



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Articles

## “The Preaching Game”

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Graham Johnston told about a preacher who preached the same sermon three Sundays in a row. After the third time, someone asked him, “When are you going to preach something different?” He answered, “When this church starts practicing this lesson, you can have a new one.”

Johnston used that story to set the tone in a section on encouraging accountability in a book chapter entitled “Challenging Listeners.” It illustrates what he called *the preaching game*, which he explained as follows:

With the preaching game in most churches, people have learned how to play and win. You know the game: If the pastor should stumble across something that strikes a certain note of conviction, don’t sweat it. The following Sunday the pastor will move on to address an entirely new topic and what brought about conviction won’t be heard again for a while. Isn’t it interesting how pastors and churches can function in this manner year after year, where most businesses wouldn’t survive that approach? In a business, after all, once a problem area is identified, effective management focuses on remedying it. (Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* [Baker Books, 2001], 84).

I did a mental double take when I read that paragraph. The irony had never before occurred to me that I can let myself off the hook when I hear a sermon that steps on my toes because I know that, as uncomfortable as I may be, next Sunday it will be someone else’s turn to squirm.

One solution to this dilemma is suggested by a conversation I had with a man during a preaching series I was doing on the letter of James. He came to me after one sermon to express his distress over the fact that I had *again* spent time on the dangers of wealth and the need to attend to the needs of the poor. I pointed out that the reason I kept returning to the subject was because I was preaching sequentially through the letter and James kept returning to it. Honest exposition required me to deal with subjects as James presented them, not gloss over the ones that made my hearers—or me—uncomfortable. I assured him that when we studied a section of text that addressed different topics, the sermon subjects would change.

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What I aimed to do was place 2 Timothy 4.2's command to "preach the word" alongside Acts 20.27's example of Paul who was "declaring ... the whole counsel of God." By choosing a Bible book or unit within a book and working through the text, we let the Spirit's authorship dictate the topics and what will be said about them. Whether the week-to-week messages reprove, rebuke, or exhort (2 Tim 4.2) is then governed less by the preacher, who still chooses what to emphasize in the text, and more by God. And over time, as we expose more sections of the entirety of Scripture, the Spirit leads us into more of God's counsel.

And if a section of the Spirit's text repeats a topic in more than one passage? Well, maybe he is telling us we need to practice that one before we get a new one.

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