

## The Art of Listening to a Sermon Acts 10:24-33

The speaker at a large convention said, “Each of us here has a job to do in this hour. Mine is to talk and yours is to listen. My hope is that you will not finish your job before I finish mine.” Today I am talking about the art of listening to a sermon. Before I became a minister I spent many years trying to perfect the art of listening to a sermon. And it involved not only note taking and adjustments to my attitudes, but it involved things such as techniques to keep my mind from wandering; Biblical strategies for keeping my focus on God rather than on the preacher; responding to the sermon with worship rather than just being an egg-head soaking up knowledge.

And I had to listen to all kinds of sermons: boring and interesting; long and short; good theology and bad theology. But I had been brought up by my parents to think about listening to a sermon as an act of worship that required *my* effort, attention, reverence and godly response. It was *not* all up the pastor. He has a responsibility to prepare, but so do the hearers.

I remember a friend of mine who introduced me to 5-point Calvinism in College. He would come away from the Arminian sermons absolutely fuming. He didn't get *anything* out of the sermon. And I tried to exhort him by telling him that he (and he alone) had allowed the pastor to spoil the worship for him. I too disagreed with the pastor, but the pastor was not the focus of attention in my worship; God was. And I pointed out that there was plenty of good stuff in the sermon that he could have used to worship and praise God. And even the bad stuff could have been turned into a prayer for the preacher and a prayer of thankfulness for what God has shown to us, and a request for humility. Well, he wasn't too convinced. But I didn't allow him to spoil my worship.

There *have been* times that I have allowed my worship to be spoiled. But I think if we are honest, all of us have struggled from time to time with really benefiting from *some* sermons. Right? And frequently what has happened is that we have allowed something about the sermon (perhaps an illustration), or about the people in front of us, or the anxieties of the week that our mind keeps turning to, or something else to turn off the switch of our spirit's worship to God. I wish I could assure you that this sermon would solve all of your issues. It won't. It won't even give every answer that the Bible has to cure your struggles, because my goal is to stick to the text. But I think that this text (among other things that we won't deal with today) gives some helpful insights on the art of listening to a sermon.

I. Worship with the whole family (vv. 24,33,22; 11:14)

The first point is that we should worship with our whole family. Now *that* point would be a big surprise to many Christians because one of the biggest distractions that any of us have faced in worship is having to deal with our little children. Isn't that right? I know that when we were training our youngest ones to sit still and pay attention during the service, it sometimes made us miss things. So I do not doubt that this is a struggle. In fact, it is precisely because adults have wanted to be better listeners that they have invented children's church, nurseries and cry rooms. I actually think it has made them worse listeners in the long run, but I can definitely understand their motivation. I can appreciate where they are coming from. And so this point may at first seem counter-intuitive. Verse 24 says, **And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.** From the context of verses 22 and 33 we know that his whole family was there. As he says in verse 33, **"we are all present before God."** In chapter 11:14 his whole family gets saved when they hear Peter's message. And it might be thought that this is an unusual situation. But when you start studying the Scriptures, you find that this is the pattern throughout the Bible. Children never knew a time when they have not been under the preaching of the Word. It is the most natural thing in the world for them.

And it is precisely because they have learned from a very young age to be listeners that they have become very good listeners when they were adults. Over and over the Scripture says things like this: **"and the congregation gathered before the Lord, the men, the women and the little ones."** That was quite a long service in Joshua 8:35. Joel 2:15-16 says, **Blow the trumpet in Zion... call a sacred assembly; gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and nursing babes...** Deuteronomy 31:12 says, **Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law.** And I want you to especially notice the phrase, "that they may *learn* to fear the LORD your God..." Learning reverence for God in worship is not an automatic process. It is something that is learned by doing. And we shouldn't be discouraged when at first we don't succeed.

What happens when children's church is established is that *their* worship is geared to attention-deficit children, and their attention-deficit problem is reinforced for years, rather than being overcome. Suddenly when they join the adult worship at the age of 12 or 13, they have a hard time

concentrating. They have a hard time applying the passage, digging for meat, being interactive with what is being preached and their inward response. They have never been trained for it.

