

Funerals & Dying

Detailed Outline *Part 1 of 4*

Introduction

One of my older friends was sitting with another woman and her niece, who were from a gypsy background. They heard me say when I was preaching that I would rather preach two funerals than one wedding any day. The woman said to my friend, "When I die, call him." She died about 15 years later. It was probably one of the saddest, darkest funerals I have ever seen. There was weeping and wailing over the body. I preached on Luke 16. One young lady came up to me and said, "That's exactly what Grandma believed."

I. Dealing With the Dying Person

My friend, who years later was now well up in age, was with another woman on her last day of life. That woman had emphysema; her breathing was labored and she looked just horrible as she lay on her death bed gasping for breath. My friend volunteered to come and sit by the dying woman's bedside. She called me to tell me she was running late and gave me this message: "I know she can't talk; I'm coming anyway. I'll just sit quietly by her bed."

A. Treat them like people

1. There is an excellent book by Joseph Bayly called *The Last Thing We Talk About*. Joe had lost two or three children, suffered death in his family and friends over and over again. He's now with the Lord. He says people avoid talking about death and think they are doing the dying person a favor. The dying person knows!
2. My first funeral was a woman dying of cancer. When we were on the way to her funeral in Oklahoma City, her husband said to me, "She never knew she was about to die." I thought, "That's isn't the way it worked with me. We talked about death every time I went to see her." She wanted to talk about eternity. In fact, one of the questions she asked me was, "What does it mean when Jesus said, 'Before Abraham was I am'?" She wanted to know and to be assured of what would happen to her after death.
3. People begin to withdraw. It is sometimes subtle. One of the ways it will happen is eye contact. Especially in times when the person's communication skills diminish. With my grandmother it was the hearing; she therefore had difficulty engaging in conversation.
4. I would watch some of my relatives; they would never look at her. It was though she was a non-person. I vowed that I would look my grandmother in the eye. Even if she didn't know who I was, she is going to know that I am talking to her.
5. Don't treat dying people like non-persons. Look them in the eye, and talk to them—about death.

B. Create a friendly environment

1. As Dr. Bayly points out, the hospital and its clinical environment have a way of making those last moments more difficult. He contrasts the way his grandfather died in hospital bed with all the tubes and stuff going on there as opposed to his grandmother, who died in the family bed, where her children had been born, with the warmth of the family.
2. Minister to the dying as people who are still alive, even in a coma. Speak to them as though they hear, because they very well may. And if they are unsaved, speak the gospel.

C. Empathize with the caregivers

1. Having said that, we should not neglect the ones near those who are dying.
2. On visiting Bob who was dying, my friend Jim asked Bob's wife how she was doing. She just broke down and wept. She said, "Of all the people who came, not one asked me how I am doing." While all the focus was on Bob, she was going through great anguish as well.

II. Some Things to Bear in Mind

A. Know that the dying want to know about death.

1. My best friend, whose father was dying, said his father would hold his hand and after all were gone would ask, "Tell me, son, are they telling me everything?" People think we are doing the dying person a favor by not telling them and prevent the blessing of them knowing where they are with the situation.
2. If they are unbelievers they need to know God. They need to know their days are limited and that they need to trust God before they die.

B. Know that Christians have a longing for heaven

1. Joni Eareckson Tada's book *Heaven* talks about Jesus in the context of heaven. People who trust Jesus and believe on Him must be encouraged to bring their focus on the good things that lie ahead. They are going to be seeing Jesus soon.
2. We had in our church a man who had a serious case of melanoma, and after a few months of treatment they pronounced him in remission. He later told me, "I am almost disappointed." He said, "I had gotten so ready for heaven. I thought I was really going." Isn't that a good thing? To be really longing for heaven?

C. Avoid talking about trivial things.

1. The first woman I ministered to who was dying had a lot of Christian friends who would come, especially on Sunday afternoon.
2. Now Sunday afternoon is when the Dallas Cowboys played. One day she told me after her friends had left, "Our conversation today was worthless." They were talking about the Cowboys and the game, something a dying person doesn't care about—she was looking to be with the Lord. Sometimes we find it easier to talk about trivial things when we are to be talking about serious, eternal stuff.

D. Answer the perplexing questions

1. Talk about the questions they have and help them find the answers.
2. People who are dying have questions—and they should. Talk to them, ask them if they have questions and seek to answer those.

E. Ask about funeral arrangements

1. Talk to them about the funeral service. It may sound strange, but it can be helpful if they want a particular song to be sung at their funeral.
2. I once did a funeral and we couldn't find the woman's funeral instructions. Later they found in her car a hymnal they would use to sing while in the car, and at the top of a hymn was written, "Sing this at my funeral."
3. Strangely, in some funerals we did "inadvertently" sing the very songs without knowing they were requested by the person.

