



How to Listen to a Sermon

If you hear your first sermon at age 20, and you are a faithful church member for the rest of your life, you'll hear an average of 2,400 sermons in your lifetime. That's a lot of sermons!

In my experience, most people do not know how to listen to a sermon. I say that not mainly as a pastor, but as a listener myself. Where else in our culture – besides school – do we go to hear someone lecture for 45 minutes every week? In school, there's the threat of tests and pop quizzes to (sort of) keep our attention, but no such incentive exists in the church. Furthermore, what is a sermon? Is it merely one person's opinion about the topics raised in a Bible passage or is it something more? Finally, isn't the sermon rather antiquated anyway? Surely in an information age, when there's more knowledge at our fingertips than any previous generation could have imagined, wouldn't the 1,800 hours (2,400 sermons at 45 minutes each) be better spent in small group discussions about the Bible?

Before we tackle how to improve listening skills, allow me to briefly address what a sermon is. A biblical sermon, a sermon in which the main and supporting points are derived from the text of the Christian Scriptures and faithfully applied to the hearers, is not a human invention. Preachers preaching God's Word are God's primary strategy to reach God's world and mature God's people. Why? Because faith is a gift that comes by hearing the Bible (Romans 10:17) and the preached Word is a public portrayal of Christ crucified (Galatians 3:1). A biblical sermon then is much more than the whimsical talk of preachers: it's God speaking. If preachers are not claiming to speak on God's behalf they have no business speaking at all. This means preaching is divine communication, and divine communication ought never to be taken lightly.

Having established what a sermon is, most of the challenges to listen to sermons are already resolved. When we remember a biblical sermon is a good word from our great God, most of the time we'll want to listen and work at it.

Prepare – Good sermons address the heart. Before hearing a sermon, pray for a soft and open heart. Ask God to block out distractions. Confess all known sin. Pre-commit to obey.

Listen – Develop habits to remain an active listener. Take notes in your Bible or a Moleskin. Sit toward the front. Keep your Bible open to the passage being taught.

Think – Love God with your mind by thinking deeply about the sermon. Consider not only the theological truths being preached, but the implications and applications of it.

Ask – Is the preacher accurately teaching the passage? Is the tension between its truth and other passages being appropriately maintained?

Apply – God commands us to both hear and do (Matthew 6:24). Hearing good sermons without applying them is dangerous. Be sure to reflect on the passage in community. Sometimes the



application will be to change a way of thinking. Other times it will be to stop something or start something else. Regardless, sermons are for doing.



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