



Pastoral Care: Funeral Services

When You Are Asked to Conduct a Funeral for the First Time

Conducting a funeral service for the first time can be intimidating. When you are asked to take part, there will likely be a relatively short time to prepare. You want to have the best presentation possible.

Funerals are designed to give comfort to the family and to give them a sense of closure. Traditions at funerals vary from culture to culture. Have you ever noticed how much funeral traditions vary from one region of the United States to another? A funeral in Seattle will be different than a funeral in Dallas. Traditions even vary from one community to the next. Behind it all is an opportunity for families to end the death process formally and begin the long-term grief process. As a church leader, you have an important part in all of this.

There are at least three groups of people you should talk to before you write your funeral sermon.

1. Talk to preachers in the area. They will know what is expected and may even have several sermon outlines that you can adapt or refer to in your preparation.
2. Talk to the funeral director. He or she will know the details of the funeral arrangements. Get as many details as you can. The funeral director will probably have the official obituary that will list pertinent information.
3. Visit the family before the funeral. Some key things to cover are:
 - Favorite Scriptures
 - Favorite Songs
 - Pleasant stories of the deceased
 - Introductions to family members you do not already know
 - Special circumstances (For example, there may be a family member reading a poem. There may be a club or organization participating in the service.)

Funerals are for families. Try to minister to their needs. The family may have a visitation period. When you go to this visitation, try to speak to all of the family members letting them know you and the congregation care for them. Likewise, at the funeral, when there is time to talk to the family, try to speak to each of them. Let them know that you are there for them. At the family visitation or at the funeral be sure to, sign the guest book.

Traditions of sharing meals and visiting vary from region to region. If you do not know what is expected of the person who conducts the funeral for visitation after a funeral, ask a preacher, elders or longtime resident church members. But a rule of thumb for visiting is when in doubt. Go!



How to Preach a Funeral for God's Glory

Here's why one seasoned pastor considers preaching a funeral one of his greatest privileges.

The subject I have been asked to write about was one of my greatest fears upon entrance into pastoral ministry. But today I consider it one of my greatest privileges. Why? Because of the historicity and glorious message of the atoning death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Obviously, I do not delight in the fact of someone's death. But I rejoice in the opportunity that the death of a believer opens for communicating the majesty of Christ and the glories of the gospel while comforting the family and friends and presenting salvation by grace to those who are lost but have come to "pay their respects."

But what about an unbeliever's funeral? Believe it or not, I also count this an opportunity to appropriately, truthfully and compassionately share the gospel. I am constantly amazed at how wide the door opens for effective gospel communication at the funeral of an unbeliever. Clearly, the preacher cannot "preach someone into heaven" or give false assurances, but there is a way to carefully turn everyone's attention to the realities of eternity and their need of the Savior.

Let's address the challenge of an unbeliever's funeral first. How do you preach the gospel at funerals for unbelievers? First, you must be committed to doing it. Second, you have to be compassionate while doing it. The implications will be obvious to any who listen to what you are thoughtfully yet pointedly saying about the gospel. The eternal state of the unbeliever who has died is revealed by the truth of the gospel. Let's be clear.

We are not called to make pronouncements about a person's soul any more than we are allowed to give false assurances concerning his eternal state. Why? God alone is in the position of knowing that person's heart and making pronouncements concerning his eternal destination—we do not know if perhaps he experienced a deathbed conversion. Instead, we are to preach the gospel and direct all in attendance to their need of the Savior in light of eternity.

The question from some would be, "Don't you have a responsibility to tell them that the unbeliever who died is under the judgment of God?" The answer is no. We have a responsibility to say that any and all who have not put their trust in Christ are rightly under the judgment of God. The individual's heart, I do not know. God alone is able and positioned to disclose and declare the condition of his heart and his eternal destination. What I must do is make clear that entrance into eternal life is only through Christ.

So, what about the death of believers? I have a confession to make. It is all that I can do to sit in a funeral service where the preacher begins with clichés of sentimentality that we somehow think will comfort people. In funerals, pastors must preach as they would in any preaching opportunity. We are



to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). To paraphrase a Puritan divine, “Truth without love is barbarity and love without truth is cruelty.”

Here is a practical suggestion to assist in this objective: always encourage the family members to ask someone who knows the individual well and can testify to his Christianity as well as his lifetime contributions to give a brief eulogy. A well-given eulogy allows the preacher to focus on the gospel, the glorious truth of forgiveness because of the cross and the bodily resurrection of Christ. A family eulogy positions the preacher to comfort the family, encourage believers and evangelize any who are lost.

Personal remarks in the sermon are necessary and helpful, but remember that all true and lasting comfort comes in the gospel promises of redemption and resurrection fulfilled in the death and bodily resurrection of Christ. Because Christ is risen, the one who has died is “home.” Everyone sitting in the funeral service is not. The question to them is, “Where will you spend eternity?”

One other practical suggestion: I love to use the Bible of the one who has gone to be with the Lord. I enjoy searching through it, securing notes from it, and noting places in it where he has underlined or written thoughts. Then, I love to use it and let everyone know that I am using it in the funeral. At the graveside after the benediction, I always place the Bible into the hands of the spouse or closest relative while giving words of personal comfort.

The preeminence of Christ our Redeemer and the truth of the gospel with the glorious promise of the resurrection must be simply, thoughtfully and clearly articulated. Your challenge is that everyone in attendance has to undergo a paradigm shift. Most of your listeners believe their loved one or friend has just gone from “the land of the living” to “the land of the dying.” You must proclaim to them that the exact opposite is actually true.

They have not left the “land of the living” to go to the “land of the dying”; they have left the “land of the dying” to go to “the land of the living.” As D.L. Moody told a New York journalist concerning the truth of the gospel and his approaching death: “Someday you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don’t you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.”

Why Have a Funeral?

When we experience the death of someone we love, a funeral service fills several important needs. First, it provides for the dignified and respectful care of the person and special tribute to their life. Among its purposes, it makes us acknowledge the death, remember the life and activate support during this naturally difficult time.



Equally important, the funeral service helps survivors face the reality of death, which is the first big step toward taking grief from the inside and allowing us to express it on the outside through mourning. Together, close friends and relatives can lend support and consolation when they're needed most.

A funeral gives friends and relatives an opportunity to express the love and respect they feel for someone who was important to them. Often, just seeing how much others care can be a tremendous help to a family in adjusting to their loss.

