

Teaching Children to Listen - 1

Child Rearing

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Good morning to you all. We are going to try to address a subject for a few weeks—actually this morning and then it won't be for several weeks because I will be gone Sundays in January and we have the Lord's Supper.

Dr. Murray will take the class next week, Sunday. I don't know his topic yet. I told him he could do anything he wanted. So I am not even sure it will be related to family living, but he will take the class next week's Sunday.

Dr. Johnson has been, you noticed, not with us the last few weeks because of his wife's condition. He is listening on SermonAudio and things or by phone, I think.

So we will play it by ear and we will go forward looking at different possible teachers to substitute for me when Dr. Johnson can't do it when I am gone.

This morning I would like to focus particularly on how to teach children to listen in church and then in a future occasion I want to look at perhaps even a tougher question: How to teach children to listen at home.

So turn with me, please, to Luke eight verses 11 through 18. Jesus has just told the parable about the sower sowing and how he interprets it in verse 11 through 18.

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience. No man, when he hath lighted a candle, covereth it with a vessel, or putteth it under a bed; but setteth it on a candlestick, that they which enter in may see the light. For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad. Take heed therefore how ye hear: for

whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.¹

Thus far.

Let's pray.

Great God of heaven, we bow before thee in these moments and ask for thy help and guidance as we address a very practical subject, a challenging one for parents and one so critical for effective functioning of our children in society, in church and in the home: how to listen. Open our ears, Lord, teach us as adults how to listen and teach us to teach our children. All this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Listening is probably one of the most underrated skills of our society. I would estimate having spoken with literally tens of thousands of people in my life, I would estimate that less than 10% of the people know how to listen.

Most people, as you speak with them, are thinking about what they are going to say next and not really listening. That is true in church. It is true at home. It is true in society. Many people as you speak with them—it could be many of us as well—say very predictable things. We have a nice exchange. We go on our way, but we haven't really listened.

And, of course, this is the task of professional counselors, to learn to listen. When you are a counselor as a pastor as well you read books about how to do it. You read other things and you get convicted. Various counselors offer different techniques on how to listen.

But generally speaking, to listen is to really put yourself in the shoes of the other person, to hear what they are saying, to know where they are coming from, to know where they are going. And so effective listening is listening that reflects back to the person what that person is saying in a way that helps him go forward and open up the more.

So if you said to me this morning, "I really had a difficult time getting to church," I could listen and say, "Well, yeah, so did I. I hope you have a good worship service."

That is not really listening.

Or I could say, "So you really had some problems getting here."

See, I am reflecting back.

And you are going to say, "Yes, I had difficulty getting out of my driveway and, you know, our car banged up against the mailbox on the way out," or whatever.

And I am going to say, "Oh, wow. Was there damage?"

¹ Luke 8:11-18

You know, see one thing leads to another and I'll get your whole story out if I effectively listen so that you feel you have unburdened all your difficulties that morning to me.

What I am saying to you is less than 10% of the population knows how to do that. And when you meet a person who really listens and knows how to draw you out in the depths of your being far beyond external things like, "I had a difficult time getting to church this morning," but when you meet someone who really draws out your deepest desires through effective listening, your deepest fears, you know, you have met a good listener. There is something about that person that you can say, "That person draws me out. He really listens."

Now what I am saying to you—this is just prefatory comments—is if you want your children to listen to you, you have to be a model listener to them. And you have to model for them also in the presence of other people what it means to listen so that listening becomes for them a skill that is better caught than taught. Yes, we teach our children. But they catch it more than we teach it.

And so what is critical is that when children hear us speak with other people, they hear us effectively listening to them and we become role models for our children as they grow up naturally learning how to listen.

Now why do we have such trouble listening? Why does human nature not want to listen? Well, I suppose there's two reasons. One is we are corrupt and we don't want to hear either what the Lord has to say to us in church and we don't really want to hear correction from what other people are going to advise us to do. We are self-satisfied. We don't want to change.

And the second reason is that we are just basically selfish. We would rather care more about what we think and we say and we do and have done and are going to do than get interest into anyone else's life.

Any pastor will tell you what I am about to tell you right now that we who are in the business of listening say it this way. When we go to people's houses and draw out their lives and draw out their children, their family it is intriguing, but we will have people say to us at the end of an evening, "It has been absolutely great getting to know you or getting to visit with you."

Well, you haven't said one thing about yourself the whole night, because they enjoy talking about themselves the whole evening, which is fine. And as a minister you learn to enjoy that as well because you care about people. So that's a fine thing. But it is amazing. I have noticed this over and over again that when people spend the entire time talking about themselves, they have a wonderful time. But how much more meaningful life becomes when you really invest your life in other people.

