

Applying the Sermon **Karen Morris**

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Decades ago I was at a seminar on preaching and an earnest young student asked 'Can you give us some tips on good preaching?' An old hand preacher sitting behind me growled 'About 20 minutes and about God' True, but it's not enough!

We want God's word to be life-changing and sometimes that's really hard to do. Recently, at a preacher's group, I said (actually whined) 'sometimes it feels like it's (my sermon) just washing over people'. And a young preacher said to me 'Even if it just keeps washing over people, God's word will eventually erode people.' That's true too, but it's not enough!

And a third idea that contributed to my thinking about application, was another old hand preacher who said 'It's essential to preach the sermon we need to hear from the text.' He didn't mean only preach for ourselves, but rather that we must apply it to ourselves first. If it doesn't impact us, then it won't impact anyone. That's also true, but it's not enough!

We are responsible for doing the best job possible with application and yet often it's the hardest bit of preparing a sermon. And learning how to work out applications from a text seems to be a 'hit and miss' affair. Many preaching books focus on the exegetical work and seem to brush over the work required to develop applications. Murray Capill's book is the most useful book I've found on writing applications.

Its title, *The Heart is the Target: Preaching practical Application From Every Text*¹, is exactly what we want- practical application from every text! There are lots of good ideas in this book, but I am going to explain just two. These two ideas come after a detailed excursion into the *point* of preaching from God's word, the life of the preacher, and the reason you would preach to anyone.

The first extremely useful idea I find is Capill's encouragement to think about the groups of people listening to your sermon. As preachers we have two dangers: 1. we think all listeners are basically the same, or 2. we are overwhelmed by the myriad needs of individuals in our congregations.

Capill helps us by classifying people broadly into four categories. Firstly, he divides people into those who are 'going well' and those who are 'not going well'. And then he divides those further, depending on whether they are aware of their state or not.

¹ Murray Capill. *The Heart is the Target*, P&R Publishing New Jersey, 2014

| | Not Going Well | Going Well |
|---------------|--|---|
| Don't Know It | Arrogant/ Complacent -Challenge/ Confront | Struggling/discouraged -Comfort/ Spur on |
| Know It | Backsliding/ Seeking -Help/ Advise | Positive/ Grateful -Encourage/ Teach |

Each group requires different things from the preacher.

Those who are:

Not Going Well and Don't Know It could be believers or unbelievers. They may be smug in an immature faith, or arrogant and unaware in non-belief. Either way, this is a dangerous position to be in and the preacher needs to challenge and confront them.

Going Well and Don't Know It are tender-hearted saints who always feel inadequate. They don't recognise their own depth of faith. Therefore the preacher needs to comfort and spur them on. She needs to reveal their faith to them so they can see they do trust in a trustworthy God.

Not Going Well, but Know It are either believers who are struggling with sin, falling away, or young in the faith; or unbelievers who are genuinely seeking and desperate to hear the good news. The preacher needs to advise and help those who are struggling by reminding them of the strength of the God's grace and love for them. Conveniently, the unbelievers need to hear about this too, in a careful explanation of Jesus' death for them.

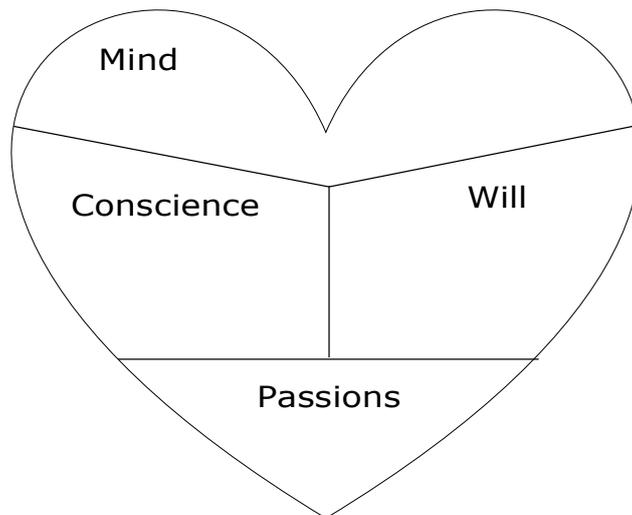
Going Well, and Know It are those who know and believe the gospel, who are eager to be fed and hear more of God's love for them and the world. They need to be encouraged, taught deeply, and enthused to share this confidence in Christ with others.

I want you to populate this table. Take some time now to put one or two names of people in your church in each category. It helps to have a real person in mind when you are writing your sermon applications. You don't need to show anyone, or even tell anyone, but it does help to plan. *Real* application requires preaching to *real people*.

A second useful idea from Capill's book is encapsulated in the title. 'The Heart is the Target' refers to 'the response of the whole of our being to the living God who has saved us from our sinful rebellion. Heart Christianity embraces what we **think, feel, do** and **desire**.'²

² Capill, *The Heart is the Target*, page 112

Therefore our applications need to connect with all those aspects of our lives, and we, as preachers, are aiming for regeneration in 'mind, conscience, will and passions'.



If we are aiming to shift our listeners from 'darkened mind to enlightened mind, seared conscience to renewed conscience, rebellious will to transformed will and ungodly passions to godly passions' then we need to be very deliberate and thoughtful.

Having introduced the idea that there are different aspects of a person we need to address in application, Capill then helps us explore those aspects by providing questions to consider in each category.

Those questions help the preacher consider the issue from different angles and as a consequence help us to move beyond the stolid and well worn 'read your Bible more and pray more' applications.

*MIND*³

*What are the central truths of the text that people must know and believe?
How can I make those clear; demonstrate their importance?
What wrong ways of thinking about this truth will I oppose?
How will these truths help people?
What might stop them believing this?
Will they buy it, how can I help them buy it?*

CONSCIENCE

*What in the text should convict, challenge?
What truths do people need to become deeply convicted of?
What failures sins, or omissions should people be convicted of?
In what ways should people be testing and examining themselves?
What would justify a clear conscience?
An oversensitive conscience?
A seared conscience?*

³ Capill, *The Heart is the Target*, page 112-116

WILL

What response do I want to see people make?

What practical difference should this make?

What should this look like in practice?

What am I going to ask people to do?

Motivations? Incentives?

What help can I give them?

PASSIONS

What are the passions of the biblical writer?

What deep desires of the heart should this stir?

How ought this text make people feel?

How can I help them feel that?

What impact should this truth have on them?

In what ways should people be stirred, moved, inspired or humbled by this truth?

What drives and ambitions should this cultivate or inhibit?

These two tools have revolutionised my thinking about preaching applications and how to develop them. I hope that they will do the same for you. The only way this will happen is by actually doing the work- populating the table of people, and physically answering the sets of questions.

And I pray that God will use your sermons to regenerate his people through the preaching of his word and the incisive application of it.