And some might say, “But having the whole family worship together is an impossibility for me.” Well, I can sympathize, but I don’t agree. And I’ll just give you one tip that will help you to breathe with a sigh of relief within a month or two. And I have had many parents who have said that this has worked like a charm for them. Now keep in mind that no new habit is learned overnight, and so this is something that will have to be practiced every day. That’s how good habits are developed. It usually takes 4-6 weeks of daily practice. So, have family worship every day. This is the learning context. And have your children sit still on the chair as if it was in church. It is worship after all. Tell them, “This is worship, and we need to sit still and reverence God during worship.” The youngest one may have to be held firmly in your hands so that he or she doesn’t wiggle. And give firm discipline to the children each time they move, or act up. *It’s a whole lot easier to do it at home than it is at church.* And the key is being consistent. Don’t discipline one time and fail to discipline the next time. Make it so that the child can predict that he will *always* be disciplined if he acts up, wanders, talks or disrupts the worship. If your discipline is done during family worship, you will find that it won’t have to be done as frequently during church. Not every child will learn at the same pace. Some children are sitting still within a week or two. Others take a month or two. But persevere and you will find that it will pay off. Reverence is learned. And it can’t be learned simply by avoiding the difficult circumstances where our children might embarrass us.

By the way, using games or art books to distract your children’s attention reinforces the opposite of what the Bible calls for. I know it’s an easy shortcut for a desperate parent, but it teaches them how *not* to pay attention. If they need an activity, the best early activity is to draw pictures of what the pastor is preaching about. In this case, it might be children sitting quietly in church. Or it might be a picture of a big ear listening to a sermon. When they can write, it might be trying to take down some notes of what God wants them to do. It’s good if they can look at the pastor when he is preaching and when they are not writing. But use this as an opportunity to train your children to be listeners with an attention span. And so point I is basically saying that this art can start to be learned very young. And there are thousands of children in family integrated churches who have been successfully trained in this without lots of gimmicks.

II. Come with expectation – with an attitude of faith (v. 24)

The second thing that I see in verse 24 is that they came with expectation and with an attitude of faith. Cornelius was waiting for them, as were the others. They were expecting to hear from the Lord. They were all ears. One of the most discouraging things for a pastor is a church full of polite people who aren't coming to either give worship to the Lord or to hear from the Lord, but are simply enduring out of duty. One person told me that he always looks forward to sermons. If it is a great sermon, he rises from it encouraged. If it is a boring one, at least he wakes up from it refreshed. But that's not the kind of expectation that I am talking about. Expectation is an *attitude of faith that God will indeed meet you here*. As James says, **Draw near to God and he will draw near to you**. You can bank on it.

You heard the story about the guy who visited a church, and right in the middle of the service a guy had a heart attack and died. And the ushers carried five men out before they found the right one. (Melvin Newland) We need to make sure that we are not dead, or even lame and sick sacrifices. We need to get enough sleep the night before so that we aren't sleeping during church. Rather than assuming we won't get anything out of the service, or assuming that we need to argue, let's come with expectation from God's messenger, that God has a message providentially designed for my needs.

III. Do not worship the preacher, worship God (v. 25-26)

A. Though respect is called for, worship is idolatry

The third principle of good listening is that we *must not* come to worship the preacher. Instead we must come to worship God. Cornelius is trying to be respectful in verses 25-26, but he fails to see what idolatry he is engaging in. Verse 25: **As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man."** Now God does indeed call members to respect the leaders of the church because of their office, but sometimes there is a fine line between respect and worship. Respect is treating them as *representatives* of the Lord. That's a heavy office; that is an honorable office, and we need to respect it. Worship would be to treat them *like the Lord*. And there *is* a difference.

God wants His ambassadors honored, but if ambassadors are not representing the Lord, they are *not* worthy of honor from either God *or* man. We need to remember that the only authority that I have is the authority of the Scripture. So if I cannot back up my claims from the Bible, my claims lack authority. You can't treat me like a Protestant Pope. The older Reformed writers often said that the only voice speaking in the church

should be the voice of Christ speaking through the Scriptures. Even Paul praised the Bereans for checking everything that he said against the Scriptures. In fact, that is an incredible honor for a pastor, to have people diligently checking out everything he says from the Bible

So there is a balance here. Show respect, but don't worship the pastor. Hold the pastor to a higher standard, but at the same time recognize that they are men with needs just like everyone else. They are no less hurt by meanness than you are. They are no less subject to discouragement. They are certainly not infallible. If you are looking to the preacher to have a sermon with beautiful oratory week after week, you are transforming the office into something it was never intended to be.

- B. Though preachers are held to a higher standard, recognize that they are men with needs just like everyone else.
- C. Though the Word of God is infallible, preachers are not.

#### IV. Come early and be prepared (vv. 24, 27)

A fourth principle that has always helped me in the past has been to come early and to be prepared. In verse 27 we find that the people had gotten there before the preacher had. **And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together.** This is another way of showing respect for God – getting to the service on time. We model what we think of worship to our children by our timeliness.

