

## Recovering from Preacher Talk

I've been what some would call a "preacher" all of my adult life. I gave my first "sermon" when I was 18 years old (36 years ago now). I still have the notes. It was on John the Baptist, and how we are to "*prepare the way of the Lord,*" in a way similar to him. It was pretty painstaking for that poor group of people who were held captive by their kindness to this young and aspiring preacher. I don't think the message was in error; it was just long – as in to the tune of an hour long! A week later I was off to Bible College. That kind and patient congregation, the same ones who saw me get born-again, baptized, and filled with the Holy Spirit all in a year's time, saw me off with gifts. They gave me a watch, so I wouldn't speak so long the next time! They also gave me a belt and suspenders, because allegedly, since I didn't have a means of holding my pants up while preaching, I kept tugging on them to stay in place. I think they exaggerated this. And they gave me a pack of handkerchiefs, because, again they alleged that I had, during the John the Baptist homily, frequently used my sleeve to wipe my nose. I still think they mistook my sweaty brow for a runny nose. Nevertheless, I graciously received their tokens, and went off to preachers' school to learn how to do it the right way.

Just so you know, I absolutely loved the Bible College experience. I learned a bunch of fantastic things about God and the Bible. I ate it up and enjoyed nearly every minute of it, even the class on how to preach sermons. So when I sort of put down some parts of the "preaching" experience, don't think I'm blaming it on the school I went to, or on anyone else for that matter. Any mistakes I've made, I made them all by myself. When I say, I've come to have a particular suspicion of "preacher talk," I'm pointing at myself as much as anyone else.

By "Preacher Talk," I'm not talking about pronouncing "God" like there's a "w" before the "d," or about that practice of adding an extra breath-syllable to the end of each phrase: "*God is good-huh! His Word is true-huh! Let's do his will-huh!*" Then there's that certain preacherly tone that sounds like no one ever talks in real life. I'm not talking about pronunciation or a tone or style. What I mean by "preacher talk" is the cliché-driven kind of Christianity that preachers often inadvertently espouse when we give our messages. It's the happily-ever-after-Christianity where everything always works out for the follower. I'm talking about the formula-driven spirituality that says if we do such and such, God will most certainly do so and so. It often comes out in sermons in terms such as, "*God always...*" and "*God never...*" In my suffering (as well as in observing the sufferings of others), I've come to doubt that God is as predictable as I once thought. I don't know that we can say with confidence that God *always* or *never* does anything in particular. Sure he never lies or sins, and he always loves. But as for things in particular, I'm not sure that we can with confidence say that God will do this or that; or that God would never do something like this or that.

I know that this might sound to some to be a bit cynical. And I don't deny picking up some cynicism along the road of difficulty. Nevertheless, even my honest study of Scripture has yielded a suspicion, if not an irritation of trite promises made by us preachers that God will always do one thing and never another. It's clear from the Bible that God is *faithful*. There's no way to read his Word and come to any other conclusion. God is most definitely *faithful*. But preacher talk seems to turn *faithful* into *predictable*. That is, because we can count on him it follows that we can always count on him to do things the same way he always does them. I've come to believe that he's *faithful* in his character, but not the least bit *predictable* in how he chooses to express his character.

<sup>33</sup>Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!

<sup>34</sup>"Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?"

<sup>35</sup>"Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay him?"

<sup>36</sup>For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

(Romans 11)

C.S. Lewis (whose writings have a distinct lack of “preacher talk”) seemed to have had a similar understanding of God when he wrote The Chronicles of Narnia. The Jesus character is a fierce lion named, *Aslan*. And one of the notable characteristics of Aslan was his unpredictability. He seemed capricious, almost fickle at times. He would show up sometimes and save the day, and at others he would wait. Or he would only show himself to one person and remain invisible to the rest. One of the characters asked another about Aslan, “*Is he safe?*” “*No. He’s not safe, but he is good.*”

It’s hard for us to live with mystery, enigma, and paradox. We seem to allow for very little *wonder* in our lives. Everything has to be nailed down, have clear explanations, and fit a pattern. But accepting the ambiguity of God’s ways is huge part of a life of faith. He’s just not that nail-downable!

Faith doesn’t mean that we have God all figured out, it means that we can live with him without having him figured out. My counsel to you is that you expect the best from God, and yet be prepared for the possibility of the best being something other than what you expected! He is God after all, and you’re not. He doesn’t work for you. It’s the other way around. He doesn’t always do what we want him to, and he has his reasons (I guess). He sometimes answers our prayers and even our questions. But God didn’t send his Son into the world to explain stuff to us, but to save us! I also counsel you to not reduce your faith to clichés and trite talk about God. Don’t make promises to others about what God *always* or *never* does. Tell them in plain talk that he’s the faithful God of mystery and wonder. His paths are “*beyond tracing out,*” so try to keep your eye on him and follow him the best you can.