

How to Listen To a Sermon

Instruction in coming profitably to
the preaching of the word of God.

Pastor Gene L. Crow

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When I was in Seminary we were required, as all Seminary students should be, I believe, to take several courses on how to write and deliver sermons, but I have never seen a course offered for those on the other side of the pulpit, never a course on how to listen to a sermon. And I think that the church is very much in need of one just now.

My own experience is that of all the sermons I have heard in my life, I know that I have not listened as well as I could (or should) have to many of them, and therefore they have not been as helpful to me as they could (and should) have been. There are those (and again, I must admit that at times I have been in this number) who, upon getting in the car after the service, could not have told you what some sermons have been about.

We often (I will say almost without exception) see churches or church members that are cold and unprofitable to God's kingdom and we immediately begin to blame the pastor or the preaching, and sometimes that is undoubtedly where the problem lies. But I suspect that there is, most of the time, something else, or at least something additional, going on. J.I Packer has said, "We complain today that ministers do not know how to preach; but is it not equally true that our congregations do not know how to hear? An instruction to remedy the first deficiency will surely be labor lost unless the second is remedied too."ⁱ To rephrase that, it is not enough that a preacher know how to preach, but the members of the congregation must also know how to listen to the sermon, or else good preaching will not be effective. Good preaching and good listening go hand in hand to produce effective sermons (on the human level that is). Practices and behaviors regarding how people listen to sermons vary widely, and though what follows in no way should be construed as a course in sermon-listening, I hope to suggest some principles that will help to increase the value of the 30 – 50 minutes (or so) which you spend listening to the sermon during a worship service.

In all that follows we must always remember that the Holy Spirit is the one who ultimately makes the preached Word effective in our lives. Without His work, all of the principles in the world will not help. Keep this in mind throughout the ensuing points.

So, how should you listen to a sermon? Let me give seven suggestions to you on this subject.ⁱⁱ

1. *With an Expectation that is Informed.*

Too often today, people see the sermon as just more or less a speech or a talk given by their pastor on some topic or another, and in many churches that is about all it is. But where that is the case what is being heard is not preaching.

But a sermon is not just a speech by the pastor. It is the God ordained method of God speaking to his people. Preaching is that all important chain between God and faith. Paul told the Roman church that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom 10:17). He then goes on to say that the way that the word of God gets to people is through preaching. Preaching is the official God-sanctioned and ordained proclamation (that is the meaning of the word) of God's word to men and women. And the *first* step toward properly hearing a sermon is to come to it with that in the front of your mind. If you come expecting to receive nothing but 30 or 40 minutes to zone out and rest, be assured, that is all you will likely receive.

The Second Helvetic Confession says (Chapter 1) that "the preaching of the word of God is the word of God." That is, as it is properly done, it is much more than just the words of man, but comes with the

authority of God, as the minister speaks it on behalf of, and as it were, in the place of, Christ, as His spokesman.

This has always been the biblical view of preaching. Reformed Christianity has always maintained this high view of it. To return to the responsibility of not only the preacher but the hearer, J.I. Packer has said:

Most modern hearers have never been taught to expect much from sermons, and their habit is to relax at sermon time and wait to see if anything that the speaker says will interest them. Today's congregations and today's preachers seem to be mostly at one in neither asking nor expecting that God will come to meet his people in preaching and so it is no wonder that this does not often happen. Just as it takes two to tango, so ordinarily it takes both an expectant congregation and a preacher who knows what he is about to make an authentic preaching occasion.ⁱⁱⁱ

That is, by the way one of the reasons that I believe preaching should be expository, drawn from God's word itself, to explain God's word to God's people. It is *for* God that the pastor speaks, so it had better be God's word *that* he preaches.

In order to properly listen to a sermon then, we first have to understand what it is that we are listening to. When we properly understand this, our expectation regarding the sermon will be properly informed, greatly enhanced, and very high. This also has the positive effect of getting our eyes off of the preacher and onto the message, which is, of course, where it should be.

2. *With a Soul that is Prepared*

I suspect that with the possible exception of our first point, this is the one that is the most neglected today.

Most people assume that preparation for properly hearing a sermon starts when the pastor says, "please turn in your bibles to . . ." or maybe, *maybe*, at the beginning of the service in between catching up on events with friends and family. But in actuality it starts the night before, and even the whole week before. I am continually amazed at how much emphasis reformed folk put on the importance of preparation the week before celebrating the Lord's Supper, but how little on the same preparation during the week regarding hearing the word preached, which is the primary means of grace.

To properly hear a sermon, part of your responsibility is to help ensure that it is *worth* hearing properly, and that means prayer. Pray for your pastor during the week. Pray that he would "be diligent to present [himself] approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2Tim 2:15); that God would bless your pastor's time in the word, that he and those with whom he deals (church secretaries, elders, friends, etc.) would all guard his time in the study of the word.

