

What Makes a Good Sermon Listener?

Consider Carefully How You Listen

Introduction

Why do we need this? Isn't listening to a sermon just like watching TV?

A Lamp Under a Jar

16 "No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. 17 For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. 18 Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away." Luke 8:16-18 (ESV)

Five points on taking care how you hear. Your life depends on it!

1. Someone who checks that the preacher says what the passage says

○ Who's your preacher?

At RCF, he meets the biblical mandate

...above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ... not be a recent convert, ... he must be well thought of by outsiders (1 Timothy 3:2-7 ESV)

...above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:5-9 ESV)

...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; [3] not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2-3 ESV)

Believes in our guiding principles

Believes in the Statement of Faith, subscribes to the Relational Commitments, and agrees to be governed by the constitution and bylaws of this church by signing the membership agreement.

Degreed and experienced

...pastor must possess, as a minimum, a four-year bachelor's degree, preferably from a Bible college or seminary; and have a minimum of 5 years ministry experience, preferably 2 years as a lead pastor.

○ Does the preaching and passage align?

Where did he get that from?

Focus is on content, not how well it's presented.

○ Does it follow good hermeneutics (principles of interpretation)?

From the RCF Constitution and Bylaws, Article IV – Core versus Secondary Beliefs

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- **Scripture interprets Scripture (the analogy of faith)** – no interpretation of a portion of Scripture can be in conflict with what is clearly taught in other portions of Scripture. This principle guards against exaggerating one portion of Scripture while ignoring other portions. Some corollaries to this principle include
 - Interpret implicit passages in the light of explicit passages.
 - Interpret unclear passages in the light of clear passage.
 - Interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament.
- **Interpret according to the literal sense** – interpret according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax, genre, and context. This principle restrains us from imaginative interpretations and requires close examination of the literary forms of Scripture.
- **Grammatical-Historical interpretation** – this is closely related to literal sense but focuses on the grammatical constructs and historical contexts of Scripture. Grammatical structure determines whether a specific passage should be considered a question (interrogative), command (imperative), or declarative (indicative). This principle seeks the original meaning of the text in order to prevent reading into Scripture our own thoughts from the present.
- **Does it follow 2 Tim 4:1-5?**

Does it teach (what we ought to believe), does it rebuke (what we ought not to believe), does it correct (how we ought not to behave), and does it train in righteousness (how we ought to behave)?
- **Practice**
 - Read the passage in advance of the sermon
 - Listen carefully when it is read.
 - What do you think is the main point of the passage? The preacher may signal this by repetition of something important, or being in the punchline, or emphasizing it the theme that runs throughout the sermon. Is the main thrust of the sermon the same as the main point of the passage?
 - Are there any surprises in the passage?
 - Who was the passage originally written/spoken to?
 - Why do think the Bible writer wrote this passage? What is the passage intended to achieve in its hearers?
 - Pray as Martin Luther prayed: “Lord, teach me, teach me, teach me.” Give me ears to hear.

2. Someone who shows up and hears the sermon in church

○ Assemble the people

Physical, not virtual, coming together of the local church. Jesus set the standard.

This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. (Acts 7:38 ESV)

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The Greek word for congregation is *ekklēsia*, the characteristic NT word for "church," and it provides a comparison between Moses' presence with the Israelites and Christ's presence in the church. The word refers to an assembled group.

...to be shaped together

how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so. ' (Deut 4:10 ESV)

○ **Accountable to one another**

Less likely to "drift" when listening with my brothers and sisters; they're watching!

When together, you know what message I've heard and I know what message you've heard. A little easier to respond the way I know I need to because you've heard it too.

Listen together, respond together. Bible is mostly addressed to people of God together.

How should we talk about the sermon after the meeting? Were we challenged, encouraged, or need greater understanding?

Make it priority to be there to hear the Word of God, and to encourage others to come with us. By our sin nature we won't want to hear the Word of God corporately because it's much too uncomfortable.

○ **Practice**

- Keep count for six months or a year of how many weeks you are in your own local church to hear the sermon. Make notes of different reasons why you are not there.
- Examine the results. If you find you're away more than you realized, and more than you ought to be, take some action to correct the situation. Don't stay up late on Saturday. Return from vacation on a Saturday, or earlier if you need a day to recuperate. Plan personal events so Sundays are free.
- Be aware of others in your local church as you listen to the sermon. Talk to them afterwards, about how we should respond as individuals and how the passage should shape the church.
- Pray often for the work of God's Spirit to shape you and the church as the body of Christ.