III. Some Things to Encourage the Dying to Do

A. Encourage them against being a "modest Christian"

1. My grandmother wrote me a note in 1980 but died 25 years later. She said, "Don't talk about me."
2. However, other people want to hear about the person, especially if they were of faith.
3. In such cases, let the dying person know that you will not glamorize or undo their lives but you will have to talk for them.

B. Encourage them to testify of their faith

1. The father of one of my best friends was diagnosed with prostate cancer. My friend was telling me how his father had become much more open about his faith.
2. You will notice this in a hospital. When people know they are dying they don't care much about shame or embarrassment and become open about talking about their faith.
3. Encourage them to use their suffering as a stewardship for getting the gospel to those who will be left behind.
4. I did a funeral for a long-term believer, but I barely knew him, if at all. He had Alzheimer's and his wife had been coming to our church and he had included in his will a beautiful statement: "Witness to the doctor who will turn off the machine."

C. Encourage them to say or write things they like to do before they die

1. A mechanic who worked on our garage door came to Christ later in his life. One of the things that marked his conversion was that he wanted to set things right.
2. Sometimes people can do things that will help those who are left behind—like writing letters. There was this person who wrote letters to his children, even to the very youngest. These letters continue to minister well after the person is gone.

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IV. How the Dying Minister to Others

A. Ministry to the dying is ministry to you.

1. People who are dying have a clearer view than we do, especially if they are Christians.
2. The most insightful commentaries on Psalms were written by those who were in the German concentration camps. It was because they saw life more clearly. There is a difference between songs written by a 22-year-old and Fanny Crosby writing out of her blindness. There is something that suffering does that clarifies the view.
3. So don't make it a one-way ministry—ask them what they have learned. Ask, "What is God teaching you?"
4. Additionally, answers to these questions can be very helpful at their funeral service too. "Dying people live day by day." They know they don't have a definite future, and so they are living their lives as Jesus said we ought to be living ours.
5. Learn from those who are dying.

B. Ministry of the dying is to those left behind.

1. A friend of mine made a video to be played at his funeral in which he shared his testimony.
2. Essentially the message said, "I know where I am going and I hope you can join me there." That is powerful.

C. Ministering of the dying through their final wishes

1. Decisions they make for their final arrangements can minister to the spouse or family who are left behind. So help people with, for example, the financial dimensions of their funeral.
2. A funeral director was telling my friend when his wife had just passed away, "Do you think your wife would prefer this spot by the shade and the pond?" Respectfully, she is dead, it doesn't matter to her and it doesn't help anybody either. It would be a waste of money.
3. However, on the other hand, being too cheap could have others wonder about the ones taking care of the arrangements.
4. If you want to keep the cost low, look at options like cremation but always think of the spouse and how it will make them look. This is where you are able to come through as a third party and help them to think through the process.

D. Ministry of the dying at the funeral service

1. When you meet people who are dying, ask for their life stories. These stories may help when you do their funeral. Also, ask for their testimony—that's vitally important. If they have a clear testimony you now have a message to share on their behalf at their funeral. That is our job, our stewardship not just to them but to God.
2. Suppose they are not a believer
 - a) For now you know what to pray for and that you have to share the gospel.
 - b) At their funeral you are able to say something like, "I met with Sally last week and we talked about death and what comes afterwards. I'd like to share with you what I shared with her."
 - c) You are not saying she believed, but it is true you shared it with her and it is a perfectly legitimate way of sharing the gospel at the funeral.

V. Preparing for the Funeral Service

A. Story gathering from friends and family

1. If possible, I orchestrate a friends and family gathering and try to get a biographical sketch of the person. They tell stories, each one jumping in about what they remembered and all the while I am taking notes. These have been some of the times of "joyful grief"—there is no other way to describe this.
2. In African-American culture, there is often weeping and crying going on at the same time. Sometimes the pianist would start a song—say, "When the Saints Go Marching In"—and everyone joins in and you want to join in the bogeying. I feel guilty, but as my friend would say, "That's not a problem—sadness and joy come in the same scenario."
3. Isn't that how a believer ought to be? You are rejoicing because they are with the Lord, and you are grieving because you miss them. They are both true and you can't deny either one of them.
4. In one event I asked if someone could tell the woman's testimony, and the sad part was no one knew it. Then I was doing a funeral for someone's grandmother who was a wonderful believer, and I asked if someone could tell how she came to know the Lord. Her husband, who people thought was an unbeliever, said, "No, but I can tell you mine," and he went ahead and shared the story that no one in the family knew. Most times you learn something in these conversations.

