatic statement in a sermon. Such occasional loud statements are quite acceptable to make a point, provided they are not an effort to hide the lack of real factual support for some or other position.

Here I am really referring to **a very predictable pattern of speaking**, where the minister would fly off the handle with emotional outbursts, irrespective of what the subject happened to be. If you have been around for over 40 years, then you surely know of certain speakers, where there was a guaranteed "powerful delivery" whenever they would speak. The subject didn't matter; at some point about halfway through their sermons they would work themselves up to a predictable crescendo, followed by an explosion like a volcanic eruption. And the next time they spoke it was the same type of performance. That also happens to be precisely the same manner in which certain worldly preachers gain an emotional hold over their ardent followers.

Let's consider one other category of bad sermons.

SERMON TIME IS NOT STORY TIME!

Over the past 60 years many men were ordained into the ministry who should never have been ordained because they lacked one of the primary qualifications for the ministry. That lacking qualification was the ability to teach the truth of God and to correctly explain the Bible to God's people.

To compensate for this lack, what many men in this situation did is: **they told stories and attached some "good lessons" to those stories.** And in many cases a part of the church service became story time!

We heard stories about Churchill and Roosevelt and Lincoln and General Patton. We heard stories of

valor and courage and perseverance about Anne Frank and soldiers and explorers and inventors and mountain climbers and sailors and sports personalities. While these stories were mostly restricted to the sermonettes, they also at times appeared in the main sermons. And the stories were great! You could also read them in Readers' Digest or in biographical books. And we heard lots of stories about various acquaintances of the speakers, like relatives, neighbors and coworkers. **It is always easy to listen to a story**; even Mark Twain could have told us that!

But there is no place for such stories in a church service of the Church of God!

The purpose of a church service is to present information from the Bible, to explain and expound the Bible, to make clear the teachings of the Bible, to explain God's plan for mankind and God's purposes, to explain the laws of God. And IF we want to tell stories, then those stories should be about Abraham and Moses and Gideon and Jephthah and Elijah and Hezekiah and Daniel, etc.; i.e. stories about people in the Bible, where the information we present in the story is based on the Bible.

But there is no place in a Church of God service for stories about people in the world. It is not denied that some people in the world have shown unbelievable courage or determination or resilience or leadership; some people in the world really have demonstrated these attributes. The point is that **the Church of God should never be directed to look to the world for positive examples in how to live our lives before God**!

For example: no matter how great a leader Sir Winston Churchill (you can put anybody else's name in here if you like) turned out to be, he was still a part of a world that is ruled over by Satan. And Satan's subjects are not to be held up as examples for the people who have been called out of this world by God. **The people in this world are not to be our examples.** We are to come out of this world. We are to be the examples for the world (Matthew 5:14), and not the other way around.

The preachers of this world's churches often resort to telling stories, with cute lessons attached to those stories. That all by itself should tell us that such a story-telling approach is not right for the Church of God.

Now one problem here was that **many people actually LIKE stories** for sermons! Thus many times people have spoken in admirable terms about the story-sermons. The reason for the popularity of stories is obvious: stories are entertaining and non-threatening. They don't make us feel uneasy. They are "**EASY on the mind**", a la Isaiah 30:10 ("speak unto us smooth things"). We don't have to concentrate too much and usually we don't have to do anything. So not surprisingly, with many people such "sermons" are quite popular. But popularity doesn't make something right!

The next time you hear a story-sermon (or are tempted to give a story-sermon?) think about God's view of story telling in services. And then afterwards don't tell the story teller how much you liked his sermon!

THE BASICS OF GOOD SERMONS

Well, with everything we've covered so far, we don't need a lengthy discussion of what makes **a sermon good**. A good sermon explains and expounds the Bible. It makes the Bible clearer to us. A good sermon follows the general pattern set by Ezra. Notice:

So **they read in the book** in the law of God **distinctly**, and **gave the sense**, and **caused *them* to understand** the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8)

Most sermons should generally revolve around **these three things**:

1) Accurately reading some verses or passages in the Bible.

2) Giving the sense of those verses.

3) Helping people understand the intended meaning and application.

Keep in mind that **at the time of Ezra the people no longer spoke Hebrew** as their everyday language. During the captivity they had exchanged speaking Hebrew for speaking Aramaic. While these two languages are certainly related, there are also certain differences between them. Thus being fluent in one of them does not automatically guarantee fluency in the other. And common people from the time of Ezra onwards have had difficulty understanding Hebrew.

So the approach that was developed by Ezra was basically as follows:

1) **The priests would accurately read the Hebrew text.** This was partially understandable to the people, but it was also partially difficult for the common people to understand. Think of us today trying to read the original John Wycliffe Bible (Middle English), let alone trying to read something in the Old English of the Anglo-Saxons. That would be somewhat like a person familiar only with Aramaic trying to understand the Hebrew language.

