

The Acquired Skill of Listening

Preaching a sermon is an acquired skill, but so is listening to a sermon. This became evident to me in the past few weeks as I have had the privilege of sitting in the pew instead of standing in the pulpit. I may have lost some of the skills of listening to a sermon that I used to possess before I became a pastor.

There are three ways of listening to a sermon, and I will outline them here. The first should be avoided in all places except for a seminary preaching class, but the second and third should be adopted by us all, even those who are preaching.

The first is listening professionally. In preaching classes at seminary, we were all asked to prepare and preach sermons which we would preach in class to be evaluated by our fellow students. We were evaluated on sermon coherence (how the points hung together), delivery, length, and ability to engage our audience. This is called listening professionally, and it is necessary in preaching classes because the exercise helped us become better preachers. Professional evaluation is beneficial to us all: plumbers, teachers, and truck drivers all benefit from the careful evaluation by their peers. It's one of the ways we grow.

But it is not a helpful exercise when we are in church. Nevertheless, I find myself evaluating preachers and their sermons professionally when I sit in church, and I find lots of opportunity to be critical.

Of course, while a good method of delivery is important, in seminary we were taught that the content of the sermon is even more important. In one of my preaching classes a fellow student proved himself to be a very capable speaker. His delivery was smooth, clear, concise, and engaging, and the rest of us were all a little envious of his abilities. Sadly, after a closer evaluation, we discovered that his sermons were not closely based on the text he had chosen. In fact, his sermons, after being scrutinized for their biblical faithfulness, were found to be rather empty. Contrast him to a friend and colleague (who has now gone to glory), who I will call Fred (because that is his name). Fred was not a very dynamic speaker. In fact, some had labelled him as boring and tedious. I don't disagree with that evaluation, but Fred had one wonderful redeeming quality: if I listened carefully and kept engaged, I would always learn something more about the teachings of Scripture.

And that brings us to the second way of listening to a sermon: we must listen evaluatively. From time to time I read a conservative Roman Catholic blog, and I was impressed by the following quote in which a parishioner is speaking to his pastor (priest): *"If you don't pay attention to the Scriptures, then we don't have to pay attention to you because the only reason we're here listening to you is that we think you'll help us understand more deeply the word of God. So, if you don't help us understand the Word of God, we're tuning you out."*¹

¹ *The Catholic Thing, August 1, 2023*

When we listen to a sermon, we should always listen with one eye on the text, and if the sermon does not come from the text, we are not obligated to listen to it. Some of the best-known teachers of preaching advise that the theme of the text should become the theme of the sermon and the points of the text become the points of the sermon. This keeps the pastor from preaching his own ideas and forces him to preach only what God's Word says. In seminary preaching classes a sermon would fail if it was not derived directly from the text that was read.

When we listen to a sermon, we should always keep our eye on the text. One of the more controversial changes many churches have made is to project the words of the text onto the screen, enabling the congregation to read the text but to then forget about it as soon as the projector is turned off. This practice gives lots of opportunity for a pastor to deviate from the text without being detected (or to avoid parts of the text that don't fit his sermon). Those who have thought about the use of technology in the worship service have wondered if it is better that the text not be projected and instead the congregation use their own Bibles or the Bibles that have been provided for them and keep them open for the duration of the sermon. Further, when reading a text, the pastor and congregation should always be aware of the context, the material that immediately surrounds the text and that is possible only an open Bible. One time I heard a sermon in which the pastor read a text and then preached a sermon which was in direct contradiction to what followed in Scripture. Clearly, he had missed the point of the text.

Listening evaluatively means that we listen to the content of the message with one eye on the text to ensure that what is coming off the pulpit is truly from God's Word.

And that leads to the third way of listening: listening intentionally. If a sermon is not taken from Scripture, we are free to ignore it. Sometimes, of course a sermon that is not biblically based does have good advice, and we can take that advice to heart. I attended a church once in which the pastor talked at length about anger management, and he said some helpful things, but he didn't base his message in Scripture. It might have been a subject for a counselling session, but it really wasn't a sermon, and, in my educated opinion, should not have been delivered as one.

However, if a sermon is truly from God's Word, then we have an obligation to adopt what it says into our lives. This is not exactly the same as "application," which people seem to want. Rather, more often than not, Scripture, instead of calling us to a changed lifestyle, calls us to a changed way of thinking and a change of heart. In other words, Scripture shapes our minds and hearts first before it shapes our actions. Listening intentionally means that we enter into the sermon with the mindset that we will conform ourselves to the teachings of God's Word. Listening intentionally means that we come to the worship service with an attitude of humility, willing to be shaped by God the Holy Spirit as he teaches us God's will. If we listen with the attitude that God has something to say to our hearts, our minds, and our will, and if we are listening with submission, we are listening well.

Perhaps it is this last form of listening, listening intentionally, that is the most difficult. I think most of us can listen professionally, to one degree or another. (That was a boring sermon. His illustrations were really engaging.) We can learn to listen evaluatively, determining if a sermon is rooted in Scripture or not. Listening intentionally is the most challenging because we must put aside our own wills so that we can be conformed to the will of God. Most of us don't put aside our own wills easily.

For the past 5-6 weeks, I have been listening to sermons instead of preaching. I have listened professionally. That is easy for me. I have listened evaluatively. I am well-trained in that. The skill that I need to (re)acquire is to listen intentionally. But maybe I am not the only one.

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