

# **The Proper and Improper Use of Illustrations in Sermons**

By, Timothy L. Johnston

[Dakota/Montana District Pastors Conference, Banff, Canada, April 3, 1989]

The “Thunder” hadn’t always been so used to victory. There was a time when they’d lose every game. Not only were they unable to score effectively, but even the most basic skills were lacking. They couldn’t dribble effectively or even pass the ball properly. They were never in good physical condition. They neither practiced any training rules nor did they understand any reason for it. There were no organized plays nor was there a play book in anyone’s locker. “Team ball” was simply a concept beyond their comprehension. Needless to say, the Thunder was the laughing stock of the league. But all that’s behind them now.

Now the Thunder has a coach known as “Lightening”. Lightening had always wanted to coach the Thunder but they disregarded him and ignored him because they simply felt he knew nothing of the sport. Then one day, by an incredible miracle, Lightening won the hearts of the team and proved, not only that he knew everything there was to know about the game, but that he was deeply committed to making them winners.

You know, the Thunder is a lot like preachers. They so desperately want to make thunder but fail so often and for so long to realize that there is no thunder without Lightening’s coaching techniques: Preachers unquestionably believe in the One of whom they speak, but isn’t there much more when it comes to “scoring a winning” sermon? They simply must learn to make proper application of His wisdom or else their message is barely retained as, they greet each member with the customary handshake and “have a nice day.”

There are many bridges to cross over from the side of the layman to that of the clergy and still more to cross in getting back again to capture the ears of their listeners. Every-ordained minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ crosses that first, bridge when he acquires a degree for his academic study, of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. However, studies on the successes of preaching emphasize that ministers must learn, in a practical way, through experience and experimentation, to make use of and apply a Christ-like style of preaching in their sermons. The importance of going about one’s business in a Christ-like way can hardly be contested in any application of ministerial service; yet, I hope to explore the many ways which that truth clearly serves here as the single, most important guideline for addressing the theme and purpose of this essay.

## **The Proper and Improper Use of Illustrations in Sermons**

In exploring Christ’s influence for added dimension to our textual explanations let us carefully observe the way He Himself used illustrations in His own ministry. He is the Head of the churches which have called us. It is tie to whore we pray for guidance in every sermon we write. And, it is His message of His Gospel and of His Kingdom which we intend to bring, in a clear way, to His people. Therefore, it’s only obvious that we research Christ and Holy Scripture for inspiration in the proper use of illustrations. The reverse seems even more obvious. Namely that if these do not serve as the inspiration for any given illustration then a warning had better be taken that we may be dealing with an improper and unsuitable usage in sermon writing.

Jesus is the “insti-tutor” of sermonizing the Gospel. The use of illustrations to make God’s love known to the world was “institutionalized” by our Savior’s ministry. Through His message, therefore, He becomes our “tutor” in an instant and for every instance of proper uses. For example, the Sermon on the Mount has some fifty-six illustrations, mostly metaphors. You can read that entire sermon aloud in fifteen minutes. If the sermon was delivered just as it is recorded Jesus was using more than three illustrations a minute. It seems plain that Jesus would want us to learn from Him about the proper use of illustrations and make use of them. Jesus words are, “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am” (John 13:13). “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (Matthew 10:24-25). In light of that, the theme which I am privileged to discuss is an excellent one. It is good for us to take time to analyze the preaching techniques of our Teacher and become more like Him in our labors.

Think of what an illustration is supposed to accomplish. “Illustration” comes from the root of the Latin word “lux”, which means “light.” Webster defines the word as “an example or instance which helps make something clear.” An illustration may take the form of a narrative, an analogy, an allegory, cliché, an anecdote, a novel or a fable, a diagram, or anything at all that makes the message clearly understood and more easily remembered. Thus we should consider, as proper illustrations, any terminology that is easily visualized which can reflect its meaning to shed light on the truth at hand and illuminate the hearer.

