



# **S** PRACTICES OF Emotionally Healthy **PREACHING & TEACHING**

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## ***Eight years after planting New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, I was exhausted.***

The pressure of preaching and teaching weekly messages, along with the rest of my leadership responsibilities, left me depleted. Although our ministry was growing, I often felt like I was gaining the world but losing my own soul (Mark 8:38).

This eventually led to a spiritual crisis. And it was during this dark night of the soul that I had a second conversion—a slow realization that my emotional health and spiritual maturity were inseparable. I could not be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature. Yet, here I was, trying to disciple others into spiritual maturity while I remained an emotional infant myself. Impossible!

This launched me on a profound inward journey that ultimately led to a whole new way of doing both discipleship and leadership that we now call [Emotionally Healthy Discipleship](#). As a result, I've invested the last twenty-eight years in applying to leadership what I consider the missing elements in most Western discipleship models—one of which relates to preaching and teaching. What I lacked, and what so many of us still lack today, is a way to teach and preach for Jesus that properly flows out of a deep inner life with him.\*

What I discovered is that there is a way to engage in this weighty work of speaking for Jesus that is a light and easy rather than heavy and hard, that strengthens rather than diminishes our relationship with him, and that is marked by joy and spaciousness rather than anxiety and pressure.

However, to experience emotionally health preaching, we must approach our preparation and delivery differently.

Specifically, we must commit to the following eight practices:

- 1 Slow down for loving union with Jesus.**
- 2 Create space for the text to deeply transform you first.**
- 3 Allow the text to intersect with your family of origin and culture.**
- 4 Preach out of your vulnerability and weakness.**
- 5 Be present.**
- 6 Surrender to God's painful process for message preparation—birth, death, and resurrection.**
- 7 Devote sufficient time to limit yourself to one main point with specific applications**
- 8 Connect your message to next-steps for spiritual formation.**

While implementing these eight practices requires energy and commitment, they offer a powerful means for God's Word to flow through us to our hearers. They also provide a way into the easy and light yoke of Jesus as we embark on the weighty task of preaching and teaching for him.

## **1 Slow down for loving union with Jesus.**

It's easy to preach sermons *about* Jesus without really being grounded *in* Jesus. I know because I've done it. The pressure of having too much to do in too little time

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\* For a fuller discussion of this, see chapter 3, "Be Before You Do," in Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

is difficult to shake, and often results in a rushed preparation process. That's why I'm convinced the number one struggle most of us have when it comes to preaching is slowing down to remain in loving union with Jesus.

The greatest gift we offer those we serve is *Jesus*. We bring the living God to others out of soil of our own life. But we cannot bring Jesus to others if we haven't first taken the time to be with him. We must allow him and his Word to penetrate us deeply enough so we first embody the text we hope to preach.

When we fail to slow down sufficiently to remain in loving union with Jesus, we become paranoid about how we appear to others from the pulpit, worrying needlessly and falling into a perfectionism that takes the joy out of our process. We feed off our audience instead of God. And we end up preaching out of a reflected self (who others say we are) rather than our true self (who God says we are).

## 2 Create space for the text to deeply transform you first.

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Exegesis and study are important, but here's the crucial question to ask:

***“Have I taken the time required for the truth of this text to sink deep into my soul and become a part of me?”***

That requires time for meditation, for *lectio divina*, and perhaps even for memorizing the text. If we preach without experiencing transformation ourselves, we can't expect our sermon to make much of an impact in the lives of others. Why? Because we cannot give what we do not possess.

Another benefit of creating time to immerse ourselves in the text is that it enables us to work through the complexities and nuances of the topic personally.

For example...

- How do I preach forgiveness when I am carrying bitterness and anger toward someone who has hurt me?
- How do I rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4) when I'm in a season of grieving or lamenting?
- How do I pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17) when I go through hours of my day without even thinking of Jesus?
- How do I integrate the problem of suffering in the world, or in my own family, with the reality that God is good and loving?

Having adequate time to wrestle with texts for our own lives is, perhaps, the most challenging preparation work to do. And it is also the most fruitful—for us and everyone around us.

### 3

## Allow the text to intersect with your family of origin and culture.

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When I study or teach Scripture, I always ask, “How does the truth of this passage differ from the the truths I learned in my family of origin and or from our culture?” In a sermon on James 2:1-13 about the issue of showing partiality, part of my preparation involved wrestling with how my family of origin taught me to rank people who were rich and highly educated differently from those who were poor and uneducated.