Since the beginning of time for thousands of years, funerals have been a means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of someone we love.

The funeral ceremony:

- helps us acknowledge that someone we love has died
- allows us to say goodbye
- provides a support system for us, friends, family members and our community
- allows us to reflect on the meaning of life and death
- offers continuity and hope for the living

The Purpose of Funerals

Importance and Reasons for Rituals

Rituals are symbolic experiences that help us, together with our families and friends, express our deepest thoughts and feelings about life's most important events. For example, birthday parties honor the passing of another year in life. Weddings publicly affirm the private love shared by two people. What do rituals have in common? First, they are typically public events. Families, friends, church members, villages, even nations – any group with strong emotional or philosophical ties – may create and enact a ritual, providing a support system for common beliefs and values. Rituals unite us.

Second, most rituals follow an established, cultural-specific procedure. The details will change, but the general pattern remains recognizable. The predictability of rituals helps participants feel at ease.

Finally, and perhaps most important, rituals are symbolic. Wedding rings, christening gowns and gold watches all symbolize important life transitions and commitments. Not just the objects, but the very acts of ritual are symbolic as well. The symbol of ritual provides a means to express our beliefs and feelings when language alone will not do those beliefs and feelings justice.

The funeral ritual, too, is a public, traditional and symbolic means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of someone loved.



Funeral Service

In a world experiencing unprecedented disasters, it is wise for all church leaders to be able to step in and conduct a funeral service should the emergency arise. I trust that these Notes will prove useful at such a time. As you know every funeral service is unique; so there are no hard and fast rules as to how a funeral service should be conducted. Nevertheless these Notes will give you some idea as to the **Order of Service** I use in Scotland.

1. Hymn: This should be a favorite of the deceased or of the bereaved family; and, if possible, one that is also known by the audience.

2. Prayer

3. Bible Reading/s: Listed below are a few examples I have used in the past. Choose one or more or even your own favorite.

- **Psalm 23** Quoted in full at the end of this file.
- **John 11:21:** *Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.*
22: But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.
23: Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.
24: Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.
*25: Jesus said unto her, **I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:***
26: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?
27: She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.
- **Luke 8: 41:** *And, behold, there came a man named Jairus, and he was a ruler of the synagogue: and he fell down at Jesus' feet, and besought him that he would come into his house:*
42: For he had one only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she lay a dying.....
49: While he yet spake, there cometh one from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying to him, Thy daughter is dead; trouble not the Master.
50: But when Jesus heard it, he answered him, saying, Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole.
51: And when he came into the house, he suffered no man to go in, save Peter, and James, and John, and the father and the mother of the maiden.
*52: And all wept, and bewailed her: but he said, **Weep not; she is not dead, but sleepeth.***
53: And they laughed him to scorn, knowing that she was dead.
54: And he put them all out, and took her by the hand, and called, saying, Maid, arise.



55: *And her spirit came again, and she arose straightway: and he commanded to give her meat.*

56: *And her parents were astonished: but he charged them that they should tell no man what was done.*

- **John 14:** 1: *Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.*
2: *In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*
3: *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and **receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.***
- **I Thess.4:** 13: *But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.*
14: *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.*
15: *For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.*
16: *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: **and the dead in Christ shall rise first:***
17: *Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.*
18: *Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*
- **Revelation 21:** 1: *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.*
2: *And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*
3: *And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.*
- 4: *And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and **there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.***
5: *And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.*
6: *And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.*
7: *He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.*
- **Isaiah 57:** 1: *The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart: and merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come.*
2: *He shall enter into peace: they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness.*
- **Job 19:** 25: *For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:*
26: *And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:*



27: *Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.*

4. Welcome

- **Friends** / Neighbours / Work associates / Acquaintances of the deceased; mentioning their names if you know them.
- **Relatives:** Naming each relative in turn.
- **In laws:** if still alive
- **Parents:** if still alive
- **Brothers/Sisters:**
- **Sons / Daughters / Nephews / Nieces / Cousins** Etc.
- Last but not least: **Husband / Wife**

5. Recall Notable Events

Before the funeral service collect stories, sayings and details of memorable events involving the deceased. Then make a real effort at the service to recount those treasured memories. For example:

- She was admired and loved by all: kind / caring / wise / forthright / elegant.
- She touched the hearts of everyone she met
- He/She had many interests: (List them) was never happier when he was out walking on the hills, playing golf, cycling, playing music etc.
- In a world where most people put their **own rights** in the forefront; he thought only of his responsibilities and duty.
- He was a tireless worker, lenient with others, ruthless with himself. High moral standards. Always grateful for what you did for him.
- I remember her/his words of wisdom. Quote one or two.
- We'll miss her/him - badly!

If he/she had a sense of humour, recall amusing incidents. Do not be afraid of making the audience smile or even laugh. A funeral, bear in mind, is not journey's end. It's simply the end of the journey on this section of the *Highway of Life*.

6. Sermon: Death is Simply a Sleep

Speak on Scriptures such as those listed below. Impress on your audience the reality of the **resurrection**. The Christian faith is founded on the fact that **Jesus (Yeshua)** died for our sins and **rose from the grave!** And that all who believe on him will also rise from their graves and live for all time! These are absolute facts. Preach them!



- They 'all wept, and bewailed her: but he said, Weep not; she is not dead, but sleepeth.(Luke 8:49-56)
- Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. (John 11:1-44)
- ***I am the resurrection and the life. he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:***
- *God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. (Rev.21:1-4)*

The Apostle Paul writes further in:

- 1 Cor.15: 51: *Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,*
52: *In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*
53: *For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.*
54: *So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.*
55: *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*
56: *The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law*
57: *But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
58: *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.*

No matter what else you may forget, do not forget to preach about the Resurrection; that **Jesus** is the resurrection and the life and that all who believe on him, even though they be dead, will rise from their graves to live again. This fact must be the foundation of your sermon because it is the *Blessed Hope*. If you do not preach it, all your other thoughts and words, however worthy, will not give the bereaved the comfort - Truth alone can give.

