

Funeral Message

In this presentation, we're to talk about the funeral message. How does that work? What do you do? How do you do it? And you know again, I'm not going to get into issues such as how do you write a sermon, all the other stuff. I'm just going to make some observations that I've noticed make effective funeral messages in my own ministry in what I've observed in other pastors over the years. So, get the scenario. Someone has passed away within your church, what do you do first? And what I often find you do is you go visit the bereaved first even before you think about a funeral message. Just visit them. Talk about the deceased. Take out a piece of paper and say, "I like to say a few things about the deceased and I know him/her pretty well. But there might be things that I don't know." So, get the bereaved just talking.

And that of itself is very healthy. And you get them crying. In the sense that you don't get them crying, they will cry. But let them cry. Let them talk. Let them laugh. I've seen some of the most beautiful times as a pastor after someone has passed away and then I come, maybe after the funeral arrangements even or right before the funeral arrangements. Sometime, I make an appointment and we sit down and don't be in a hurry because sometimes it takes a little while. Other times, things come together right away. And they're just sharing.

But my point is in grief, grief is not something you can just like it's scientific. It can happen this way, this way and that way. No, you got to kind of be just there. It's dynamic. People are dynamic and they're processing this in different ways. If people are in denial at this point or if they're in shock, a lot of times, you're just talking a little bit and talking about the life, and things are going to take a little while. But do this, because what happens when you do this, is you start getting the—I believe—a theme of how that person lived. A theme that you can have in the back of your mind as you begin playing the funeral message together.

I remember this one man, who was a professor. He would become a preacher. And he got Huntington's disease which is very debilitating. And as he progressed in the Huntington's disease, he lost more and more control of his limbs and his body functions. And when he did pass away, I've met together with the family and it was very sad. But there was a little joy that he's with the Lord instead of struggling.

And as I was listening to the family, I heard various vignettes of this person's life in what he contributed, in what he did. And I wrote down a few things here and there. And then I asked too about what passages did he like? What passages did maybe you have as a family here? Or did he have a passage that was his favorite passage? Or do you have a passage that you want us to encourage everybody in a funeral?

So you're sitting down and you're talking. In that meeting, which is so typical for many of these meetings, the family will have a passage. They'll have a lot of memories. But there will be a unifying theme, I believe, where there's something about this person's life. There's something about the passage and you'll see that convergence. So now you've had the meeting. You've listened. You're actually sharing stories helping some of the grieving occur. Then you're actually now in your study. Maybe you have a passage. And the passage that was picked is "God works all things for good," I'm just using that as a sample, "for those who love him." And just think about that passage and think about the life of the deceased and the stories and start connecting the theme of the passage with the theme of the person's life.

God works all things for good. Our dear loved one got Huntington's disease and it was debilitating. And you all had to face that and the trials of that. And yet, the deceased, he never forgot that God works all things for good. And let me tell you some of the good that God worked through this man's life and then share some of those graces of God, those moments where God showed up so clearly in the life of the deceased and in the family.

That's the kind of funeral message that's encouraging, that elevates scripture. And at times of funerals, it's a great time. It's a parable to pointing people to Christ and pointing people to the hope of the gospel. I want to give another scenario. What if you don't know whether the person was a believer or not. You know, this is a very difficult situation and we face it more and more. I believe you don't preach someone into Heaven because the reality is you can't preach them into Heaven. If they don't know the Lord and they don't care about the Lord, they're not with the Lord and that's the way it is.

In those kinds of situations, I still believe you meet with the family because being with the family may be as a different characteristic. Now, it's more like, encouraging them in their grief. Maybe it's more about gently encouraging us that Christ is our only hope. And at those kind of funerals, those are often times you can remember some of the moments of contribution of love that the deceased might have given. But if you're asked to do a message like that, and often a pastor is not asked to do a message like that.

But if you are, you may share, I believe, share those good positive memories but base them in this person was an image bearer of God. And it will be no secret to those who are listening that, that person was not a believer. You may say, "Well, this person did not believe this person was created in God's image. As image bearers, each of us have a relationship to God. In times of grief, we need God's grace and we need God's grace now." Even if you were to share some of the positive things of that person's life.

Here's a positive thing. If a man, even if he wasn't a believer loved his children and loved his family, that's appropriate to share. That he loved his children and he loved his family. He was a hard worker. He's a hard worker which connects us in the Bible to the cultural mandate to subdue the earth. So he had in there the imprint of the image of God whether or not he was a believer or not. I also encourage you to reflect and think about this as you come to your position on how to deal with doing a funeral for those who are not believers.

I want to talk a little more too about actually presenting the message. In presenting the message, that's a dynamic situation because on one level, who are you preaching to? Who are you speaking to? Who are you encouraging? Really, it's the ones who are directly connected to the bereaved. Don't feel that you have to have a lot of different agendas with all sorts of audiences. Really minister to those who are hurting.

One more thing about that is people have different ways in which they put messages together. And people like me, I'm much impromptu. I will just write some notes if I do a sermon and write it out in detail. I'll practice it. I'll research it. But I'm more impromptu. Other people write manuscripts. In a funeral message, I strongly recommend that you write a manuscript no matter what your personality is because a manuscript that you practice, you're getting the names right, you're getting facts right.

One thing is very distracting is if you kind of go off the cuff a little bit and you get the name wrong or you get the dates wrong or the facts wrong, and those become distractions for the bereaved. So I would on funeral messages recommend that you write the whole funeral message out. About time, one thing you can do when you meet with the family is ask them "How much time do you want the message to be?" Because remember, they're your, in a sense, they're your audience. And if the bereaved say, "Oh, we would like... could you make it fifteen minutes, Pastor?" "No problem. Fifteen minutes is just perfect." Half hour I've heard or five minutes. Because in the end you're helping them.

Now if it's like, one minute. You might say, "I like to be a little longer because this message is also about helping you guys grieve and one minute may not be long enough." You begin to dialogue about that, but generally fifteen minutes is just about right for a funeral message. Anyway, you as a pastor

have an incredibly important role in putting together that message. And I think the tone of the message is one of grace and of encouragement but also sadness. It's a sad time but it's a happy time. So it's happy in that if they're a believer, they're with the Lord but sad because we're going to miss the loved one.

We grieve but we don't grieve as believers like the world grieves. We believe in hope, in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And despite how sad that is, carry along that hope. I'm going to talk about one more thing. And that is specifically if you deal with a family who is just so despondent and in sorrow, let's say, a family lost a child or something, be very careful to keep your tone very subdued. Be very careful about not giving the quick answers.

Well, Little Johnny is a crown and a jewel of God right now. I know pastors and leaders and even especially parishioners don't know what to say. Then they just say something that feels interesting and comforting but the bereaved are just not there right now. And in messages and in just counsel, be really careful to be very sensitive and keep growing this area. Keep reading up in this area. Talk to chaplains.

One of things that I have benefited over my life is I meet, I see a chaplain at a hospital or a chaplain somewhere, I will say, "Hey, what's the five things you've learned about ministering to grieving people?" And they will tell you. And their stuff is really good. So I just want to encourage you. This is a time where it can be very tiring as a pastor, but it's a great opportunity to love those that God has put in your charge.