THE 5 QUALITIES OF GOOD PREACHING

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON
A major concern that can and should be addressed in the Church is that of bad preaching. Again and again, people said that they left the church because homilies were “boring, irrelevant, poorly prepared,” or “delivered in an impenetrable accent.” Speaking as someone who is called upon to give sermons all the time, I realize how terribly difficult it is to preach, how it involves skill in public speaking, attention to the culture, expertise in biblical interpretation, and sensitivity to the needs and interests of an incredibly diverse audience.

That said, homilists can make a great leap forward by being attentive to one fact: Practically every Gospel involves an encounter between Jesus and a person—Peter, Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, etc.—who is questioning, wondering, suffering, or seeking. An interesting homily identifies that longing and demonstrates, concretely, how Jesus fulfills it. When the homily both reminds people how thirsty they are and provides water to quench the thirst, people will listen. In this way, the goal of good preaching is not to entertain but to grab a hold of people’s hearts, transform them through biblical revelation and send them out to the world as Christ-bearers.
It is helpful that we have a rubric for this kind of preaching. That’s why I recently devoted a whole episode of my podcast, “The Word on Fire Show,” to exploring the question: What are the five qualities of good preaching?

Below you’ll find an edited transcript of the show so you can read it slowly, at your own pace, and reflect on how you can share the good news of our Lord with the people nearest and dearest to you.

Peace,

† Robert Barron
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QUESTION: Some people are going to hear this topic and think, “Five qualities of good preaching applies only for priests or seminarians,” but I want to emphasize that this is really for everybody. Any Catholic in the pew can be an encourager of good preaching. They can help their priest to preach better, but also we preach to people as well. We preach to our children, those of us who are parents. We preach to our family and friends whenever we discuss anything gospel-related. We preach to ourselves, many church leaders have encouraged preaching the gospel to yourself.

Bishop, recently you were given an award from the Aquinas Institute of Theology. They honored you with the Great Preacher Award, and they invited you to come and not only accept the award but to give a talk. In that talk you outlined the five qualities of good preaching.

A little bit of context about the current state of Catholic preaching reveals why this is an
award-worthy topic. A recent survey from the Dioceses of Springfield asked several hundred former Catholics, “What were the main reasons why you left the church?” About seven of ten said that their spiritual needs were not being met, and many of the anecdotal responses complained about the homilies. They said, “I never heard good preaching or good homilies in the Catholic church, but then I went to an evangelical church and I was really filled. They were powerful, they got deep into the Bible. I really felt spiritually fed.” Many people leave the Church over bad preaching and I think not a few Catholics wish that the preaching was stronger in their parishes. For all those reasons, we’re going to be talking about the five qualities of good preaching today.

Let’s spend some time on each quality, beginning with the first, which is that good preaching is mystical. What does that mean?

**BISHOP BARRON:** It means there’s a distinction between speaking about Jesus and allowing Jesus so to possess you, so that he speaks through you. The latter is preaching. The former
could be lecturing, it could be teaching theology, it could be correct, it could be even inspiring, but it’s not preaching. To preach is, again, to allow Jesus so to seize you that your words become his, that he speaks through you. Jesus is not one teacher among many, but the Word made flesh. He’s the incarnation of the very word by which God makes the universe, and therefore his word is a transformative word.

Real preaching happens when the Word has so seized the preacher, that he becomes a vehicle of that transformation. My point there to the crowd in St. Louis, which included a lot of priests and seminarians, was prayer is not a sidelight to the preacher like it’s a nice bonus to have a healthy prayer life. No, you can’t preach unless you’re a person of prayer. What you’re doing isn’t preaching unless you are steadily and deeply immersed in Christ. If you can say with Paul, “It’s no longer I who speak but Christ who speaks in me,” now you’re preaching. That’s what I mean by the mystical side of it.
There’s a danger to a hyper-intellectualism. I, as you know, have been advocating the intellectual life for years, but there’s a danger of a hyper-intellectualism where I’m just talking about the Bible or talking about Jesus. I think you can tell quickly if the preacher is someone who knows Jesus intimately and personally and not just in an academic way. It’s that intimacy that gives rise to real preaching.