7. Closing Hymn

8. Closing Prayer

9. Invitation to guests to come back to the home - or hotel for refreshments (if applicable).



AT THE GRAVESIDE

1. Prayer

2. Bible Reading: 1 Cor.15:51-58 (see above)

3. Committal: Words such as the following may be used before lowering the coffin:

- 'And now we commit the body of our beloved (**Name Here**) to the grave,
- To rest in peace till the resurrection of the dead at our Saviour's return to earth.
- **When this corruptible shall put on incorruption.
And this mortal shall put on immortality.
Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written,
Death is swallowed up in victory.
O death, where is thy sting?
O grave, where is thy victory?**

As the coffin is lowered into the grave, read a short portion of Scripture.

4. Reading ... PSALM 23

1. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
3. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
5. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over
6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

5. Closing Prayer

Bear in mind that these Notes provide only brief **guidelines**. You may add a poem, musical item, have a family member say a few words on behalf of the bereaved relatives or sing a hymn or two at the graveside. It's up to you and the close family to decide what best suits the occasion.

'May God be with you' is my prayer.



How to Write an Obituary

Instructions

1. Begin the obituary with the deceased person's full name, age, city of residence, and date and place of death. Beyond the name, you should include his/her nickname. Often older people are known by that rather than their formal, given name. In the following paragraph, include his/her birth date and town, the parents, giving the mother's maiden name in parenthesis. Include his/her marriage date, where, and to whom. If they had special celebrations, such as their golden wedding anniversary, list those here. By the third paragraph, you can write his/her educational degrees, places of employment, organizational memberships, hobbies, special interests, and what the deceased person will be remembered for. These might run to another paragraph, depending on the person's involvement.
2. Then you should write the person's survivors, beginning with spouse, children, grandchildren, parents, brothers and sisters (with the spouse's first name in parenthesis) and their city residence, aunts, uncles, and nieces and nephews. Next list the people who have preceded the person in death such as his/her parents or a spouse. Following comes the date and time of visitation, if any, and the funeral. Some families prefer a private funeral with an open visitation. These preferences should be noted for the readers. If a luncheon or dinner will be held after the funeral, mention this. If the person has died in severe winter weather, a spring date might be set for a memorial service.
3. If a memorial fund is established for the deceased, include that next. If the fund is for a special cause or organization, add that. This might be a specialty of the readers, and they might want to donate more. Sometimes the memorials are "in lieu of flowers." Always add where the readers may phone for more information such as Anderson Funeral Home, the city, and phone number. If the funeral home has a website, include this for those who want to write in the memorial book. While some persons write their own obituaries prior to death, very few do. Knowing what to include in an obit is vital to give your loved one his/her credit in life and to inform the area of his/her death. You might want to submit this same obit to other newspapers where the person's friends or family reside.



How to Write An Obituary For a Mother

Instructions

Things You'll Need:

- Place of worship or good friend.
 - Local newspaper address and phone number (from the local paper)
 - Lots of courage
1. The first thing you need is your mothers full name at death. Then her birth date and what town and state she was born or what country if other than U.S.A. The date she passed away. What town and state she passed away in. How old she was at time she passed away. This will be your first paragraph.
 2. Next it will say "she is survived by children:
Name of oldest child: _ _ _ of, then where they now live (town and state).Eg..(Jane Doe of Dallas,Tx.) Also left to cherish her memory are _ _ _ How many grand children? or are there any? and list how many great grand children if she has some.
Then List her spouses name if he is alive.
 3. Now you are getting close to the end. Tell what date services are to be for Mrs./Ms._ _ _ . Then what time. The name of the funeral home or place of worship and what town it is in. Name of person officiating. Where and when interment will be.
 4. Tell when family and friends may come to viewing or memorial before the funeral. What day of the week and time of the day. Eg. (Thursday 6 to 8:00 P.M. at Roselawn Chapel). Then the address of chapel.

Losing a loved one is always difficult - but one of the hardest tasks after a death is trying to communicate to the rest of the world how much your father or mother meant to you in just a few lines. An obituary is a public announcement of someone's passing, and can range from a perfunctory list of the major details to an extensive eulogy.



How to Write an Obituary for a Father

Instructions

Things You'll Need:

- Paper and a pen, or a computer
 - The details of your father's death, including time, place, cause, and any important circumstances
1. Write your father's full name at the top of the paper, followed by the details of his death. Be sure to include time, place, cause, and any important circumstances. It is easiest to write these as bullet points.
 2. Choose four or five adjectives that describe your father. For example: loving, hardworking, devoted, caring, and special.
 3. Write a first draft of the obituary. If you're having trouble getting started, looking at obituaries in the newspaper. Your first draft should be as sparse as possible.
Example: John Doe, 73, died Friday of complications due to colon cancer. A devoted familyman, Doe is survived by his wife, Jane, and their three sons, John Jr, Joe, and Jim.
 4. Most obituaries include information about a wake or funeral service and some also include directions for charitable donations.
Example: John Doe, 73, died Friday of complications due to colon cancer. A devoted family man, Doe is survived by his wife, Jane, and their three sons, John Jr, Joe, and Jim. Viewings Wednesday and Thursday at Smith Funeral Home. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Cancer Hospital A.
 5. Once you are satisfied with your rough draft, call the newspaper in which you're placing the obituary.

Running an obituary is not cheap - you may pay by the word, or by the line. Determine how much your first draft will cost. If you have a budget to pay more, consider adding some additional details. More often than not, you'll find yourself cutting words.



6. Read the obituary to another friend or family member to make sure it is clear and all the details are correct. Once you have a final draft, contact the newspaper and follow their instructions for submission.



How to Write an Obituary for a Child

Losing a child is one of the most painful experiences a family can go through. When writing a child's obituary, keep in mind that this is the family's last tribute for their loved child and should reflect a feeling of hope and comfort. It will be emotional for anyone writing obituaries, so follow these steps to make it a little less difficult.

Instructions

1. Contact the newspaper first. Find out what the cost is and if there are any restrictions as to length. Some newspapers charge by the number of lines. Ask if pictures are included or at an added cost. Place the obituary a few days before the funeral or on the closest Sunday as that is the day of the most read obituaries.
2. Use the deceased child's full name. If she went by a nickname, include that in parenthesis right after the first name.
3. Include the date and place of the child's death. It is not necessary to give information on how he died. That is up to the family. Some families feel it is important to increase awareness of terrible childhood diseases for example: "Melanie led a valiant fight with cancer."
4. Write a brief description of the child's life, including the place and date of birth. Sometimes this is difficult with a young child, but describe the people he inspired, and his favorite activities, hobbies or toys. Anything that is special or unique about the child.
5. Offer comfort and hope. For example, include a line about how much he will be missed, he will be with his family again or has completed his assignment on earth. Be brief and stay within the family's belief system.
6. Include the names of the child's siblings and parents. Grandparents and aunts and uncles can also be mentioned, including those who have already died.
7. Include the information of the time, date and address of where the funeral will be held.
8. End with instructions where flowers or contributions or where charitable donations in the child's name can be sent.



