

How to Listen to and Process a Sermon¹

How to listen to a sermon? You may think, what a silly subject. After all, it would be pointless to write on “how to watch TV.” And listening to a sermon is even easier than watching TV, since I don’t have to deal with the remote control. It’s a passive activity, something preached to me, not something I actively do.

Ah, but it’s not. After the parable of the sower, Jesus says: “Consider carefully how you listen” (Luke 8:18). He says if we listen in one way, we will be given more, but if we listen in another way, even what we think we have will be taken from us. It’s a life-and-death business, listening to sermons. So let us consider carefully how to listen. Here are seven pointers.

1. Expect God to speak.

Although we are listening to sound waves produced by human vocal chords, if the preacher is opening up the Bible then we are actually listening to the authoritative voice of God. “If anyone speaks,” Peter writes about Bible teaching in church, “he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pet. 4:11). And if anyone listens to a faithful sermon, he should do so as if hearing the very words of God.

Pray during the week for next Sunday’s preacher. Pray for yourself and those who go to church with you. Come to the sermon as physically and mentally fresh and attentive as you possibly can. Quiet your mind and heart and expect God to speak. “Lord, speak to me. I am listening.”

2. Admit God knows better than you do.

When Timothy preached in Ephesus, Paul warned him that many would “not put up with sound [health-giving] doctrine,” but would desire for the preacher “to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Tim. 4:3). By nature we all want that. We want the sermon to make us feel better about ourselves, to boost our self-esteem, to reinforce our preexisting prejudices.

¹ The Gospel Coalition: 7 Ways to Become a Better Sermon Listener, 2015.

But when God speaks, he calls me day by day, week by week, to turn from sin and to trust in Christ. He calls me to “get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted” in me (James 1:21). I need to sit under the Word in humility, not over it in judgment. God is God and I am not. I must be ready, then, to adjust my opinions, my beliefs, my heart, my life.

3. Make sure the preacher says what the passage says.

Our question is how to listen to an *expository* sermon. Every sermon should open up from Scripture the meaning God has already put into Scripture. In this sense, every sermon should be expository—*exposing* what’s there. The alternative is “impositional” preaching in which the preacher *imposes* a meaning on the text. Of course, some sermons expound one passage while others expound verses from more than one passage. The advantage of the former is that it’s easier to ensure the preacher says what the passage says.

The authority of the preacher doesn’t come from his office (pastor, minister, or whatever) or his powerful personality. It is entirely a delegated authority. When he says what Scripture says, he speaks with authority; when he does not, he has no authority. A friend once said to me that when his pastor preached, he would have his Bible open and ask, “Where did he get that from?” It’s a good question. If I can see he got it from the passage, I should bow and repent and believe; if not, I shouldn’t.

Be humble but not gullible. Read the passage during the week leading up to the sermon. Ponder it. You don’t have to be an academic to do this. What’s the main idea? Is the central thrust of the sermon the central thrust of the passage?

4. Hear the sermon in church.

It is possible to hear sermons from downloads, alone, in our own time, at our own convenience. This is not a bad thing, but it’s not the best thing. God’s standard pattern is for his people to assemble (“church” means “assembly”) and sit under his Word together.

Listening to sermons is not a “me and God” thing; it’s a “God shaping us together” thing. We listen together. We hold one another accountable. I’ve heard the sermon; you know I’ve heard it; now you know I’ve heard it. You expect me to respond appropriately, and I expect you to. We help one another, stirring one another up to godly living as we gather together (Heb. 10:24–25).

5. Be there week by week.

Be regular in church. We breathe the cultural air of anti-commitment. It’s so easy to drift in and out, sitting on the edge as spectators. But the commitment to consistently gather with your covenant family is important.

God doesn’t give us quick fixes that come from hearing one or two Sunday sermons; he shapes and molds our minds, our hearts, and our character over time by the steady drip, drip, drip of his Word. We need to hear Christ proclaimed again and again. As Peter puts it, “I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them” (2 Pet. 1:12). Consider keeping a record of the Sundays you are—or are not—in church. You may be shocked at how often you’re away. Resolve to be there regularly, both for your own good and the good of those around you.

6. Do what the Bible says.

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves,” the apostle writes. “Do what it says” (James 1:22). The purpose of sermons isn’t to make us know-it-alls, but to make us like Jesus. We are to be those who “hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” of godly character (Luke 8:15). We don’t come to the preaching of God’s Word to be entertained or to have our brain cells tickled by intellectual displays or to have our emotions swayed by manipulative oratory. We come to hear, to worship, and to obey.

After the Sunday sermon, think about some concrete way in which you will obey the preached Word. Write it down. Tell someone what it is. It may be something to start doing, or to stop doing. It may be words to speak, or to stop speaking. Most of all, it will be an attitude or desire of the heart. It may help to keep a journal Sunday by Sunday. Return to past entries from time to

time and review your progress. Ask yourself how God is at work in you through his Word. You may be surprised and encouraged.

7. Do what the Bible says today—and rejoice.

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” So says Psalm 95, and so says the writer of Hebrews quoting it (Heb. 3:15). *Today*. There is an urgency to our hearing. Don’t put it off till tomorrow, for tomorrow may never come.

And then rejoice. Be glad God caused the Bible to be written exactly as he wanted. Be glad for the good news of all he’s given us in Christ. If you are a believer, be glad your name is written in heaven. Let each time you sit with your covenant family in Christ listening to a sermon be a time of fresh repentance, fresh reliance, and fresh obedience to your King.