A gentleman having an appointment with a guy who was always late for meetings was surprised to see the man there early and waiting for him. He said, “Why, I see you are here first at last. You were always behind before, but I am glad to see you have become early of late.” That would be a great resolution for some of you to make – to be first at last, or at least to begin to be early of late.

#### V. Avoid cliques or exclusionary circles (v. 28)

- A. “keep company” – versus isolation

A fifth thing that blesses God and opens us for blessing is if we avoid cliques or exclusionary circles. 1 Corinthians 11 says that this was the precise issue that had robbed them of God's blessings in worship and had opened them up to God's judgments instead. It was not discerning the Lord's body as being the people. When we mistreat each other, we need to remember that we are mistreating Christ's body.

And so verse 28 says, **Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man**

**common or unclean.** In your outline I have broken that down into four ways that we can fail to properly discern the body of Christ. The first can be seen in the phrase, **keep company...** People who never come to church, or who prefer to be isolationistic are failing to properly relate to and honor the body of Christ. Listening to a sermon by tape is different than coming to church. So God's admonition is to keep company rather than isolation.

B. "another nation" – versus racism

The second phrase in that verse is **another nation** and that stands in contrast to racism. God delights in a church that welcomes every nationality. Revelation 5 describes a great throng of people singing to God and worshipping Him **Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation** (Rev. 5:9)

C. "not call any man common" – versus snobbery

The third phrase is **I should not call any man common** and that stands in contrast to the snobbery of an elite. And by the way, the elite don't have to be rich. In this case, it was a poor fisherman who might have been tempted to call the rich Gentile common. It would be similar to a tradesman looking down his nose at a white-collar person who doesn't know how to use a hammer. Well, he might be an idiot in one department, but that's where the body needs each other. Right? So whether it is racial snobbery, economic snobbery or any other kind of snobbery, God wants us not to engage in it.

D. "not call any man... unclean" – versus "overly righteous" (Ecc. 7:16)

The last phrase in verse 28 is **not call any man... unclean...** There will always be people coming into the church who will be less put together than you are in this stage of your development. They might make social blunders and sins as bad as what Cornelius did when he worshipped Peter. But we can love them anyway. Notice that Peter doesn't stone him to death for idolatry. Cornelius didn't know better. Peter just corrects him and moves on. And when we don't call people unclean and untouchable, we have God's delight resting upon us rather than the judgment that 1 Corinthians talks about. We can expect illumination and sanctification through the truth. This is the context for proper listening – a life style that is in harmony with God's call and God's grace.

VI. Have God-centered expectations (v. 29-33)

A. There are always reasons, expressed or unexpressed, for why we come to worship (v. 29)

The last admonition that we see in this passage is that we should have God-centered expectations. And I see five ways in which this whole service was God-centered.

The first point is simply helping Cornelius to recognize that we always have reasons for why we come to church, whether those reasons are expressed or unexpressed. Peter wants Cornelius to be thinking about his reasons. He asks in verse 29: **Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask then, for what reason have you sent for me?** It's good to ask yourself that question. Self-analysis can expose whether we are coming for God-centered reasons, mixed or man-centered reasons.

B. Prepare for Sunday worship the week before (vv. 23, 30-31)

Cornelius's reasons were very good reasons that can be imitated. Look at verses 30-31. **So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the night hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God.'** The first thing that we see is that Cornelius prepared for worship by what he did in the previous week. Verse 23 speaks of a night's rest. And we would get far more out of a sermon if we were rested the night before. That's so obvious that it shouldn't need mentioning, but it is often ignored. In fact, in Jewish households, and in many Christian households, they make the Sabbath begin at 6pm. Their day didn't begin at midnight or in the morning. The evening before was already being devoted to the Lord in Scripture reading and prayer. If you began your Sabbath at 6pm, you would be much more likely to get a good night's rest and be alert for the sermon.

But Jewish preparation began long before that. The whole 24 hours before the Sabbath was called the day of preparation. That was the day in which all preparations for the Sabbath were made. Yes, chores were caught up. But it was also the time to make sure there was food in the pantry, that the clothing was all laid out and ready, and that they were already looking with expectation to the Sabbath. This put them into a frame of mind to benefit from the Sabbath and from God speaking to His people.

But for the Jews, anticipation began even before the day of preparation. In God's providence, Cornelius had been preparing four days before with prayer. He was humbly seeking God's face before he even went to church. He wanted to know God. He was praying for God's grace. Karen Burton Maines, in her book on Making Sunday Special, points out how the Jews made the whole week revolve around the Sabbath. The three days after the Sabbath were reflective and the three days leading up to the next Sabbath were anticipating it. And the reason for that was that the Sabbath was at the

center of the Ten Commandments and was called the sign of the covenant. When I read that, I thought that was rather remarkable.