And so just ask yourself: Do I invest myself in other people by listening to them? Am I the kind of person that people come to, to share their life with, to open up? Do people naturally reveal things to me because, well, I listen? It is an important question.

And so we do a lot of talking to our children. We do a lot of talking to other people. But let's remember. If we want our children to be good communicators with other people, not to be selfish, we have got to model listening skills ourselves.

So that's the subject that we want to approach in a global way.

Now I want to focus, first of all, today and probably one more time on how to listen in church. And then we are going to come back full cycle and talk about listening at home and listening in relationships with other people.

John Calvin often talked with his congregation about how to listen in preaching and what to expect of those who preach, how to listen positively, how to listen constructively with criticism. And Calvin said, "Scarcely one in 10 hear a sermon." It is very depressing for a minister in case you didn't know.

But if profitable hearing was a problem in Calvin's day when they had very little modern media bombarding them with all kinds of sound bytes and quick reactions, how much more in our day when preachers have to compete with all kinds of media that are savvy and geared to getting the ear and the attention of people? And, in fact, with such quick pictures and sound bytes that many people will advise ministers today, "Don't ever preach more than 15 minutes because Americans can no longer handle more than a 15 minute message."

Well, Calvin was one of the few preachers who kept stressing with his people how to listen. He taught them how to listen, not just how ministers should preach, how they should listen. You find it again and again.

I struck me this summer when I was reading his sermons on Deuteronomy how often he comes back to this theme: Teaching his people how to listen.

And, of course, Calvin's emphasis here was flowing out of his high view of preaching because he believed that in preaching God comes and speaks to people. In fact, Calvin had such a high view of preaching—it is scary actually—but what he actually taught was that as long as the minister doesn't contradict the Word—when he contradicts the Word it is just the minister talking—but when he doesn't contradict the Word, it is God himself speaking to the congregation as if he were speaking the very Bible, the very Word of God.

So that Calvin said to his people, "When you come to church, as long as I am speaking the Word of God and I am a duly ordained minister and this is God's duly appointed time to gather in the assembly of the congregation, God himself is speaking to you."

How in the world can that be when I am a mere man?

“Well,” Calvin said, “There are really two ministers speaking at every sermon. There is the external minister who is the mere man, who is speaking the words. And there is the internal minister who is the Holy Spirit who is taking the words and addressing them to the minds and souls of people.”

And so preaching, Calvin says, is the organ, the instrument and the authority that the Spirit uses in his saving work of illuminating, converting and sealing sinners. Therefore wherever the gospel is preached to us, it is as if God himself has come in the midst of us. There was an inward efficacy of the Holy Spirit when he sheds forth his power upon hearers that he may embrace a sermon by faith.

Now the Puritans followed in Calvin’s footsteps here. They didn’t talk as much about it as Calvin, perhaps not quite as much, and yet a number of the Puritans addressed this whole subject in some depth.

The Puritans took it up even a bit more quaintly. One of them calls the 66 books of the Bible, “The library of the Holy Spirit.” And he says, “Preaching is God speaking to us through that library as a father reads a book or speaks to his children.”

You see, God gives us his Word as a Word of truth and as a Word of power. So it is very critical that our children know that when they come to church God is speaking to them through his library and that therefore it has the authority of God himself and is absolutely critical that we listen to what he has to say.

Then the Puritans focus on all kinds of practical directions. Samuel Annesley has a sermon, “How may we give Christ a Satisfying Account of Why we Attend upon the Ministry of the Word.” He talks about listening.

David Clarkson has a sermon called “Hearing the Word.”

Thomas Manton, “A Life of Faith in Hearing the Word.”

Thomas Senior, “How we Hear the Word with Profit.”

Thomas Watson has several pages on listening to the Word.

Thomas Boston has three different pieces on it.

Thomas Shepherd has a sermon on ineffectual hearing of the Word.

Now after the Puritan era, 1700, suddenly from 1700 until today you will find no literature—no emphasis except for a 19th century work by Edward Bickerstaff on hearing the Word—on listening to sermons. Why is that? Why so much emphasis by the Reformers and the Puritans and then so little since then?

Could it be—I am just suggesting, because I don't know for sure—but could it be because there has been a de-emphasis on what preaching itself is? And it is seen more as something that man does rather than something that God says.

Well, whatever the case may be, the words of Jesus still hold true. “Take heed therefore,” Luke eight verse eight, “how ye hear. Take heed therefore how ye hear,”² because you are going to be, under any sermon, you are going to be one of four kinds of hearers. Either the sermon is going to fall into the thorns. It is going to fall on the rock or it is going to fall in the hard pack or it is going to fall into your heart and give abiding fruit.

So when you talk to your children about sermons here is the foundation that you must lay about listening in church. You must impress upon them the importance of what is going on in church. God is speaking to them personally. Then you must show them that under every sermon there are different kinds of hearers and they must be the hearer that receives the Word into their heart. Over and over and over again we must stress with our children this very important thing of coming to God's house prepared to listen and then listening and then putting the listening into practice.