Illustrations are a form of mental replay.... It makes repetition possible without weariness.... Recapitulation, even duplication, may be effected while simultaneously sustaining interest. There is some sense in the rustic preacher who said, “First I tells them what I am going to tell them, then I tells them, then I tells them what I told them.” The illustration is a skillfully disguised restatement of the preacher’s thesis. If handled appropriately, the listener comes to a clear understanding of the truth(s).<sup>1</sup>

We might compare the aggressive and successful offense of the team, Thunder, to illustrate the means for proper illustrations. After many years of failure and frustration they became successful by learning the necessary skills from their coach and His experiences. We have already made the point that Coach Lightning was for the Thunder what Christ is for the preacher. Now let’s consider what he taught them.

It may have seemed obvious to the Thunder that the game revolved around the ball, but Coach Lightning drilled every aspect of ball handling into them. One day the coach assigned to each of the mystified team players one of the game balls. They all seemed to be identical. He required that each player keep His own ball with him at all times night and day. They were told they must even sleep with their ball. It was to stay on their person while they ate, attended classes and even on their dates. They were to handle it, smell it, examine it. Two weeks later at the afternoon practice, without warning, they were told to give tip their balls and mix them with the others. Then each was asked to find his own ball. Surprisingly, they could all do so without difficulty. They had fondled and scrutinized and lived with that ball until it became intimately theirs. Now Coach Lightning was able to explain what may have seemed obvious. Namely that each player on the court was to know exactly where the ball was and who had it at all times. By that he taught them concentration on the ball which proved to be, a great advantage for the kind of anticipation and awareness that was necessary. With simple training such as this the Thunder became very smart ball players. As the Thunder found success in their learned ability, to concentrate on the ball so can we find success in the use of illustrations with increased concentration on the practical applications of Holy Scripture.

The example is meant to show how the preacher becomes more than an exegete when delivering a sermon to his congregation. Preaching requires taking what seems obvious (i.e. the truths of the text) and becoming so fully acquainted with it that you see applications for its message when you sleep, or eat, or drive down the highway. Truly the living word can then come alive when life with all of its variations is applied to it. The preacher must perpetually hold up textual truths in the face of everyday normal life, and, in that light, examine and study it, always asking the Holy Spirit to show him how it illustrates Christianity. This must be at least partially what is meant by “Pray without ceasing.” Once more then, since this point is so important to successful illustrations, the obvious isn’t so much that we live life, but that we become aware of life and its experiences. The illustrator of the living word must truly observe life.

Every preacher must develop an alertness toward life in order to think illustratively. As you read, as you feel, as you act and react, all of life becomes a reservoir from which you can draw illustrative material.<sup>2</sup>

W. Floyd Bresee points out,

<sup>1</sup> J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction To Contemporary Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker-Book House, 1975), p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175

The minister who complains about having no illustrations is admitting either that his religion isn't relevant to life or that he doesn't yet possess what every successful preacher, must develop—the “homiletic bias”. The homiletic bias means more than training yourself to see the world; it means always seeing it in spiritual colors.

What are these observations telling us? What does homiletic bias teach us about Jesus' style of preaching? How does it illustrate His Kingdom? The answer lies in the example of the way our Master preached in His sermons. Mark 4:33-34 tells us that “With many parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable.” Jesus was so well acquainted with the meaning of His message that He could see illustrations everywhere. His observations on life were spiritual and in explaining His perception of truth all the living colors of grace were brought to life.

Notice how broad and all-inclusive were our Teacher's observations of life. He used in His illustrations: home life (leavening bread, borrowing from a neighbor, patching clothes, lighting lamps, sweeping floors, tile boy who didn't want to live at home, children playing games in the street); business (tending money, collecting money owed, paying taxes, the shrewd manager); trades (managing orchards and vineyards, building houses, fishermen staring their catch, bosses and servants); nature (salt, light, wheat, tares, harvesting, flowers, birds, wind, rain and peals of thunder, hair falling out); places; politics (kings going to war); language, (raca, an eye for an eye); human fears (losing an eye or an arm, law suits, trampled); social events (feasts, weddings) and countless others. If Jesus is our homiletics teacher then it means being so well acquainted with our message that we might apply it with an illustration to every facet of life.

