

Spurgeon's Thoughts on How Long a Sermon Should Be

How Long Should a Sermon Be?

by Charles H. Spurgeon

Taken and updated from "Advice Gratis"
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This month we give our readers our free advice and at least we feel sure that it is worth the fee charged for it, if not more. When a man has been more than twenty-one years in the ministry he may be considered to be of age, and upon some points it may not be foolish to "*ask him.*" Though by no means skilled in the law, we have some experience in matters concerning the gospel, and will give our reply to a certain inquiry that has reached us.

Question? - An Old Puritan asks, "What have you been saying about short sermons being the most difficult to preach? How long do you generally preach?"

We only quoted Dr. Chalmer's opinion that the shorter the discourse the more time it required in preparation; but we endorse it fully and think we can prove it. When a man has nothing to say, it generally takes him a long time to get to the end of it. Like a man who is going nowhere he finds he has not reached his point and thinks he might as well keep going. When the gutters of a town run with water, one would not be surprised if the current continued for a week; but when the conduit floods them with wine, even a king's ransom cannot afford many minutes of it. Excellence enforces brevity. You cannot have a diamond as large as a pyramid, nor a pearl the size of a Swiss lake. To some degree, with a conscientious preacher, the direction of his subject is predetermined, and brevity enforces excellence.

If the preacher is allowed only forty minutes for expounding a great truth, he feels that he must not multiply words; but must

compress much meaning into every sentence. If an Arctic expedition is limited to only a few pounds of provision, they are wise enough to secure the essence of the meat, and not an ounce of mere bone or garnishment is tolerated. Give a man abundance of stowage in a vessel, and he will not spend time in close packing; but drive him hard in the matter of space, and it is quite wonderful how much he will contrive to get into it. A truss of hay (56 *pounds*) brought on a wagon to Whitechapel is one thing, but a truss compressed by hydraulics for ocean transit is quite another. Shortening a sermon requires work. You cannot get an Australian sheep transformed into a pot of Liebig's essence¹ without careful cooking. Neither can you distill a garden of roses into a drop of precious rose oil without skillful labor. The same is true with thought. You cannot release it from the overabundance and blending of words unless time and mental effort are given to the task. Of course, a man can talk nonsense during the briefest period allotted to him and it is to be feared that a great many do. But, at any rate, they cannot flatter themselves that the quantity made up for the quality. Hopefully, they will discover how lacking in usefulness their messages are and work at improving them.

In general, a long sermon is a great evil. Length is the enemy of strength. The delivery of a sermon is like the boiling of an egg. It is remarkably easy to overdo it and spoil it. You may medicate a man until you make him ill; and preach to him until you make him wicked. There is only a single step from being satisfied to eating more than one should. A wise preacher never wants his hearer to have more than he should. Enough is as good as a feast and better than too much. Having learned by long experience that we exactly fill the twelve pages which our publishers allow for a penny sermon, when we speak for forty or forty-five minutes, we have come to adopt that period as our allotment, and we usually find it neither too short nor too long.² In occasional services, when we address persons who have no other opportunity of hearing us, we take more liberty, but our regulation allowance is three quarters of an hour. A man who speaks well for that length of time has told his people quite enough, and from him who preaches badly they have in that time heard too much. Most preachers can deliver all their

best thoughts on a text in forty minutes and as it is a pity to bring forth “afterwards that which is worse,” they would be better off bringing the feast to an end. To men of enormous jaw it may seem a hardship to be confined to time, but great kindheartedness will judge it to be better that one man should suffer than that a whole congregation should be tormented.

The speaker’s time should be measured out by wisdom. If he is lacks discretion, and forgets the circumstances of his listeners, he will annoy them more than a little. In one house the dinner is burning. In another the child is needing its mother. In a third an employ is expected at work. The extra quarter of an hour’s dull and uninteresting talking puts everything out of order.

