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A Theology of Preaching, Part 4

Isaiah 55:10-11: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it."

What a wonderful promise. It means that God's word, when studied, proclaimed, or read has a certain predetermined end which God guarantees. While it is the preacher's job faithfully to proclaim and explain God's word, God will use the preached word in at least one of four ways:

Telos	Teaching	Sinful Inclination	Question
To Glorify Christ	Colossians 3:11; Romans 11:36; 2 Corinthians 1:20	To worship or give deference to self	How does this text encourage me to worship Christ?
To Strengthen or Engender Faith	John 20:30-31	To Trust Self	How does this text encourage me to rely upon Christ?
To Attack Moralism	Ezekiel 33:23-26	To Relate to God on the Basis of our Deeds	How does this text encourage me to relate to God by <i>grace</i> ?
To Exalt God	Ezekiel 33:27-29	To Bring God Down to our Level	How does this text encourage me to make much of God?
To Dissect our Lives and Refashion them in Christ's Image	Hebrews 4:12	To be entertained by God's Word	How does this text change my thinking, desiring, or doing?

We are going to add a fifth telos when it comes to our understanding of how God uses His word!

Now based on this you might think that you and I have little if no responsibility when it comes to the preached word. Preaching is something one man is called to do in a service and so that which he will be held accountable for. Yet other than enduring the time spent, I have little if no responsibility, for according to Isaiah 55 it is God who will bring about His perfect will when it comes to His word.

If that is your thinking, you couldn't be further from the truth. Yes, the preacher stands before God and will endure a stricter judgment as he proclaims God's word (cf. James 3:1). Yet there is a judgment upon everyone listening to a sermon. Did you get that? Sitting under the preaching of God's word brings with it responsibility and accountability from God Himself- which is the focus of our text today!

Zechariah 7:12: "And they made their hearts *like* flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts."

Hebrews 4:2, "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard."

And this brings us to the stewardship that in listening to the word of God preached. With Ezekiel's calling to preach, he had become all the rage amongst the exiles (v. 30). Speaking of these exiles he wrote:

Ezekiel 33:31a, "And they come to you as people come, and sit before you *as* My people, and hear your words..."

God/Ezekiel here is describing the activity that ought to occur when a child of God comes to church and sits beneath a pulpit. In this case, what was occurring was the genesis of the synagogue which was in full bloom when Christ came in His first advent. Regardless, notice the language, it is charged, "they come to you as people come." This is so beautiful. They were NOT coming as outwardly rebellious individuals or men and women of Baal (as so many did prior to the exile).

Speaking of the elders/leaders of God's people, some of who know doubt were among those flocking to hear Ezekiel preach:

Ezekiel 14:1-3, "Then some elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all?'"

Recall, the religion of Yahweh at this time was nothing more than a lucky charm. These elders were serving the Baals and yet, to cover their bases, they approached Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord. And so they came NOT "as people come," BUT as the Baalist might come. Tet such was NOT the case here; not at this time! The people gathering before Ezekiel had learned their lesson and so were coming before the prophet in humility with full intentionality, that is the idea the passage conveys! "They come to you as people come, and sit before you as My people" this is covenant language! The phrase, "as My people," references the covenant promise that "God would be their God and they would be His people" (Exodus 6:7; cf. Genesis 12:1-3). The language speaks of an intimacy and so communion.¹

The people of God at this time clearly had learned their lesson. Repentance had done its work and so now they were flocking to hear God's word preached "as the deer pants for the water brooks" (Psalms 42:1)! Furthermore, "they... sit before you as My people, and hear your words." In the Bible when it says that God "hears prayer" (1 John 5:14), that doesn't mean that He merely hears what is being spoken. Rather, it means that God understands the request, what was behind it, the heart of the petitioner, and so responds accordingly!

And so to say that God did NOT hear a prayer is to say that God rejected the prayer of the individual, as in the case of God's people when they had given themselves to sin. This is speaking to God's people at a time when they had absolutely no intention of serving the Lord:

Isaiah 59:1-2, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden *His* face from you, so that He does not hear."