With Jesus the Kingdom was always “like” something. Let's remind ourselves of just one chapter, Matthew 13: Jesus taught,

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed.... like a mustard seed.... like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.... like treasure hidden in a field; again.... like a merchant looking for fine pearls; once again.... like a net that was let down into the lake.

That isn't by any means a unique chapter of the Bible for illustrations. Scripture is literally loaded with them. Paul, at least partially, explains why in 1 Corinthians 10:11, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages have come.” The remainder of the explanation for the use of all these illustrations is described by the author of Hebrews who writes, “For the word of God is living and active.”

Much more time is required in sermon writing for the study of “grace” than for how it can be illustrated. All scripture is written down for our learning and each text must be examined in the light of its application to sound doctrine and in light of its great value to fallen man. After that comes the question on hand, “How do we bring it to life?” Jesus always seemed to be asking, “How can I make them understand?” That's where Jesus was at. He was spiritually alive all of the time and searching for ways to make it clear through everyday language. Christ taught the homiletical bias.

Once God in His wisdom committed Himself to language as the means to communicate His love, He simultaneously committed Himself to the use of metaphor.... The God-conceived, God-executed, God-communicated plan of salvation for the human race is so colossal that it defies the capacity of language to contain it and to convey it. Thus God pulls out all the stops in order to convey it to human minds and human hearts. He comes at it from every possible angle.... Language is the vehicle God chose to describe it, better, no doubt, than any other vehicle God might have chosen. So God exploits the medium He selected. He taps its maximum potential. Biblical metaphors, figures of

speech, images, and rhetorical devices to communicate Good News are the delightful outcome of God's mining the medium of language for all it is worth.<sup>3</sup>

The court of play to the Thunder is like the whole world to the messengers of the living Word. Coach Lightening illustrated a few subtle approaches in training the team to make use of the entire court and to know where they are on the court at all times. He arranged several lock-ins where his team had to sleep on the gymnasium floor. They each brought their sleeping bags and were assigned places to sleep according to their particular zone. At three in the morning he woke them all up from deep sleep, called them over to the bleachers, and lectured them, in total darkness, on the values of making full use of the court by knowing just where you are at all times. Then they were told to return to their sleeping bags for the remainder of the night. The first time this technique was tried none of them were able to go directly to their spots. But, by the fourth lock-in they had learned to find their zone in complete darkness without any trouble.

This training is meant to illustrate what we need to learn in making use of our court; the modern or contemporary world, from which we must draw our illustrations. In helping people to retain the truths of the Bible it is of significant value to relate their Christian faith, and the Bible's teachings, to their everyday life. Jesus showed us how to do that. However, illustrations are not as meaningful these days if we are talking about shepherds and sowers as much as fences, barns, silos, telephone poles, farm vehicles and county highways. Wash machines are a better illustration than beating clothes with rocks down by the river, and so on.

Actually, Bible illustrations serve more as proof to our themes. They do not serve as a substitute for examples from contemporary lifestyles. However we should consider using Biblical illustrations which are not so familiar, such as the life of Demos or Onesimus. So often the hearers tend to be bored with a Biblical illustration they have heard many times before unless it is creatively done. Remember a "proper" illustration sheds light from something that is familiar and helps people remember your message when they go back to their homes and businesses and "their own world".

The illustration of Coach Lightening's lock-ins does not suggest that we should go camping all over our home towns. We can create interesting illustrations without ever owning a sleeping bag or learning how hard the gymnasium floor can really be. We simply have to observe and familiarize ourselves with the country and its beauty, with the homes and their customs, the businesses, the interests, and the people, young and old, around us. Let's just think in spiritual terms and view everything, as much as possible, with a homiletical bias, so to speak. Think of all the ways that the up-coming sermon can be reflected in what you see and hear. Be familiar with the world around you; and, not only use it for your advantage in the pulpit, but also to give you increased appreciation of the beauty and significance of the entire creation.

