

“HOW TO LISTEN TO A SERMON”

Acts 10.33

Dr. John S. Waldrup

Churches are facing a crisis in America today because so many pastors will not preach to the hearts of the sinners sitting in the seats in front of them. In those few Churches with converted preachers who declare the whole counsel of God's Word, many are not responsive to the preaching of the Bible. The result is an entire country that is rushing headlong toward catastrophe, while we are already experiencing the judgment of God.

And what do we see while all this happens? Many who profess to be, and who may actually think they are, God's people sit in the auditorium and do nothing, for the most part. It was a tragedy for Nero to fiddle while Rome burned, but it is a far greater tragedy for so-called Christians to fiddle around. At the same time, the United States of America prepares to burn under the wrathful judgment of a holy and righteous God.

For a long time, I agonized about this problem of unresponsiveness. I asked God, “Why doesn't he respond to the preaching of your Word, Father? Why are their lives not changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, as your truth is proclaimed? That sermon should have hit her right between the eyes! Why did she not even flinch?” I began to realize, as I prayed such prayers, that God often works in a person's life in ways that cannot be immediately seen by others. I have come to the conclusion that there are three possibilities to explain, on a human level, why the preaching of the Word of God seems to have little effect in the lives of some of those who are thought to be God's people, in the lives of some of those who claim to be saved.

One problem might be sin in the preacher's life. Indeed, God cannot use filthy vessels, and will not bless the ministry of a preacher who is not right with God or, more likely, who is not even saved. The fact that many preachers are lost is why so few pulpits in America proclaim the whole counsel of God's Word but instead tickle and pet their audiences with mild expository Bible lessons or irrelevant topical sermons.

Another problem might be sin among those who hear the preaching of God's Word. Indeed, Isaiah and Jeremiah had no gross sin in their lives, yet their preaching elicited no response. Why? Sin. Simple sin in people's lives and an unwillingness to repent and turn to God. When the crowd is unresponsive to the preaching of God's Word, it could be sin. What kind of sin? Perhaps secret sins in the lives of Christians. However, more likely, unregenerate hearts are in the lives of those who claim to be saved but who have never really trusted Christ.

There is a third problem, not directly related to sin, that makes for unresponsive hearers of God's Word. This problem has not plagued the human race until the last sixty or seventy years. This problem is not seen in some of the more backward countries, but is an increasingly prevalent factor in the technologically advanced countries of the world.

The problem is people's general inability to listen to a sermon properly. Maybe a better term than inability is lack of training, lack of self-discipline, or short attention span. Many people nowadays do not know how to listen to a sermon because they have not been trained by their weak parents, and have not found it necessary to actively listen to another person talking.

Do you call it attention deficit disorder? Having a short attention span is almost always caused by a lack of self-discipline, whatever the cause. Could this be why the problem is found in Western Europe and the United States, but is virtually unknown in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe? To be sure.

This inability to listen to sermons has been illustrated to me again and again as I have taken to the old Puritan and Baptist way of interviewing folks after preaching to them, eliciting from them.¹ Parents might begin with, “What did the Pastor preach about this morning?” “Uhhhhh, sin?” “Uhhhhh, I don’t know.”

I know the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, but it doesn’t require spiritual discernment to comprehend the subject matter of sermons or Sunday School lessons. It only requires spiritual discernment, actually, to understand it. By this, I mean a person may not understand what I meant when I preached about the lake of fire. That would take spiritual discernment to a degree, some level of illumination. To sit through a sermon and not know that I preached a sermon on the lake of fire has nothing to do with spiritual discernment. It has to do with paying attention. Some people listen to nothing that is said during a sermon, though they hear it all.

How, in God’s name, can some people sit there and have not the foggiest clue of the subject preached on at the end of the sermon? It is simple. You do not know *how* to listen to a preacher preach. You need to know *how* to listen to a preacher preach, because if you do not know how to listen to a preacher preach, and thereby **do not** listen to a preacher preach, resulting in having no understanding of what message is delivered when the Gospel is proclaimed, you will not be saved.