Ministering after Suicide

Early in my ministry, a young parishioner completed suicide. Her death devastated our church, our community and me. Following her funeral, many attendees shared with me their story of a loved one who had died by suicide, and each spoke as if the death had just happened. Those painful memories were fresh and raw. I left the funeral heartbroken, my eyes suddenly opened to lives haunted by unhealed grief.

Recurrent pastoral encounters with suicide and mental illness have marked my ministry through the years. I still have much to learn about ministry within the context of suicide, but three practices have helped me along the way.

1. Speak openly about suicide.

A suicide leaves survivors—family and friends who deeply loved the deceased. Many people don't know what to say to survivors. Suicide is a taboo topic in our culture and churches. Most survivors of suicide are abandoned to work through their grief, while friends and family remain silent, whispering behind their backs but completely avoiding the topic in their presence. Much of this reaction is understandable: we hesitate to use the word “suicide”, so we speak in hushed tones, sharing vague details, hoping to change harsh reality through ambiguity. Suicide is painful, awkward and difficult to talk about, but avoidance doesn't change reality.

In my experience, suicide survivors are hungry to talk through the details once they sense you will be a compassionate presence. Let them talk. Ministers ought not avoid the topic with grieving families because it makes us uncomfortable. Suicide is uncomfortable to talk about, but for the sake of those you serve, get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

With the family's permission, talk openly about what happened with others. Remove the stigma of suicide by addressing it boldly, lovingly and prophetically. Let us not perpetuate misconceptions about suicide by failing to speak with the confidence, love and honesty to which God calls us.

2. Remember that emotions are complex.

When people die by suicide, their surviving family and friends can feel a bewildering array of emotions. Sadness and pain are common in all grieving, but with suicide, less socially “acceptable” emotions can be just as strong. Experiencing these emotions is unpleasant for suicide survivors and hard for us, as the listener, to hear.



Survivors may feel great anger: “How could my loved one take his or her own life?” True, suicide is not really a choice, but the result of deep anguish and (oftentimes) mental illness. Still, let survivors be angry. Help them acknowledge and express anger safely and without judgment.

Many ministers are surprised when survivors express a deep sense of relief. Perhaps their loved one battled mental illness for a lifetime. That struggle was likely marked with times of success and relapse, emotional and financial struggle and relational difficulties. Repeated suicide attempts may precede the final, "successful" attempt.

Why should we be surprised when survivors express relief? The roller-coaster has stopped, and survivors can feel relief that their loved one’s pain is ended. But they may even feel a sense of personal relief that the ruthless “ups-and-downs” of mental illness have ceased. They don't want to feel relieved, but feelings, especially unpleasant ones, do not come and go at our bidding. Ministers must grant to survivors the liberty to feel unpleasant emotions, without being censored or "fixed".

When we deprive suicide survivors of a safe space to talk through difficult feelings, the grief stagnates. Survivors limp along, never fully healing, never fully returning to life. The grief associated with suicide is complex grief that may include crippling guilt and shame. Survivors unfairly bludgeon themselves for a lifetime for failing to do "more" to prevent the suicide. This is hard, messy stuff. We must enter into the survivor’s unique pain, and walk with them where they are, as they are.

3. Above all, point them to Jesus.

In all things, point them to Jesus. Jesus looked on people’s pain with the deepest compassion. He wept over death and died to destroy sin, despair, brokenness, and pain. Point grieving people to the God who died for them – the God who knows our suffering intimately. Our crucified and resurrected God understands the pain of even the most complex, unimaginable losses.

I don't have all the answers, and it’s been my experience that most grieving people don't really want answers anyway. They do, however, need a whole lot more than you and I can possibly give to them. They need something that only God can give: grace, healing, peace, hope, love and redemption.

Ministers can and must walk with suffering people, showing empathy and deep compassion, but it is Jesus who heals the broken heart. Point them to Jesus. Patiently, persistently and compassionately remind them that Jesus is with them. Help them see that Christ’s suffering reveals to us a God who is not distant from our pain, but enters into pain with us. Our God can be trusted to heal and deliver.



Faithful Christian Funeral

Psalm 90:1, "Lord, through all the generations you have been our home! 2 Before the mountains were created, before you made the earth and the world, you are God, without beginning or end. 3 You turn people back to dust, saying, "Return to dust!" 4 For you, a thousand years are as yesterday! They are like a few hours! 5 You sweep people away like dreams that disappear or like grass that springs up in the morning. 6 In the morning it blooms and flourishes, but by evening it is dry and withered. 7 We wither beneath your anger; we are overwhelmed by your fury. 8 You spread out our sins before you--our secret sins--and you see them all. 9 We live our lives beneath your wrath. We end our lives with a groan. 10 Seventy years are given to us! Some may even reach eighty. But even the best of these years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we are gone. 11 Who can comprehend the power of your anger? Your wrath is as awesome as the fear you deserve. 12 Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom. 13 O LORD, come back to us! How long will you delay? Take pity on your servants! 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives. 15 Give us gladness in proportion to our former misery! Replace the evil years with good. 16 Let us see your miracles again; let our children see your glory at work. 17 And may the Lord our God show us his approval and make our efforts successful. Yes, make our efforts successful!

Prayer

Special Music

We are gathered here today in this service to pay our respects to _____. Today for the comfort and hope we need let us turn our thoughts to the love of God. He cares for us even when we do not deserve to be cared for. For in the midst of such sorrow we must lean upon God. We must remember that what sorrow is to us, is great reward for _____. For _____ has graduated from this life with it's troubles and pains to a better life eternal with his Lord and God.

At such a time as this we need to trust in the Lord God. He is a God of sympathy and understanding. He knows our hurts and our loneliness. He knows how we feel. The Bible tells us that He knows our sorrows and records our tears. If He see the tears, He knows the reason those tears fall from our eyes. We are told that all our thoughts, ways, and words are known to Him. And that a book of remembrance is written before Him for those that fear the Lord and think upon His name.

