

Training Your Children to Listen to Sermons

2016-2017 Family Living Class

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I'm going to speak to you today about how to help children listen in church and when you help children listen in church, I need to warn you ahead of time, you've got to listen well yourself also, be an example. So a lot of what I say will be applicable to anyone listening in church.

Let's read from James 1:22-25.

22 But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. 23 For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: 24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. 25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

I also want to read Luke 8:18.

18 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.

Let's pray.

Great God of heaven, we thank you so much for the Gospel and for the opportunity to hear sermons that proclaim the word of God. Please help us to help our children and as we seek to do so, Holy Spirit of God, please work in our children a desire to listen to the word of God, that thou wouldst be the greatest teacher of our children and that we would find our work in teaching them to listen to be easier because thou art working in them. Lord, please bless this talk and please help us with this problem. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I don't know of any parent that hasn't struggled, any God-fearing conscientious parent, who hasn't struggled with, "How can I get my children to really listen to sermons?" And sometimes you can just about pull out your hair, particularly when they're young. You

say it seems hopeless and it's discouraging, depressing. Well, I want to start out with an encouragement this morning. If you persevere, if you persevere you will experience that God will own it and bless it, at least in an outward way, as your children grow up. Particularly when they get to be 7-8 years old when they begin to write, you can begin to inculcate in them the taking of notes and that type of thing and you can even draw dotted lines like my wife did when our kids were young; if the sermon was about God's goodness, she would just write little dotted lines: G--- o--- d---, God is good, and the child would trace it and bring the notes home, talk to the child. God is good, repeat the sermon. So little simple things. Remember the illustrations a minister gives and say, "Did you hear something about this?" and try to job their memory. But, you see, little efforts along the way can help you and don't give up. Now and then you'll be disappointed but now and then you also will be pleased that your children are listening. So it's a battle. I heard that in church this morning, it's a battle all the time. Satan wants them to get nothing. You work against Satan in Christ's strength and dependency upon the Holy Spirit.

Now, it's astonishing how few people have written in church history about the importance of listening to the word of God. I've said before that there are thousands, literally thousands, tens of thousands of books written about how to preach but there are only a few little slim volumes; one by Edward Bickerstaff in the 19th century, about 150 pages, on how to listen to the word of God. I don't know why this is such a neglected topic because it's such an important topic for everyone, but also for children. And I do not know the single resource in the English language of any length on how to teach children to listen to sermons. It mystifies me because it's a big part of a parent's life. You're bringing your children to the house of God, you want them to listen.

Now, John Calvin is a rare exception. He talked to his church often about how to listen and he was discouraged about how people listened to his church as well. In fact he said, "If the same sermon is preached say to 100 people, 20 receive it with the ready obedience of faith while the rest hold it valueless, some even loathe it." Calvin said that the importance of listening to sermons begins with teaching your children to understand what's going on in church so you've got to teach them that there are two ministers in every sermon: the physical man who stands behind the pulpit who is ordained and anointed by God to bring the word of God, and the Holy Spirit who is the internal minister and takes the words that the minister speaks and sends them as arrows into the hearts of the hearers and they are a hearer so they need to receive the arrow of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I went on family visitation once and I talked to the children, of course on family visitation to each child, and the next Sunday I came in church and went in the pulpit and the mother from that family had a child that was a little restless and so she thought she'd get the child's attention so she said to the child, "Do you know who that is up there?" The child looked up at me and looked back at her mother and said, "God." The mother was like, "Oh!" But, you know, God is there and you actually need to teach your children that. The minister, of course, is not God, God forbid, but God is in the word and you need to teach them we go up to hear God speak to us through his word. As they get a bit older,

you can tell them, 10-11, "As long as the minister speaks the word of God, it is God speaking to us. So this is a very important event in our lives, children, in fact it's the most important event of all. There is nothing more important in your life than coming up to the house of God."

So that's what Calvin wanted to stress and if you have that conviction yourself that this is by far the most important thing you do every week, even if you don't do much conscientious teaching of your children, with that conviction they will feel that. So that's first and foremost. That's just by way of introduction. You, yourself, have got to feel how critical going up to the house of God is if you're going to really teach your children that as well.

