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**3 Tips for Using Biblical Languages in Preaching**

SEPTEMBER 16, 2015 BY [EDITOR](http://www.bhacademicblog.com/author/ivan-mesa/) [LEAVE A COMMENT](http://www.bhacademicblog.com/3-tips-for-using-biblical-languages-in-preaching/#respond)

I remember the first time I prepared a sermon after I had learned some Greek. I was in Greek 2, which meant I could translate very basic sentences from John or Mark and I recognized around 70% of the words in the Greek New Testament. I was excited to use my new skills to prepare a more fruitful sermon. I quickly realized I wasn’t going to find many golden nuggets with my meager Greek education. The best I could do was look up words in a lexicon and get a more precise understanding of its meaning in that context. That in itself was useful for understanding the passage, but I wasn’t going to lay out a lexicon in front of the congregation or put BDAG’s entry to *kairos*on a PowerPoint.

So how should you use the biblical languages in your sermons? Should you use them at all? Professors will give you differing advice, some warning you never to mention biblical languages in your sermons, and some advising you on how to use it properly. To add my voice to the crowd, I want to suggest three tips for using biblical languages in preaching sparingly and humbly. I’m going to use Greek as my example language, since that’s what I teach, but everything applies equally well to Hebrew and Aramaic.

**1. Don’t be a Greek jerk.**

For some reason, my Greek students latched onto this phrase early in our classes. I originally warned them not to be Greek jerks when a student asked me how to handle sitting under preaching that misused the biblical languages (e.g., creating [exegetical fallacies](http://amzn.to/1Jveqwh)). The idea was that students who barely know two semesters of Greek should relax and refrain from policing their pastors in their use of Greek. The phrase “Greek jerk” became a jovial buzzword in our classroom.

But the same idea applies to preaching: don’t use your knowledge of Greek from the pulpit in a way that makes you seem untouchably enlightened. If you’re going to mention the word “Greek” in your sermon, make sure you’re doing it for the benefit of your congregation, and not for your own reputation as a “scholar.”

**2. Point to alternate English translations instead of the Greek.**

If you want to make a point from the Greek that is not in the English version you’re using for your sermon, the odds are that some other English version has the translation you want. For example, if you’re preaching [1 Peter 5:6-7](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet%205.6-7), you might want to make a sermon point out of the fact that v. 7 is an adverbial participial phrase expressing the *means*to accomplish the command of v. 6: “humble yourselves (imperative) . . . *by casting*(adverbial participle of means) all your anxieties on him.”

Suppose you are using the NIV to preach. The NIV doesn’t capture the participial relation: “Humble yourselves. . . . Cast all your anxiety on him.” The NIV translates the adverbial participle as an independent imperative, resulting in the loss of a connection between the ideas of humbling yourself and casting all your anxieties on God.

There are two ways you could address the NIV in a sermon. First, you could tell them that the word for “cast” in v. 7 is actually a participle in Greek, which means it’s telling you the means by which you carry out the imperative in v. 6. But watch out: everyone just fell asleep. Grammar lessons just don’t preach. The better way to respond to the NIV is to say something like this: “The NIV here translates verse 7 as an independent sentence, but it actually misses an important connection between humbling yourself and casting all your anxieties on God. Other English Bibles, such as the ESV and NASB, translate these two verses correctly as one sentence, with verse 7 telling you *how* to humble yourself. The best translation is from the NET Bible, which says, ‘Humble yourselves . . . *by casting all your cares on him.*”

While this analysis is also a bit involved, you avoid appealing to a realm that is inaccessible to your congregation (Greek), and I find that many congregants are very interested in the differences between English translations. So this approach may keep their attention better, which enables you to drive home your sermon point more effectively.

**3. Use Greek when your point absolutely depends on it.**

Recently, I was preaching on [James 5:1-6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/James%205.1-6), which deals with oppressive landowners hoarding wealth and stealing wages from their workers. The passage begins, “Come now, **you rich**, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.” Automatically, everyone wonders, “who are ‘the rich?’” Am I “rich?”

So, I took a couple minutes to explain that the biblical notion of poverty and wealth is not solely financial, as in the Western mindset, but also includes socio-political and spiritual aspects, which are generally more prominent in uses of the word, especially in pejorative contexts. To demonstrate this, I read several passages from the OT that demonstrated the use of the word “poor” in contexts of oppression or spiritual non-self-reliance. Even David calls himself “poor,” and we know he had more financial wealth than anyone in his day.

But to make the point very clear, I had to tell them that each of these instances of “poor” is a translation of *the same Hebrew word*. So the word itself is flexible enough to encompass all these aspects of poverty. Moreover, the Bible also uses three other Hebrew words and at least twelve different Greek words for the concept of “poverty.” Any concept that takes 4 to 12 words to express is far more comprehensive than one simple idea, such as lack of wealth.

The total amount of time I spent referring to Greek and Hebrew amounted to about 10 seconds. The information was inaccessible to the congregation, but it was crucial to make a major point of the sermon, that James is not condemning you solely because you have some savings in your bank account. I considered the trade-off worth it in this case: they have to trust me momentarily as a “scholar,” but their understanding of the passage is enhanced or corrected. In this case, my sermon depended on communicating the variety of Greek and Hebrew words that express the notion “poor” (and by extension, “rich”), so I did so as briefly as possible.

**Conclusion**

So, my best advice is threefold: don’t be a Greek jerk, avoid using Greek if you can make the same point from English translations, but don’t be afraid to use a tiny bit of Greek if it is absolutely necessary for your sermon. Ultimately, if you do use it, use it humbly, with the intent to help your people understand better the Word of God. Also remember a golden rule of preaching, that if something is extraneous to the points you’re trying to make, remove it—and that includes the use of biblical languages.

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