**QUESTION:** For this quality, the person I have in my mind as embodying the mystical quality of preaching is one of our great heroes, Archbishop Fulton Sheen. He was famous for advocating the holy hour, this one hour he would spend with the blessed sacrament. In all of his writings and interviews he would say that’s the reason why I’ve been a successful preacher. Can you talk a little bit about the role of a holy hour in the mystical quality of preaching?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yeah, I’m glad you mentioned Fulton Sheen. You’re right, he’s one of my great heroes. What’s interesting about the holy hour thing is that in my generation (I went semi-
nary in the late 70’s and into the 80’s) no one read or listened to Fulton Sheen. Fulton Sheen was this, “Oh yeah, our parents. That guy on TV our parent’s listened to in the 50’s.” No one read him, no one listened to him. But his word went like a seed deep underground and it came sprouting up in the next generation. As I began teaching at Mundelein, to my great surprise, I’d hear students talking about Fulton J. Sheen. Really? It’s Fulton Sheen you guys are listening to? “Yeah, and we’re reading his books.”

You’re right, his central teaching in all his retreats and also along with priests was a holy hour. To be perfectly blunt, when I was in seminary, let’s say early 1980’s, if you had said to one of us, “Have you done you’re holy hour today?” We wouldn’t know what you were talking about. It just wasn’t language that we used. The post-counsel generation was really kind of discouraged from praying in front of the blessed sacrament. That was seen as static and non-liturgical and it was the Mass that mattered, not the reserved sacrament. All of that private adoration was kind of muted in the years I was coming of age.
In God’s providence, a lot of it was planted deep underground and it comes sprouting up in the next generation. Now all the guys at Mundelein, and I think most the guys now at Camarillo, the seminary in LA, would regularly do a holy hour. I do a holy hour now and I never did many years ago. That’s the influence of Sheen, and I think maybe will be his longest term impact. Your dead right that he would’ve said that’s where preaching comes from.

Another, of course, great hero of mine, Thomas Aquinas, his associate who spoke at his canonization proceedings, acknowledged of course that Thomas was a genius, but he said, he received far more wisdom from his hours of prayer than his hours of study. That’s not just whistling Dixie, and that’s not just a pious thought, that’s a very, very important insight. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest geniuses in the West, got his wisdom more from prayer than he did from study. That’s the mystical side of preaching.
QUESTION: The second quality of good preaching you talked about in your address to the institute was that good preaching is biblical. *Dei Verbum*, the document from Vatican II on the Word of God, says that all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by sacred Scripture. How does good preaching become more biblical?

BISHOP BARRON: When someone challenged Flannery O’Connor and said, “Catholics don’t read the Bible.” She said, “Well, they have two eyes and brains don’t they?” In other words, we can start by picking up the Bible, getting good commentaries, and spending time every day in a prayerful reading of the Bible. Also, read the church fathers who are deeply immersed in the Bible. We all have two eyes and a brain, and so start with the Bible. Let me say something about this before we go any further. It might seem like a common place to say, “Of course preaching is biblical. What else could it be?” However, when I was coming of age, we put such a stress on experience and relevance, thinking
the reason people don’t listen is it’s not relevant to their experience, it’s not about their real life. If you go down the dusty pages of the Bible you’re going to lose everybody. We took that line of thinking very deeply. The result was a lot of preaching lost its biblical emphasis entirely.

It would maybe take a kernel of an idea from the Bible and then run with it in some other direction. There was a lot of talk about the experience of the preacher but not the Bible. I told the folks in St. Louis, a turning point for me was a seminary course I prepared in my years at Mundelien called The Christology of the Poets and Preachers. What I wanted to do was teach texts of our tradition that were not technically Christological but they were about Christ. I chose poets such as Dante and GK Chesterton and many others, literary figures. I also wanted to choose preachers.

I taught the great preaching of Origin from the late second, early third century, Augustine from the fourth century, St. Bernard from the 12th century, Thomas Aquinas from 13th century, Newman from the 19th century, Ronald Knox from the 20th. What I found while preparing the material for this course
took my breath away, the realization that none of them preached the way we were taught to preach. None of them. From the second century to the 20th century. What I mean is, you did not find a lot of experiential references, a lot of relevance to the time of the preacher. What you found was a very densely textured tour of the biblical world.