And so those are the three things I really want to talk to you about under this subject heading: preparing for listening, then listening, then putting listening into practice.

Well, how do you prepare for listening? Five things. Number one, you prepare yourself with prayer. So you teach your children that they should pray privately for God's blessing before they come to church.

Secondly, you reinforce it with your own prayer at the meal time especially just before the church service. I think half of your prayer, if not three quarters of it, at that meal time should be to beseech God that we might hear the Word and receive it and live it out and that God might help the minister to bring it to us and so on. Let there be an emphasis before every sermon in your family the importance of coming to God's house and that children realize this is extremely important that I listen.

The Puritans used to put it this way. Don't only dress your body, but also dress your soul with prayer when you come to God's house.

And then, thirdly, of course, you teach your children to pray when they come to the sanctuary.

We were extremely alarmed to hear in the consistory room—I don't now how true it is—but someone told us, a few people told us, actually, that there were some little children that weren't praying with the congregation when the congregation prayed. That is why we had the announcement a week or two ago. And frankly it stunned me. I thought certainly every father had taught his family that when the minister or the elders and deacons come out to pray, the whole congregation prays. Even if you are a three year old

² Luke 8:18

you fold your hands, you close your eyes and you pray for blessing on the sermon. But apparently that wasn't being done by everyone.

I hope it is now. But that's the responsibility of you as parents to teach your children to pray for a blessing upon the sermon. And when you put a lot of focus here, you see, what are you doing? You are reinforcing in your child's mind: I must listen. This is important.

Number two, come with an appetite for the Word. Come with an appetite for the Word.

Thomas Watson said, "A good appetite promotes good digestion, a good meal and good growth."

Peter put it this way, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby."³

And Ecclesiastes five verse one says, "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools."⁴

So you have to come with a tender and a teachable heart asking, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" We come to every sermon saying, "Lord..." That is how we should come, "What needs to be changed in me? What needs to be done differently? What do I need to learn today?"

And, you see, when we come with that attitude, our children will pick up those vibes and they will learn to listen better as well.

Now to come with a teachable heart, to come with an appetite for the Word means that you don't rush around until midnight on Saturday night and fall into bed exhausted and then get up at the very last moment before you come to church and frazzle, quickly gather your children together and hustle them into the van and quickly get to church and you make it by two minutes and you drop into the bench and you... You haven't even thought about the sermon. You never thought about what is coming up.

Well, what are you teaching your children? The only important thing is just to get there.

What did the Puritans teach their children? Do you know that most of the Puritans spent Saturday evening with their families home together? Certainly can't make that a rule in our day and age, but that is what they used to do. They spent the Saturday evening home alone together. They prepared for the sabbath. They prepared for preaching by reading together, by talking together. They knew what the minister was going to preach about. Often the Father would talk a little bit about it ahead of time.

³ 1 Peter 2:2

⁴ Ecclesiastes 5:1

For example, “Do you know what next Lord ’s Day is going to be?” translated in today’s language.

You open it up with your children. You say, “This is what the minister is going to talk about tomorrow. Let’s go over this. Let’s talk about this.” You prepare.

Or if the minister is doing a series of sermons you pretty well know what the next sermon is going to be.

One Puritan put it this way. “If you bake your bread on Saturday evening, you will find it warm and ready to be eaten on Sunday morning.”

That is often what they did, you see. They put the bread in the oven on Saturday evening. Sunday morning they took it out. It was good for eating.

And so they said, “Warm your heart on Saturday night.”

Put your heart into the oven, as it were, so that on Sunday morning you are in the mood, you are in the frame of mind, you have spent some time Saturday evening preparing, getting ready for worship. You are anticipating the day. By Sunday morning you have an appetite to come to the Word of God. And so Sunday morning you get up sufficiently early so your family can be ready without rushing, without panic. And on the way to church try to speak about something about what the sermon might be about.

The children are talking about all kinds of things. Try to steer it in the way like this is the Lord’s Day. Or maybe they are arguing and bickering on the way to church. Maybe you just need to say, “Children, we are on the way to the house of God. God is going to speaking to us. You have got to be in a good frame of listening. We will talk about these things later, tomorrow, not today. Let’s think about what we are about to do. We are going into the house of God.”

Number three, meditate on the importance of the preached Word as you enter the sanctuary of God. The high and holy triune God is about to meet with you to speak to you directly.

“The voice is on earth,” said Thomas Boston, “but the speaker comes from heaven.” What an awesome thought.

The gospel is not the Word of man, it is the Word of God. Come to church, then, looking to God and not to man and teach your children that. Let your whole demeanor, as you enter church, as you meditate, perhaps as you read the Bible ahead of church, let it convey that.

