

Preach the Word

Vol. 23, No. 2

November/December 2019



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The Curse Blessing of Knowledge

By Nathan Nass

I have a sister and a sister-in-law who are both nurses. I love them both dearly, except when they start to talk together about nursing. Then the acronyms start to fly around. Those are followed by unpronounceable medical conditions that I've never heard of. Then a lot of abbreviations and shared experiences that only a nurse can understand. If you've been part of a conversation like that, how do you feel? Invisible. Frustrated. I don't get it! It's like they're talking another language. I know that what they're talking about is important. I'm glad they know about it. But it has nothing to do with me. I'd almost prefer not to listen. Have you experienced that feeling?

It's not just nurses. We could list any number of examples of people who have their own "language." I love talking to family members in the military, but when they start talking to each other, they lose me. NCOs and IEDs and 24-hour clocks.... I love talking with Hispanic immigrants. It's fascinating to learn about their lives, until dairy workers start talking together about their work. Then they lose me. There's only so much about the cow reproductive system that I can handle. I can't picture it. I don't want to picture it! I know it's important. I'm glad there are people who know that stuff. But it's not for me. I don't get it. I'd prefer not to listen.

This communication-killing phenomenon has a name. It's called the "Curse of Knowledge." You can Google it! The curse of knowledge happens when people unknowingly assume that their hearers have the background to understand what they are saying, even though they really don't. We often don't realize the gap between our knowledge and the knowledge of the people around us, and that knowledge gap can be a great barrier to communication.

In 1990, a Stanford student named Elizabeth Newton proved the curse of knowledge through a simple game in which she assigned

people to one of two roles: "tapper" or "listener." Each tapper was asked to pick a well-known song, such as "Happy Birthday," and tap out the rhythm on a table. The listener's job was to guess the song. Over the course of Newton's experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Of those 120 songs, can you guess how many the listeners correctly identified? It sounds pretty easy, doesn't it? Well, the listeners guessed only three of the songs correctly. There's more. Before the listeners guessed, Newton asked the tappers to predict how many of the listeners would guess correctly. They predicted 50%. The reality was just 2.5%.

Why? When a tapper taps, it's impossible for her to avoid hearing the tune playing along to her taps. In contrast, all the listener can hear is a kind of bizarre Morse code. Yet, the tappers were surprised by how hard it was for the listeners to guess the tune. The problem is that once we know something, it's hard to imagine not knowing it. In a way, our knowledge has "cursed" us. We have difficulty sharing that knowledge with others, because we can't relate to their state of mind. In fact, we get frustrated when others can't

Simple Preaching: In our last issue, we were encouraged to preach simply for the benefit of all of our hearers. We heard from Luther, "He's the best preacher who can teach in a plain, childlike, popular, and simple way." One reader shared this feedback, "[Your article] reminded me of a remark made by one of my parishioners at St. Paul's in Douglas, Arizona back in the 1950's. Her comment was, 'Put the feed down low where the lambs can reach it. It won't hurt the sheep to stoop a little.'"¹ What a great encouragement to simple preaching from a sister in Christ!

seem to understand what's so obvious so us. Can you see the damage done to effective communication? That's the curse of knowledge!²

Do you think this curse of knowledge can affect us as pastors?

Do you think this curse of knowledge can affect us as pastors? I do! By God's grace, you have a deeper knowledge of God's Word than most people do. You've spent years of your life studying the Bible, even in Hebrew and Greek. You've made reading God's Word a daily part of your life. Before you preach a sermon, you spend hours studying the text and carefully thinking through different possible interpretations. But then you stand up and preach to people who haven't had many—or any—of those blessings. Do we unknowingly assume our hearers understand more than they do? Can you see how this curse of knowledge could be a barrier in our preaching?