The words that seem the most appropriate today are those of the great Apostle Paul, who said as he came to the end of his life, *I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.*



Paul left this world a better place than he found it. He had been faithful to his God and now prepared to go for his reward.

These words also describe _____'s life. Especially the part about *keeping the faith*. _____ too left this world a better place than he found it.

1. _____ kept the faith with his wife, _____. When two people enter the marriage bond, they do so in faith. Neither one knows whether the other will always be true. But they accept each other on faith, taking their vows, *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer*. Faith is a lovely thing at the marriage altar, but it is far more lovely after many, many wedding anniversaries have been celebrated at which one can say, *Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three for the greatest of these is love*. _____ and _____ were married ____ years.

2. _____ kept the faith with his children, _____. When parents bring children into this world, that is an adventure of faith. They do not know whether the children will bring honor or shame to the family, they proceed with faith. On the other hand, the children cannot know whether the parents will keep faith with them. They may disappoint them or forsake them. One of God's greatest blessing is Godly parents. Children who have such parent need to thank God daily.

His children, _____ enjoyed the privilege of a Christian father and his faith will remain a part of both of you. _____ kept the faith with his son, _____, and his daughter, _____, and with his grandchildren. And they all kept the faith with him. Their's was a love and concern that all could see and feel, even to the last. This love will remain with you for the rest of your lives. No one can take the memories, they are precious to you.

3. _____ kept the faith with his friends. All the cards, flowers, and people speak to that fact. Never did I hear him say a bad word about anyone. Always happy and glad to see you. Never complaining. A gentle man who no one ever saw angry or upset. This gentleness he past on to his children. What a great character he set as a example for us all. And all of us found it easy to love _____. It is a shame we can't all be like that.

4. _____ kept the faith with his church. _____ loved his church and support his church in prayers and finances. _____ was a charter member of _____ Church and he devoted many hours to church work over the years. He serves as a deacon and treasurer over the many years. He loved serving His God thought the church. His loyalty speak loudly to us all. He was always supportive of my work and encouraged me every time he saw me. I appreciated that.



Who of us doesn't remember _____ sitting in this sanctuary on Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting and hearing him pray. It was one of the things I first missed when he had to go to the nursing home. In the last years of his life he was unable to attend church and when you talked to him about church tears came into his eyes. He loved the church that Jesus died for. We had many a good talk about God and the church. I always left _____ with a tear in my eye because of the love he had for Jesus. He will be missed by his church.

5. Most importantly however, is the fact that _____ kept the faith with his God. He loved God. There was no doubt about that. It was the realization that a greater power was behind his life that gave him courage and that kept a light in his eyes. He never lost sight of the fact that God was holding his life. _____'s faith is an example to us all. When one gives themselves to God, God puts a bit of Himself in us. He lends us reasoning powers to think more clearly, by seeing above the present to a better tomorrow. He puts love in us so we can love others with a genuine concern and compassion. He puts forgiveness in our spirits so we are not bitter at ourselves, or others, or with Him.

He never lost sight of the fact that God was holding his life. _____ is enjoying the presences of God and Jesus now. He is in that special place where *eyes have not seen, nor ears heard, neither has it entered into the hearts of men the things that God has prepared for them that love Him*. He gives us an example of how to meet suffering and disappointment with the power to raise above it in His strength. He gives us the assurance that He is in control of all that happens in our lives and the promise that it all has a purpose and meaning which only He may understand.

_____ 's faith is an example to us all. When one gives themselves to God, God puts a bit of Himself in us. He lends us reasoning powers to think more clearly, by seeing above the present to a better tomorrow. He puts forgiveness in our spirits so we are not bitter at ourselves, others, or with Him. He gives us an example of how sweet suffering and disappointment with the power to raise above it in His strength. He gives us the assurance that He is in control of all that happens in our lives and the promise that it all has a purpose and meaning which only He may understand.

There was something _____ had that we could all see. That something was God. You can have that same God by asking Jesus into your hearts. When we lose a loved one and friends like _____ it leaves an emptiness that's impossible to fill. _____ cannot come back to us, now would we call him back if we could. King David said of the baby lost, *He can't come to me, but I can go to him*. And so it is that someday we have the promise that we will meet again. The void is great to each of us for different reasons. His faith is our example and our hope. God will bring the peace that passes all understanding to each of you as you lean on Him.



Let us pray:

We lift our hearts in gratitude for the life of _____, who has now gone from among us; for all that he/her was to those that loved him/her and for everything in his life that reflected your goodness and love. We thank you for the privilege of knowing and sharing in his life. Help each of us to lean upon you as _____ did. May we remember that those whom we speak of as dead are alive with you for ever more? May Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit bless you and keep you, now and forever more. Amen.



5 Funeral Blunders to Avoid at All Costs

What we say is powerful in such a vulnerable situation, and we should tread carefully.

Nothing makes me shrink back from holy ambition and the good fight of ministry like preaching a funeral. I wrestle for days and nights on not only what to say, but also how to say it.

If I'm enjoying an encouraging season of life, I struggle to enter into the suffering of the grieving. Who am I to represent the feelings of the hurting family as they watch me attempt to honor their loved one? But much changed for me when I preached my dad's funeral last August. God gave me the insight of not just the preacher, but also the family member.

This moment is never casual or easy. It takes much courage and help from the Holy Spirit.

As we ask for God's help in prayer, we must not be careless with any of our words. What we say is powerful in such a vulnerable situation, and we should tread carefully.

So here are five things we must avoid when preaching a funeral.

1. Do not refer to the departed saint only in the past tense.

Part of our duty as the preacher is to honor the Lord by talking about how this child of God loved Jesus and gave his or her life for his glory.

However, too many times we can carelessly speak of the person in past tense. If we believe the deceased is alive in Christ and in his presence, we must refer to him or her also in present and future tense.

In this way, we remind family and other listeners of the hope of the gospel.

2. Do not forget God's perspective.

We're taught in Psalm 116:15, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." God is glorified when his children come home.

Being in the unveiled presence of God is the highest joy a believer can ever receive. It is the end of the long struggle of sanctification and the beautiful beginnings of glorification.