A story is told of a young man who picked up a golden coin lying along the road., Ever after, as he walked along, he kept his eyes fastened on the ground in hope of finding another. In the course of a long life he picked up a good deal of gold and silver, but in all these years he never saw the lovely flowers by the wayside or the grassy dell, or mountain peak and silver stream. He caught no glimpse of the blue heaven above, or the snowy clouds, like angel pillows, telling purity and glory beyond. God's stars came out and shone like gems of everlasting hope, but he kept his eyes upon the mud and filth in which he sought the treasure; and when he died, a rich old man, he knew this lovely earth only as a dirty road in which to pick up money as he walked along.<sup>4</sup>

No two preachers will illustrate exactly the same way or see the same meaning in an illustration. Thus every successful illustrator will be as unique and original as their very own finger print. Every person sees life differently and applies his personal talents to the Christian faith according to his own outlook on life.

<sup>3</sup> Francis C. Rossow, *Preaching The Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Reins, *Treasury Of Themes And Illustrations* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1983) p. 375.

The illustrative concept is a way of looking at things. In fact, it is one's own personal way of looking and looking and looking at everything: It examines the texture of every fabric, missing not a color and neglecting not a thread. It examines the tangible and intangible for the substance of an illustration.... It milks secrets out of stone and wraps warm imagination around the aggravating tune of a squeaking shoe. Nothing is too small to excite it. Nothing is large enough to discourage it from toying with the fringe of the robe and hoping for the touch of inspiration.<sup>5</sup>

The variety of talent in preachers can also be illustrated by the Thunder. Each player learned well to apply his own talents for the success of the team. "Lil' Ike" and "Furinstinz" were the starting guards. They always knew where the ball had to be at the end of every play and smartly waited for the right timing to make it happen. In searching for just the right illustration every preacher carries his message through the contemporary world similarly to the way Lil' Ike and Furinstanz move the ball down the court. As they reflected the wisdom of their coach's enlightenment so can we smartly apply kingdom truths in the likeness of the contemporary world.

Thinking of this very point as he drove down the long, narrow, country highway, a minister could see how true it was. "I am a blessed soul granted life by a wonderful Maker. My car is like my human body with many frailties steering down the narrow path to my destiny. The striped lines and the signs are like God's loving directives to make my journey safe. The telephone lines remind me, of the simple but important communications we have through prayer. And, as I look to the buttes I can almost sense the awesome presence of celestial hosts." "Truly", he thought to himself, "the world offers illustrations, everywhere I go showing that God is with me."

The Thunder's starting Forwards, "Bugsie" and "Four-eyes," added significant dimension to the team's success. Their talents were superbly refined by observation. Coach tightening had assigned them the task of studying game films. They were to observe the talents, strengths and weaknesses, of their teammates and examine how they might contribute to team success by applying their own talents to the others. They also studied the game films of their opponents: They studied every play, every player, every move. They even observed the crowd to thoroughly prepare themselves.

Observation is the key resource for refining proper illustrations. Like Bugsie and Four-eyes, the more we reflect upon the world, talents, interests, and habits of the people whom we are addressing in sermons the better we will serve to relate Christ's Kingdom to them. With a noticeable interest in their lives we'll hold their attention and allow the Word of God to take root. W. Floyd Bresee maintains, "The Word must be combined with hearing before it produces faith. And illustration is the most successful means available for focusing people's attention on truth." This leads us to the goal of an illustration when the hearers respond, "This sermon is about us" or "I have a problem similar to that". That's when Christianity is made relative to one's own life. That's when believers are "fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace"(Eph. 6:15b). The illustration must fit both the text and the hearers. Therefore, once the illustrator uncovers a good or even great example in something he's observed, then he must ask whether it can be properly used in this instance. Don't force the illustration. Use your perceptive talents to contribute to the needs of your hearers.

Furthermore, our personal experiences are an excellent source for illustrations, especially when the silhouette of those experiences are raised against the background of the everyday life of the Christian. The pastor's personal life is the most common source of illustrations. Some can be improper as will be discussed later. However, it is almost a necessity that you use your own. Your own illustration is better, even if it's not as good as one that someone else observed and wrote down. Demaray writes,

A.W. Blackwood says one should never preach beyond his own experience. Canned sermon illustrations from omnibus collections seldom ring true in the pulpit. They may

---

<sup>5</sup> Louis Paul Lehman, *Put A Door On It* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Pub, 1975), p. 35.

sound good on paper, but do they live for the preacher? That is the test. The picture painted must have a point of authentic contact with “my” experience. “I have seen and heard” rings the bell of authenticity.