Can you imagine who the culprits are who train millions of children and adults to slip their brains into neutral and passively listen to the words of another? What devices require no effort to listen to? Right. Your television set, your computer, and your smartphone are wonderful devices that were supposed to be such powerful educational tools.

Sadly, and increasingly the case in our culture, parents have become culprits in contributing to inattention. This is the result of moms and dads not demanding and commanding a child’s attention when they are speaking to them. There are so many boys and girls trained by their clueless moms and dads to believe that listening to their parents talk to them is optional, with no painful consequences for not carefully attending to the quiet words of their mom and especially their dad.

What else and who else is responsible for more than 300 millions of Americans who are trained to turn their brains off while listening to just about anything, whether it be an ungodly soap opera, a sitcom, a mom or dad who refuses to reinforce attentiveness, or a “man of God” preaching what he claims is the Word of God from behind a Plexiglas pulpit.

The response is always the same on the unconscious level. You sit down, you get comfortable, the talking starts, and the hearing of the talking triggers your mind to fade out just enough to doze off for a while, or just enough to miss the message from God you absolutely needed to hear. Computer games, smartphones, and clueless parents employ different mechanisms, but with the same outcomes.

This is okay when you are watching television, because the amount of attention or intelligence required to watch the tube is almost zero. Computer games and smartphones mostly involve reacting without much thought. And so very many moms and dads speak to their children with the required attention and responsiveness absent. But such is not the case whenever the Word of God is preached. When God’s Word is being declared, you *must* pay attention with everything you have. Preaching is the means of grace leading to salvation, according to First Corinthians 1.18 and 21. This is why godly and mature parents are so determined to train their children to listen whenever they speak, and then to respond immediately.

Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to read the Bible when you are tired or sleepy? The reason it is so hard is that you must *actively* attend to the matter of reading the Bible for it to benefit you. The same is true with Scriptural Bible preaching. For you, for me, for your child, or for anyone, to benefit from the preaching of God’s Word, especially a Gospel sermon, you **must** be an active listener. The keyword here is **active**. Only when

¹ I urge you to watch <https://youtube.com/shorts/cYVtFV0b1mY?si=0ngWtKXnrzJN7FWp>

you *actively* listen to the preaching, only when you consciously put forth the effort required to listen to the sermon properly, will you get anything out of it.

As an aside, let me mention an additional problem that has come to light. Sometimes someone will hear me say something that jars him so much that he stops listening to the sermon entirely and focuses all his attention on that one jarring comment. For another individual, it will be a word he does not understand or has never heard before. That person will stop listening because he does not understand a single word, not realizing that I always define the words I use and show how they are used, so my audience will grasp their meaning. Therefore, it is not helpful to stop listening, whatever the reason. Do not fixate on a single word or one comment that jars you. Consciously decide to take in the whole sermon.

Only when you realize that you must *participate* in a sermon, both mentally and vocally, will God's Word really begin to grab hold of your life, and will the Spirit of God really start to use the truth in your life.² If that point in time ever comes, you will no longer fall asleep in Church, you will no longer hit or miss in your Church attendance, and you will no longer skip Bible study. Why? Because you *must* hear God's message for you from God's Word. If you do not, all is lost.

Also, something happens with people's parenting when moms and dads actually listen to sermons. There comes a time when parents become so concerned about their children's conversion that they begin to quiz them after Church, either on the way home in the car or at the dinner table, as mentioned before. "Tommy, what was the title of the preacher's message today?" "Jenny, what were the main ideas of the pastor's sermon this morning?" "Sally, what did the preacher tell folks to do today?" "Have you ever done that?" "Would you like to do that?" "Sam, how could you sit there and not know the one thing the preacher said was the most common mistake folks make in that area?"

Let me reiterate what I mentioned a few moments ago: if a lost person does not understand the sermon, he will not be saved. There is no way he will ever understand the preacher's sermons unless he puts forth the necessary effort to pay attention. Daydream during sermons, and you will go to Hell. Pay attention, and you just might be saved.