Blessed are the children, in my mind, who see their mom and dad searching the Scriptures ahead of church not looking around to see all who is here and who doesn’t come and not an air of curiosity, but an attitude of worship.

You don't have to read, of course, you can sit and meditate. Let your children feel that you realize you are coming into the presence of God.

And it is good, I think, from time to time to speak to your children about the fact that every single sermon they have to give an account of one day. Everything will have eternal consequences. Every sermon is a matter of death unto death or life unto life. The gospel preached will lift us up to heaven or it will cast us down to hell. It will advance our salvation or it will aggravate our condemnation. Coming to a sermon is a very serious business, indeed.

Thomas Watson said, "Woe be to those who go laden with sermons under shoulders into hell."

"The nearer," said David Clarkson, "to heaven any are lifted up by gospel preaching the lower will they sink into hell if they heed it not."

"Take heed therefore how ye hear,"⁵ children. This is a serious thing to do, to go to the house of God.

Fourthly, remember as you go to the house of God you are entering a battle arena. Many enemies will be there, children, to keep you from listening. There will be internal enemies in your heart, indwelling sin, your own ignorance and blindness and maybe your own evil heart that wants to not listen. But there will also be external enemies. Satan will want to keep you from listening, children, and worldliness and maybe even your toys and the things you play with and the things you do will try to keep you from listening. Satan will try to get your mind to fix on those things.

But whenever you have a thought come into your mind that gets you away from the sermon, children, ask God, ask God to help you put that thought out of your mind and go back to the sermon. And when your mind wanders again say, "Lord, forgive me," and go back to the sermon. And when it wanders again say, "Lord, forgive me," and go back to the sermon.

You see, Satan is always trying to get you children to not listen to the sermon. He wants to disturb you before the sermon. He wants to distract you during the sermon and he wants to dismantle the sermon from your mind when it is done.

You see, Satan has activity before, during and after the sermon. So should you. You should battle him and pray for strength to overcome all enemies by listening well.

And, fifthly, come with expectation. Come with expectation. There should be, when we come to church Sunday morning, in our prayer at breakfast time in our families, there should be an air of expectation. We get to go to the house of God.

⁵ Luke 8:18

I told you already how I wake up all my children on Sunday morning and say, “It is our favorite day. We get to go to the house of God today to worship God.”

No matter if they are groggy. I want that to be the first words they hear. This is an exciting thing. This is a day of expectation. This is the day that God normally works.

There is a Puritan by the name of David Clarkson. He has a sermon. I forget the exact words, but it is a very long title, but it says this. God works more frequently in the courts of God than in the tents of Jacob. And what he means to say is that in Israel every home was like a tent and God works from home to home, yes. But God especially comes when his people gather together in his courts. That is God’s favorite time to work.

So our children must feel that. There is expectation. This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice in it,”⁶ Psalter 318, Psalm 118.

Let us go to the house of God, children, expecting our covenant God to work in you as children. We expect it. It is the norm. It is not the abnormal. Sometimes I think when we grew up we were almost conveyed the feeling that it was abnormal for God to work in children. Not so. Ask the children of God in the congregation today. A good percentage of them will tell you Go began with them when they were children. Expect the Lord to work. Plead on his promises to work. And let your children feel it, that you go to church with this attitude. “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?”⁷

David put it this way, Psalm 119 verse 140. “Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it.”⁸ He loves God’s testimonies, he says, exceedingly more than gold. To the point, David says, where it nearly consumes me and I would meditate upon it all the day.

Well, we all come short of that, don’t we? But isn’t it a joy? You can set aside worldly obligations for a day and come to God’s house. And you know that God is going to work there. He is going to save people there. He is going to make people grow in grace there. What a beautiful thing.

Convey that to your children. They come with expectation.

Well, sadly our time is up. We are going to have to leave it there. But we will begin next time by actually how to listen to the sermon, how to listen to the sermon.

Let’s close with a word of prayer.

Great God of heaven, we bow before thee and we ask thy benediction upon these few thoughts, about how to come to a sermon in an attitude of listening. Oh Lord, that we may not only learn to listen well to other people and get them to open up to us to hear

⁶ Psalm 118:24

⁷ Jonah 3:9

⁸ Psalm 119:140

what they are saying, to empathize and to sympathize and to counsel and to encourage one another so that iron sharpens iron, but may that kind of listening also happen in the sermon that we may so listen, we and our children, that it may be, as it were, a dialog between thee and us in the sermon and as thou dost speak to us that we might be crying out with prayers and supplications to thee and that we might be unveiling our heart to thee, even under the preaching. Lord, draw us out in the sermons, thou as heaven's counselor, do thou work mightily in our hearts under the preaching of the Word of God. All this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.