Origin’s sermons which have had a huge impact on me and Augustine’s sermons were deeply biblical. Read Newman’s twenty-page sermons from the 19th century – deeply biblical. Ronald Knox is also bible focused. I’ll tell you something else, Brandon, when I was rediscovering Fulton Sheen many years ago, someone had given me little cassette tapes (see how dated this is?) of Sheen’s sermons. I put them in my car and listened to them on my commute. One of them was a talk that Sheen gave on preaching. Here’s the greatest preacher of the 20th century talking about preaching and the number one principle he said was, “Good preaching is biblical.” Biblical. He said it over and over again.

He was making exactly this point: If you start with experience and relevance, it might seem like that’s
the way to grab the people, but it’s not preaching. Karl Barth, the great protestant theologian of the 20th century, preached in a deeply biblical way, wrote theology in a deeply biblical way, and Barth said his job as a theologian was to be a mystagogue, or a tour guide if you want, through the jungle of the Bible, so we come to know its characters, its style, its patterns, its rhythms, its language. I used the example with the folks in St. Louis of Tolkien, where Tolkien begins *The Lord of the Rings* with this lengthy description, I think it’s like 70 pages, of Bilbo Baggins’s birthday party. You think, when is this story going to get off the ground here? It is a rollicking adventure story, but first he had to introduce you to this fantastical world. You would not get the thematic sense of the story without understanding the texture and dynamics of the world: how people spoke, what they look like, who they were, elves and orcs and hobbits and so on. Something similar can be found in good preaching. It takes you on a tour of the Bible, so as to understand its message.

**QUESTION:** Good preachers are biblical tour guides, they take their listeners into the weird,
dense complex biblical world, but they aren’t afraid of its strangeness. You wrote a whole book on *The Strangest Way*, and you’ve said often that we need to recover the strangeness of Christianity, this idea takes us to your third element of good preaching. You say good preaching is unnerving. What precisely do you mean by that?

**BISHOP BARRON:** I use that quote from an Anglican Bishop who said, “When Paul preached there were riots. When I preach they serve me tea.” It’s a funny line and it’s about the domestication of religion, the domestication of our preaching. If preaching is this nice thing that we do and afterwards they serve you tea and then you go home, then you’re not really preaching a word that will cut people to the heart, and that’s the language we hear in the Acts of the Apostles. When the first kerygmatic preachers preached, people were cut to the heart. They were changed. They were called radically to conversion. It wasn’t a tidy, friendly, domesticated form of preaching, it wasn’t telling people what they wanted to hear.
Let me press it. Often preachers tell their audience something they could hear from any other source. If you’re preaching and you’re sharing psychological insights or cultural wisdom, you might be right and true and good and maybe even inspiring, but you’re not preaching, because preaching has to do with the breakthrough of the Word of God, the breakthrough that happened in Jesus.

I urge people to go back to the beginning of Mark’s Gospel and what I call the inaugural address of Jesus, his first words: “The time of fulfillment is now.” There’s a kind of fire bell in the night quality to that rhetoric. “Wake up, wake up! Pay attention. Something new has happened.” He’s not trading in spiritual generalities, he’s not trading in bromides or common spiritual insights, he’s talking about this breakthrough of the Kingdom of God. He’s announcing the coming of his own person, which is the coming together of divinity and humanity. I think all good preaching should have this grab you by the lapels quality, this shake you out of your dull drums quality.
If we’re too tidy and domesticated, we’re not preaching.

**QUESTION:** I’ve talked to a lot of priests who confess openly that they really struggle with delivering the unnerving message because they’re afraid it’ll discomfort a lot of people in their pews, people are going to complain about after Mass. What advice would you give preachers who are maybe a little hesitant about this unnerving style of preaching?

**BISHOP BARRON:** I’d say man up. Look at the great preachers. Go get John Chrysostom, read Chrysostom’s sermons. The empress came into the church while he was preaching with her entourage and he referred to them as the cows of Bashan. I’m not recommending you do that every homily, but get the courage that comes from the Word of God and realize that you are there to bring people this word of salvation, it’s a matter of spiritual life and death. If you get that calling deep in your heart, then you won’t be so afraid.
Second thing, though, I don’t want to give the wrong impression as though every sermon is some fire and brimstone thing. No. The good news is unnerving, it’s upsetting, it turns things upside down, but it doesn’t mean you’re preaching fire and brimstone and moralizing all the time. But it means you’re announcing this shocking novelty of the gospel.