Do you understand now why the gentle parenting that does not demand and command children's attention is a soul-damning approach to child rearing? If your children are not *required* to look at you, listen to you, and immediately obey you when you talk to them, how can you expect them to look, listen, and respond to a teacher or preacher? It is not left to your child to decide whether or not he will look at you, listen to you, and immediately obey you. That is on you as a parent.

"Well, I think I can be saved on my own." Do you? What do you do with Acts 8.30-31, where Philip said to the eunuch, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" The eunuch responded, "How can I, except some man should guide me?" No, God most usually uses men to reach men. The men God usually uses to reach men are those who preach.

So, you say, "Okay, preacher, if active listening is what is required to get the most out of an entire sermon, since I am here and do not want to waste the time I am investing in my attendance, how do I go about becoming an active listener?" I am glad you asked that question, because in Acts 10.33 we see a beautiful example of an active listener in the person of a Roman centurion named Cornelius.

I invite you to stand to read that verse with me:

"Immediately therefore I sent to thee; and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

² Read "Amen!" for instruction in Scripturally participating in a sermon's delivery at <https://www.classicalbaptist.press/pamphlets>.

Understand that this passage does not give the mechanics of proper listening, but it does suggest the proper *attitudes* that lead to appropriate listening. We see nothing here about taking notes, about the correct posture when sitting, about the adequate amount of sleep, about going to the bathroom *before* the service begins, and the right kind of food that will help you stay awake and attentive.

There is nothing said here about not sitting next to distracting people who want to talk or make cute comments at inopportune times. I have seen parents distract their unsaved children during Gospel sermons. Such things certainly need attending to, but they are not mentioned here. Such things are far more likely to take care of themselves, you see, when the listener's attitude is right.

If you will imitate Cornelius' attitude, and it is God's will that you do just that, you will hurdle the greatest of obstacles that stand in your way of properly listening to Gospel sermons. And those Gospel sermons may be used by God to save your wretched soul.

Remember, James wrote, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth," James 1.18. So, God uses the Bible to bring Christ to sinners and to bring sinners to Christ. However, do not forget First Corinthians 1.21: "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." Thus, we see that God uses the Bible, specifically the Bible preached to sinners, to bring those sinners to Christ.

Do you want to serve God?

Do you want to learn the Word of God?

Do you want to become a more faithful servant of Christ?

Do you want to be saved?

Then pay close attention to what I say as I set before you three attitudes that will enable you to become a good listener when God's Word is preached.

First, YOU *MUST* HAVE THE ATTITUDE OF EAGERNESS

This attitude that makes for better listeners is seen in Cornelius' own words. Notice his reaction to God's command to fetch Peter, recorded earlier in the chapter, so that he might be taught the things of God. He described his response to Peter in these words:

"Immediately therefore I sent to thee."

Does that tell you anything? It should. It tells you that Cornelius wanted to know what God had for him through Peter's ministry, and he wanted to know *right now*. If you ever expect to get anything out of the preaching of God's Word, then you need to discard the notion that listening to sermons is a chore, or that you are doing God a favor by being in the Church house. What lack of judgment and absence of wisdom is displayed by that individual who shuns those occasions when the Word of God is preached, or who does not magnify the importance of the preaching of the Gospel to his own family by his inattention or failure to attend. Although our Church's music director knows that I like good music to lead into my preaching, as a means of stimulating interest and to focus your attention on the preaching, do not think that the presence or the absence of soul-stirring music in any way mitigates your responsibility to prepare yourself for the preaching of God's Word. People need to understand that it is a privilege to hear sermons from the Bible, even if I happen to be the preacher. The vital aspect of this whole matter is God's Word. Oh, that the Spirit of God would apply God's Word to the hearts of sinners through preaching.

Here are some good reasons why you should be eager to hear sermons.

Probably the most noticeable thing that happens when the Bible is preached is that men and women can be saved. If you want to be around when souls are being saved, come and hear preaching. A man would have to be

as spiritually cold as ice not to want to participate in something God uses to bring sinners to Christ. Is that not right?

