LISTEN UP!

A practical guide to listening to sermons

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Why on earth do we need a book like this?

“What a silly subject!” you may say. After all, it would be pointless to write a booklet called *How to watch TV*. And listening to a sermon is even easier than watching TV, because I don’t have to master the remote control. All I have to do is sit, try to stay awake to the end, and then – hey, presto! – I’ve listened to the sermon. It’s something that is done to me (or even inflicted on me), not something that I take part in. I don’t need a booklet to tell me how. It’s no different from watching the news on TV!

Ah, but it’s not the same at all! After the parable of the sower, Jesus says: “Consider carefully how you listen” (Luke 8 v 18). He goes on to say that if we listen in one way, we will be “given more”; but if we listen in another way, even what we think we have will be taken away from us. The way we listen is a life-or-death business. It is possible to have ears that fail to hear (Mark 8 v 18), to be “ever hearing but never understanding” (Mark 4 v 12). Listening to sermons is a risky business: it can damage your health or take you closer to final rescue. What it won’t do is leave you unchanged.

There are books and courses to help people preach sermons (I run one!) but I’ve not read anything written in the last 200 years on how to listen to sermons. So we’re going to do what Jesus says and consider carefully how to listen. First we’ll consider seven positive ways to listen; then we’ll think about how to listen to bad sermons. And, finally, what we can do to get better sermons.

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1 The most recent guide I have come across is: “Directions: How to hear sermons” (in *Let Wisdom Judge*, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1959, pp188-190), by Charles Simeon, the Cambridge minister in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
Seven ingredients for healthy sermon listening

1. Expect God to speak

Adam couldn’t really be bothered with sermons. There were a number of things he liked about church, especially the friends he had made and the music (when the new music group were leading). But not the sermons.

He felt he had to put up with those because it would look a bit off if he walked out when the preacher started. They just seemed dull.

Faced with the entertainment choice between 24 and The Sermon, it was a no-brainer: 24 won, any day.

Beth was really looking forward to the sermon. Last Sunday she had gone up to the preacher and said: “I’m so looking forward to next Sunday – can’t wait”. He looked pleased, if a bit surprised. But Beth wasn’t trying to sweet talk him; she really did look forward to the sermon, with a sense of eager anticipation. She wondered what God was going to say to her. She felt as if someone had told her to expect a telephone call from the US President: all week she was, as it were, waiting by the phone. So when the sermon started she was paying close and eager attention.

Beth was right. And Adam was a fool. We are to listen to sermons expectantly because Jesus gives the authority of God Himself to the preacher who teaches the Bible accurately and prayerfully. Jesus governs His church by the written word of Scripture (which has been called His sceptre). The main way He does this is not by the written word being read, but by the written word being preached and taught. Of course, it is good when people who can read, do read and study the Bible; but it is vital that all people, without exception, hear the Bible preached.
When Peter tells Christians they have been born again “through the living and enduring word of God”, he explains that: “this is the word that was \textit{preached} to you” (1 Peter 1 v 23-25).

Paul thanked God that when the first Christians in Thessalonica heard the good news of Jesus (Acts 17 v 1-4), they “accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2 v 13). Of course, the words they heard were spoken by human preachers; but they recognised that these words were at the same time \textbf{the actual words of God}. And it is not just apostles like Paul who can speak like this; Peter says that: “If anyone speaks” (and the context is Bible teaching in church), “he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Peter 4 v 11).

\textbf{A word of warning}, however: it is not always true that when we hear the voice of a preacher, we hear the voice of God. The preacher’s authority is a borrowed authority; it’s not because they are gifted or eloquent that preachers have authority, nor because they may be ordained, or have titles, degrees or qualifications, or are recognised by churches or denominations.

However, \textbf{when the Bible is faithfully opened up}, we are to listen to the preacher’s voice as the voice of God Himself. The preacher stands in the great tradition of prophets and apostles who spoke the \textbf{word of God}. Unlike them, the Christian preacher cannot offer new or fresh ideas to add to the Bible. But like them, there is a borrowed authority to speak what God wants spoken. We ought to listen to this kind of sermon with the utmost seriousness.
There should be **nothing casual about our listening**, as if this were “just another sermon” or simply “what always happens at this point in our meetings”. When Ezra the preacher opened the written word to read and preach it, all the people stood up as a mark of respect and attentiveness (Nehemiah 8 v 5). In the same way, there ought to be a reverent hush as the Bible is read and preached in our meetings. Sometimes in sermons we will smile at ourselves and our foolishness (preachers do well from time to time to invite us to laugh at such things) but we will **never be light or flippant** about the voice of God.