The other story I told in this connection was the one that Stanley Hauerwas recounted, the Methodist theologian. He was over in Edinburgh, Scotland to do the Gifford lectures, the famous lecture series. He preached one Sunday in the cathedral there, and there was a tradition going back to the Reformation that the sexton of the cathedral would literally lock the preacher in the pulpit and wouldn’t let him out until he preached the gospel. As I said, I don’t subscribe the 16th century Protestant vision of what the gospel means, but I like the instinct behind it. Don’t let the guy out of the pulpit until he’s proclaimed Christ and his transforming word. Don’t let him
get away with jokes and cute stories. That’s not enough.

That can play a role, I’m not necessarily down on that, but don’t let him get away with just jokes and cute stories. He needs to preach Christ, and lock him in until he does.

**QUESTION:** The first quality was that good preaching is mystical. The second is that it’s biblical, and the third is that it’s unnerving. Let’s move to the fourth quality you’ve identified which is that good preaching is a call to conversion. The program for priestly formation says, “All preaching is designed to call sinners to repentance.” Not some preaching, not one homily of five, all preaching is designed to call sinners to repentance. Can you talk about how good preaching is a converting command?

**BISHOP BARRON:** It goes back to the inaugural address. Jesus says wake up, the time of fulfillment is now, and then he says, “repent and believe the good news.” The word behind
our word repent used there is *metanoiete*, which means, literally, “go beyond the mind you have.” Change, turn around, see things differently. The announcing of the gospel is a shining of a light. When you shine light, you reveal the smudges on the window, or to turn the metaphor, when you shine light, that’s when you see imperfections and the bugs go crawling out for cover.

Light has a way of revealing what’s the matter. As long as you’re driving away from the light you can see okay out of a dirty windshield and you think everything’s fine. Now turn the windshield toward the sun and you can’t drive. You realize how compromised that windshield really is. This room is fine, nothing’s wrong with it. Now turn the lights on, the bugs go crawling. There really is a problem here.

That’s what good preaching does. It shines the light. You don’t have to moralize, you just shine the light and then people say, “Oh, how far my life is from perfect.” In that sense all preaching is a
summons to repentance, because we’re all sinners. The one thing that every single person reading this has in common is that we’re sinners. That’s the one thing. We’re different in background, education, gender, et cetera, but the one thing we all have in common, we’re all sinners. When you shine the light, sinners will realize there’s something the matter and we’ll know we need to change.

Good preaching makes people see the world differently. That’s metanoia, literally going beyond the mind you have. Good preaching causes people to turn around, that’s conversion, turning around. Chesterton said, “The only people that see life aright are those that stand on their heads.” It causes you to turn your life upside down so you actually see it right. In that sense, all preaching is a call to conversion.

**QUESTION:** Talk a little bit about the woman at the well. You used her as an example in your talk to the other priests at this conference. The story
at the woman at the well is especially instructive for this principle that great preaching should be a call to conversion. How is that?

**BISHOP BARRON:** The point I was making there is it’s a call to conversion but it’s not a fire and brimstone moralizing. The dynamics of that story are so rich. Here comes this woman who is deeply compromised and in pretty deep trouble. Many people have pointed out that a single woman coming to the well at noon is singling right away that she’s in trouble, because normally the women will go together and they go at a much better time of the day, not when the sun is at its zenith. What’s the matter? We find out quickly enough that she’s probably someone looked down upon by the other women in the community and she’s living a fairly compromised moral life.

Does Jesus know all this? Sure he does. What’s his approach? It’s not to stand there and thunder denunciation, but rather he invites her in that very winsome way, “Give me something to
drink.” When she balks, he says, “If you knew who was asking you, you’d ask Him for a drink and He’d give you water bubbling up to eternal life.” In other words, he beguiles her, he intrigues her. He draws her into his ambit. He offers her grace. In the wake of that offer, he then makes the moral challenge, “Call your husband.” “I have no husband.” “You’re right in saying that. You’ve have five and the one you’re with now is not your husband.” Talk about naming her pain, he names very clearly what the problem is.