Puritan pastor John Angell James has helpfully written:

Prayer is a means of assisting the minister which is within the reach of all. They who can do nothing more, can pray. The sick, who cannot encourage their minister by their presence in the sanctuary, can bear him upon their hearts in their lonely chamber: the poor who cannot add to his temporal comfort by monetary donations, can supplicate their God "to supply all [his] needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19): the timid, who cannot approach to offer him the tribute of their gratitude, can pour their praises into the ear of Jehovah, and entreat him still to encourage the soul of His servant: the ignorant, who cannot hope to add one idea to the stock of his

knowledge, can place him before the fountain of celestial radiance: even the dying, who can no longer busy themselves as in former times for his interests, can gather up their remaining strength, and employ it in the way of prayer for their pastor.^{iv}

This is a way in which each member of the congregation can and should be involved in the preparation of each and every sermon.

When it comes specifically to your *hearing* of the sermon, that too should begin well before the actual hearing of the sermon. By Saturday evening your thoughts and prayers should begin turning toward the coming Lord's Day and the worship service, and the word to be preached. Another Puritan, George Swinnock said "If you leave your heart with God on Saturday night, you will find it with him on the Lord's Day morning."

The Sunday sermon will be much more profitably received by you if your heart has been prepared prior to the service, ideally the night before, by prayer and confession and by reading the passage to be preached (if you know it ahead of time).

The preparation of our soul should begin the night before, but of course it must not end there, but should continue on Sunday morning. During our morning physical preparations, our prayers should be focused on the upcoming gathering of God's people with God, with special emphasis on the preaching of God's word, which, as we have already stated, is God's ordained means of speaking to us.

The preparation of our soul is an important aspect of listening well to the sermon on the Lord's Day.

Another aspect of having a soul that is prepared is to have a body that is prepared as well. Quite simply, that means getting enough sleep the night before. One of the worst, that is, the least profitable, ways to listen to a sermon is to sleep through it. This is also a very serious "slap in the face" to God, for someone to come into His presence, and then, at the very point that He most pointedly speaks to us, to fall asleep. Each of us should do what it takes so that we can be awake during the sermon. That really leads us to our third means of listening well to a sermon.

3. *A Mind that is Alert*

If your soul is prepared and your body well rested, and if you have a proper understanding of what a sermon actually is, realizing that you will be hearing from God himself through His ordained spokesman, then your mind should have no trouble being alert. And it is vitally important that your mind be in this state if you are to hear with profit what God is saying to you. God's word ultimately, as we will see later, works in our hearts, but its avenue of entry is through our minds. Preaching appeals first to our mind. Our heart cannot respond to what our mind does not understand. In Romans 12, Paul says that the transforming work of God's word takes place through the renewing of our *mind*.

Now, while it is sometimes difficult to come to the sermon in such a state, it is vitally important that we do; and the way that we achieve this is through what to many is a dirty word . . . *discipline!* Discipline is necessary because our tendency is to let our minds wander during the sermon. Fight that tendency!

Here are some suggestions to help with keeping your mind alert.

The first is a bit of review. If we understand what we are at church for in the first place, and understand that listening well to the sermon is part of our worship to God, we will be better about it; remember that it is God who is speaking (through the preaching of the word) and we should listen. Also my earlier comments about getting adequate rest the night before is very pertinent to this subject.

Next, let me seriously suggest that you take notes. I will nearly always provide sermon outlines of varying lengths in the bulletin, anything from just the title, if I don't want to give away the direction of the sermon ahead of time, to very detailed ones with lots of sub-points. Use them to take notes. Or, if you

have a notebook that you use then use that, but use something! And though ideally you will keep your notes for later review (might I suggest using them at your evening meal to review and discuss what was said in the sermons that day), they are not useful only for those who do so. Even if you throw them away as soon as you leave church, the act of taking the notes, and I do mean taking notes, not just doodling on the page, will help to process what is being said. You will find yourself listening more intently, and retaining more of what is being said.

In interpersonal communication there is much talk about *active listening*, that is, actively being engaged in the process of hearing what the other person is saying. Listening well to a sermon is very much an active task, much more so than most people realize.

Another quote, this time from Richard Baxter.

“Make it your work with diligence to apply the word as you are hearing it . . . Cast not all upon the minister, as those that will go no further than they are carried as by force. . . . *You have work to do as well as the preacher and should be all the time as busy as he . . . you must open your mouths and digest it, for another cannot digest it for you . . . therefore be all the while at work, and abhor an idle heart in hearing.*” (emphasis added)

So, how do you listen to a sermon? With 1) an expectation that is informed, 2) a soul that is prepared, and 3) a mind that is alert. Let’s add a fourth.

4. *With a Bible that is Open*

I believe that the most effective preaching is expositional preaching. That is, preaching that opens up and explains the text of scripture, letting it speak for itself. This involves, on the preacher’s part, careful study in the original languages, and attention to the various contexts in which a passage is found. As an expositional preacher, I seek to take you through a biblical text or texts and attempt, by God’s grace, to explain the meaning of the passage and its implications and applications for you.