Remember, we will not instinctively hear preaching as the voice of God. Our natural reaction is to take it simply as the voice of people. One of the wonderful things the **Spirit of God** does is to open our ears so that we receive it not just as the voice of people, but as the voice of God. We need to pray for Him to do this in us.

**PRACTICAL STEPS TO TAKE**

1. Look up next Sunday’s Bible passage and read it at home during the week.

2. Pray for next Sunday’s preacher in the middle of the week.

3. Pray often for yourself, that, by His Spirit, God will grow in you a heartfelt expectation that God Himself will speak to you as His word is preached.

4. If you can, try not to come to the sermon exhausted, but to come rested and ready to pay close attention.

5. Deliberately prepare your mind and heart before the sermon and say to yourself: “This is when God speaks to me”. Pray again: “Lord, speak to me, I am listening”.


Chloe and Dylan both understood the sermons. But their responses were very different. Chloe’s response was to try to find a way around it; Dylan’s was to bow before the teaching of God. You and I must not only take seriously the voice of God; we must bow the knee in submission when He speaks. We must come humbly to the preaching of God’s word.

But we don’t want to do that. We come to the Bible with all kinds of prejudices. We don’t come to the sermon as blank sheets, like a new page in a notebook. On the contrary, we come to the sermon with our lives already scribbled over. We come believing certain things to be reasonable, and others to be incredible. We come accepting that some kinds of behaviour are normal and acceptable, whereas others are not. For the most part, we don’t get these prior beliefs and assumptions from the Bible; we get them from our culture, from the places where
our culture tells us what is normal, believable and acceptable. For example, from soap operas (someone has called soaps the sermons of our society), or from our favourite blog, radio station, Facebook friendship group or magazine. And we get these beliefs from our own histories – from our parents, friends and experiences. So, what we really want is for the Bible to tell us we’re ok, what we’ve done is ok, and what we believe is ok.

But it isn’t ok. It’s not at all ok. Far from coming to the Bible as a clean sheet, I come to the Bible as a thoroughly messed-up person, unable to think straight, speak right or act as I ought. That means I must expect the Bible to call me to repentance and not to reassure me that I’m ok. It will never make me comfortable or complacent in my sin.

When Timothy had to lead the church (or churches) in Ephesus, Paul warned him that people “will not put up with sound (ie: health-giving) doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4 v 3). Comfortable doctrine makes me feel good about myself; it doesn’t hurt. But health-giving doctrine does hurt.

This is one reason why faithful Bible teaching isn’t more common in churches, because faithful Bible teaching will always cause offence. Sermons about the right way to do liturgy, or about church government, or about current affairs, or about the terrible sins of other people, or about the fascination of religions and philosophies will not upset me.

But the voice of God spoken by a faithful Bible teacher will get under
my skin. It will cut to the core of my being (Hebrews 4 v 12, 13). 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 (James 1 v 21). And I mustn’t expect to like it. Sometimes I may even feel insulted. While Jesus was preaching against the Pharisees, a religious teacher (presumably not a Pharisee) interrupted Him to say: “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also” (Luke 11 v 45). He listened to Jesus’ sermon; he understood it perfectly; and he didn’t like it at all. “I don’t like biblical preaching; I find it offensive,” you might think. Quite so; it is.

It’s been said that it’s very hard to get a person to understand and accept something when their salary depends on their not understanding and accepting it. In the same way, 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.

