

## The Gospel Boomerang

By Steven J. Cole

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Preaching, I have discovered, is a hazardous occupation.

I first learned this a short time after starting in the pastorate, when I made the mistake of preaching a series on the Christian and his money.

I did not consider the subject personally threatening. My finances were above reproach. I sought to live a simple life style. I was not in debt. I was tithing my income to the Lord's work. I was honest on my income tax.

I also was not blind. I had seen the nice cars in the church parking lot and the VCR's and computers in people's homes. "These people need to learn what God has to say about this important subject," I thought. "They're victims of living in materialistic America."

I chose my texts as carefully as a hunter selecting his best arrows.

What I found was that God's word works like a boomerang as well as like an arrow. I shot it at my congregation, and it came back and hit me. Over the weeks when I was preaching on money, the Lord nailed me on a number of areas.

For example, I came to realize that my "10-percent tithe mentality" was out of line. God owns it all; I am just the manager. Giving 10 percent does not get me off the hook so that I can squander the other 90 percent on myself. I had to start asking, "Lord, how much do you want me to give?" Since then, by faith, I have stretched to increase my giving. It turned out to be a very expensive sermon series.

### Applying It to Myself

Experiences like this began to teach me that before I preach God's truth to other, I must apply it to myself. If I don't, God will.

The main benefit that results can be summed up in one word: *integrity*. This integrity runs in three directions.

1. **Integrity toward myself.** John Calvin said, "It would be better for the preacher to break his neck going into the pulpit than for him not to be the first to follow God." Applying the truth to myself first enables me to say without pride, "Follow me as I follow Christ." This enables me to preach God's word with greater conviction, because I know experientially that it works.

If I have not "been there," I have got to be careful not to imply in my sermon that I have. If I am struggling, I must admit it. I want people to know that I'm walking with God, but I don't want them to think that means that I walk on water.

### Feeling Their Struggles

2. **Integrity toward my hearers.** If God's truth has hit me first, I can relate to where people are at in their struggles. This causes them to identify more with what I say, because they can sense that I understand what they are going through.

This perspective keeps me from raining down denunciations from the pulpit. While sometimes it must be done (as all the Old Testament prophets), too much scolding can be counterproductive. People come to church with their spiritual umbrellas ready, so that the preacher's imprecations run off onto their neighbors. Scolding seldom motivates people to change.

Integrity toward my hearers gives me greater compassion and patience. I know how hard it is to apply God's truth to myself—and I come from a Christian home where my parents loved me and taught me God's ways. Those who have not enjoyed such blessing must struggle even more than I do.

## Avoiding Formulas

3. **Integrity toward God.** If I have felt God's truth hit me before I preach it to others, I know that I am not just sermonizing. I have met with God and have heard from him. I know that I have got his word for his people. With a clear conscience before God, I can preach with greater power and less fear.

Quite often after I have preached, someone will ask me, "Did anyone tell you what I've been going through lately?" They will proceed to tell me how my message dealt with specific things in their lives, as though I had been following them around that week. It is a great joy to reassure them, "I honestly had no idea what you were going through when I prepared this message. But it's obvious that the Holy Spirit knew, and he prepared this message for you."

Every preacher faces the danger of cranking out messages by formula. After you do it a few hundred times, you get the system down pretty well: "Attention-grabbing introduction; three main points; a dramatic story for the conclusion." But maintaining integrity before God by applying his truth to myself first keeps me from formula preaching.

Before Hugh Latimer, the English martyr, preached before the high and might king, Henry VIII, who is able, if he think fit, to take thy life away. Be careful what thou sayest. But Latimer, Latimer, remember thou art also about to speak before the king of kings and Lord of lords. Take heed thou dost not displease *him*."

That is the hazard of preaching—that we speak before the one to whom all things are open and laid bare (Heb. 4:13).