God's people at this time flocked to the worship of the Lord and lifted up many prayers to God,

yet God is said “NOT to have heard them.” This does NOT mean that He did not know what they were praying (He heard their prayer in that sense). RATHER, it means that He rejected their prayers! Accordingly, when we read that God’s people sat at the feet of Ezekiel (as he began his preaching ministry) and “heard his words,” we understand by this that they came with full intention of receiving God’s word and treasuring it in their hearts.

What a beautiful sight this would have been after all that the worship of God had suffered the previous 250 years! Finally, after so long, God’s people learned their lesson, and now they were NOT coming as Baalists, but as ones who were “treasuring the word of God in their heart that they might not sin against God” (Psalms 119:11)! In the words of D. I. Block:

To a casual observer the response to Ezekiel’s ministry is impressive. V. 31a presents the exiles as disciples, eager to learn all they can from some great teacher. So they come in droves, crowding his house and sitting before him, eager to hear him. The scene exhibits all the signs of success. (Block, 1998, p. 266)

This would be that which would characterize God’s people during the intertestamental period! They became people of the book! Yet in spite of their new-found piety and zeal, there was a flaw in what God’s people were doing- a flaw that would characterize God’s people at the time of Christ (cf. Mark 7:6-8).

Ezekiel 33:31b, “And they come to you as people come, and sit before you *as My people*, and hear your words but they do not do them, for they do the lustful desires *expressed* by their mouth, *and* their heart goes after their gain.”

At first glance what is gloriously absent at this time is that God’s people were NOT going after the Baals! Clearly, they had learned their lesson! Yet in reality, all they had done was to exchange one false god for another- the latter being less obvious. The focus of Ezekiel 34 is NOT on generic shepherding situations, BUT a very specific one, in 585 BC, those Jews *already in exile* on account of the first two deportations were faced with a refugee problem of epic proportions.

Recall those who arrived in Babylon in the first two exiles were educated, powerful, wealthy, and the like. As such, they entered Babylon and gained back much of what they lost when they were taken from their home.² The exile of 586 BC was quite different. This was an exile of control by which the inhabitants of one region were moved to another region to squelch the urge to rebel (again, people tend not to die for a land that is not their own). As such in 585 BC the established, successful, and powerful Babylonian Jew was greeted with thousands upon thousands of Jewish brothers and sisters who were dirty, stinky, diseased, sick, hungry, weak, and dying. These war-torn survivors would have had need for food, clothing, covering, medicine, work, and the many other resources necessary to begin a new life. And do you know what these Babylonian Jews did? They turned a blind eye to their brethren!

Ezekiel 34:2, 4, “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel [as ‘shepherd’ was NOT a formal office, this would have referenced any and every one in a position of

authority, encouragement, or provision amongst God's people]. Prophecy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? [God gives us wealth, understanding, spiritual gifts, and the like to minister to one another! The position these Jews attained in exile was for the weak and hurting amongst God's people!! Yet what did they do? Skip down to...] 4 Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.'"

Do you see what was going on at the time of the writing of our text? The people of God who had flourished in exile, no doubt feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number and need of the Jewish refugees before them, turned a blind eye to their weak and hurting brethren. In fact, when pressed sorely by these vagabonds, they became harsh and bitter, and so "with force and severity they dominated them." Yet *THESE VERY SAME INDIVIDUALS* who were neglecting their brethren, now as humbled and renewed people, flocked to hear the word of God preached. You can just imagine how many hurting Jewish men, women, and children they passed in their haste to get to church and hear Ezekiel preach!

So do you see their flaw and therefore the call that rests on our lives as we hear a sermon? It is that we submit to a pulpit for more than a religious pick-me-up, encouragement, or inspiration. This was the flaw of the Jews seated before Ezekiel. They did NOT come to grow in their walks with God and so to submit to the word and will of their Lord! True

- They no longer were worshipping the Baals.
- They no longer were in outward rebellion against God. ****In fact...****
- They flocked to hear God's word preached (you can imagine that they even took notes, put them in binders, and placed them on their shelves)!
- Yet it had absolutely no bearing on their lives!

So what is the call when it comes to listening to a sermon? It is NOT enough to hear the word preached, take copious notes, and genuinely delight in the process. RATHER, we must appropriate what we hear, apply it to our lives, and be changed by it!

