



Profiting from Preaching: Learning to Truly Hear God

It is a few hours after church on Sunday. The phone rings. An excited voice on the other line announces: "You've been selected to win a million dollars. All you have to do is think about this morning's sermon and tell me the theme, the main points and a few personal applications, and the million dollars is yours:" Would you get the money?

If this scenario is unlikely, there is a similar scenario that is not only likely but certain. Each of us will experience holiness, hope, and heaven, or disobedience, despair, and death, based on what we have done with the preaching of the gospel (Mark 4:1-20). Preachers will be held accountable for boring or unfaithful preaching (James 3:1). But listeners are responsible to use what they have been given through the preached Word. Many of us might be hearing the Word with eagerness. Others of us might fill a pew from week to week but gain little from what we hear. Can such "hearing" really profit?

True hearing certainly requires God's recreating work. The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us that "the *Spirit of God* makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effective means of convincing and converting sinners, and building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, to salvation" (Q&A 89). Apart from God's blessing people hear the words of the sermon but not the God of the sermon. They hear about Christ but do not receive Christ.

But Christ also says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 3:22). One ordinary means by which Christ works the benefits of redemption is the preached Word (WSC, Q&A 88). And proper hearing takes personal discipline. Kent Hughes urges us to "break holy sweat" in hearing God.

There are three ingredients necessary to profit from preaching.

Preparing for the Preaching

Good listening doesn't just happen. It is developed through thoughtful preparation.

Preparing Throughout the Week

Good sermon listeners tend to be those who maintain regular family worship. To put it negatively, we should not expect to love worship and preaching on Sunday if we are not developing a spiritual appetite through personal and family worship Monday through Saturday.

Midweek preparation also means thinking ahead about the next Lord's Day. The Puritans called Sunday "the market day of the soul. As grocery day approaches you think about the list of items you need. As we anticipate meeting with God we should meditate on our needs and anticipate God's provision.

By daily preparation we will learn the heart of the psalmist who wrote, "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord" (Ps. 84:2).

Preparing on Saturday Evening

How often are our Saturday evenings true preparations for worship? To transition from the busyness of the week to the gospel-restfulness of the Lord's Day we should have special times of

family worship Saturday evening. Puritan George Swinnock wrote, "If you would leave your heart with God on Saturday night, you should find it with him on the Lord's Day morning"

Saturday evening preparation is not only spiritual. Since good listening requires a rested body and mind we should be sure to get plenty of sleep Saturday evening (without oversleeping and having to rush to church). Recently I listened to arguably the greatest sermon ever preached on American soil, Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God:" The problem was, I listened to it when I was settling in to bed for the night. The next morning I remembered almost nothing of what I heard. Preaching doesn't work by osmosis!

As guardians of the home, parents should require their children to be well rested for church. Parents can't make a child sleep, but they can enforce a reasonable "lights out" *time*.

Preparing Sunday Morning

As we get ready for church Sunday morning we should be careful to show others our best grace. If we would be on our best behavior Sunday morning our worship would be greatly improved. Men who holler at their families to "hurry up!" are not preparing anyone for worship.

We should also consider sitting as close to the front as possible. Why do most events fill up from the front to the back? We can all confirm from experience: The closer you are, the more involved you are. Perhaps some of us are more likely to win the lottery than to change where we sit at church. But most of us would do better to move forward.

Preparing with Prayer

Sermon preparation should be joined with prayer. Pray for God's wisdom when you open your Bible. Before the worship service pray for the minister and his preaching. If you feel yourself growing tired, either spiritually or physically, pray for strength.

Receiving the Preaching

Even good preparation does not guarantee good listening. Rather, "we must attend to the Word with diligence" (WSC, Q&A 90).

Come to the Service Expectantly

Do not come to church to have your ears ticked or to fulfill someone else's expectations. Come to hear God's Word explained and applied. Expect the sermon to make God's Word plain, to answer real-life questions, to assist in application, and to lead Spirit-illuminated listeners to God through Christ. "As newborn babies, desire the sincere milk of the word" (1 Peter 2:2) and thereby receive it with faith and love.

Take Responsibility for Your Spiritual Health

Our lives might radically change if we took more responsibility for what we hear in church. The next time you leave church saying, "I didn't get much out of the sermon," ask yourself, "Was I not a diligent hearer?"

This is what God suggests in Hebrews 5. The Hebrews, by this time, ought to have been teachers, but they could still only handle the most basic teaching. "By reason of use" you must have your "senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (v. 14).

Interact with the Text

One of the saddest sounds in church is that of Bibles closing as the sermon starts. Reading the text and keeping the Bible open during the sermon help many people to better converse with God.

Many people also find it helpful to take notes during the sermon. Unfortunately, we tend to take notes in church the same way we were trained to take notes in school. In school, students have to record large tracts of text in order to pass the quiz or test. But this might not be the best way to take sermon notes. Don't try to record every thought, and use shorthand where possible. Try to get

the main points, and possibly, the sub points, *simply as a way of organizing your notes*. But within the skeleton outline you should fill in thoughts that God knows you need to remember and apply. Your notes will look different than your neighbors: You might also do well to quickly write down distracting thoughts (e.g., a shopping list item, or a person you forgot to call). Writing down our distractions frees our mind to forget and refocus.

Applying the Preaching

An old minister once said, "The sermon isn't done until it's done' He meant that the purpose of the sermon isn't realized until the hearers do it.

Paul says that the unrighteous perish because they did "not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10). They did not put the Word of God into practice. Unbelievers hear the gospel, but they do not do what it says and so it does not profit them (Heb. 4:2).

We all want to think that we are doers of the Word and not hearers only. But what do we do with the word that is preached every week? We need to work to apply every word we hear specifically. The doer of the Word, says James, "continues in it" (1:25). He keeps the sermon going after the Sunday service.

Ask the Right Questions

As we process the sermon we should ask, "What was the main point of the sermon? What is one thing I learned about God? What are a few things God is calling me to do as a result of this sermon? How can this sermon make me more like Jesus?" The psalmist hid God's Word in his heart not to become smarter or wittier but holier (Ps. 119:11).

Discuss the Sermon

It's amazing what happens when we talk about Scripture. If you only hear something and never think or talk about it again, you will probably forget it. Talking about the sermon helps us to lay it up in our hearts.

God's Word is living and active. The Spirit will apply it in the lives of his children. But we have a responsibility to benefit from His Word. Let us never deceive ourselves by simply hearing the words of the Bible. Instead, let us diligently listen to God and do what he says so that his Word may become effective to salvation.

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