Alright, so I want to divide my talk into three sections. First of all: preparing your children for the preached word. 1. You need to pray in the presence of your family for a blessing on the sermon, Sunday morning in particular, but also throughout the week. It's good to have your children hear that you are praying for the ministers who will be preaching the next Sunday, particularly on Saturday. You know, Saturday can be a very trying day for ministers as they are preparing the final preparations for the pulpit. They can be tormented and on Saturday in particular it would be good to pray for ministers that God will be with them in the study. Then on Sunday morning at breakfast time, your children should hear you praying earnestly for a blessing for every one of them as they go up to hear the very voice of God from the very word of God. So you pray for yourself, you pray for your children, you pray for the conversion of sinners, you pray for the edification of saints, you pray for the glorification of God's Triune name, you pray for listening ears, you pray for an understanding heart, but in your prayer what I think is most helpful is to have some excitement about the wonder. "We get to go to hear the word of God today! That's amazing!" And let that excitement spill over into your prayer. Let your prayer on Sunday morning be somewhat more elevated than your prayers on a regular day. "This is the day of the Lord. This is the day the Lord has made. This is the day of resurrection. We get to go up, children, to hear the word of God coming to us!" Let that attitude permeate your prayers. Then pray for the minister. Pray that he will receive the energy of the Holy Spirit, he will open his mouth boldly to make known the mysteries of the Gospel, pray for the Holy Spirit to convict and quicken and humble and comfort and guide through the word of God, that your whole family will benefit from it for good.

2. You stress with your dear ones the need for every family member to come with a hearty appetite for the word of God. You know, a good appetite promotes good digestion and good growth. Peter said, "as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow thereby." Solomon said, Ecclesiastes, 5:1, "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to offer the sacrifice of fools." So a good appetite for the word means we need to have tender and teachable hearts so a way of bringing that to young children is to say, like Paul did in Acts 9, "We need to go to the house of God, children, to say like Paul, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' because in every sermon God is telling us how we should live and we need to ask ourselves, 'Show me, Lord, how I should live.'" So come up with a hearty appetite for the word of God.

Now, I don't know what it's like in your family but it can be a struggle on Sunday morning to get everybody on time in the car. It is not helpful, it is not helpful to cultivate a hearty appetite for the word when there is a lot of stress in trying to get to church on time. So set a time a little bit before even when you should leave, when you're going to leave and so even if it spills over a few minutes, you're not all stressed out. And you get to church early enough that you can sit in the pew and be meditative. That's good for children, too. They can just sit quietly. Think. And teach your children to pray silently also when they come into church. I know we all pray together as a congregation but why not use those earlier minutes when you're sitting there all alone to pray as well. Don't just pray once for a sermon, just keep praying and let that be your example as well.

3. Discipline yourself and encourage your children to meditate on the importance of the preached word as you enter God's house. I've already hinted a little bit at that, but let me stress with you what Thomas Boston said. He said, "The voice is on earth but the speaker is in heaven." What an incredible thought. You teach your children, you see, that ministers are simply God's ambassadors bringing you God's word, 2 Corinthians 5:20. So you teach your children, "Don't focus on the minister. The minister is not the important one, but focus on the word of God he brings."

One of the most encouraging things for a minister, especially when you have multiple ministers in a church, is this: you're visiting someone and they're telling you how much they appreciate the sermons in the house of God and what they're doing for them and they say, "Yeah, and then this sermon came to me and I forget even who was the preacher, but the Lord..." I just love that, "I forget even who was the preacher, but the Lord..." The Lord, that's the key thing, you see. The Lord spoke this or the Lord did this.

When I grew up, my dad used to always say to us, I heard it from him so many times, he said, "The important thing isn't being religious or having a lot of exercises or experiences, the important thing is what has the Lord done in your life." He used to say to me, "You know, some people can talk for an hour and a half about how they got converted but, really, most of it is what they did." What's really important is what the Lord did. What the Lord did. Then you don't have a really long story, do you? What the Lord did. The Lord spoke to me at this particular occasion. The Lord convicted me of sin. The Lord drew me to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that's what you want to focus on with your children, what's important is what the Lord is saying in the sermon, not how I feel, first of all, that's significant because of what the Lord says but the important thing is not what I want, it's what the Lord wants, what the Lord is saying. It's all about the Lord and the goal of worship is that we worship the Lord and we bring him glory in worshiping. So teach your children that.

And teach them, too, that every sermon counts for eternity. That's the importance of the preached word. Salvation comes through faith and faith comes through hearing God's word, Romans 10 says, so every sermon, Deuteronomy 32 says, is a matter of life and death. So the preached Gospel either lifts us up to heaven or it will cast us down to hell. "The nearer," David Clarkson said, "The nearer to heaven any are lifted up by Gospel

preaching, the lower they will sink into hell if they heed it not, therefore, take heed how you hear." That's why the Puritans called the Sabbath the market day of the soul. As they went to market each week to stock up on supplies, so we stock up on our spiritual goods for the week by listening to sermons and meditating on them through the week to come. Sermons are very very important.