To listen humbly is to be realistic about this. What is more, it is to recognise that there is more than one way to evade the challenge of the Bible. The simple way is just to say: “The Bible is wrong, I don’t agree with it, and that’s all there is to say”. But the more common way in Christian circles (where we hesitate to be quite so blunt and honest in our rejection of the voice of God) is to find a clever way to reinterpret the Bible so that I can persuade myself that, although I must admit it looks as if it challenges me, in fact it doesn’t. This preserves my impression of piety while safeguarding my rebellion against God. Beware the voice that says: “Yes, I know Christian people of past centuries have consistently taken this passage at its face value, but now we know better and can see that it doesn’t fit quite comfortably with political correctness or with western materialism (or whatever)”. To listen humbly is to admit that the Bible is right and I am wrong, that God is God 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 Spirit of God to humble our proud hearts.
PRACTICAL STEPS TO TAKE

1. Which parts of this week’s preached Bible passage challenge your beliefs or lifestyle?

2. Does the passage clearly teach these things?

3. Pray for the work of God’s Spirit to enable you to submit to what the Bible clearly says, and to help you to change.

3. Check the preacher says what the passage says

For **Finley**, the sermon is something that just washes over him, a kind of merging of his stream-of-consciousness with the preacher’s stream-of-consciousness. If it’s engaging, he enjoys the stories, the humour and the personality of the preacher. But he finds it a bit awkward when someone who hasn’t been there asks him afterwards what the preacher said. Or, if the preacher is very clear, he may be able to tell you what the preacher said. But he’ll be a bit stuck if you ask him what the Bible passage was, and how the sermon related to the passage.

**Ellie** is a great thinker. She reads the passage before Sunday comes, and then, as the passage is being read in church, already she is beginning to wonder what the preacher is going to say. As the preacher speaks, she is mentally trying to sort out how the preacher gets the sermon from the passage. She’s the kind of (sometimes rather tiresome) person who will go up to the preacher afterwards and actually ask them where in the passage their second point came from. Preachers aren’t used to that!

Finley is lazy; Ellie is wise. Listening ought to be an activity rather than a “passivity”. Unless we want to be brainwashed, we ought never to hear or watch anything without engaging our critical faculties. If that’s true for TV or a movie, how much more for sermons where the preacher claims the authority of God. We need to check that the preacher is actually using the only available authority, which is a borrowed authority that
only comes from teaching what the Bible passage teaches. So, we need to listen carefully to the passage and ask whether what the preacher says is what the passage says.

I was speaking to a friend called Mark about his church, where the preachers would say all sorts of fanciful things. They would start with the Bible, but before long they were flying around all over the place. Mark had only recently grasped the need to listen actively. I asked him: “How is church going?” He replied: “You’ve ruined it for me! Previously, I just accepted what the preachers said. But now I keep looking at my Bible as they talk and asking myself: ‘Where did he get that from?’” It’s a good question: where did he get that from? If preachers can show they got it from the Bible, then I must humbly submit to the authority of the word of God. But if not, then it’s just the opinion of one human being against another.

Some people find it helpful to have paper and pen and take notes. This focuses them on what precisely the preacher is saying and helps them to see whether or not it comes from the passage. Others find note-taking a distraction and prefer to devote their energies to listening. Whatever strategy you use, always have in mind the question: where did the preacher get that from? We are not asking how well or badly the preacher preached, in terms of communication skills. We are asking whether the message of the sermon was unpacking and pressing home to us the message of the passage.

It’s worth saying that it’s not only academic people who can listen actively like this. Some people have experience of reading and studying books, and some of those skills may come in handy with the Bible. But anyone can understand enough of the Bible, when it is clearly read and taught in a language they understand, to be able to see at least roughly whether
the preacher is building the sermon from the passage, or just using the passage as a springboard for saying what they wanted to say anyway.

It is the work of God, by His Spirit, to open our minds so that we listen clearly, think clearly, and discern clearly whether a sermon is true to the Bible. By nature we cannot think straight. So again we need to pray for His work in us.

**PRACTICAL STEPS TO TAKE**

1. Read the passage or listen carefully when it is read.

2. What do you think is the main point of the passage? This may be signalled by repetition of something important, or by being in the punchline (for example, of a parable), or by being the theme that runs through the passage. Is the main thrust of the sermon the same as the main point of the passage?

3. Are there any surprises in the passage, ie: things the Bible says that we wouldn’t expect it to say, or that it says in ways we wouldn’t expect it to say them?

4. Who was the passage originally written or spoken to? Are we in the same situation as them? In particular, if they were before Christ, we need to be careful what parallels we draw; we can’t simply apply it straight to ourselves. After all, it wasn’t written to us. It was written for us (for our benefit) but not directly to us.

5. Why do you think the Bible writer wrote this passage? What is the passage intended to achieve in its hearers?

6. Pray as Martin Luther used to pray: “Lord, teach me, teach me, teach me”.