3. Do not ignore the lost.

The lost are always around us. They may not lie in the casket, but they are dead in their sins.



The lost need to be reminded that death is a reality of life, a transition we will all make one day. If there is any place for preaching the seriousness of sin and the grace of Christ, it is when preaching over the body of a saint into the eyes of the lost. Plead with them to repent and enjoy eternal life with the Savior. The honored saint is more alive than anyone can ever imagine.

4. Do not say or imply the deceased was perfect.

Real people are encouraged to hear about real life. And real life is full of both joys and sorrows. The honored saint has finished the race and fought the good fight of faith. We can learn from the life of anyone united with Christ.

5. Do not leave out the reality of heaven—expound on it.

The church needs to keep hearing and studying from God's Word about our future home. Lack of talk about heaven reveals our lack of faith, hope and joy in it. This dearly departed child of God now enjoys God and the riches of his kingdom. For at least a few moments, we can pull people out of their "here and now" perspective that shrinks the joy set before them in Christ. Remind them that Christians are always surrounded by grace and have nothing but heaven in front of them.



Christian Funeral or Memorial Service - Planning and Organizing

Guide to Planning a Christian Funeral or Memorial Service

Planning a Christian funeral is never an easy thing to do. Saying goodbye to a loved one is difficult. People grieve in different ways. Oftentimes family tension adds to the stress during an already emotionally burdensome period. This practical and spiritual guide is designed to alleviate some of the burden and offer steps to help you plan your loved one's Christian funeral service.

First, before making any plans, ask family members if your loved one left specific directions for their funeral. If so, this will greatly ease the load of making decisions and guessing what your loved one would have wanted. Be sure to find out if your loved one has a funeral or burial insurance policy or prepaid arrangements with a funeral home or cemetery.

If no prearrangements have been made:

Preparing Your Attitude

Start by arming yourself with the right attitude. Making the funeral arrangements will be less of a weight if you recognize that it can actually help you and your loved ones work through the grieving process. Begin thinking of the service as a celebration of the person's life. It should be dignified and respectful without being depressing and morbid. Along with mourning, there should be room for expressions of joy—even laughter.

Choosing a Funeral Home

Next, contact a funeral home. If you're not sure of a reputable one, ask your church for a recommendation. The staff of the funeral home will expertly guide you through the process, from legal documents, preparing an obituary, choosing a casket or cremation, and every element of the memorial service and burial.

Choosing a Minister

If your loved one was a member of a church, they would most likely want you to ask a pastor or minister from their church to officiate the service. If you are working with a funeral home, let them contact the minister of your choice. If the deceased had no contact with a church, you may want to rely on the funeral home to recommend a minister, or ask family members to help decide on a



minister. The person you choose to officiate will have a large part in shaping the overall dynamics of the funeral service.

Offer Hope

As a Christian keep in mind this important detail when planning the funeral service. Funerals are one of the rare times in life when non-Christians stop to think about eternity. A funeral is the perfect opportunity for a Christian family to and the hope for eternity with non-believing family and friends. If you wish to clearly present the Gospel and offer the hope of salvation in Christ, be sure to ask the minister to include this in his message.

Planning the Service

Once you have a plan for the service, you should sit down with the minister and go over the details:

- Any special songs or music you would like to include.
- Any poems, stories, Bible verses, or readings you would like to include.
- Any special speakers or singers you would like to participate.
- Any specific photos of your loved one or family you would like displayed.
- Is there a charity or a benefit you would recommend to mourners in lieu of sending flowers?
- If guests are invited to the grave side service, an announcement should be made at the end of the service.

Working with a Funeral Coordinator

Many churches have funeral coordinators. If the service is at a church, you will want to speak with the person responsible for coordinating the funeral to go over details, such as arrival times, flower arrangements, audio and visual needs, reception arrangements, etc. If the service is at a funeral home, they will work with you to coordinate every detail.

Preparing a Eulogy

A typical eulogy is about 5 minutes in length. It is recommended to leave the emotional elements for the end of the eulogy. Any additional tributes given by family or friends should be limited in length to keep the service from going too long. Young children and family members may want to write down a few sentences to be read aloud by the minister or the person giving the eulogy.

Whether or not you are giving the eulogy, it is helpful to have certain facts and information available. Here is a sample eulogy outline to aid you in preparing the necessary information.



Outline of a Eulogy

- Give a brief history including birth date, place of birth, parents, grandparents, siblings.
- Where did they grow up? What was their childhood like?
- Where did they go to school?
- Professional and career accomplishments?
- Who did they marry? When and where? Children and grandchildren.
- How long were they married?
- Significant life accomplishments.
- Personal interests, hobbies, achievements.
- Character qualities, Christian service, and how they affected other lives.

Special Remembrances

A table is often provided for the family to place special remembrances, photographs and other memorabilia during the service. Be sure to think about what you might want to display. Take some time to gather these items and make arrangements with the funeral coordinator.

Service Handout

Because most memorial services are planned in a relatively short period of time, this detail is often overlooked. If you would like the guests to have a memento or remembrance, you can provide a special printed handout or bookmark. This can be as simple as a picture of your loved one with their birth and death dates, the order of service and a cherished Bible verse. Check with the funeral home or coordinator, as they may provide this for you upon request.

Guest Book

When I used to help coordinate funerals for my church, I noticed that families often forgot to bring a book for the guests to sign. This record of attendance is usually very meaningful to family members, so ask someone to be responsible to bring a guest book and a nice pen.

Length of Service

The entire length of the funeral service often depends on the number of guests. Time should be allow either before or after the service to greet your guests and give them a moment to say their good byes to the deceased. It is recommended to keep the actual service length anywhere between 30-60 minutes.