3. Someone who expects God to speak

- **The preacher has God's authority, when Bible is preached accurately and prayerfully**
- Jesus governs His Church by the Scripture preached, not just read.

23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for

"All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

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*The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
25 but the word of the Lord remains forever."*

And this word is the good news that was preached to you. 1 Peter 1:23-25 (ESV)

- Paul's thankfulness that the Thessalonians heard the good news of Jesus, not as the word of men, but as the word of God.

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." 4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. Acts 17:1-4 (ESV)

13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. 1 Thes 2:13 (ESV)

There's an important difference between preaching and reading.

- **A warning: when we hear the voice of the preacher, it is not always true that we hear the voice of God**

The preacher's authority is a borrowed authority, based on elder qualifications we mentioned earlier, and his faithfulness to the Word. His authority is not because he is a gifted teacher, eloquent, ordained, has titles, degrees or qualifications, or is recognized by churches or denominations.

When the preacher faithfully teaches the Bible, we are to listen to the preacher's voice as the voice of God Himself.

- **Nothing casual about listening to God**

Ought to be a reverent hush as the Bible is preached. Consider Ezra preaching to the people:

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. Nehemiah 8:5 (ESV)

Distracting physical actions and a distracted mental state IS irreverence! Don't miss God's goodness and His glory!

- **Nothing instinctive about hearing preaching as the voice of God**

Our natural sinful reaction is take it as the voice of people. Holy Spirit opens our ears receive it as the voice of God. Pray for Him to do this in us.

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○ Practice

- Look up next Sunday's Bible passage and read it during the week.
- Pray for next Sunday's preacher in the middle of the week.
- Pray that by the Holy Spirit God will grow you in a heartfelt expectation that God will speak to you as His word is preached and to give you ears to hear.
- Come to the sermon rested and ready to pay close attention.
- Deliberately quiet your mind and pray, "Lord, speak to me, I am listening."

4. Someone who admits God knows better

- **Come humbly and bow before the teaching of God's word, or ignore it and be "comfortable"**

I come to the Bible as a thoroughly messed up person, unable to think straight, speak right, or act as I ought. I must expect the Bible to call me to repentance and not to reassure me that I'm ok. It will never make comfortable or complacent in my sin.

Paul warned Timothy that people will not put up with sound (health-giving) doctrine, to the degree of gathering around them a great number of teachers to say what they wanted to hear. Comfortable doctrine makes me feel good about myself; it doesn't hurt. Health-giving doctrine hurts.

Faithful bible teaching will always cause offence. The voice of God spoken by a faithful Bible teacher will cut to the core of my being (*Heb 4:12-13 (ESV)*)

It will challenge me to 'get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted' in me. And I mustn't expect to like it; I may even be insulted, like one who listened to Jesus:

One of the lawyers answered him, "Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also." Luke 11:45 (ESV)

It is very hard to get me to understand and accept the teaching of the Bible when my comfort, my lifestyle, my complacency and my selfishness all depend on my not understanding and accepting it.

Our wicked hearts have more than one way to evade the challenge. One simple way is to say "the Bible is wrong, I don't agree with it, and that's that." The more common way in Christian circles is to find a clever way to reinterpret the Bible so that I can persuade myself that, although it looks as if it challenges me, in fact it doesn't. This preserves my impression of piety while safeguarding my rebellion against God.

To listen humbly is to admit that the Bible is right and I am wrong, that God is God and I am not, and I need to change.

On our own we will never bow humbly before the voice of God. By nature we always rebel. We need to pray for the gracious work of the Holy Spirit to humble our proud hearts.

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○ Practice

- Which parts of this week's preached Bible passage challenge your beliefs or lifestyle?
- Does the passage clearly teach these things?
- Pray for the Holy Spirit to enable you to submit to what the Bible clearly says, and help you to change.

5. Someone who does what the Bible says, today, and rejoices

○ Where's the fruit?

The purpose of sermons is to make us more Christ-like to God's glory. We are to be those who:

... hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. Luke 8:15 (ESV) where the fruit is Christlike character.

○ I'm bored! Entertain me!

We mustn't expect sermons to entertain us. We live in a culture of entertainment; we can find amusement at the press of a remote control button, a click of a mouse, or the pull of game controller trigger. One reason some people have stopped coming to listen to sermons, if they come for entertainment, is they can find better entertainment elsewhere.