If you are preaching on financial stewardship or generosity, you might ask yourself questions like these:

- 1 What messages have I internalized about security, power, and money from my family growing up?
- 2 How do these messages still impact me today?
- 3 How do they clash with the way God calls me to live in the new family of Jesus?

If you are preaching on love or relationships, you might ask, “How did my family handle differences, conflict, and connecting emotionally?”

That’s why using a tool such as a genogram to identify the impact of your family of origin on your personal life and leadership is foundational for your formation as a leader. If you haven’t yet completed a genogram, take advantage of the free teaching module (with a video and handouts) on our [website](#). This simple but powerful tool will help you construct a genogram of your family going back three to four generations.

My wife Geri often commented that sharing my struggles with the clash between my family of origin and the biblical text was often the best moment in my messages. The reason was simple: The stories were relatable and created moments of deep connection with the people listening.

### 4

## Preach out of your vulnerability and weakness.

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My leadership preparation, both formal and informal, left out one of the most important biblical pathways for spiritual growth—weakness and vulnerability. As a result, in my early years of preaching, I highlighted my spiritual strengths and successes, and used only general stories to illustrate vulnerability. That’s what I had been taught to do in seminary as well as in the preaching books I read. The problem was that those stories were not coming from an authentic, lived experience in my own following of Jesus.

But if you listen to my sermons after I began the journey of Emotionally Healthy Discipleship in 1996, you will notice a sharp difference. That is when I made

the radical shift to preach not out of my strengths and successes, but out of my failures, weaknesses, and struggles. I began to share publicly my own wrestling and difficulties with biblical texts and truths. Initially, this level of vulnerability was very uncomfortable, even frightening. Over time, however, it became natural and second-nature to me.

I continued to do exegesis, look for great illustrations, and develop a coherent flow for sermons, but I dropped my perfectionism. I finally realized that the most impactful part of the message was the power of Jesus coming through my own struggles to apply the text. Paul was right—when we are genuinely weak in ourselves, we are strong in him (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-12)!

Preaching out of my weaknesses placed everyone in our church on equal footing, broken and forgiven, wrestling together to obey God’s Word in our lives.

## **5 Be present.**

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When we teach and preach, it is easy to be more focused on ourselves than the people to whom we are speaking. Instead of being present to them, we’re preoccupied with how we’re coming across. “What are people thinking as I speak? Does this message make sense? Do I need another illustration somewhere? Did anyone notice I stumbled at that last point?”

We’re so wrapped up in ourselves and our content that the people to whom we are speaking become, in Martin Buber’s words, “*Its*” rather than “*Thous*.” In other words, we unconsciously treat our listeners as objects rather than human beings. I know. I’ve done this more times than I care to admit.

Whether we preach before an audience of ten or 10,000, the most important gift we give our audience is to see them as “*Thous*,” not “*Its*.” They matter.

Here’s a simple recommendation to start. Before you begin your next message, take ten to fifteen seconds to be still and look directly into the faces of the people to whom you are speaking. See them. Be present with them... and yourself. Then take a deep breath and begin.

## **6 Surrender to God’s painful process for message preparation—birth, death, and resurrection.**

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I have spent decades preparing and preaching well over a thousand sermons. Less than five of those came to me easily—as if I were taking dictation. The rest were birthed in a slow and painful process of God working the text in and through me.

Every week, my process followed the same pattern of birth, death, and resurrection. The sermon's birth ("This is going to be an incredible message!"), was followed by its death ("This is going to be the worst sermon ever!"), and then its resurrection when my preparation finally came together ("This is the most important message I have ever preached"). That pattern persisted for decades. On Monday, I'd be excited about the truth and revelation of a text. On Tuesday and Wednesday, I wondered if anything coherent might emerge out of my study and prayer. By Thursday or Friday, and a few times even on Saturday night, God would resurrect a meaningful application of the text specifically for this moment and this audience.

If you can relate, you're in good company. This has also been the norm for most preachers I've known over the years.

I love study, but it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who ignites a message within us. What is our role? We pray. We study. We meditate on the text. We listen to him. And we faithfully follow his promptings in this painful process God so often uses to birth his message in and through us.

## 7

### **Devote sufficient time to limit yourself to one main point with specific applications**

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In my early years of ministry, I made 3-4 main points in each message to ensure that at least one of my points spoke to people. (This came more out of my anxiety and feelings of inadequacy than God). Then I allowed maybe ten to fifteen minutes to think through application points.