This hit home for me on a recent evening with my kids. I was reading to my 8- and 4-year old boys from a children's Bible before bed. That evening, the story showed a picture of heaven. I asked my 4-year old son, "Remember how we get to heaven?" He said, "No. I don't know." "What?" I said. "Come on, you know how we get to heaven." He said, "No, you never told me." Huh. I bet he's right. I can't remember ever specifically telling my boys how we get to heaven. I assume they know. How could they not? I know how to get to heaven, so I assume my boys do too, even without telling them. What a dangerous assumption! That's the curse of knowledge.

I've had the blessing of taking an online course from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary called "Preaching in a Postmodern World." I appreciated these comments from Professor Rich Gurgel:

Basic assumptions we may make about knowledge possessed as we preach would be utterly wrong. If all



growth in knowledge progresses from the known to the unknown, how easily our presumed starting point with our hearers could leave people hopelessly in our dust!

If we are not careful about our assumptions as we stand up to preach, we could unwittingly leave our hearers in the dust already from the first sentence of our sermon!

This lesson is urging us to check our assumptions about what our hearers know, lest we leave more and more of them clueless in our preaching because we will seem to be preaching to someone else somewhere else living in some other time.

So what do our hearers know? Each is a unique individual, but all live right in the middle of our postmodern culture. Have you had the chance to study what our postmodern culture is like? Here are four basic characteristics of postmodernism that were mentioned in our course:

1. **There's no absolute truth.** "What's true for me isn't true for you." Truth is subjective and can be different for every individual and society.
2. **Words and texts have no meaning apart from the reader.** "That's just your interpretation." Readers and listeners have the right to find their own meaning in a text, even if it involves twisting or changing the author's original intent.
3. **Morality is relative.** There is no objective right and wrong. Each individual decides what is right and good for them.
4. **Skepticism is good.** It's wise to be skeptical of authority, institutions, and anyone who claims to have the truth.

How many of those statements match your worldview? More importantly, how many of those fit a biblical worldview? After being immersed throughout the week in postmodernism, people step into our churches—praise the Lord!—and we expect them to think as biblically as we do. Can you see how that assumption could hinder communication?

1. Not recognizing significant deficits in hearers' basic Bible history knowledge.
2. Not discerning where misunderstanding is masquerading as familiarity with biblical truth.
3. Not seeing where hearers' biblical knowledge has become disconnected bits of "Bible trivia" divorced from grasping the grand themes of biblical revelation.
4. Not grasping the need to translate when speaking theologically to a culture that thinks more and more therapeutically.

That's quite a list! How many of these assumptions affect our preaching, without us even knowing?

Let's think about that last assumption—not grasping the need to translate when speaking theologically. Isn't it true that the longer you serve as a pastor, the more knowledgeable and comfortable

you are with theological vocabulary? At the same time, as the years pass, the less knowledgeable and comfortable the average person is with theological vocabulary. That means that the knowledge gap is constantly growing! The list of words that need translating is growing rapidly too. Redemption, reconciliation, atonement, sacrament, Lamb of God, justification, sanctification, divine call, absolution, vicarious.... Of course, none of those words is bad. They are rich and deep and beautiful. But to many people, it's like we're speaking another language.

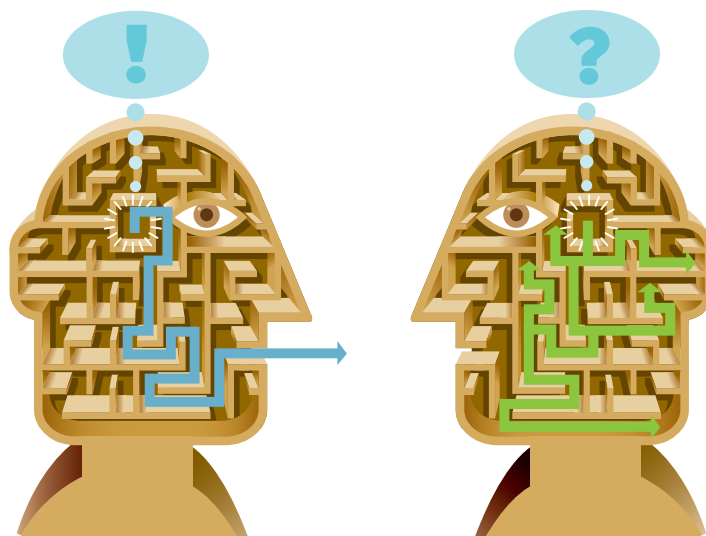
You can even add words like "sin" and "eternal life" to that list too. About 30 families attend a monthly food pantry at our church. I give a short devotion to small groups of people as they wait for their food. This past month, I used *"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 6:23). Simple, right? No! When I talked about sin, I got blank stares. "Sin? What's that?" It was like I was speaking another language. Eternal life? That wasn't a comfort to anyone. My first reaction was frustration: "Come on! Why don't you get it? Everybody knows about sin and grace." No, they don't. I assume they do, but they don't.