But some will listen for the entertainment factor, and the Bible is not silent on this. Herod enjoyed listening to John the Baptist preach, even though John condemned John's wrong marriage.

for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Mark 6:20 (ESV)

There was a time when people loved coming to hear Ezekiel preach; it was as entertaining as listening to a popular love song:

And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this comes—and come it will! — then they will know that a prophet has been among them." Ezekiel 33:32-33 (ESV)

We see this today in Christian sub-culture of celebrity preachers.

Remember, good preaching will teach (what we ought to believe), rebuke (what we ought not to believe), correct (how we ought not to behave), and train in righteousness (how we ought to behave) (2 Tim 4:1-5)

○ Why do today what I can put off until tomorrow?

Every sermon is urgent. Moses' last recorded sermon: *See, I have set before you **today** life and good, death and evil. Deut 30:15 (ESV)*

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And the psalmist: **Today**, *if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, Psalm 95:7,8 (ESV)*. The letter to the Hebrews takes this verse from Psalm 95 as its text for a strong word about urgency: *But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Heb 3:13 (ESV)*

Every time we hear the word of God preached, we must respond today by a turning of the heart away from sin (repentance) and towards Jesus in trust (faith). It’s not that we become Christians again day by day; that is not necessary. God has already implanted His word in those He’s redeemed, but we still need to respond.

Every time we listen to a sermon, the devil will whisper in our ear: “That was good stuff. Why not do something about it tomorrow?” And we instinctively want to agree, because tomorrow never comes. To hear a sermon and not respond is worse than not hearing it at all; it makes us more guilty than we were before. *If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. John 15:22 (ESV)*

So when the devil whispers, “Why not respond tomorrow?” we must reply, “No, today as I have heard His voice, I will not harden my heart.”

Of course, we cannot do this unless God works in us. If we are to obey today, we must cry out to God work in us today.

○ I am an island

On our own we cannot obey. We are slaves to sin, unable to help ourselves. We cannot even repent without God working repentance in us. *God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 2 Tim 2:25 (ESV)*. It is God who opens our hearts to respond to his message-- We need to pray that he does this week by week to his truth.

○ Practice

- After this week’s sermon, write down all the ways you wish that other people would obey that teaching. Don’t hold back. When you’ve written it all down, tear it up.
- Now, write down as specifically and precisely as you can some action you need to take to obey this Bible passage. Ask yourself how the preached passage shows you an attitude of what you believe, shouldn’t believe, words, or actions that need to change. Whatever it is, write it down.
- In a week’s time, and then in a month’s time, look at what you’ve written and ask yourself whether the Bible passage made any difference to you.
- Pray for God to work obedience in you to His word. Urgently pray for His grace to enable you to repent.
- Ask yourself in what way the passage encourages you to trust in God and in Christ afresh. Then resolve urgently to put that fresh trust into your life as God helps you.

(Ash, 2009, pp. 2-23)

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Summary

Review the five points to becoming a good sermon listener:

For the Practices, pick your top one or two from one or two of the five points and apply to your life. Please don't create an enormous list that in the end you won't be able to do. Here effective with a few is better and ineffective with a lot.

If none of these struck you, come one of the elders and we'll help you out!

Share the ones you picked with your trusted accountability person. If you don't have one of those, see one of the elders!

7 suggestions for encouraging good preaching (translated—encourage your preachers!):

1. **Pray for the preachers.** Pray specifically that they will work hard at the at the Bible passages (1 Tim 5:17) and preach them faithfully, passionately, and in a way that engages with the listeners.
2. From time to time, **tell the preachers you are praying for them** and looking forward to the sermon.
3. **Be there.** You may be surprised what an encouragement it is just to have you there!
4. **Thank them** afterwards for what you learned. Don't flatter or give vague comments about how good it was (or wasn't). Try to be specific and focus on the biblical content rather than the stories or illustrations. Tell them if there was something in particular that you found helpful.
5. Be prepared to be **constructively and supportively critical.** Ask the preachers to help you see where they got a particular point from a passage.
6. **Relate to your preachers** as one human being to other human beings. Remember that the best sermon recording by a remote preaching hero is no substitute for the word of God preached by a human being face to face with other human beings in the context of trust and love.
7. Be on the lookout for **gifts of preaching** and teaching in the church, and be ready to suggest they develop these gifts and get further training. Mention these ideas to your church pastoral leadership.
(Ash, 2009, p. 30)

Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away." Luke 8:18 (ESV)

References

Ash, C. (2009). *Listen Up! A Practical Guide to Listening to Sermons.* The Good Book Company, LTD.