A country hearer once said to his pastor, “when you go on beyond half-past the hour, do you know what I always think about?” “No,” said the orator. “Well, then, I tell you plainly, it is not about what you are preaching, but about my cows. They need milking, and you ought to have consideration for them, and not keep them waiting. How would you like it if you were a cow?” The last remarkable enquiry suggested a good deal of reflection in the mind of the pastor to whom it was proposed and perhaps it may have a similar beneficial effect upon others who ought to confess their long preachings as among the chief of their shortcomings.

¹ A method of preparing and compacting meat to keep for long periods without refrigeration.

² Spurgeon’s sermons were published individually and also syndicated worldwide. He usually spent part of his Mondays in editing the transcripts of his messages for the space allowed for publication.

More Thoughts On Preaching

by Charles H. Spurgeon

Excerpts updated from an article titled

“In My Fiftieth Year, and Getting Old”

in the March, 1884 issue of *The Sword and the Trowel*

Turning fifty years of age has come with unusual searchings of the heart. When feeling exhausted with unbroken periods of work, I began to fear that it was the result of old age as well as the heavy demands placed on a pastor. We all remember how John Bunyan says in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, “as I pulled, it came.” So have my sermons. They needed more pulling, and yet more. This is not a good sign for the quality of the sermons.

A fellow pastor, who was by no means being overcritical, has said, “A very little examination will convince the most skeptical people that a shocking percentage of preachers are dull, dry and tiresome.” Surely these men did not start out this way, or why were they allowed to begin at all? They must have grown into a routine of preaching and settled down into a flat, unprofitable style as time went on.

The Rev. Martyn L. Williston has said, “No man, in average health, should be less of a man at fifty than at twenty-five. But many appear to be so, and, in fact, they are! It is their fault, not the people's, that the demand for their services decreases. Most of our professional weakness can be traced to our own lack of mental energy. If we choose to, we can remove a great deal of uneasiness from our congregations. Preachers who grow duller as they grow older (at least this side of sixty or seventy) do so as a result of mental laziness. They are very much like farmers who deplete the soil by planting the same crops over and over again. We must constantly replenish heart and brain, or the fields of thought will turn sparse and barren.”

This is good sense and should stir up the aging man to an increased diligence in reading and study. But it should also be clear

to him that he must have more time than ever for these purposes. He must use his hours conscientiously and his people must just as conscientiously provide them to him. The Israelites made bricks without straw, but they could not have made them without time. More time will be needed for collecting useful materials, and more time will be needed for preparing them for the building up of the church.

The odd danger of advancing years is length of sermon. Two honored brothers, who have recently died, were an infliction on their friends in their last years. To describe one is to depict the other. He is so good and great, and has done such service that you must ask him to speak. He expects you to do so. You boldly suggest that he will occupy only a few minutes. He will occupy those few minutes, and a great many more minutes, and your meeting will die out under his long lasting sermons. Your audience fidgets, all interest is gone, your meeting is a failure. And all this because of a dear old man whose very name is an inspiration. The difficulty is not to start these grand old men but to stop them when started. They appear to be wound up like clocks that will not stop until they run down. This is a tempting habit that needs to be guarded against when years increase. It may be wise to resolve to be shorter as age tends to make us want to be longer. It would be a pity to make our congregation smaller by making our sermons longer.

It is also frequently true that elderly speakers become somewhat lazy in their preparation. It has been said that a young man is most concerned with the question, "How shall I say it?" As a result, he usually has a good and pleasing style. But the older man too often only thinks, "What shall I say?" While this may improve the content of his message, his style of delivery is all too likely to become careless and put his hearers to sleep. If this is the case, it should not be. We should work to improve all areas of our public speaking, so far as our powers have not diminished. We cannot be blamed if our memory does not quite serve us as it once did, or if our imagination is not as rich as it used to be; but we deserve to be criticized if we allow our power to decline even a hair's breadth.

We must not make a mistake about what improvement really is. It is possible to preach better according to popular taste and actually preach worse according to what is really useful. God grant that we may not “improve” in this fatal way! It is easy to have more substance and at the same time to become more dull. More may be taught while less is learned. May we have grace to avoid this form of undesirable progress. The art of growing old wisely will need to be taught us from above. May we be willing students of the Great Teacher!