

## The Imperative-Indicative Balance — Something every preacher must understand

Right application of Scripture necessitates Herman Ridderbos's famous insight into Paul's theology. Every *imperative* of Scripture (what we are to do for God) rests on the *indicative* (who we are in our relationship with God), and *the order is not reversible* (Acts 16:14–16; Col. 3:1–5; 1 John 5:1–5).

The human instinct with every non-Christian religion reverses the order, teaching that who we are before God is based on what we do for God. Thus, any preaching that is distinctively Christian must keep listeners from confusing, or inverting, our “*who*” and our “*do*.”

*What Christians do is based on who we are in Christ.*

We obey because God has loved us and united us to himself by his Son; we are not united to God, nor do we make him love us, because we have obeyed him.

*Our obedience is a response to his love, not a purchase of it.*

We keep this indicative-imperative relationship clear, not by when we happen to mention each element in a sermon, but by making sure that the message is not done until listeners are motivated to obey God based upon God's gracious provision for them. Sometimes, we'll lay a foundation of God's provision as a motivational basis for the imperatives that follow; other times, we'll detail the clear duties of the text before explaining the relationship with God that enables our obedience.

There is a conceptual priority on the indicative that motivates and enables obedience, even if the imperatives follow in the actual presentation of the sermon. If we try to establish a standard order or proportion for the mention of the imperatives and indicatives in our sermons, we will inevitably end up twisting texts in ways not intended by the original authors. We certainly should mention the imperatives and indicatives in various orders or proportions in different sermons according to the content and context of each biblical text.

Still, the key to making any message gospel-consistent is making sure listeners do not walk away with the sense that their behavior is the basis of their redemption.

*A sermon is not a sermon, if it includes no imperatives; a sermon without application is mere abstraction.*

*But a sermon isn't a Christian sermon if its ethical imperatives eclipse its gospel indicatives. A message that only heaps duty upon duty is mere legalism, even if the duties are in the text.*

*Proportions of imperative and indicative will vary,  
but listeners need to be able to discern the importance of each.*

We damage Scripture's purposes, and the clarity of the gospel, if we do not pastorally consider what is needed for each element to be heard and lived. A message that hammers on imperatives for 35 minutes, and then ends with a tossed in, “But remember Jesus loves you,” does not understand how the human heart functions. A message that mews about Jesus' love for 35 minutes, and ends with an intangible, “So make your life count for him,” does not understand the human propensity to use grace to avoid obedience.

As pastors, we should aim for messages that enable people to honor our Savior with gospel-enabled obedience. To do this well, we must evaluate both the demands of a text and the

disposition of our congregation. This will help us determine the proper balance between imperative and indicative. If people don't know what to do, then they cannot obey God. So imperatives of some sort are necessary. If people obey out of wrong motivations, then their so-called obedience doesn't honor God. So indicatives that rightly motivate and enable must ground every imperative.

The proportion varies, but both must be present with enough significance to inform behavior and stir affections for Christ's honor.

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