PREACHING & TEACHING

Sermon Illustrations

Twelve original sermon illustrations, written out in full and grouped by theme, plus the three rules that decide whether an illustration lands or sinks the point it was meant to carry. Written for preachers who are tired of the same recycled stories and want something the congregation has not heard.

12 illustrations · 7 segments

One movement on how to use them, then six themes with two illustrations each. All original, all free to use without credit.

BEFORE YOU RECORD

- One illustration per sermon. Two is usually one too many, and three means the congregation remembers the stories and not the claim. Pick the one that serves your single sentence and cut the rest however much you like them.
- These are written to be adapted, not read verbatim. Change the details to your own context, because a story told in your own specifics will always land harder than one told in someone else's.
- Do not explain an illustration after telling it. If it needs explaining it was the wrong illustration. Tell it, pause, and say the claim once.

01. Three rules before you use any of these

read first

[not preached - this is the part that decides whether the rest works]

One. The illustration must illuminate the claim, not decorate the sermon. If you could swap it for a different story without changing the meaning, it is decoration and it should go.

Two. Never make yourself the hero. A preacher who is the wise one in every anecdote stops being trustworthy by about the fourth week. If the story has you in it, be the one who got it wrong.

Three. Never use a real person's story without their permission, and never use a congregant's story at all if they could be identified. The pastoral cost of getting this wrong is far larger than any sermon is worth.

02. Grace and what is undeserved

2 illustrations

[both of these work best in the turn, not the opening]

The restaurant bill. A man eats in a restaurant every Friday for a year. One week the waiter tells him the meal is paid for, and has been for some time, by someone who asked not to be named. He keeps coming. He keeps eating. But he starts looking around the room differently, because now every person in it might be the one, and he finds he cannot be rude to any of them. Grace does not change what you receive. It changes how you look at the room.

The inherited house. A woman inherits a house from an aunt she barely knew. She spends the first year apologising for it, telling everyone she did not earn it, almost embarrassed to open the door. Then one winter she puts three people up in it who have nowhere else to go, and she never apologises for it again. The gift did not become hers when it was given. It became hers when she used it.

03. Forgiveness

2 illustrations

[handle with care - somebody in the room is being asked to forgive something serious]

The unsent letter. A man writes a letter to his brother every year on the same date and never sends one. Eleven letters in a drawer. When he is asked why, he says the first one was angry, and the second one was angry, and somewhere around the sixth he noticed he was writing to a version of his brother who had stopped existing years ago. He was forgiving a man who was no longer there. Which is most of what forgiveness is: releasing someone from a version of themselves you have been maintaining.

The carried weight. Anyone who has carried something heavy a long way knows the strange thing that happens when you put it down: for a while your arms still feel like they are holding it. Forgiveness is often like that. The decision comes first and the feeling comes much later, and the gap between them is not hypocrisy. It is just what putting something down feels like.

04. Faith and acting before you know

2 illustrations

[useful for anything on Abraham, the disciples, or calling]

The headlights. You can drive from one end of the country to the other at night seeing only sixty metres ahead. Not one of those sixty metres is the destination. You never at any point see where you are going. And yet people arrive, every night, in their thousands. Faith is not being shown the route. It is trusting that the next sixty metres is enough.

The apprentice. A young joiner spends two years being told to plane boards flat. Not to build anything, just to plane. He is certain he is being wasted. Years later, running his own workshop, he notices that he is the only one who can feel a warp in a board with his hand before the level finds it. The two years were not a delay before the work. They were the work.

05. Perseverance

2 illustrations

[good for the middle of a hard season in the life of a church]

The cathedral floor. The people who laid the foundation stones of the great cathedrals knew, with complete certainty, that they would not see the roof. Their grandchildren would not see it. They cut the stones square anyway, including the faces that would be buried and never looked at again. There is a kind of faithfulness that is only visible in the parts nobody will inspect.

The bamboo. A particular bamboo is planted, watered, and does nothing visible for four years. Not a shoot. In the fifth year it grows twenty metres in a single season. It was not idle. It was building a root system large enough to hold what was coming. Some seasons of a life look identical to wasted time from above ground.

06. Doubt and honest questions

2 illustrations

[these give permission - useful when the room contains people afraid to say it]

The tested bridge. Engineers do not prove a bridge safe by admiring it. They load it until it complains, measure the complaint, and then open it to traffic. A faith nobody has ever leaned hard on is not a strong faith. It is an untested one, and those two things look identical right up until the moment they do not.

The second language. Anyone who has learned a language as an adult knows the stage where you understand far more than you can say. You follow the whole conversation and produce three broken words. Most people's faith spends years in that stage, and mistaking it for having nothing is the commonest reason people quietly leave.

07. Generosity

2 illustrations

[for stewardship Sundays that you would rather not preach]

The open hand. Try holding a handful of sand tightly and then loosely. The tight fist loses more. Everyone has tested this as a child and forgotten the lesson as an adult, which is roughly the whole history of our relationship with money.

The extra place. In some households there is a standing habit of laying one more place at the table than there are people expected. Most nights nobody comes. But the family who does it has decided in advance, before anyone knocks, what their answer will be. Generosity is mostly a decision made early, not a decision made at the door.

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