2) So then the priests would **faithfully translate the Hebrew text** they had read **into** the **Aramaic** language, the common language of the people. This inability by the common people to understand Hebrew was the main reason for the development of several Targumim (the Old Testament in Aramaic) during the period before the New Testament.

3) While it was helpful for the people to hear the Scriptures in their own language (like us hearing the Bible in English rather than in Hebrew or in Greek), that still wasn't really enough. So therefore in this third step the priests showed the people **how these Scriptures applied to them** in their daily lives, explaining and expounding and amplifying the meaning of the Scriptures they had read.

And that represents the essence of good sermons. The focus is always some or other part of the Bible. And the goal then is to make that part of the Bible as clear to God's people as possible.

While we today should follow this same general approach that was first established by Ezra, in our circumstances it is helpful to **change the sequence** of these three steps. So in our circumstances these three steps should most commonly look as follows:

1) **We read the selected Scriptures in English.** This represents step #2 from Ezra's time.

2) **Then we establish whether what we have read is in fact a faithful translation** of the original Hebrew (OT) or Greek (NT) text. This we do by examining key words and expressions in the Hebrew or Greek text. At the end of this step we have established either that our English translation is basically correct, or we have exposed certain mistranslations that have found their way into our English versions. This represents step #1 from Ezra's time. We are basically working backwards to the original text.

3) Having established an accurate text in English, we then go to step #3 from Ezra's time. **We explain the intended meaning** of the text, showing applications in our daily circumstances, etc. We make the meaning of the Scriptures we have presented plain to God's people.

Now since most of our English translations of the Bible are generally reasonably good, the first two steps

from Ezra's time are frequently condensed into one step today. In other words, we commonly assume that our translations are faithful to the original text. And instead of having to carefully examine every single word in the original Hebrew or Greek text, for most verses in the Bible it is generally sufficient for us today to examine only key words or key expressions within the text, accepting that the rest of the text has in fact been translated in a basically correct way. Of the 31,175 verses in the Bible probably around 30,000+ don't contain any significant mistranslations, and can therefore be readily accepted as correct.

So a good sermon boils down to presenting step #3 from Nehemiah 8:8, **helping God's people to understand what the Bible means**. That's what God's servant Ezra did! And that is what every good sermon today still does!

It is not a matter of entertaining people with stories, or of working people up emotionally so that they can feel inspired. It is simply a case of "**causing people to understand the reading**". Once a sermon has done that, then it is a good sermon! And THEN the quality of the ground comes into play: is the ground good or is it rocky or is it thorny? A good sermon gives people the tools to make their own decisions regarding how they can best put God's laws into practice in their own lives.

IN CONCLUSION

So what is the real value of good sermons? Good sermons will provide understanding of the Bible. Good sermons are vital in helping us to grow in grace and in knowledge and in understanding. They make additional information available to God's people.

What is the major limitation of all sermons? No sermon can actually change a person's relationship with God. The relationship we establish with God depends on us providing "good ground" in our minds. And unless there is good ground present in our minds, all sermons, including those given by Jesus Christ Himself, will fail to produce any positive results. The quality of the ground in a person's mind is always far more important than the quality of the sermons the person will hear.

Good sermons can provide information, but they can never provide commitment to God.

No human being will ever know everything there is to know about the Bible and about the information God has revealed in the Bible. Therefore it becomes incumbent upon those who speak in Church to never stop learning, so that we will be able to add additional understanding whenever we speak to God's people. It is not particularly desirable for a minister to do nothing more than to rehash all the things he has said 50 times before. It is simply not edifying to tell people, who have been around the Church for 40 years or more, the same old things which they have heard for decades.

Of course it is difficult to try to constantly add to the understanding of God's people. A minister cannot simply fall back on giving the same old lectures year after year, the way a school teacher can do with his old lectures to new students every year. The minister himself is also supposed to constantly grow in understanding. If he really "asks, seeks and knocks" (Matthew 7:7-8), then God will surely continue to open his mind to greater understanding, so that he in turn can then present greater understanding to the congregation of God's people.

Beware of being impressed by powerful inspirational sermons or by story-time sermons. Look for understanding that requires sound thinking and sound logic. Beware of any presentation that appeals to your emotions.

If you have the opportunity to get together with some of God's people on the Sabbath, make use of that

opportunity (Hebrews 10:25), even if the quality of the sermons you are likely to hear doesn't measure up to your particular expectations. And always remember that the quality of the ground in your mind is far more important than the quality of the sermon you will hear. The focus is on you, not on the man to whose sermon you will listen.

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