But in any case, you will get much more out of a sermon if you have been praying for the pastor the week before as he prepares, and praying that God would give us a heart that is eager to change. One person said that on Sunday morning the congregation gets what it has prayed for the week before. So there is preparation.

C. Be eager to hear the Word (v. 32-33)

The third way to be God-centered is given in verses 32-33. The angel had told Cornelius, **Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.** [Here's Cornelius' response.] **So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come.** He's eager to hear. There was an immediate response to the angel, and an enthusiastic anticipation of the preacher's coming. When I was a teenager I looked forward to Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday evening worship. I couldn't get enough of the Word. And I think my eager approach to learning opened me up to benefiting so much more.

D. Be listening for "all the things commanded you by God" (v. 33)

1. "Hear" – don't daydream

The fourth way in which he shows a God-centered approach is that he asks Peter to let him have it. It doesn't matter what God wants to say, I want to hear it. You can see that in the second sentence of verse 33. Cornelius says, **Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.** Wow! Now *there* is a wonderful attitude that we would do well to imitate. We want to hear all things commanded to you by God. We want the Word, the whole Word and nothing but the Word. If you are listening in that way you will get so much more out of the preaching because God will bless you with more insight. In John 7:17 Jesus said, **If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.** He is saying that your attitude will make a great difference on whether God opens the Word up to your understanding.

Let's break that phrase down. He says first, **to hear**. You've got to have a hearing ear. It's hear, *versus* day dream. A senator from Ohio used to start most of his speeches with the question, "Ladies and Gentlemen, why are we here?" He spoke at a Psychiatric Hospital one day and as soon as he asked that question, "Ladies and Gentlemen, why are we here?" an inmate immediately said, "Well, because mister, we are not all there." We need to be all there when we are in worship. We must concentrate.



Let me give you some techniques that I have used to keep from zoning out in a service. First, I ask the Spirit for His illumination before the sermon begins. If the pastor prays for that, I agree with him, and if he fails to do so, I ask God to open my mind and heart and keep me from daydreaming. I pray.

Second, I take notes of the sermon. And I do that because I've got a lazy mind that needs to be pushed. It is a technique that keeps my mind moving. And I prefer to take my own notes to filling in preset notes. But either way works. Taking notes helps to focus the mind, whether or not you later on throw away the notes. It's a technique for getting the most out of a sermon.

Third, I talk to God as God talks to me through the sermon. I respond with a "Thank you," or an "I didn't know that. I'll write that down Lord," or "Yes, Lord, I repent, and I thank you that your grace can change me." Or, "Lord, you are awesome." Now, don't say it out loud or you will be a distraction to everyone around you. You can say the occasional "Amen," or "yes," or something like that. But I usually do a lot more interaction than that, so I tend to say it quietly *inside* my head. But if you are interacting with the Word, your mind and spirit will be engaged with God. You are being active rather than passive.

Fourth, I flip to references that the pastor is reading so that I can be a Berean. That way I get the Word through both the ear gate and the eye gate. It reinforces it. So I read.

Fifth, I write down action items of what I need to do differently after I leave the building. And I put the action items into a reminder list that I am working on.

Sixth, I pray for the preacher when he seems slow, or when he is preaching bad theology. I pray that God would bless him.

Seventh, I try to look the pastor in the eye when I am not writing. That too helps me to concentrate.

Eighth, I ignore the preacher's bad habits, or anything else that might be a distraction. I don't count the number of times he said "Um." Nor do I count the ceiling tiles or the number of fruit flies hovering nearby. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? It's an issue of focus. And Satan loves to bring distractions. It could be anything from the hair do of the person in front of you to a piece of fuzz on someone's coat that is driving you crazy. Out in Ethiopia it was chickens walking through the congregation, the occasional dog yelp and other things. One time when my dad was preaching on how Satan uses distractions, everybody was looking above his head. The whole time he was preaching a large snake was hanging

above his head from the rafters and moving back and forth. They probably didn't hear a word he said. That was one distraction they probably should have paid attention to by whacking it.

And so those are eight tips that I use to try to develop hearing ears. 1) I pray, 2) I take notes, 3) I interact with what God is saying, 4) I read along in the Bible, 5) I write down action items, 6) I pray for the preacher during the sermon, 7) I look the pastor in the eye when I am not writing notes. 8) I ignore extraneous distractions. We must hear, and hear intelligently.