On that day, I'm afraid I made those people feel like I feel when my nurse relatives start to talk about nursing stuff. "I know that what you're talking about is important. I'm glad you know about it. But it has nothing to do with me. I'd prefer not to listen." May that never be what our hearers say about God's Word! When we don't realize the gap between our knowledge and the knowledge of the people to whom we preach, our unfounded assumptions can keep people from growing closer to Jesus. That's the curse of knowledge.

Of course, there's a problem with that phrase. Knowledge about Christ isn't really a curse. No way! It's a blessing. What grace God has showered on us, that *"from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"* (2 Timothy 3:15)! If so many people today have so little knowledge of Christ, why do we have so much? We say with Paul, *"By the grace of God I am what I am..."* (1 Corinthians 15:10). By grace we, like Ezekiel, have gotten to taste the Word and know how sweet it is. *"He said to me, 'Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth"* (Ezekiel 3:3). Knowledge of the Word isn't a curse. It's really a blessing!

Our goal as preachers is to take the biblical knowledge that so easily separates us from our hearers and use that very knowledge to be a tremendous blessing to their faith in Jesus. Isn't this what Jesus was talking about when he said, *"Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old"* (Matthew 13:52)?

It's daunting to think about all the gaps between what the Bible says and what people think. But I hope you're willing to use another word to describe that challenge: Exciting! Can you see the opportunity God has placed before us? It's no fun preaching



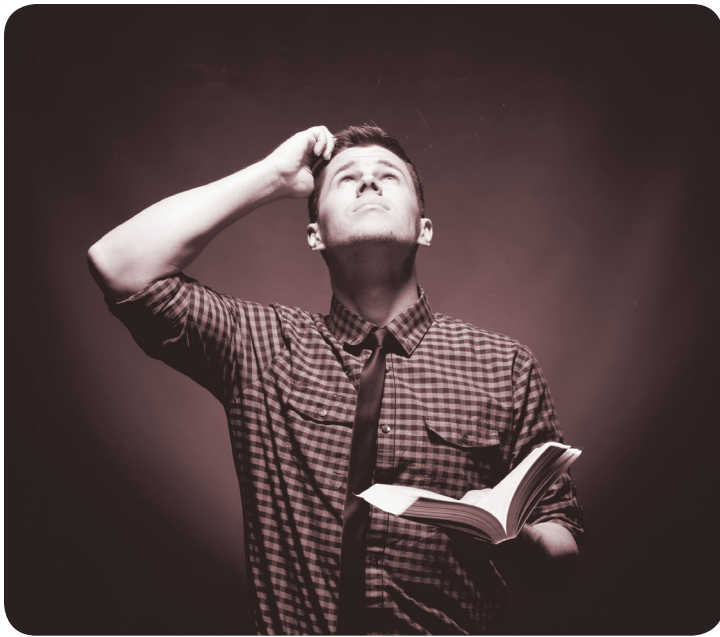
to know-it-all, and that's not our audience. In grace, God fills us with his Word and provides us with endless opportunities to share the treasures of Jesus with people who desperately need it.

Look for ways to talk to people outside your church.