He’s done it so winsomely and he’s done it now in the context of an offer to grace, that she responds positively. In fact, by the end of the story, she’s so converted that she puts down her water jug and she goes announcing Christ to the city. She becomes an evangelist. That’s a model of good preaching. Yes, you’re going to call sinners to conversion, but you won’t do it in a brutal, front-on sort of way. You’ll winsomely offer grace, you’ll shine the light, and people will come to know their sin and then seek forgiveness. I think that’s how you do it.
QUESTION: So far we’ve seen good preaching is mystical, biblical, unnerving, and a call to conversion. Let’s look at the fifth and final quality. You say that good preaching is a summons to mission. You’ve often said that the church doesn’t have a mission, the church is a mission. How does good preaching become a summons to this missionary life?

BISHOP BARRON: That’s the whole purpose, isn’t it, ultimately? Think of the miraculous draft of fishes, Jesus summons Peter into adventure: let’s go out into the deep water, and they get the great draft of fish, and then Peter says right away: “Lord, I’m a sinner. Leave me, I’m a sinful man.” However, Jesus does not leave him. He offers him forgiveness and sends him on mission.

Think of Isaiah, he has the great vision of God in the temple and then he too responds, “I’m a man of unclean lips,” a sinner. The Lord purifies him and then sends him on mission. All the great figures in the Bible are sent on mission to evangelize,
and so all good preaching has that same offer of grace. It is a turning on of the light, it invites conversion – to see things differently, turn around, change. Then it sends. Even If the sermon leaves you at “I’ve been forgiven,” then it is unfinished. The completed message is that now as a forgiven sinner, you must go forth and announce the good news of Christ.

The example I used here biblically is the road to Emmaus, which has all the dynamics. Two disciples going the wrong way, so like all of us. We’re disciples, we want to follow Christ but we go the wrong way. Jesus doesn’t thunder denunciation, but he comes and walks with us. That’s so Good. That’s what a good preacher does, too, walks with us. Then he opens the Bible, there’s my second point, it’s deeply biblical. He shows them the pattern of the God’s revelation. While he’s doing that their hearts burn within them. Good preaching should produce what I call that good spiritual heartburn, that if you reveal this pattern of amazing grace and forgiveness then people start to get it and their hearts catch fire.
Then he sends them. By the end of that encounter, despite the difficulty of the road, despite the lateness of the hour, up they get and go back on mission. Good preaching is an encounter with Jesus, with his transformative word, but that word never just leaves us to bask in its glory, it sends us to share it. I would say every good sermon should end with a call to mission.

**QUESTION:** We’ve looked at these five qualities of good preaching. Again, they’re that good preaching should be mystical, it should be biblical, it should be unnerving, it should be a call to conversion, and then finally a summons to mission. Before we wrap up here, I want to ask a question that’s burning in my mind as a layman. You know, I’m sure a lot of priests and seminarians are going to listen to this and find tremendous value and help, but as a layman, I’m thinking, we go to a parish, we have thankfully really good priests and preachers. There’s probably a lot of laypeople listening to this thinking, “What can I do to help have better sermons in the Catholic church? We don’t want to complain; we don’t want to pester.”
You’ve been a pastor, you’ve been a priest, you’re now a bishop, what would you recommend for laypeople and how they can encourage these five elements of good preaching?

**BISHOP BARRON:** First of all pray for you preachers. I always tell preachers, “You got to pray,” which is true. But the people of God, pray for your preachers. Pray for them. Pray for your priests regularly, “Lord, help them to be better preachers.” That’s a key. Also give good, constructive feedback. For some people, “Hey, father, that was a good sermon,” is just a way of saying, “Hey, good morning.” It doesn’t really mean much. I think to give a preacher good, substantive and constructive feedback.

Some perishes I know have this weekly meeting where the preacher will gather with five or six people and they’ll have a little session. How did it go? Did it get through to you? Did it work? Or they’ll meet with maybe another group as they’re preparing a sermon. What’s going on in the com-
munity? What needs to be addressed? What’s your sense of the gospel here. I think those are good methods.

I encourage priests to have other priests in a group who help prepare for a sermon, but I think having the laity involved is also a very good thing. We have to avoid the danger there, where like at the Olympics, the sermons over and up come the scores: 10, 9.5, et cetera. We have to avoid that, because the danger of course then is the tickling of the ears of people – catering to what the people want to hear.

I would say pray for your preachers and offer them constructive criticism in the right context.
For more conversations like this one, be sure to check out “The Word on Fire Show” at WordOnFireShow.com. You’ll also find instructions on how to subscribe to new episodes so you’ll never miss one.