The preached word is a stewardship given to us by God unto our growth and maturation in Christ. Accordingly, we have a duty every time we sit beneath its teaching. We must NOT listen out of fascination or superstition (as if God's word were a religious lucky charm). RATHER, we must listen in order to DO the word of God!

This is such an important point, for the last days — the days in which we live — will be characterized by people who are, "Always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7)! T. David Gordon, speaking of this pitfall amongst God's people, wrote:

This explains, in part, the phenomenon that many Christians will read their Bibles daily for fifty years, and not have one opinion that changes in the entire fifty-years span. Texts do not change or alter or skew their perspective; texts do not move them or shape them; they merely *use* them as mnemonic devices to recall what they already know... To employ C. S. Lewis's way of stating the matter, they 'use' texts but do not 'receive' them. (Gordon, 2009, p. 50)

The Word of God must be far more to us than a mnemonic device or a religious habit/duty. Rather we must listen and submit as ones who have no claim on any area or thing in our lives. That means

- Jobs.
- Relationships.
- Occupations.
- Inclinations.
- Habits.
- Everything!

Are all up for grabs! We must listen to submit! We must listen to obey! We must listen that the word of God might transform anything and everything in our lives- no holds bar!! Indeed, our goal is NOT to use the text, BUT to receive it deep into our souls unto the transformation of our lives!

A fifth telos when it comes to the word of God; it is God's intention to use His word to dissect the child of God, expose his sin and rebellion, crush his wayward will, and so re-form him into the image of Christ. Using the language of sacrifice, specifically as it relates to the burnt offering where an animal would be dissected, arranged on the Altar of Burnt Offering, and then wholly consumed in dedication to the Lord, the Hebrew writer said, "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

This is the intent of every sermon you manage to endure! It is NOT to inspire you or move you, BUT to rip your life apart- your priorities, habits, inclinations, thinking, theology, and the like- and then to reshape it into the image of Christ!³ In this regard, the question we ask of the text is, "How does this text change my thinking, desiring, or doing?" Yet this is where it gets difficult... for there are many Sirens today vying for our attention. Consider one of them the competition.

Ezekiel 33:32, "And behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not practice them."

Once again, we are told that the people of God listening to Ezekiel received his words, but they did NOT practice what was preached. They did NOT submit themselves to it; it was just a religious activity. Why was that? What is the stated reason here? “You are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument.”

Some commentators see in this nothing more than a “love song.” Yet that does NOT fit with what is said here. The focus of a love song is to communicate one’s love and devotion. The song referenced here had absolutely no element of communication, just entertainment, which points us in another direction! The “sensual song” referenced was that of the music associated with Baal — that which grabbed the heart of God’s people the last 100 years of the nation. It was distinct from the music used in conjunction with the worship of God.

Consider the music used in the worship of God. The place of music in the worship of God was designed to serve a *SUPPORTIVE ROLE*. It was never intended to be worship, it never constituted worship, rather it served only to support the worship and so the prayers of God’s people. A. Edersheim wrote:

Properly speaking, the real service of praise in the Temple was only with the voice. This is often laid down as a principle by the Rabbis. What instrumental music there was, served only to accompany and sustain the song. (Edersheim, 1997, p. 76)

As such, Biblical worship — that is, ascribing to God His worth — consisted of God’s people adoring, honoring, dedicating, giving, and listening to God. Things you would say to and do for a person! Accordingly, the emphasis when it came to singing was NOT the tune, the instrumentation, or the voice singing it, BUT (1) what was being said AND (2) was it said with intentionality/did they mean it (John 4:24)? The music/tune served only a supportive role.

And then consider the music used in the worship of Baal. In Baalism, it was quite the opposite. Worship was defined by how the worshipper felt- whether or not he was moved. Recall, in Baalism worship was a subjective experience where the worshipper was moved into an ecstatic, emotional state via a combination of drugs, dancing, sex, sacrifice, and... MUSIC.

In this regard, the actual content of the music/song was not relevant. What was important was whether or not the music moved the individual. Accordingly, in Baalism the music was all important- and so the quality of the voice, the tune, the skill of the musician, etc. The words and so the message was not!