4. We prepare our children for the preached word when we remind them, which I hinted at in the sermon this morning, that they are entering a battleground when they walk into church. So here's an example of what you'd say to a 12 year old, your children, "Many enemies are going to oppose your listening today. Internally you may be distracted by worldly cares, by even lusts of your flesh, by a cold heart, maybe even by a critical spirit. Externally you may be distracted by the behavior of a few people in church or even the dress of others or noises or people moving around. Satan will oppose your listening to God's word with all his power because he knows if you truly hear the word of God and you respond to it, he will lose you. So what he wants to do is just what Jesus said, he wants to take the seed of the word that the minister throws over the congregation and he wants to peck away every seed so that you don't profit from the word. Don't let Satan get away with that."

5. Teach your children to pray that they might come with a loving expectant faith to the house of God. Fearing God, delighting in God, this is what they need. Teach that to them. So try to cultivate, I mean, the Holy Spirit alone can do this, of course, but try to cultivate a love for the word in you, in yourself, and in your children by stressing the need for faith.

Now, what about receiving the preached word? Receiving the preached word. Well, talk to your children this way. 1. "Dear family, we need to listen with an understanding and a tender conscience." And you can explain to them here Jesus' parable of the sower: that people listen to the word of God in different ways. You can say, "Well, one person is like a stony-hearted superficial listener and the word falls on a hard path and it makes little impression on this hard heart. Don't be that kind of listener. You listen and you let your conscience speak as you listen. 2. The easily impressed but resistant listener is like rocky ground. A plant begins to spring up right away but it soon withers and dies because it lacks sufficient nutrients. And this is like a listener who gets really excited about a sermon he hears but then goes out into the world on Monday and just forgets all about it. 3. Don't be a half-hearted distracted listener. That's like thorn-ridden soil. Jesus said, "And that which fell among thorns are they which when they have heard go forth and are choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life and bring no fruit to perfection." You see, this is the kind of hearer who can get impressed by sermons but his heart is still in the world and he fills his life with worldly things so that sermons just get crowded out and the word of God is choked by the thorns. But, children, you need to be an understanding fruitful listener. That's the fourth kind of listener and the fourth kind of listener applies the Gospel teaching he hears on Sunday to his conscience and to his life throughout the week and he bears fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Children, you need to ask yourself: the sermons I hear on Sunday, does it make a difference in my life on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday?

2. Teach your children to listen attentively to the preached word of God. Do you know Luke 19:48 describes the people that are listening to Jesus and he said, it's an interesting phrase in Greek, it actually says literally, "They hung upon him hearing." That's what the Greek says, "They hung upon him hearing," or they attended to the word of God, as it says in Acts 16 of Lydia. She attended to. The Greek word there is, "She turned her mind to the things spoken by Paul." You've got to concentrate. Children, you've got to concentrate and listen.

You see, Calvin said we should not listen to sermons as spectators but as participants. You participate in it and when the minister prays, you pray with him. The minister is not the only one working in the sermon. Good listening is hard work. You're working in every sermon because good listening means worshiping God continually. So respond to a sermon, listen to a sermon as a matter of life and death because that's what it is, it's a matter of life and death.

So we are to attend to. Now, the word "attend to" is derived from two Latin words. The first one means "to," and the second means "tendo," which means "to stretch or to bend," and we get the word "tendon" from that, don't we? Or sinew, that stretches. So the word "attend" literally means we must stretch our minds by listening.

So tell your children that. Stretch your mind. Concentrate. Make sure you get enough sleep the night before so you don't get drowsy. Listen. And as you listen, what you really want to listen for too is: how does God want me to be different because of this sermon? And what does God want me to know from this sermon that I didn't know before?

Thirdly say, "Dear family, we need to listen with submissive faith." James said, "Receive with meekness the ingrafted word." Meekness means submission, a willingness to hear the word; a willingness to be corrected and that, of course, the Holy Spirit only can give as well. But you can teach children a certain amount of that. God has to bless it but you need to stress with them to be truly submissive to God we need faith. That's the gift of God so pray for that faith. Martin Luther said, "If the chief ingredient of a medicine is missing, the medicine will not be effective." Faith is a chief ingredient of listening to a sermon so you and your children need faith.