Four-eyes didn’t watch all those tapes in order to learn how to play the game exactly the way others do. He was looking for ideas which could in turn be applied to his own talents. Bugsie too, with his big ears, was not listening to everything that was told about the sport in order to make use of someone else’s talents but to refine his own. Using another’s illustration is just like trying to use your brother’s Commodore programming skills and his programs to make your own operation work on an IBM clone. It simply doesn’t track properly. An illustrator, after careful observation, still must grasp the text with his own mind, apply his own talents, and relate the message in his own words.

Before going to the bench, so to speak, for further sources of illustrations We should perhaps meet the last starter of the Thunder. His name is “Grace.” He was the big, powerful guy in the middle on whom everyone relied. He stayed on the court the entire game and was never replaced from the bench. In fact, team success depended on building the entire game plan around him. Needless to say failure was inevitable if he’d fall into injury.

Every preacher can relate the name of Thunder’s Center to the conscious element which they build their every sermon around—grace. A very basic truth can be applied here concerning the question of proper illustrations. Illustrators should not use every coherent example that crosses their minds. The “game plan” of each sermon is to present God’s gracious love given to unworthy sinners. Every good work, every ordinance of God, every counsel, every prayer, every and all activity, whether spiritual or secular, should, according to the Christian way, find its motivation in, the Gospel. That is where all our illustrations are coming from and returning to.

In sticking with the game plan, if the illustration is not serving as a spot-light which is aimed toward God’s grace in Jesus Christ, then, no matter how profound the perception, it is surely not a proper illustration: The illustrator’s search is to find life-like examples in a given text and reflect their light, either directly or indirectly, to clarify and emphasize God’s love in it all. Needless to say, if grace is taken out of the center not only will the illustration be improper, but the sermon will fail to serve its purpose.

Now then, having met “the starters”, knowing the game plan, and realizing how important it is to follow, we know just what kind of help to look for when needed. Coach Lightning was aware of these things. He knew there was help, if necessary, in going to the bench. At the risk of pressing the illustration beyond limits into part 11, let’s meet the two key players on the bench. “Piles” is the old timer with lots of past experience. And “Boox” is good but the coach used him sparingly because didn’t always get along with the other players so well. More simply explained, he just had different experiences. Piles was used in the game more often because he had proven himself successful before.

For the illustrator Piles compares to the files which the more experienced have on hand. Since it is the obligation of every preacher to keep the Word alive, and illustrations have proven themselves capable of assisting in that objective, it is a good practice to write down an illustration as soon as you realize one.

Your file is a good source of illustrations. Always write down an illustration as soon as you hear or think of one. Forget that you can remember and remember that you are bound to forget. Have you heard about the preacher who had such a beautiful thought that he immediately dropped to his knees to thank the Lord for it, but when he got up he forgot what it was? Write it down. And have a well organized topical file so it will be readily available when you need it.<sup>6</sup>

At least keep track of those which have worked well and seemed to fit just right in previous sermons.

---

<sup>6</sup> W. Floyd Bresee, “Illustrations In Sermons,” *Ministry*, (September 1984), 30.

In many ways the instruction of filing and indexing has nothing to do with the theme of this paper. But in some ways it does. When an especially good and proper illustration has been discovered it may fit more properly into another sermon some other time. Keep track of it or lose it forever. Also, the rationale of Coach Lightening's use of Piles more often than Boox illustrates a valuable point for illustrators to keep in mind. Your own illustrations are always going to fit your own unique way of perceiving the struggles and intimacies of the Christian faith better than illustrations which have been written by another author. In all the occupied pulpits in this country on Sunday mornings there are not two individuals who are alike just as there are not two identical sermons being preached. If you need to go to the bench for illustrations, and every illustrator will find that necessary on occasion, first go to what works best for you—a file of your own thoughts.

Books which contain ideas for illustrations can be another resourceful option from the bench. These are left to last, because they should be used as a last resort. Their greatest value may actually be in reminding you of some incident closer to your own life or that of your congregation.

