

Wasted Time

By Jamie Buckingham

Well, it's the end of another year and I'm looking back at the things I wish I hadn't done in 1988. Especially do I wish that I hadn't wasted huge amounts of time doing things which later proved to be totally unproductive.

The majority of my wasted time has been spent attending public meetings—either listening to preaching, or (sigh!) doing the preaching myself. Over the last 11 months, according to my records, I have preached 203 sermons and listened to an additional 49 messages—not including tapes. That, it seems, borders on spiritual overkill.

It would seem, after attending meetings for more than 50 years, a man would be able to discern what wastes time. Yet I continue to sit through dozens of dull, boring meetings—snoozing, staring stupidly while a preacher rattles on, or writing magazine columns while people think I'm making notes on the sermon.

What the kingdom needs is more preachers like Mike Evans from Ft. Worth. Two years ago I sat listening to Mike preach at a pastor's conference. I was just thinking, *He doesn't know what he's talking about*, when he stopped in mid-sentence. He paused, scratched his head, and then with wonderful honesty confessed, "I don't know what I'm talking about." With that he sat down.

Now *that* was a sermon worth hearing.

Most meetings I've sat through, however, were wasted time. Of the 54 sermons I've heard this year I can remember small portions from only two. The problem: the subject was meaningless; or I was sleepy or preoccupied with a deadline; or, as in Mike's case, the speaker didn't know what he was talking about (even though he may have tried to make up for it by shouting).

It takes a smart man to know when to shut up and sit down.

NOTE: Watch for the speaker who constantly uses gimmicks to wake you up—"Hello!"

"Are you breathing out there?"

Don't feel guilty. He is the one who



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put you to sleep in the first place.

I'm grateful to a missionary friend who has slept through more sermons than Ronald Reagan. He taught me how to sit on the platform as though I were listening to the boring speaker, and sleep at the same time. It's done by holding your pen in your hand over your notebook, with your head bowed as though writing. It works every time unless you go to sleep and drop your pen, or you begin to snore, or you leap to your feet because the preacher has just shouted "ARISE!" and you—jolted from your slumber—thought he was shouting at you.

The second chunk of wasted time is the time I've squandered talking to others. Psychologist Richard Dobbins says people retain only 10 percent of what they hear. I polled my Sunday morning congregation recently and asked how many recalled my text from the last Sunday. Not a single hand went up. I asked how many could remember *anything* I said. No one.

Most embarrassing, I couldn't remember what I had said either.

What do people remember? They remember mistakes and goofs. My congregation will never forget the time I was preaching and turned around quickly in a dramatic gesture—sticking my foot through the bass drum. I then tumbled off the platform carrying the entire drum set with me—cymbals, bells and all.

People also remember visual illustrations of sermons.

Six years ago, after I lost 60 pounds, I stopped by the butcher shop and got a huge plastic bag filled with that much beef fat. The following Sunday I dragged it to the pulpit and preached from Hebrews 12:1: "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us...." A lot of fat folks got angry that Sunday. Some even left the church. No one forgot the sermon, however, even though some now belong to other churches.

People remember what they see far more than what they hear. Last summer I preached a series on the "whole armor of God" from Ephesians 6. A friend loaned me an antique suit of armor. I dubbed the suit "Ivan the Ironman" and set him on the platform for the entire seven weeks. Each week I used it to illustrate my message: the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth and the sword of the Spirit. They especially liked the morning I put on the helmet of salvation and had the visor drop down—meaning I couldn't get it off. People may not have known what I was talking about but they remembered the show and tell.

Then one night on national television I preached on "girding up your loins." I wore one of my wife's long skirts into the pulpit and "girded" it up like a huge diaper to show how to get ready for spiritual warfare. Since then I've asked a bunch of people if they know what it means to "gird up your loins" and every single one of them reminded me about the skirt. I'm a little embarrassed about it, but it's a lot better than preaching for an hour on the eschatological meaning of the ashes of the red heifer, and the only thing the people remember is that it was the morning you forgot to zip your pants and throughout your sermon your shirt tail was sticking out of your fly like a little white flag.

I'm going to try to do better next year; that means wasting less time listening to long sermons and spending much more time preparing short ones. People, I've discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out before noon. ■