Fourth, you listen with humility and serious self-examination. You say to yourself, "As I examine myself under this sermon, do I really want to receive God's truth as a student? Do I really want to learn? Do I really want to grow under this sermon?" And stop listening for other people. That's a problem. That's a problem in all of our lives. "Oh, So-and-so needs that." It can be a problem for a minister too because you know the flock. But as ministers, we've got to listen for ourselves as well. Don't be like Peter who said, "And Lord, what shall this man do?" There is a time for thinking about what other people, what spiritual condition they're in and loving their souls, oh yeah, that's good, but during a sermon, God is speaking to you. And so it applies what Jesus said here sort of in a certain way, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me." That's what we should do in every sermon.

Now, I like to think of it this way and I'm putting this in my own words but Thomas Watson gave me this idea. You see, when a doctor tells you something about how to maintain your body, what do you do? Do you just say, "Oh well," and let it go in one ear and out the other? "It doesn't matter." No. He says, "I'm going to prescribe this medication for you. I want you to take this every morning, every evening right before your meal." And you're listening. I used to say to my wife, "Have we got that down? Let's write it down." Know exactly what the doctor says. I'm going to follow exactly what the doctor says. In a sermon, the heavenly Physician is coming to you and saying, "If you want a healthy soul, this is how you must think, this is how you must speak, this is how you must act. This is what you must do." So you ought to listen. Listen as if your life depends on it because it does.

Now, what about practicing the preached word, then? 1. We teach our children to strive to retain and pray over what they've heard. Hebrews 2:1, "we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip." And so what that means is, I wish we had done this with our children but I would recommend it, one of the best things you could do after a sermon is over is get on your knees as a family afterward and pray as a father. That would be great if you could do that. Joseph A. said, "We must go from our knees to the sermon and go from the sermon back to our knees." And too often we think the sermon is done and we don't even talk to our children about the sermon on the way home and the sermon doesn't even come back in the conversation. It's as if we didn't go to church in our socializing later in the day. That's convicting. That really ought not to be. So strive to retain and pray over what you've heard.

Now, some of you remember my former secretary, Mrs. Q., just a very sweet godly lady and she told me that what she did, she told me this once, she said, "I take as many sermon notes as I can during the sermons, all three of them," in those days we had three sermons, and then she said, "On Sunday evening when I go to bed, I get down on my knees and I lay the sermon notebook in front of me and I just read through them. Read a couple of notes, pray about it. Read a couple of notes, pray about it. Read a couple of notes, pray about it." She said, "That was usually the best part of my Sabbath day because I was praying, drinking in the sermons and praying over them." What a beautiful thing to do.

Secondly, teach your children to familiarize themselves with the truths that they've heard and one of the best ways to do that, according to the Westminster Directory for Public Worship, is when dad and mom engage in, this is what the form says, "repetition of sermons, especially by calling their families to an account of what they've heard." They go on to explain, what you do is you repeat the sermon to your children and dialog with them through Q&A about the sermon at the level where they're at and that tests you as a parent, how well you've been listening, because if the average sermon comes at about a 14 year old level and you've got 7 year olds, I mean, part of the sermon a 7 year old could understand but not all of it, you then have the task of taking the main thoughts of that sermon and repeating them at a 7 year old level, which is a challenging thing but it's a very encouraging thing.

Now, we found in our family, though we haven't always done it fully consistently, but we found that the very best thing for listening really is note taking. Not every child will take notes the same way. Not every child will profit from note taking the same way. But when you do take notes, most children, most children will get more out of the sermon than when they don't take notes. Some children will take notes more literally of what the minister says, other children will kind of put it in their own words which is probably a bit better, but it helps concentrate the mind. And when your children learn to take notes, what's really good is then you can come home afterward and speak to them about it and you can read over their notes and talk about it and that's a wonderful thing as well. Now, if mom and dad are taking notes as well, then that's also helpful because then you can refer to your own notes too as you're talking to your children later about it.

Then finally, put the sermon into action. Put the sermon into action. Do it, basically. Be doers of the word. Be active hearers and doers. That's what James is saying. That's where the rubber hits the road.

Alright, let's pray together.

Gracious God, we ask thy blessing upon this talk. Please help us to help our children and please bless our efforts so that they may listen better to the word of God, and above all, give thy Holy Spirit to bless it to their souls. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Training Your Children to Listen to Sermons

Luke 8:16–18

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