B. Customize the service

1. I don't do canned funerals. It takes me at least a day or two to put together a funeral service. One needs the time to get all the data and put them together so that it is well-sewn.
2. That preparation time needs to come from somewhere—maybe from sleep time, especially when there is a Sunday sermon preparation looming.

3. Nevertheless, don't do a disservice to someone by doing a canned funeral service. These were unique individuals; they were special and they need a custom service.

C. Remuneration

1. I never take money for funerals. This is ministry as a church and family, it is not time for some extra "five cents," Charlie Brown style.
2. Also, often these are not the time when the family members have much extra money either. It speaks loudly to them to say, "I do this for the Lord."

D. Find the "question" people are asking

1. What I do is ask questions to find:
 - a) What are the unique circumstances?
 - b) What's the "question"?
2. Someone usually asks a question—for example, "Why is it that the good die young?"
3. Now you have a question about God's timing, and that opens up the door for a sermon and the gospel.
4. At a certain funeral I was drawn to Psalm 73, where the psalmist is caught up by the affluence of the wicked while bemoaning his own fate. Then he comes to the sanctuary of God, and it is from that point on that he begins to see as God sees him. He remembers that God is with him in his suffering on earth and also with him in heaven. So he says, "The nearness of God is my good."
5. That is what's good, not the prolonging of life but for a believer who dies, he or she knows that is the closest they can get to God.

VI. Dealing with Difficult Funerals

A. Dealing with suicide

1. I don't ignore or hide the fact that someone has killed himself or herself. I have even been deselected as a result of making my intent in this matter known.
2. There are three points I cover when doing a suicide funeral:
 - a) Suicide is sin: God says you must not take life. It is telling God that He can't provide for me in my time of need.
 - b) Suicide is not the unpardonable sin: Refusing to trust Jesus is the unpardonable sin, not suicide.
 - c) A Christian who commits suicide will go to heaven: What is wrong is that he is bumping up the schedule. He is right though in believing that death takes him to heaven, but he will have to face God for not trusting Him.
3. It is important that these facts be stated since how can anyone comfort people if they deny the family the truth of what has happened?

B. Conducting the funeral of an unbeliever

1. I went to a Masonic funeral in a church and as we walked out my friend told me, "It wasn't what the minister said that bothered me but what he didn't say."
2. Anyone can read the wonderful text from John 14 and Revelation, but don't we dare read them in the sense that we are all going to heaven. We are not all going there.
3. Be sensitive to the person who has died, but do not give the impression that all present are enjoying the blessings of those verses. Let them know this passage is for those who believe in Christ and the hope they have in Him.
4. Urge them through these verses to believe in Christ, who offers the only hope in death, and distinguish clearly between belief and unbelief.

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VII. Conducting the Funeral Service

A. Separate eulogy from the sermon

1. In the funeral message I conduct, I separate the eulogy from the sermon.
 - a) I never use the biographical sketch I am given at the funeral—it is like reading a 30-second commercial.
 - b) People who come to the funeral only know a page of the person's history, and one of my responsibilities is to let them see the book.
 - c) So I start at the beginning and walk them through so people are able to connect the dots.
2. Once the eulogy is done, I make a separation—often with a song or some kind of interruption in the actual service.
 - a) However, I always make a link between the biographical sketch and the sermon.
 - b) As an example, I might say, "We have talked a lot about Grandma Smith—her life, her faith—and all that is true. What the Bible tells me to tell you and what she would want me to tell you is that none of that has got anything to do with her being in heaven. She is in heaven because of what Jesus did. "
3. The problem when we talk about people and how wonderful they are is that people begin to equate that wonderful people go to heaven. We know that is not true—only believers go to heaven. It is important to draw that line at the funeral service.

B. Make the connection

1. When it comes to an unbeliever, if you shared the gospel with them then you can say, "When I visited Mrs. Smith we had the opportunity to talk about heaven, and I'd like to spend this time sharing that conversation with you.
2. Here's what I tell the audience—in this last section we have been talking about the deceased and celebrating the life that God gave them. Now I am here to talk about you—you need to know what the answer is, to give you comfort when facing death. We need to have that link that connects both.
3. Illustration:
 - a) In the funeral of the father of someone who comes to our church and was clearly an unbeliever, the audience were all grey heads. These were the elderly friends of the deceased.
 - b) In getting the story of his life, I got the recollection of how he goofed when warming a plane for a flight during World War II when stationed in the Pacific.