Next, Bible preaching is God's preeminent way for Christians to be taught the Word of God. Some of you may think it's the Bible study session where Christians are taught the Bible, but let me share something with you. In 2020, the Sunday School ministry celebrated its 240th birthday. Do you realize what that means? It means that for more than 1780 years, the *preaching* of God's Word was the primary means of teaching it. I am not demeaning the Sunday School or Bible lessons by any means. I am simply seeking to exalt the *preaching* of God's Word, which is not the same as teaching.

I aim to shed Scriptural light on the place of preaching in your life. In Ephesians 4.11, Paul names four ministries of gifted men given to the Church for the purpose of maturing its members in the faith and teaching them the Word of God. Those men are apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. They are all, or should be, preachers. Are you eager to learn God's Word and then to live it? Then you ought to be keen to hear God's Word preached.

My final reason for being eager to hear a sermon is that in a sermon, you can listen to Christ glorified in a way not usually found anywhere else. Some examples:

When painting a verbal picture of the salvation which can be found only in Christ, can words be found to express the uniqueness of Jesus Christ any better than these words preached?

“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved,”

Acts 4.12. I do not think so.

Or when lifting our glorious Savior in the eyes of folks with these words, and crying out for men to humble themselves before Him?

- 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.
- 9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:
- 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth;
- 11 And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father,

Philippians 2.8-11. Again, I do not think there is a better way of communicating this truth.

Or when convincing folks from liturgical religions of Christ's exclusive role as mediator between God and men with these words?

- 5 For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;
- 6 Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time,”

First Timothy 2.5-6. Is this better communicated by teaching? I do not think so.

I do not know about you, but I am eager to hear God's Word properly preached, because when it is preached adequately through the power of the Holy Ghost, men are saved, Christians are taught, and Christ is glorified in a way unparalleled by other means. That is not done with half-wit homilies, doctrineless devotions, or timid teaching. Only through strong Bible preaching does God wonderfully bless in this way.

The prophets were preachers.

The Savior was a preacher.

Paul was a preacher.

Peter was a preacher.

Tyndale was a preacher.
Luther was a preacher.
Calvin was a preacher.
Knox was a preacher.
Wesley was a preacher.
Whitefield was a preacher.
Nettleton was a preacher.
Carey was a preacher.
Spurgeon was a preacher.
Lloyd-Jones was a preacher.
Samuel Rai is a preacher.

To listen properly to a sermon from God's Word, you must have an eagerness, a hungering if you will, for Bible preaching. That is what Cornelius had. That is what you *need*. If you do not have that attitude, you should set out to cultivate it.

Second, YOU *MUST* HAVE THE ATTITUDE OF APPRECIATION

Cornelius appreciated Peter coming to deliver God's Word to him. This is again seen in his own words: "and thou hast well done that thou art come." "I'm glad you came, preacher." Cornelius understood that Peter was a man sent from God with divine truth to declare to him. At first, Cornelius attempted to show Peter extreme reverence, but Peter would have none of it. Peter was not self-deluded. He knew he was, after all, only a man, and not someone who would sit on some throne, wearing white silk, and expect you to kiss his ring or anything. Cornelius still appreciated Peter's ministry, even after it was clearly communicated that the preacher was only a sinner saved by grace, just like he was. He was a sinner called by God and consecrated to the glorious Gospel ministry.

So, Cornelius had definite reasons for appreciating Peter's ministry of preaching divine truth. You folks today have those same reasons, and more. Preachers ought to be appreciated because they are Christ's gift to His assemblies (Ephesians 4.8 and 11). When the Lord gives a gift, you should appreciate it. There is nothing more disconcerting to me than ingratitude. Too many churchgoers are ingrates with regard to their pastor. Too many do not appreciate what God seeks to do in their lives through the ministry of their pastor, and in the lives of their children.

Second, preachers should be appreciated for protecting the flock. Here is what Paul told the preachers from Ephesus:

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood,"

Acts 20.28.