Secure your own illustrations. They are always fresh, a quality that does not apply to those bound in illustration books. These volumes are replete with old, trite, unbelievable stories far removed from life in the present day. James S. Stewart counsels, "Omnibus volumes of sermon illustrations are the last refuge of a bankrupt intelligence. The best illustrations are those which come to you as the harvest of your own reading and observation.... Be your own anthologist."<sup>7</sup>

Think of books as "pump primers". Admittedly, the illustration in this essay about lock-ins was used that way. Re-design another's illustration into your own words and in your own context. Shape it to fit the requirement of your theme. But take caution, perhaps more than what was taken in this essay. For even now the essayist may be thinking, although it worked for him at the time, are the illustrations really adding light to the proper use of illustrations or are they simply entertaining the hearers or, even worse, are they just added paragraphs that burden them like the lengthening of labor pains. This scary thought leads us into the defense against the improper use of illustrations in sermons.

Coach Lightening drilled the defense into the Thunder by means of continual warnings and threats of failure. For example, if anyone was found without their hands in the air whenever they were not on the offense the whole team would be lectured severely about the disappointments of losing and would have to do all their exercises with hands held high. If they'd fail to see a pick and yet, blocked off from the ball they'd all have to do their calisthenics and agility drills with blindfolds. The basic skills of the defense thus became like second nature to them as did success.

Similarly, preachers need to defend themselves against improper uses of illustrations or risk failure. The Thunder was trained to hold their hands high for two specific purposes. First, because they hadn't yet secured possession of the ball, and that is always the best chance to get control of it. Second, their hands need to be up in the area where the ball is being passed around and scored against them. Proper defense in the use of illustrations not only assures us of the opportunities to gain control of the message but can also block and reject those which will take something away from it.

A few things have already been drilled in regard to improper uses of illustrations. The initial point was that Christ and Scripture must be the inspiration for an illustration or it may in fact be an improper usage. Proper and improper means for inspiration is another topic in and of itself; however, if God's Word has not been sufficiently researched, and if prayer has not been thorough then inspiration may fall short. These are the means for centering the entire game plan around Grace. In order to keep him healthy and active throughout the entire ball game fully examine and understand each truth, as did the Light of men, before attempting to compose profoundly perceptive insights to illustrate the contemporary world. And pray that the inflated human ego does not obstruct vision, but that our preaching, in spite of ourselves, may illuminate the hearts of our hearers to

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction To Contemporary Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 175.

Christ crucified. Inspiration, then, as it is drilled like a basic skill in sermon preparation, becomes the second nature for defense against obstructive, vague, selfish, and other improper illustrations.

The eighteen to twenty-five minutes after the second hymn is not story time. In defining “Illustration” W. Floyd Bresee adds,

Its purpose is not the same as storytelling. It is never used to excite or entertain, but to throw light on the truth. Storytelling, on the other hand, is that which is used for its own sake and is out of place in the pulpit. It deserves the indignation heaped upon it.

Brown differentiates illustration from story telling in the following way:

The word “illustrate” means literally to throw light or luster upon anything. The illustration is never to be regarded as an end in itself; it shines for the sake of something beyond. When the lighted candle is held up to the painting, it is not intended that the beholders should look at the candle, but at the painting upon which the candle throws its light.<sup>8</sup>

Telling a story during a sermon may be entertaining but it will take away from the message. It tends to shed blinding light upon the object being illustrated. The hearers attention may be held for just the duration of the story but soon last again as the preacher leaves them with more to think about than the specific message on hand. What do they remember, the story or the truth?

There’s a few others on tire bench of the Thunder whom you haven’t met yet, “Hongo”, “Joker”, and “The Hammer.” These players illustrate more of the improper uses of illustrations. Needless to say, they were never entered into the conference matches which counted. They only played for exhibition games.