Firstly, please only have one main point from God in your message and thoroughly drive it home. Ask yourself: ***"What is the one point God wants people to take with them and apply from this message?"***

Secondly, make clear and practical applications to people's different life situations. It takes a lot of work and time to make clear and practical applications that speak to people's different life situations, being sensitive to where people are in their spiritual journey. Some are just seeking Jesus. Others are starting out as baby Christians. We speak to people who are in crisis, grief, joy, transition, doubt, or bitterness. We speak to those who are single, divorced, widowed, parents of young children, and married couples.

A core part of my message preparation included applying my message to specific groups of people. I named and imagined them in my mind. I put myself in their shoes at work, home, school. I wondered what objections and questions they might ask. Inevitably, this led to trimming of other parts of my message to make ample room for specific applications.

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### Connect your message to next steps for spiritual formation.

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Preaching is critically important for both shaping the culture of a community and equipping people to follow Jesus. But preaching or teaching alone is not enough. To grow and mature, people also need to be part of an intentional discipleship process that's imbedded in the ministry programming of your church.

For example, if you're teaching a message series on loving your neighbor or having healthy relationships, you may want to offer a workshop or seminar on clean vs. dirty fighting, or how to clarify expectations. (See the Eight Skills in Part 2 of the [The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course called Emotionally Healthy Relationships](#)). If you're teaching a series on prayer, you may want to follow up with half-day retreat at a local retreat center or offer a course on ancient spiritual practices that have stood the test of time.

The possibilities are endless. What is important, however, is to connect the main point of your sermon (or series) with a larger plan to support the spiritual formation of your people.

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**I invite you to review the eight practices of emotionally healthy preaching one more time.**

1. Slow down for loving union with Jesus.
2. Create space for the text to deeply transform you first.
3. Allow the text to intersect with your family of origin and culture.
4. Preach out of your vulnerability and weakness.
5. Be present.
6. Surrender to God's painful process for message preparation—birth, death, and resurrection.
7. Devote sufficient time to limit yourself to one main point with specific applications.
8. Connect your message to next-steps for spiritual formation.

Which one might be most important for you to begin applying today?

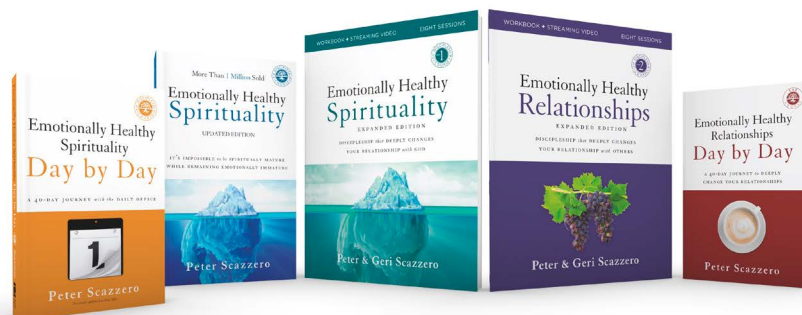
I am humbled and grateful that God may have used my years of preaching to help others become more like Jesus. But the one person who has been most transformed by my messages, beyond a doubt, is me. All those hours in Scripture, applying God's truth to both myself and my hearers over decades, has profoundly changed me. And that is one of the greatest gifts God has given me in this life.

My prayer is that you might find this to be true in your life as well.

# NEXT STEPS

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***The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course*** was designed to lay a theological and practical foundation for every member your church to slow down and be with Jesus. In this 2-part course, not only will your church learn the countercultural practice of Sabbath-keeping, but they'll learn much more.



**Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (Part 1)** is designed to deeply change your relationship with God, and **Emotionally Healthy Relationships (Part 2)** is designed to deeply change your relationships with others.

Preview the Course online at [emotionallyhealthy.org/preview](https://emotionallyhealthy.org/preview)



## ABOUT PETE SCAZZERO

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Pete Scazzero, along with his wife, Geri, are the founders of [Emotionally Healthy Discipleship](https://emotionallyhealthy.org), a ground-breaking ministry that moves the church forward by slowing the church down, in order to multiply deeply changed leaders and disciples. This journey began when Pete founded New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York, a large, multiracial church with more than seventy-three countries represented—where he served as senior pastor for twenty-six years.

Pete hosts the top ranked [Emotionally Healthy Leader podcast](https://emotionallyhealthy.org/podcast) and is the author of a number of best-selling books, including *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* and *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship*. He is also the author of *The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course (Part 1 and 2)* that has transformed tens of thousands of lives around the world.

For more information, visit [emotionallyhealthy.org](https://emotionallyhealthy.org) or connect with Pete on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/petescazzero), [Facebook](https://facebook.com/petescazzero), or [Instagram](https://instagram.com/petescazzero).