That is the background of this text which speaks of a “sensual song.” D. I. Block wrote:

The people’s presence before the prophet is motivated by a craving for the sensuous and sensational. Erotic speech is on their lips, and he has become for them a singer of erotic songs. Ezekiel’s oracles titillate his hearers, offering temporary satisfaction, but like any other addiction, they drive the audience back for more. (Block, 1998, p. 266)

It was with this that God indicted His people as they flocked to listen to Ezekiel. As a gifted speaker, Ezekiel's sermons moved them. YET it was NOT on account of the content of his preaching. RATHER, Ezekiel moved them because of his manner — his rhetorical gifts, his style, the quality of his voice, etc. This is what brought out the masses! Consequently, the impact of the sermon was no different than the impact of a Baalistic song... it grabbed their feelings, elevated their emotions, but left their mind empty — which in this case was tragic since the content most certainly was there!

Ezekiel 33:32, "And behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not practice them."

So what is the faithful pulpits competition? It is the urge and inclination that accompanies Baalistic worship... and so the passion to be moved! Ezekiel aimed at their mind, BUT his homiletical gifts hit their emotion. And lest you think that this has no bearing on your life today, the Bible indicates that in the last days this once again will be that which allures God's people away from the Faithful Pulpit- the longing for an experience- and so encouragement and inspiration. Paul, after solemnly charging Timothy (and thus all preachers in this age) to preach the word of God wrote:

2 Timothy 4:3, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires."

From this consider the flaw/danger that exists every time you hear a sermon. Rather than listen to receive God's word, the temptation/the Siren will be there for you to listen as one might listen to an entertainer. In contrast, speaking of the pulpit, Robert L. Thomas wrote this:

The whole purpose of sitting in the listener's seat is exposure to the message for the purpose of personal confrontation, information, conviction, motivation, and transformation. The hearer's thoughts should not be concerns about how well the preacher is doing, how clever or interesting he is, or how well structured his sermon is. The listener is not there to admire or criticize a piece of oratorical art, but to be spoken to personally by God's representative. The object of the preaching event is a change in thinking, attitude, and behavior. The hearer must prepare himself with this anticipation. (John F. MacArthur, 1992, p. 352)

With this understand! Preaching constitutes a holy moment in the life of a congregation where God's people submit themselves to the word of God knowing that they will be held accountable to what they hear by God Himself! Accordingly work at listening, understanding, and so submitting to the word of God that is preached each week. Come prepared to do that, and so well-rested, unoccupied, and unencumbered by unconfessed sin! In this regard, a theme that you have heard from me like a broken record is

- When the word of God is preached, identify the truth(s) that are being proclaimed from the text that morning. Then take one of them!
- With the truth, spend time meditating on your previous week, month, and year asking, “If I had been mindful of this truth then, what difference would it have made?”
- To prompt you toward that end, utilize the questions that are raised by The Teloi behind a faithful pulpit- which I’ve listed for you in your notes.

Family of God! May the pulpit be a time of covenant renewal wherein the will of God is read and explained, and we respond with, “All that the Lord has said, we will do; and we will be obedient” (Exodus 24:7)!

Works Cited

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End Note(s)

¹ D. I. Block wrote, “...the reference to the ‘disciples’ as ‘ammî, ‘my [Yahweh’s] people,’ suggests that all is normal in the relationship between the people, on the one hand, and the prophet and deity on the other.” (*The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT, p. 266)

² That is why they were taken. In both exiles, Nebuchadnezzar took the cream of the crop of Israel that they might be a productive force in Babylon. Recall, these were not an exile of conquest, but, on the part of Babylon, an exile of opportunity.

³ You say, but my preacher doesn’t preach/explain God’s word. He is ungifted or endeavors to preach a message each week disconnected from God’s word. B. B. Warfield’s response is fitting here, “And let me tell you straightout that the preaching you find dull will no more seem dull to you if you faithfully obey the Master’s precept: ‘Take heed how ye hear’: that if you do not find Christ in the conference room it is because you do not take him there with you; that if after an ordinary day’s with you are too weary to unite with your fellows in closing the day with common prayer, it is because the impulse to prayer is weak in your heart. If there is no fire in the pulpit it falls to you to kindle it in the pews.” (*The Religious Life of Theological Students*) Bad preaching is no excuse nor does it lessen in any degree the responsibility God places on your and my life as we approach this holy desk. We must approach it to submit our lives to the word of God without reservation.