



How do we hear?

We hear a lot every day. Some of it is good. Some of it is not so good. How much attention do we give to what we hear? How do we listen to those sermons on Sunday?

No more great preaching

This is something we hear rather frequently today. People talk of powerful preachers of yesterday, of famous evangelists of the nineteenth century, of Charles Spurgeon and Campbell Morgan. No such preachers today! The age of great preaching is past! Besides this, preaching has fallen into secondary place! The sermon is passé. The pulpit has lost its influence in modern society! There are better methods of communication! Ministers of the gospel are aware of those attitudes, and as they face their calling they do so in the consciousness of "who is sufficient unto these things?"

Have you ever wondered if perhaps we have lost the art of listening? Could there be another side to the issue? Many books have been written on Homiletics, and faithful ministers read them eagerly. They take special courses and attend seminars on preaching. Have you ever read a book on how to listen to a sermon? Maybe such a book hasn't even been written. What was the last sermon you heard? What did you gain from it? How much did you prepare for it? Just how does one listen to a sermon?

Times are different

When I was a lad our people went to church to hear sermons. In those days ministers had various series of sermons on Bible books, on Christian living, and on relevant matters of the day. I recall how large auditoriums were filled on Sunday evenings. People flocked to hear a popular series of Bible expositions. I have heard them say they had to be in church by 6:30 or there would not be an empty seat for the 7 o'clock service. They went to God's house with real anticipation, and talked about those vital messages both before and after the Lord's day.

That doesn't happen much anymore. Especially not on Sunday evenings! Why such a change? Can't or don't ministers preach that way any more? Some of these pulpit masters are still living. Although they have retired from the active ministry, they still conduct worship services. I wonder oftentimes what they must think. The same preachers, the same good presentation, but what a difference at church! What a golden age that was for devoted ministers of the Word.

Responsible listening

The devoted preacher must develop fresh methods of presenting and enforcing the truth, must avoid trite and hackneyed expressions, and must be on guard against clichés. However, the worshipper should pause a little to ask why he or she is there, should pray a little for God to open his or her heart and ear, and should think a little in anticipation of the message.

If the services are bland or uninteresting, the blame is very, easily laid on the preacher. We know that he should be diligent to present a well worked out cogent and coherent message with vibrant delivery. He must pray fervently and study diligently to speak the Word of God instructively, interestingly, and inspiringly.

However, listeners should cultivate spiritual susceptibility so that they may be interested and may profit by what they hear. Criticism of the pulpit is very common, but criticism of the pew is scarcely heard. Students should be taught how to preach, but we all should be taught how to listen. Maybe

good preaching is one of the lost arts, but it is to be feared that good listening may have disappeared. These two act and react on each other. A poor speaker can make a dull hearer, but a good listener can help to make a lively preacher. A receptive and responsive audience gets through to the speaker and adds fervor and intensity to communication.

The Bible and hearers

Our Lord Jesus Christ has spoken an entire parable on the matter of hearing. We call it the Parable of the Sower, but it could more aptly be named the Parable of the Sorts of Soil. It is just as true now as it was in the day when our Lord sat in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and spoke this parable that the effects of the preaching of the gospel depend on the character of the hearers.

Some of the soil became a path and was hardened by the traffic of many soles. There is a lot of "soul traffic" today too. It is difficult for us to listen because of all the things going through our minds. Besides that, we are so accustomed to TV that an ordinary church service seems blah. The soul may even become sermon hardened because it has heard so many. This is an insidious danger when our blessings are so common and we have received so much in the way of God's gracious providence. Too many are like Tennyson's "Northern Farmer," who said about the parson:

*And I always came to his church before my Sally were dead,
And heard him a-bumming away like a buzzard clock over my head;
And I never knew what he meant, but I thought he had something to say;
And I thought he said what he ought to have said, and I came away.*

Of Jesus' preaching we read that *"the common people heard him gladly"* (Mark 12:37). The Pharisees even said, *"Lo, the world is gone after him"* (John 12:19). However, at one point in His ministry we read, *"Upon this many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him"* (John 6:66). The identical preacher, and He surely preached well, but the hearers made the difference.

On the day of Pentecost when Peter preached, the people listened.

"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do?"

(Acts 2:37)

When the Apostle Paul preached in Lycaonia he was received as a god, but later he was stoned (Acts 14:11-19). He spoke by the power of the same Spirit, he imparted the true message from God, but there was quite a change in the audience.