How to Plan a Memorial Service

- Once arrangements have been made for the disposition of the body, you will need to plan the content of the actual funeral or memorial service. You can be as involved with the preparation of the service as you wish
 - Funerals are typically more formal and dictated by religious rites. Memorial services are more personalized and open-ended. The funeral home you are working with can provide the space and help with flowers
 - **Select a Date and Location:** Typically the date of a viewing or funeral is set in accordance with religious law or the availability of the funeral home, church or synagogue. However, memorial services can be held at any time in just about any location. Take the availability of close family members and friends into consideration when setting a date.
 - **Find an Officiant (If not you):** If the deceased was a member of a religious congregation, you may already know who the service's officiant will be. If you don't know where to start, a funeral director can help you find a celebrant. Keep in mind some religious leaders may not "charge" for their services, but an unofficial honorarium of anywhere from \$100-\$250 is typically expected.
1. **Set Up a Memorial Fund:** A memorial fund can be set up in the name of the deceased in order to accept donations from mourners for the deceased's favorite charity or the deceased's family
 2. **Place an Obituary and Invite Guests:** If you are working with a funeral director, he or she will help you place an obituary stating the time of the viewing, funeral or memorial service. If you are not, you should plan on placing an obituary yourself. Guests should otherwise be notified of the service by a phone call or email. It's a good idea to appoint a couple of people other than yourself to contact the deceased's friends and family members. People belong to so many fragmented social circles that you'll need all the help you can get to reach everyone affected by your loved one's death.
 3. **Select Pallbearers:** While a funeral home can provide pallbearer services, you may want to appoint six family members or friends to act as pallbearers. Pallbearers carry the casket to and from the hearse and site of the service or burial.
 4. **Ask Someone to Give a Eulogy:** A eulogy is an oral remembrance of the deceased delivered by a friend or family member. You may want to ask more than one person to deliver a eulogy. Eulogies are typically kept to 3-5 minutes in length. You may also choose to include an "open mic" portion in the service during which any of the attendees can come up and deliver a remembrance.



5. **Ask Family Members and Friends to participate in the Service:** You will need friends and family members to participate in other parts of the service as readers, musicians or ushers.
6. **Create Printed Programs:** The funeral home or the location's funeral coordinator will typically help you plan and create a printed funeral program, but you will want to have some kind of memorial card or program for the service's attendees.
7. **Choose the Music and Readings:** Funeral and memorial services typically consist of several readings and songs that reflect the life of the deceased and the occasion. You can use live musicians or a recording, and you can choose popular funeral poems like WH Auden's Funeral Blues or something more personal.

Choose Flowers: If you are working with a funeral home, they can help you identify vendors and choose floral arrangements. Otherwise, you can work with a local florist. Flowers are not a necessary part of the service.

8. **Select Food and Refreshments:** If you plan on having a reception following the service or a full-blown wake, you will need to put someone in charge of finding a location for the gathering and selecting refreshments.

Create a Memorial Display

Some mourners like to set up some kind of memorial display both to commemorate the deceased and give service attendees a means of participating in the service. A memorial display might include photographs and items that symbolize the deceased's hobbies and accomplishments. The display might also include cards that guests can write memories of the deceased on for the family.

1. **Deceased's Full Name:** Be sure the newspaper or funeral home spells the name of the deceased correctly.
2. **Date and Place of Death:** The cause of death is not typically included.
3. **Short Biography:** This typically includes the person's date and place of birth, schools attended, degrees achieved, vocation and hobbies. It can be written as a perfunctory, chronological list or as a more prose-like tribute.
4. **Names of Survivors:** This typically includes the deceased's parents, children, spouse or domestic partner. Some people even include the name of a beloved pet.



5. **Service Announcement:** When and where the funeral, memorial service, viewing or wake will take place.
6. **Memorial Contributions:** Where people can make donations in remembrance of the deceased or send flowers.



Preaching a Funeral? 4 Should's and 2 You'd Better Not's

Jared Moore

Don't miss an opportunity to preach the gospel--but don't blow it, either.

Many pastors have a difficult time determining whether—or what—to preach at a funeral. Here are four "should" and two "should not's."

We Should:

1. Preach the gospel.

Funerals force all in attendance to admit their mortality, including their eventual death and judgment. Although we hide ourselves from death continually (do you see animals die, do you bury your own dead, etc.?), funerals force us to look mortality in the eye. Whenever we admit that death is real, understanding that it's "the wages of sin" is just one step further. God is the one who has judged sin temporally through death; however, He has crucified His Son so that sinners will enjoy Him forever through Christ. Christ's death propitiated God's wrath toward sinners. Sinners simply must repent, placing their trust in Christ alone for their salvation. Hopefully, this "face-to-face" meeting with mortality will send your hearers running to the cross for salvation.

2. Accommodate.

Some of you may disagree with me on this; however, I will gladly read poems that speculate concerning eternity if the family of the deceased requests it. I will, however, qualify what I'm about to read by saying, "The family has asked me to read this poem titled _____." Just because you read it does not mean that you necessarily approve of all the theology that it contains. Although I will not read a heretical poem for anyone, I will gladly read a poem that I disagree with that is still in the realm of orthodoxy.

3. Preach the truth concerning heaven and hell.

There are more sermons on heaven than on hell in today's pulpits. As pastors, however, we should emphasize both places since the authors of Scripture emphasized both. You should not allow this rare opportunity to pass you by to preach the result of trusting in Christ: heaven, and the result of rejecting Him: hell.

4. Preach the gospel from the deceased's perspective.

Something interesting that the Scriptures teach is that both heaven and hell are full of entities with a desire for evangelism. Peter says that the heavenly angels desire to look into sharing the gospel (1 Peter 1:12), and Jesus says that those in hell wish someone would share the gospel with their loved



ones so that they wouldn't have to come to such a place (Luke 16: 27-31). Bring this reality up by saying, "If the deceased could be here today, he would tell you to place your trust in Jesus Christ; for he knows today more than ever that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one gets to the Father but by Him (John 14:6)."

We Should Not...

1. Correct theology beyond the gospel.

If the gospel does not hinge on the theology that is believed or being presented by someone else at the funeral, then you have no need to correct it at this time. The gospel should be the emphasis, not 100% correct theology. Basically, whatever is in the realm of orthodoxy should be tolerated. Only come against what you know to be 100% false, and don't be arrogant. After all, you should not be as sure about eschatology as you are about the resurrection of Christ.

2. Speculate about the deceased's location at this moment: heaven or hell.

Regardless of how godly or ungodly a person was, we do not know 100% whether this person is in heaven or hell at this moment. We must be careful not to preach people into heaven or hell. Instead, we must seek to be vague about what we do not know, and instead, focus on the power of the gospel for those who believe. Your sermon is not for the deceased (he's not there) but is rather for those present. Emphasize the fact that all those who trust in Christ will be reconciled to God through Christ, absent from the body and present with the Lord until the day Christ returns, and their bodies are raised from the dead and join their spirits to rule and reign with Christ, forevermore exalting God. Oh, happy day!