But this kind of preaching requires a certain kind of listening as well, and part of that is that you need to have your bibles out and open to get full benefit from the sermon, even if you have the passage being preached on committed to memory. During sermons here, we will almost certainly turn to other passage that shed light on the main passage, and you should want to turn and see those with the rest of us.

While we are on the subject, let me digress for a moment to encourage you to bring your own bible to church. Many people in confessionally reformed churches have slipped into the habit of simply using “pew Bibles” in church. I say away with that! Bring your own Bible to church! One which is yours, that you know, that you have lived with and read through and marked up with highlighting and underlining and dog-earing, whatever helps you learn the scriptures. And by the way, though the Word of God is indeed sacred, there is nothing so sacred about the ink-on-paper printed in your Bible that you can’t, indeed that you shouldn’t, mark your Bibles. Particularly illuminating remarks or cross references, written in the margins, or passages or particular words highlighted, will come back to help you again and again throughout your life.

Another reason to keep your bibles open is to make sure that the pastor is saying things that are true about the passages. Many times I have heard pastors misquote cross-references, quote them out of context, or try to support even legitimate doctrines by passages that don’t actually support them. Remember the Bereans spoken of in Acts 17 were commended by Paul for checking out what Paul himself was saying.

So, whether you bring your own Bible to church or not, don’t put your bibles away after the text has been read, and please follow along. This is an important aspect of properly hearing the sermon.

5. *With a Heart that is Responsive.*

Back in my third point I discussed having a mind that is alert, but effectively and rightly listening to a sermon takes more than our minds, it requires a heart that is responsive. Though the word first appeals to our mind, it cannot stop there. The psalmist said, “Your word I have hidden . . .” where? Not in my mind, but “your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11).

Remember that in a biblical sermon, God speaks to you, and the Spirit uses his word to calm our fears, comfort our sorrows, disturb our consciences, expose our sin, proclaim God’s grace, convert dead souls, reassure saints in their faith, and that these are more than simply “brain functions,” they are matters of the heart, and we have to be not only ready and willing, but anxious to receive these things in our heart by faith.

6. *With an afternoon/evening that is Reflective.*

Just as preparation for the sermon, and proper hearing of that sermon does not begin at the start of service, neither, if it is to be effectual hearing, can dealing with the sermon end with the benediction of the service.

Use the time after the morning service, whether you are here at church (which I encourage you all to be if it is possible) or go home for lunch, and the time following the afternoon service to reflect on the sermon(s) you have heard, to meditate on the sermon and the scriptures from which it was taken. Use it in your family devotions on that day, or perhaps on Monday, some time while it is fresh in your mind. However you do it, continue to think on what God has spoken to you through the sermon.

God’s word preached is not meant for you merely while you are sitting in the pew, but for your use throughout your life. Your notes that you take, whether on the papers we hand out, in your own personal notebooks, or in the margins of your bible, are all ways to remind you of what has been said, and prayerfully being reminded of what has been said is a way to obtain the greatest benefit from the sermon. So be reflective in the time after the sermon.

7. *With a Life that is Ready to Spring Into Action*

Jesus said, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” (Jn 13:17). Just as you should be anxious to hear what God is going to say to you on Sunday, and as you should be anxious and putting forth the effort to get the most from what you are hearing during the sermon, you should, we all should, be anxious to put into practice what we learn from the sermon.

Sermons will always have application. Sometimes it will be clearly stated as such, sometimes not, but as mentioned above all sermons are meant not only for the hour in which they are preached, but they should have a lasting impact. A sermon will always demand something of you, expect some response from you. That application can be quite varied; It could be some doctrine, something about God to know, to remember, or to recall; some sin to avoid, some grace to cultivate, some error to avoid, some comfort to derive, some action to be taken, some good work to do, some virtue to strengthen, etc. There will always be some application given by the minister, and there will always be some application that the Holy Spirit will make in your life.

Be anxious to put God’s word to work in your life. Always be prayerful that the Spirit of God will be answering the prayer of our Lord when he prayed on your behalf, “sanctify them by thy truth, thy word is truth.” (John 17:17). Be determined to not only be hearers of the word, but to be doers of it.

Note this, if you just appreciate the sermon and it makes no difference in your life, you have wasted your time hearing it (and many do).

I pray that this short bit of instruction is helpful. Prayerfully prepare yourself for each and every service you attend, each and every sermon you hear. May the God whom we proclaim receive the glory that is due to him alone, both now and forever.

Endnotes

ⁱ J.I. Packer, *The Puritan Approach to Worship in A Quest for Godliness*. Crossway Books, 1990. p 254.

ⁱⁱ Much of what follows is borrowed from Dr. Philip Ryken from Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

ⁱⁱⁱ J.I. Packer, *Why Preach in The Preacher and Preaching*, P&R. pp. 4-5

^{iv} John Angell James, *Church Members' Guide*, quoted in John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Word Publishing, 1992) p354.