Hongo was a fancy dribbler and could maneuver himself into position for a shot frequently. In fact, too frequently he’d force a shot and wasted the team’s opportunity to score. He was hardly effective both offensively and defensively. It’s true that he caught everyone’s attention as the ball bounced around his back and through his legs. However, to his chagrin, he stayed on the bench. For him, the primary objective was misplaced when he wanted the crowd to have something to say about who should start. External conditions turned him to entertainment of the crowd. He’s like the preacher who feels a need to become flashy and entertaining with the use of catchy stories at the expense of the true goal of preaching. Perhaps he feels ‘the need to make strong impressions upon those who pay his “much-to-much salary.” Preachers should beware of this kind of misplaced motivation which can be obstructive to lighting the truth.

Also defend yourselves against being a “Hongo” or hero of every personal illustration. It may be good for people to hear of your humanity now and then and to know you are aware of it. On the other hand, be cautious of glorifying your wayward youth or sound as though your bragging about your mistakes of the past. Some preachers make it sound as though the only fun they’ve had was serving the devil. When using illustrations from your own family, talk lovingly about them. Also, don’t embarrass your children by either building them up or running them down. They already have enough of a goody-goody image surrounding them without Dad’s sermons magnifying the problem.

Humorous illustrations, in almost every case, should be regarded as improper, like story telling. I can’t find a single instance where it would be appropriate to make use of one’s sense of humor in the pulpit. Can you? That would be like putting Joker into a crucial game for the Thunder. He simply takes the event much too lightly. Even if humor is not being used for the sake of entertainment and is not insincerely motivated, humor runs the risk of misunderstandings. No member of the congregation should be given a hint that law or gospel should be taken light heartedly. How can humor contribute to the serious needs of the hearers? Preachers are addressing mostly contrite hearts which feel the burden of their sins and hope to receive a most serious

---

<sup>8</sup> Charles R. Brown, *The Art Of Preaching* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1922), p. 124.



proclamation of absolution. At the same time there are those who need to be struck with the fear of God in order to turn themselves to acts of contrition and repentance. Members of any church love to know their pastor and that he has the ability to tell interesting stories other than those of the Bible. They can especially feel comfortable with him when they see he has a sense of humor. Still, this type of acquaintance should not be sought from the pulpit instead through get-togethers and visitations.

Proper illustrations depend on aggressive sermon writing. There are limitations however. The priorities of proper illustrations will not allow the preacher to show any aggression toward specific members or use a personal experience which directly or indirectly “gets even” or gets the last word in against a member with whom there may be difficulties. That’s why The Hammer wasn’t allowed to play in important matches anymore. He was a hacker and fouled out of every game. He simply gave up far too many free throws and then was thrown out. Since illustrations can be such powerful tools they can also cause powerful negative reactions. They have the ability to separate a pastor from his flock whether; they were intentional or not.

A preacher’s work includes leading members who are having problems with their personal life or the church or even the pastor. It’s entirely different to embarrass them or badger them with an illustration that seems to be about themselves. Be careful of anything that may look like a foul. Everyone of the Thunder knows how easy it is to get called for a foul. If it looks like a foul the ref. will probably interpret it as one. Remember an illustration is like a spot light that is directed toward the listener’s personal world. Even a perfectly legitimate illustration at the wrong time can be taken as bad sportsmanship. In this respect-the hearers are also the referees. We may not think of it as a foul, but its their call that stands. These types of improper illustrations can be anything that rubs off the wrong way, that threatens to disclose confidentiality, or exposes the preachers awareness of a specific persons unrepentant attitude. Deal with them as a shepherd, but not with illustrations in a sermon.

In conclusion, delivering an effective sermon offers a sense of victory to the preacher, especially after he has struggled long and hard. Those feelings of satisfaction provide for him the opportunity to reflect well upon what he has learned well. The result warms his heart with gratitude to be a representative of the Most High, an administrator of the ministry of the keys, and, above that, an heir of the Savior’s love through the living Word.

### **Sources For Illustrations**

1. The Bible
2. The modern world
3. Personal experiences
4. Books

### **Available Resources For Illustration Helps**

1. R. C. Reins, *Treasury Of Themes And Illustrations* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House). -- This one should be all you’ll ever need.
2. Carl G. Johnson, *My Favorite Illustrations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1972). -- This one is at the Seminary Library.
3. All kinds of Illustrative ideas are offered in the various “junk-mail” offers that are sent to your church year-round. I’ve never investigated them.