Examine the Old and New Testaments. Take note of God's means of protection for His people then and now. There is a difference. **Then**, God used the angelic host to protect His chosen people. **Now**, God has seen fit to use God-called men to defend His people from supernatural attack and from divisive elements who would rip Churches asunder. You ought to appreciate the preacher for the protection he provides for your life, much of it coming through his sermonizing.

Third, preachers ought to be appreciated because your appreciation of the preacher helps to prepare you to receive his message from the Book. You will be more receptive, barriers and resistance to truth will be reduced, if you genuinely appreciate the preacher's role in God's plan for your life. Cornelius had reason to appreciate

the preacher God had sent to him, and I know that it may sound self-serving to say that you do, too. Your appreciation for a preacher's personal commitment to doing that is beneficial for you.

By the way, many of you are wonderfully appreciative as I preach. In that respect, I am not complaining at all. However, others have been obviously less appreciative than they could be; not of me, but unappreciative of God's provision for their spiritual well-being. Occasionally, as one young man once told me, parents completely undermine a preacher's effectiveness when they express to their children the opinion that the pastor's preaching is ineffective in bringing their children to Christ. The children will listen to what is preached after hearing a mom or a dad say that? Have the attitude of eagerness. Have also the attitude of appreciation.

Finally, YOU *MUST* HAVE THE ATTITUDE OF UNDERSTANDING

Reread his words:

"Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

Cornelius understood that God had somehow chosen to communicate certain truths through the life of another man to him, and that, for those truths, he would be held responsible by God.

I am not trying to imply that Peter occupied any mediatorial role, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. We who read our Bibles and study them with discernment realize that no man or woman stands between you and Christ in that respect. No mere human mediator is needed or is competent. For one thing, the Lord Jesus Himself is the sole mediator between you and God, First Timothy 2.5:

"For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

He is unique in this respect. There is no one else like Him.

Secondly, all believers are now priests, according to First Peter 2.9:

"But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

Since I am a priest, why do I need a priest?

What Cornelius understood, instead, was that God had chosen to use men with the Gospel to reach people, to use men with the Bible to teach people. And though these men are instruments in God's hands, it is you who will stand before God someday, responsible to Him for the truth that has been given to you by such men as me. Understand that.

Three attitudes that Cornelius had helped him to be a good listener. *Eagerness*, which naturally reflected his emotional, intellectual, and spiritual hunger to know God's will for his life. *Appreciation* of God's servant as the channel by which much of God's will for his life would be made known to him. *Understanding* of his responsibility before God to be obedient to that portion of God's will that was declared through the preacher's ministry.

Do you know how to listen to a sermon? Does your family? Do you prepare yourself for Church, and do you prepare your family by cultivating their eagerness, appreciation, and understanding? Are you training your children to look at you, listen to you, and respond to you when speaking to them? This prepares them for the preaching of God's Word.

Are you an unconverted person? If you are, you had better be eager, you had better be appreciative, and you had better understand that God has chosen men to guide you to Christ. Are you eager to avoid Hellfire? If not, there is something seriously wrong with you.

Prepare yourself in this way before you come to the Church house. If you have children, prepare them as best you can before you come to Church next. Pray as well that God will bless you through His preachers. Then cultivate an eagerness to see these prayers answered. Stir your excitement about Gospel preaching. Parents? If you are excited about Gospel preaching, your kids will be, too.

Next, cultivate appreciation for those who minister to you. How can I be a normal man and not be especially concerned for the spiritual welfare of someone who I know appreciates my ministry? How can I not be particularly careful to remember that person in prayer? As well, do you not think the Savior is pleased when you appreciate the gifted man He has given to you?

Finally, ask yourself what you are responsible for doing at the conclusion of the sermons delivered to you. Understand that you are accountable to God for the message from His Word to you. People who have all three of these attitudes (eagerness, appreciation, and understanding) and apply them are the people who end up being saved, who I see growing in grace, and who seem to grow in spiritual stature. It is such people as these that God places His hand on to bless.

I have never in my life seen a sinner come to Christ who was not eager during the preaching of the Gospel, who was not appreciative to me or whoever was preaching the message from God's Word, and who did not understand that he had better get it, better get it right, and better get it soon, or he was lost forever.