2. "All things" – not selective hearing

Well, verse 33 goes on to say, **to hear all the things...** We don't want to have selective hearing that is listening for a phrase that can justify my sin or justify my theology. Nor do we want to ignore things that are unpleasant to hear. Sometimes people who are theologians will only be listening for new bits of information that they are interested in or have never heard before. But the whole sermon should be responded to by way of worship. We are to hear all things – yes, even the unpleasant things. We should respond to God with even the things that we know by heart. Sermons don't have to be covering things that are new. Even with the old, we are to hear all the things.

3. "Commanded" – not optional

Verse 33 goes on, **"to hear all the things commanded...** This is obviously an exhortation to a pastor to preach what *God* commands, not simply what people want. But it is also an admonition to the congregation to be listening for God's voice. Your goal is to be so focused on God that when His Word is preached, your heart is on fire because God Himself is talking to you.

4. "Commanded by God" – not consumer driven

And so the whole phrase says, **to hear all the things commanded you by God.** Sermons are not to be consumer driven engines. They are to be God-driven. And it's not just pastors who are guilty of catering to the consumer-oriented church. It is the church that has made man-centered demands. They want entertainment, or comfort, or encouragement, or their favorite subject. But our goal when coming to worship is not to be happy because our favorite subject has been preached on. Nor should our goal be to hope that the preacher will fix your husband or your wife or your kids and hope they are listening. We can just trust God's providence on that issue, and be ready to hear all the things commanded by God for you.

- E. Always be conscious that you are "present before God" (v. 33)  
– the God of the universe!

1. This will be reflected in inward attitudes

But let's end with the middle phrase of verse 33, which says, **we are all present before God**. When you listen to a sermon, you are not simply listening to Phil Kayser. You are listening to God speaking through the sermon. According to Scripture, God uses the foolishness of preaching to be His mouthpiece today. When Jesus sent out the 70 preachers in Luke 10, he told them, "**He who hears you hears me**" (Luke 10:16). *Now it was only because they preached the Word, right?* But in Pierre Marcel's masterful book on preaching he said, "[Jesus] makes it a point to affirm that when they proclaim the good news it is as if he himself, the Christ, proclaimed it in person. It is and remains the word of God; it retains its same power and effectiveness" (p. 12). And he goes on to give many Scriptures that show that the preaching of the Word regenerates hearts, gives faith, sanctifies the saints, confers hope. It is called the power of God. And Paul is amazed that God banks so much on the foolishness of preaching. But it's not because of the preacher. It's that God stands behind His ambassador and carries that Word to the hearts of His people, assuming of course that I preach the Word.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus knew that something was different because they felt their hearts burning within them as they heard the Word of God being preached. Why? Because God was quickening that Word to them. They were in the presence of God.

And this consciousness of God's presence with us in His royal covenant ceremony ought to affect our inward emotions and ought to affect our outward demeanor. Even our dress is reflected by what we expect in worship or perhaps what we have experienced in worship. But it is especially affected by what we consider the preaching of the Word to be. Is it God speaking to us through the feebleness of the preacher? Paul said, **my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power** (1 Cor. 2:4). In the previous chapter Paul admits that preaching is foolishness to the world, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

2. This will be reflected in outward demeanor

Conclusion:

So, what can we conclude after having looked at this passage? I think we can conclude that failing to listen to sermons as we ought is a sin, and since Christ came to save us from our sins we can have hope when we are miserable listeners. If it's not a sin, then maybe there is no hope for us. But if it is a sin, there is huge hope. He died to bear our sins so that we no longer feel judged by them. We can also conclude that listening to God's Word is a

virtue that Jesus perfected while he was here on earth. He had obviously been a good listener when at the age of 12 he was able to interact with the teachers one on one. And this same Jesus can live His life out through you. So this is not just the passive obedience of Jesus (where he is punished for our sin), but it is also the active obedience of Jesus being lived out on our behalf.

I think we can conclude that God is for you in this process, not against you. So even though you are not able to listen like you wish you could, His grace can enable you.

I think we can conclude that the art of listening to a sermon doesn't happen automatically, but it can be learned and can be prepared for.

I think we can conclude that the ability to listen is largely governed by our theology, our worldview and our attitudes. It is transformed when God opens our understanding to realize that we are gathered in His presence and the presence of the holy angels.

When I was doing research for this article, I didn't find a lot of help. But there *was* a short one-page article by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals entitled, *How to Listen to a Sermon*. I will close by quoting their concluding statement. At the end of the page they said,

“So what is the right way to listen to a sermon? With a soul that is prepared, a mind that is alert, a Bible that is open, a heart that is receptive, and a life that is ready to spring into action.” And I say, “Amen.” May God grant such reception to the sermons you hear week by week. And may we grow in our joy as we learn to focus upon God. Amen.