- c) I told the story and said to the audience, “There are mistakes in life that we can laugh at, just as we did. However, there are some areas where we dare not make a mistake, and that is when it comes to Jesus Christ.”
- d) With this connection, it is now possible to get into the gospel. It becomes a good segue without having to tell he is a believer.

C. Cover the ugliness; uncover the joys

1. We lost a son who was three-and-a-half months old to crib death.
 - a) Such memories are permanently etched in our memories. At the moment of death there are some ugly scenes.
 - b) In times like these I read passages like 2 Kings 2, which talks about Elijah being caught to heaven in the chariots of fire. I read then 2 Kings 6, where Elisha and his servant face the military forces gathered around—where Elisha prays that the eyes of the servant would be opened to see the horsemen and chariots of fire. Next, I read about Elisha on his deathbed and is with the king—where the king says, “My father, my father, the chariots of fire and the horsemen thereof.” I then read Luke 16, where we read about the rich man and Lazarus. The text says angels transported him to heaven. The angels who protected in 2 Kings so that he would not die till his time came were the angels who provide the transportation.
2. The point is that appearances are not reality.
 - a) It appeared that the rich man was going to a good place, but he wasn’t.
 - b) The reality is that believers are transported by angels to the presence of God, and there they enjoy His presence forever.
3. This is what overshadows and covers the ugliness of a believer’s death.

VIII. Conclusion

A. Here are the words of Ed in his living will:

To the person who makes the decision to terminate the medical treatment or who may be required to disconnect any life support system, I wish to assure you that you are not taking my life, and I do not want you to feel any guilt or remorse.

No man or group of men can take my life against my Lord’s will. My God can and will preserve my life independent of life support systems, if He chooses to do so. I choose to live only if the Lord has a purpose for my life and restores my life and strength sufficiently to serve his purpose in such a way that I will rise up from this bed of affliction.

My prayer is that God will bless you for serving me. In the event if there be any who read this instruction that are concerned about their own inevitable death and eternal destiny in heaven or hell, I recommend consideration of the following Scripture verses: Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23; John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8–9.

My reason for choosing to die under these circumstances rather than struggle for sheer existence of life is because I have a deep abiding faith in the ability and promise of my Lord

Jesus Christ to preserve and transport me to a place that He has lovingly prepared for me. Death is not final, nor to be feared. I am looking forward with great joy to being with my great God and my Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ and with many of my family and friends.

"Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:23-27)

B. That is powerful for someone to have to read to see if it is legal or not to pull the cord.

1. When the mother of someone at our church was diagnosed with cancer and was given two weeks to live, it was told, "We are not prolonging life but prolonging death."
2. That statement has helped a number of people when they have to make a decision about unplugging the machine.
3. For a believer, to prolong death is no service; and ideally that believer would have already expressed that desire.

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Questions & Answers

Do you do any reruns on the message that was asked to be preached again?

Although I have used the same text, the message is always different. The essential truths are the same, but I try to view the text in the light of that person. If the person or the families have requested a rerun I try to find out the reason why. It is the sense that, "Lord, I need to speak to these people and I need a sense from You of what to say"—rather than just open up a can and warm it up again.

What are the circumstances when there may be those "questions" that can be used during the message?

People discount 50% what preachers say, whether it be weddings or funerals. Use moments from the person's life and it will speak to the audience. For example, a photograph from a crack in the door of my grandmother reading her Bible was superimposed with "Why she believed what she believed" and projected during the funeral service. We even played a video of her reading John 14 when she was a 102. Even unbelievers in my family knew that was Grandma.

How do you deal with a suicide funeral?

I cover the three points previously discussed. Remind them that the hope that they will get to heaven must not be clouded by a lack of faith; that they can be sustained here through that circumstance. In my opinion this comfort can only come by dealing with the issue.

What ought to be the level of emotional sensitivity we are to demonstrate during a funeral service?

I try not to prolong the funeral. I talk about the person, celebrate their life, and stay sensitive to the circumstance in a way that makes the gospel clear. I make certain I am not being deceptive. Achieving that balance is not always easy.

How rigid are you in your suggestions? For example, in suggesting the use of one funeral parlor over the other.

I usually go with them to the funeral parlor but avoid suggesting one over the other. I might suggest if one is cheaper than the other. I want the family to participate in the process. However, sometimes they are so caught up in their grief that they just allow someone else to take care of all those things. In such cases, as part of the service we as a church provide all the help. The one place I am firm is where I insist giving the gospel as part of the message. I want the message to help them deal with the situation, but I want the freedom to give the gospel.