

How To Listen To A Sermon

We go to great lengths to make certain that our minds are in the right place during the worship service. The song leader reminds us to focus more on the words than the music. A brother usually reads a passage or makes a few remarks before the Lord's Supper, lest we partake in an unworthy manner. For the collection, we are frequently reminded that the Lord loves a cheerful giver.

What about our responsibility toward the preaching? "Is anyone taught how to listen? How utterly amazing is the general assumption that the ability to listen well is a natural gift for which no training is required" (Mortimer Adler, *How to Speak, How to Listen*).

"And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul preached to them" (Acts 20:7). Half of our time (and more) in the worship service is spent listening to the preaching of the word of God. Perhaps we ought to spend some time training our ears to know how to hear.

How should you listen to a sermon?

With an open Bible. This is, in fact, the greatest responsibilities of the hearer. "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). The Bereans didn't just take the preacher's word for it and say, "If Paul and Silas believe it, it must be true." They "examined" what was said, a word used in the Jewish legal system to describe how they would investigate in court or evaluate carefully.

As a preacher, what matters most is not what I *think* or *say* about the word of God, but the word itself. And I certainly want my audience to examine my preaching to see whether these things are so. When Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos, "they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). They were listening with an open Bible. The word deserves as much.

With an attentive mind. Preparation is expected of the preacher. If I were to list all kinds of excuses each week for why I was not ready to speak, I'd be out of a job. But doesn't the preacher have the right to expect people to be prepared to listen with an alert mind? Remember those Bereans? They examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so, but only because they "received the word with great eagerness" (Acts 17:11). Let us restore such a willingness to our worship.

And even when we are prepared, distractions can keep us from giving our full attention to the matter at hand. When we're constantly getting up and down or coming in late, we may very well be keeping someone else from being able to listen with an attentive mind. Be aware.

With a receptive heart. The heart is the target of the sermon. When the people on Pentecost heard the preaching of Peter, "they were pierced to the heart" (Acts 2:38). That's exactly where Peter was aiming. That's where the Lord wants to reign. Not in shallow, crowded

soil, but that which is good and fertile and honest.

It's no wonder why James said we ought to receive the word implanted "with humility" (Jam. 1:21). When Jesus revealed to the disciples that one of them would betray Him, their response was, "Surely not I, Lord?" (Matt. 26:22). A good listener hears the word of God and asks, "Does this apply to me?" I'm afraid all too often we're ready to apply the preaching to person down the pew or across the auditorium. Start with your own heart.

With a willing life. You want to make the preacher's day? Don't just say, "Good lesson" or "Great job." Those are nice to hear for sure and are very encouraging. But the preacher knows he has used the word effectively when you tell him, "I needed that" or "That helped me." That tells you that not only was their Bible open, but their mind and heart were as well.

Are you willing to live what you learn? Paul told the church at Corinth, "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men" (2 Cor. 3:1-3). By seeing your life, let other people see a sermon that they too might come to know the Savior and receive the word implanted, which is able to save their soul.

The power of the preaching is not in any preacher. It is in the word that he proclaims. Don't listen to me. Listen to Him!

—Bubba Garner