

# 9 Things Preachers Should Never Say



**Many preachers shoot themselves in the foot when they start off with hackneyed or formulaic phrases that fail to capture the fleeting attention of those in the pew. Charley Reeb, a Florida pastor known as a gifted preacher, outlines nine opening lines that good preachers avoid.**

Preaching is challenging. When someone suggested to Winston Churchill that he ought to put his oratorical skills to use as a preacher, he replied, "I am not such a fool as to think that I could speak to essentially the same people about the same subject each week and keep their attention." Indeed.

The preacher's job is tough enough as it is without shooting ourselves in the foot. Here is my list of nine things preachers should never say.

## **1. Last night as I was watching Netflix**

We've all had those crazy weeks when we were late getting a sermon finished, but we don't have to broadcast it. If Netflix saved your sermon on Saturday night, don't make it worse by telling your congregation about it. They will think you slapped the sermon together on your way to church. If you do reference Netflix, leave out the part about Saturday night!

*Never forget that most of your listeners have survived a week of soccer games, angry bosses, deadlines, and overdue bills. What difference will your sermon make to their lives?*

## **2. I have three points today**

You want to kill your sermon before it starts? Tell your congregation how many points your sermon will have. They will begin anticipating how long your sermon will be and never pay attention to your message. "It took her ten minutes to get through point one! We've got a long way to go." Keep them in suspense.

### **3. Let me tell you a funny story**

Don't ever begin a story this way. First, you remove the element of surprise, which is half the fun of humor. Second, your listeners will be the judge. If you tell them it's funny, many of your listeners will think, "We'll see if it's funny or not." Instead of experiencing the story, they will critique the story. If the story is funny let it speak for itself.

### **4. Our Scripture lesson for today is**

Starting your sermon by reading the text is a big mistake. Many of your listeners are not waiting expectantly to hear a text of Scripture. It is unfortunate, but some of your listeners don't even believe the Bible is inspired. They need to be convinced why they should listen to the text. Most listeners decide in about two minutes whether a sermon is worth listening to. I suggest spending that time telling them why they should care about your Scripture lesson and then read it.

### **5. Before I begin today**

You begin your sermon the moment you open your mouth, so this statement doesn't make any sense. What's more, listeners want to know right off the bat where you're going to be taking them. If you waste time giving more announcements or make an irrelevant joke about last night's football game, there's a good chance you will lose some of your listeners. As journalists like to say, "Don't bury the lead."

### **6. My New Testament professor said**

We've all had professors who were like Yoda to us, but don't make the mistake of assuming your listeners care about the insights of your seminary professors. This is what is known as the "Curse of Knowledge." Of course you should allow the wisdom of seminary to guide your sermon preparation, but never forget that most of your listeners don't share your frame of reference. They've survived a week of soccer games, angry bosses, deadlines, and overdue bills. What difference will your sermon make to their lives?

### **7. Let me illustrate**

Just illustrate! Don't preface your illustration by telling them it will be an illustration. See how ridiculous that sounds? Just give the illustration. Like humorous stories, effective illustrations have an element of surprise to them. Don't steal your illustration's thunder. A good illustration needs no introduction.

### **8. Did you hear the one about the priest, minister, and rabbi?**

Steer clear of corny and canned jokes. Your sermons deserve better. I know, I know. What's his name on television (the one with a big smile) tells a corny joke at the beginning of every sermon. If you want to emulate him, you have bigger problems. Every once in a while you may come across a good joke to tell but use those sparingly. The best humor comes naturally from your own observations, insights, and experiences of life.

### **9. For those of you who were not here last week, let me recap**

Unless you're really into guilt trips, don't remind your listeners of their past absences in worship, especially at the beginning of your sermon. That's not the best way to capture their attention. And those who were in attendance shouldn't be rewarded with a long summary of previous sermons in a series. Recapping is fine as long as you are short and concise.

This article is adapted from Charley Reeb's blog about preaching at [charleyreeb.com](http://charleyreeb.com). He is author of *That'll Preach! 5 Simple Steps to Your Best Sermon Ever* (Abingdon Press, 2017). The book is available through Cokesbury and Amazon.