Keys for proper hearing

1. Anticipation

How much do we really anticipate meeting God in church? Are we truly thrilled about that? Are we anxious to praise Him for all His favors and for so great a salvation? Do we look forward to a refreshing lift after a hard week on the job? Isn't it great to sing praises to His name after hearing that precious name cursed all week? How enjoyable to have fellowship with kindred minds after associations with many who move on a different wave length. Think of how Cornelius looked forward to the visit of Peter with the brethren. *"And Cornelius was waiting for them, having called together his kinsmen and his near friends"* (Acts 10:24).

Prayerfulness is a real part of anticipation. We need to become fertile ground for the reception of the Word, and we know that such preparation is the work of the Holy Spirit. How the messenger needs our prayers. How much more blessed to pray for him than to wonder what he is able to tell you that you have not heard before. He is a human vessel who feels his failings and limitations, and knows he must receive power from the divine source. He is at the throne of grace before entering the house of God and walking to the pulpit. Join him there and your soul will be blessed. Whether his name is John or not, he is only a man, but he is sent from God.

Thomas missed Jesus that evening of the first day of the week because he did not anticipate the Lord's coming. The Athenians did not receive Paul's great message because they did not expect to hear the truth from the true God. They met the Apostle Paul with this idea in their mind: "What would this babbler say? ... *Now all the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing*" (Acts 17:18, 21). Many in Jesus' own day missed His great salvation because they stumbled over His habitat, and felt like Nathanael when he first met the Savior, "*Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?*" (John 1:46). How often we stumble over some minor matters to miss the major message.

2. Concentration

What if all the thoughts we think while the sermon is brought could be flashed on the screen before the audience! Surely, it is the speaker's task to hold our attention as well as to gain it in the first place, but again, this is a two way street. It requires real effort to listen with rapt attention and not allow our thoughts to stray. At school, especially in college, it is essential to cultivate concentration on the class lectures. Isn't God's Word worthy of such attention on our part? Ministers should stimulate that kind of listening, but intelligent audience-cooperation is necessary. It is not complimentary to say this, but some people suffer from mental indolence. God gave us a mind to use and enjoy, and we should be willing to put real effort in its exercise. Concentration is to hearing what digestion is to eating. It assimilates what we hear for our growth in grace.

Most of us find it difficult to remember. However, there are aids for this, and we should be using them. I do not believe our pew Bibles in the churches serve us as well as they could. How much better to take your own personal Bible to the Lord's house, and teach the children to do the same. Then we could use the Bible profitably by writing some notes in the margin, or on some paper taken along for that purpose. Such little notes really make it your own Bible.

Seeing listeners take notes prompts the speaker to a higher level of preparation and delivery for communication. It is encouraging to see people care that much and to put forth that kind of an effort. When the thought passes through your mind, down to your fingers, and on the paper for your eyes to see, retention is facilitated. All this helps a lot to remember and understand. Those few notes are good for later review and reminder. You don't have to write much. Maybe only a few suggestive words. But they put your Bible to good use.

Some pastors have a feedback session from time to time. A good idea. Anything to help concentrate and remember. How helpful those notes would be for such a session. It would also help a lot if we would discuss some of these matters with someone after the service instead of talking about everything else. Isn't God's Word worthy of that much attention and concentration?

3. Application

This is a very real feature of a sermon. A discourse on the Word is not exclusively exegesis of the text, as vitally essential and basically important as that is. The application is something in which all can take part. Accept the responsibility of a listener. A servant of God cannot know all the needs of all the people all the time. In our Christian maturity we can discern avenues for application. We should listen seriously with the ever present question of how we can relate this to our life. There is great potential in these unfolding thoughts from God's Word. Ponder those thoughts, and the Holy Spirit will apply them to you where you live.

How do we hear? Do we want to act on and from the things we hear? One who is effected by what he hears, but takes no action on it, makes himself more impervious to the truth when it is presented again. Apparently many become past feeling with respect to messages from the Bible. Acting on what we hear makes us better hearers the next time. It sharpens the receptivity of the mind, and equips to live the Christian calling.

*Thy Word, O Lord, like gentle dews
Falls soft on hearts that pine;
Lord, to Thy garden ne'er refuse
This heavenly balm of Thine.*

*Watered by Thee, let every tree
Forth blossom to Thy praise;
By grace of Thine bear fruit divine
Through all the coming days.*

Fred Van Houten

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