Do You Include These 3 Vital Elements When You Preach a Funeral?

Practical advice: "Don't preach them into heaven. Don't preach them into hell. Just preach the gospel for the people who are there."

The most helpful advice I ever received about preaching at a funeral for someone I didn't know is: "Don't preach them into heaven. Don't preach them into hell. Just preach the gospel for the people who are there." This principle captures our task regardless of the kind of funeral we do. Ironically, though we focus on remembering and celebrating the life of the deceased, the funeral service is ultimately for those who attend.

The sermon is where the gospel must be preached clearly. Only when we can personally have confidence in a person's conversion should we feel comfortable to speak of the heavenly reward he/she has now received. If there is any doubt in your mind, it is best to focus on the gospel for your hearers and resist the temptation to provide a false comfort that you have little or no basis to give.

A funeral sermon should not exceed 20 minutes and should highlight these three categories, preferably expounded from a text(s) of Scripture:

1. Acknowledge the Need to Grieve

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11) is particularly helpful, as there seems to be a legitimate time of grieving for those present and sorrow for those who are experiencing the separation that death brings, including Jesus who wept (John 11:35). I often share about the time my father sat my wife and me down, once we found out we had miscarried with our second child, and exhorted us to take time to grieve over this child, instructing us how to do so.

Don't ever presume that people realize that grief is appropriate or that they know how to work through their grief by simply talking about their deceased loved one. In actuality, many do not want to talk about them because of the hurt felt in loss. Many pastors know that often, years later, people learn the value of this process, eventually working through the grief with some pastoral guidance.

2. Make the Hope of the Gospel Clearly Known

True hope in grief cannot come apart from the hope of the gospel. This is why the second and third portion of a funeral sermon focuses on Christ's person and work. Whatever text you choose to preach, make sure you are able to focus on the clear elements of the gospel from it: God's holiness,



man's sinfulness and deserving judgment, Christ's perfect personhood and atoning work to save us, our essential response to repent and believe upon Christ.

3. Call Your Hearers to Respond to the Gospel

To do so appropriately and effectively, you must prepare by knowing as much as you can about your hearers as well as the deceased. You should assume Christians and non-Christians are present. You should assume they all have come with a preconceived understanding on how we receive eternal life. For example, I have done a funeral where 90 percent of those in attendance were devoted Catholics, another who were mainly Mormons and another where no one in the building had ever set foot in a church.

In every case, I explained the gospel clearly, called my hearers to repent of their sins, believe upon Christ and trust in him. Yet, in each of these different situations, I approached calling them to respond to the gospel differently, depending upon their preconceived understanding of the "good news." Exhort them to grieve. Preach the gospel clearly and simply. Help them understand their need for Christ as death is before them. Call them to repent and believe.

5 Filters for a Funeral Sermon

One of the hardest weekends of my life in ministry came when I was called upon to preach the funeral of a baby on a Saturday morning, marry a couple of Saturday afternoon, and then dedicate a baby on Sunday morning. All of the families were close friends and members of the same church where I was pastor.

That was a particularly hard funeral sermon to develop and deliver but they are all challenging. It is a difficult thing to do. People's hearts are broken. Many of the people present are not believers. A lot of those who are followers of Jesus are from other churches and traditions.

I've preached a lot of funerals. Along the way I've learned some lessons from others and I've learned some lessons the hard way. Whether you are a pastor or a family friend called upon to deliver the sermon at a funeral, here are a few principles that can help you make the most of the opportunity to preach at such a monumental time in the lives of the family and friends gathered at a funeral.



5 Filters for a Funeral Sermon

Here are five filters to pass your funeral sermon through before preaching it:

1. Is this about the deceased?

This is important. If you get this wrong that's what people will remember. Interview the family to find our important details of the person's personal, professional, and spiritual life. Did they have a favorite hymn? Use it at the funeral. Did they have a favorite place? Mention it. It's even better if you can carefully craft it in as a part of a sermon illustration.

Use the high points of the person's life story as a means of instruction to those present. There is no greater way to honor a deceased dedicated teacher than to teach the people present to celebrate her life. There is no better way to honor a kind mechanic than to remind people to maintain friendships in their lives.

2. Is this about the risen?

A funeral is essentially an opportunity to celebrate the person who died. It's the preacher's job to take it a step further and make it about the person who rose from the dead. This is a delicate task but don't shy away from it out of fear of offending unbelievers present. Mortality has just slapped them in the face as they've watched beloved Aunt Susie die. Make it about Jesus. In Luke thirteen the people asked Jesus about the people who had died when a tower fell in a construction accident. Jesus used it as an opportunity to call them to repentance. He didn't waste their awareness of mortality. When people stand in the presence of mortality it's the preacher's job to point them toward eternity. Do it lovingly and gently but do it.

3. Is this comforting?

Preach the Gospel like a man in love with the mourners. The Gospel is always hard but it is never harsh. When people are mourning the Gospel must be given like a loving salve not an angry salvo. It is far better to bombard mourning people with hope for forgiveness than to barrage them with their sin.

4. Is this challenging?

Now, don't let the above filter keep you from making the sermon challenging. Funeral sermons must remember their audience. That's what filter #3 is about. It has been well said that the preacher's job is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. This is one of those times where the chief task must be to comfort the afflicted. However, that's doesn't mean we waste the opportunity to challenge unbelievers into a saving relationship with Christ.

"In her final days, Aunt Susie took great comfort in knowing where she was headed. Today, do you know in whose hands your life is held? Is Aunt Susie's hope your hope?" Shine a light on the stair case which leads to Christ. Don't drag them up the stairs screaming and kicking. Point the way. Open the door.

5. Is this biblical?



This is the final filter. After you've prepared your sermon ask yourself this one question: is this faithful to scriptural ideas and biblical truth? We can celebrate the deceased, mention Jesus name, comfort and challenge people, but if the ideas of the sermon aren't congruent with the ideas of the Bible it will have no power to change lives. You might make a few friends with your poetry but you'll have wasted the opportunity to be a part of lasting life change if the Bible was not directly reflected in the things spoken at a funeral.

Funeral sermons should celebrate the dead and point people to the risen. They are difficult assignments but there is perhaps no other time when people are as aware of their own mortality and potentially awake to Jesus and eternity