So how do we do that? It's hard for many of us to remember what it's like to not have all the theological training we've received. But there are a lot of people who can teach us that. Look for opportunities to talk with people outside the mature Christian members of your congregations. I'm blessed in doing Hispanic outreach to spend a lot of time around a lot of people who know very little about the Bible. I need to listen to them to learn how they think and to hear how they talk. Look for ways to talk to people outside your church. Not for their benefit—for yours. To learn. To listen. To see what people are like. To be prepared to share the Word in their language.

As you talk with people, note gaps between what people know and what we assume they know. The first step to breaking assumptions is to be aware of them. Maybe you could start by scanning the liturgies you use at your church. What are theological words that we assume people understand? I found these in the Service of Word and Sacrament: fellowship, penitent, atoning sacrifice, called servant, eternally begotten, incarnate, sacrament, redeem, heavenly realms, kingdom of our God, Lamb, institution.... These are good words. Words rich in meaning! But we can't assume people know them. If we're going to use them, we need to preach about them often with concrete definitions and clear illustrations to plant these words into people's hearts.

I tried that recently. I preached a sermon with the simple theme "Grace."³ When I saw Hosea 3 come up in our lectionary, I was amazed by the concrete, visible way God describes grace. What's grace? Grace is a husband loving an adulterous wife over and over again. After she runs off with another man, grace is paying



“Pastor, I could actually follow you the whole sermon.”

Doesn't that make you excited to preach? I hope you look forward to writing that next sermon. You're not sharing old news. You have knowledge to share that everyone absolutely needs. There's one characteristic of postmodernism that I didn't mention above. People today are searching for *identity* and *meaning* in the emptiness of life. You are blessed with knowledge of both of those things! Tell them about our glorious identity as the children of God by faith in Jesus. Tell them how much they and their lives mean to God. He made us. He saved us. He's got a spot for us in his house. You get to open eyes and change lives and save people through the Word of Christ. That's the blessing of knowledge. Doesn't that make you excited to preach?

Just please, by all means, in every way, in every sermon, remember to point them to Jesus. May there never be little boys waiting for their dads to tell them about heaven or people waiting to be told where there is hope and peace and joy. You know. It's in Jesus! Don't ever assume that people know how much Jesus loves them. Don't ever assume that they know the way to heaven. Don't ever assume that their hearts are sufficiently filled up with the grace of God in Christ.

Like my little boys, they won't ever get it on their own. They need someone to tell them. To share the blessing of the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins. To share the blessing of the knowledge of a Father's gracious love. To share the blessing of the knowledge of eternal life in heaven. Over and over again. We get to share it! The blessing of knowledge. How has God been so good to us? May God bless you as you share the blessing of the knowledge of Christ!

the full price to bring her home. Grace is loving the unlovable, the undeserving, the adulterous. That's grace. That's God's grace for us! When you preach, take your people from the theoretical and theological to the concrete and visible. God does!

Take your people from the theoretical and theological to the concrete and visible.

As you take people into God's Word, check to see whether they are following you along the way. Ask questions in your sermon. Say, "Got it?" or "Make sense?" or "Can you see what God is saying?" and see if heads nod. Have one central theme and a clear flow for people to follow. One of our members talked with me after a recent service. She seemed happy, so I was expecting a "Great sermon, Pastor!" Know what she said? "Pastor, I could actually follow you the whole sermon." She meant it as a compliment. That was a good day. God's Word was preached. She could follow what was said. Her heart was filled with Jesus. That's the blessing of knowledge.

¹ This is from retired pastor Joel Gerlach, who taught homiletics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from 1971-1981.

² This description of Newton's study at Stanford can be found in "The Curse of Knowledge." Harvard Business Journal (December 2006). <https://hbr.org/2006/12/the-curse-of-knowledge>. Accessed May 9, 2019.

³ If you're interested, you can read it at <https://upsidedownsavior.home.blog/2019/09/15/grace/>.

