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Acts 17:10-15

Outward Church: How to Listen to a Sermon

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Sermons are boring!... Let me rephrase. Sermons can be boring. I grew up in a Baptist church in Estes Park, Colorado. The pews were, and still are, a lovely shade of orange. For a long time, I got out of having to listen to sermons regularly by helping my dad with children's church. It was like a "get out of jail free" card. It was fantastic. At children's church, there were plenty of club crackers, and the Gatorade was flowing.

But after a while, I started sitting through the worship service and listening to the sermons. I'll be honest, a lot of the time, I tried to distract myself or think about other things. But, over time, I began to listen more attentively and be more interested. Some still bored me, but many held my attention. The best ones were the ones that I couldn't help but listen to. Like, I'd try to zone out, but what the pastor was saying was so compelling, I'd keep tuning back in.

If you were to estimate, how many sermons do you think you've listened to in your lifetime? Let's see, if there are 52 weeks a year, maybe estimate you hear 50 a year. Now, how many years have you been listening to sermons? I'd say, regularly, since about the age of 12. So 21 years, times 50 sermons, is about 1,050 sermons. And that doesn't include all the additional YouTube and podcast sermons and Christmas Eve sermons I've listened to, so maybe add a couple hundred more. And account for sitting through some sermons during those early years as well. My number is a little complicated because I've preached some of the sermons. So, let's just call it good at about 1,500 sermons. That's not bad. I've listened to 1,500 sermons.

If each one of those sermons averaged 35 minutes, I've sat through 52,500 minutes of preaching, or 875 hours of preaching. That's a pretty big investment. I want to make sure that I get something out of my investment. That all that time and commitment is worth it. How many sermons do you think you've listened to? How many hours do you think you've invested? Have you gone through the motions, just entertaining yourself till it's over? Or do you want to get something out of it?

Today, I want to talk about how to listen to a sermon (reformation21 article). On Shark Tank, they like to say that time is their most precious commodity. Time is money, right? Time is a precious resource. It's too valuable to just go through the motions. The good news is that when we give God our time and set aside space for him to speak to us through his preached word, things happen. God moves.

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

That sounds kind of painful, doesn't it? But it means that God's Word, when we really hear it can work a miracle in our hearts, to transform us from the inside out.

Maybe you're not a Christian. You don't buy what the Bible is preaching. You're giving us this one shot, and then you're out of here. Well, first, thank you. Thank you for listening. Thank you for hearing me out. Thank you for seeing what this Bible and the story of Jesus is all about. But be warned, the Bible will mess with you. If you really listen and want to hear, you won't be the same. But isn't that good? You don't want to waste your time. You don't want to just go through another inspirational self-help program. You want to encounter the living-breathing God. I think God gave us sermons as a way to do that.

Are you intrigued? Are you listening? Our passage today tells us how to listen to a sermon (TGC article). And since there's nothing more powerful in the world than alliteration, I give you three Rs: receive, research, respond. **How to listen to a sermon:**

1) Receive with an open heart.

We're continuing our story in the book of Acts. Paul is on his second missionary journey. He's just been chased out of Thessalonica, which is in Macedonia (modern-day Greece), and he's arrived in Berea. Berea is "about forty-seven miles southwest of Thessalonica on the road to Athens." (Clinton) Before, he was traveling along the via Egnatia highway to Rome but diverted south to Athens. Paul has brought Silas, Timothy, and probably Luke with him. They go into Berea to the Jewish synagogue to preach about Jesus.

Acts 17:10-11 (ESV)

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

These Jews are described as being "more noble" than those in Thessalonica, the ones who chased them out of town because of their jealousy (Acts 17:5). There was something special about the Bereans' character. They were humble. They were teachable. They were not petty or jealous. Their hearts were open to whatever God wanted to teach them through the Scriptures. They were willing to receive with an open heart.

When you think about listening to a sermon, would you think about opening your heart? Would you consider praying, "God, I want to hear whatever you have for me?" Have you ever tried to eat with your mouth closed? Try to eat with your mouth closed at lunch today. My daughter has learned she can close her mouth if she doesn't want to eat more. It makes it hard to feed her. To eat a sermon, we have to open our ears and listen, but even more so, to really let it sink deep, we have to open our hearts. What does that look like?

Well, it says, "they received the word with all eagerness." They were **anticipating** what Paul had to say. They were excited by it. How might you anticipate hearing God's Word on Sunday? Three ways:

- 1) **You can read the Bible passage beforehand.** We're working through the book of Acts, so just read ahead. Read all around. Understand the story. Write down questions about things you don't understand. And then if I don't answer them, ask me.
- 2) **You can pray for the Lord to open your heart to whatever he wants to teach you beforehand.** I often pray that the Lord would say the things he wants to say through me. Do you ever play catch? It takes two to play catch. I was once playing baseball catch with a friend on a hill. I reached up to catch the baseball, and it hit me right under the nose. I wasn't ready. I couldn't see it. I'm trying to throw the metaphorical Bible ball at you. Get that glove up! Pray God will help you catch it. I really don't want you to get hit in the face with a Bible ball. I'll pray to throw well. You pray to catch well. We can pray for each other too. Prayer opens our hearts.
- 3) **You can pray for the church community to hear what God wants us to hear.** Don't just pray for yourself; pray for all of us. Would we be moved and shaped as a church community in the direction God wants us to go?

But what if you disagree with what I preach? I never preach anything controversial, right? Even when we hear something we might not agree with right away, we can still pray the Holy Spirit would open our hearts to the Scriptures and whatever he has for us to learn. We still use discernment, but we discern what is true by reading and studying the Scriptures, which brings us to our second R. #1) Receive it with an open heart.

2) Research the Scriptures.

This is what the Bereans are famous for. When Paul preaches to them, it says, “they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” What exactly were they doing? Paul is preaching the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, a message they’ve never heard before. By this point, he might have written the book of Galatians, but that’s not what they’re talking about. The Bereans heard what Paul was saying about Jesus being the Messiah, God’s special anointed king, and they search the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) to see if what Paul says about Jesus the Messiah is true.

- **Genesis 3:15** – The promise that one day the offspring of Eve would crush the serpent’s head, but the serpent would wound his heel. Then they considered if Jesus has fulfilled that through the cross.
- **Genesis 22** – The story of Abraham nearly sacrificing his son Isaac. Then considering if God the Father sacrificing his son on the cross is a fulfillment of this story.
- **Leviticus** – Looking at the sacrificial system, how it was never enough, and if Jesus is indeed the spotless lamb, he can pay for the people’s sins once and for all.
- **2 Samuel 7** – God promised that one of David’s descendants would sit on his throne forever. Jesus is one of David’s descendants (Matthew 1; Luke 3).
- **Isaiah 7:14** – The promise that a virgin would conceive and give birth, and then they considered if that is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus to Mary.
- **Isaiah 52:13-53:12** – The prophecy of the suffering servant who would be “high and lifted up,” would be “despised and rejected by men” and would be “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.” And they would consider if it was by Jesus’ “wounds we are healed.”
- **Daniel 7:13-14** – They would look at Daniel’s vision of the “son of man” (a name Jesus often used of himself) being presented before “the Ancient of Days” and given dominion, glory, and a kingdom.

One thing I really appreciated about Terry’s preaching was that he drew us into the Hebrew Bible (and yes, I say “Hebrew Bible” partially in honor of him). He’d read the passages surrounding a text. One of the points he made was that when a New Testament author referenced an Old Testament text, they didn’t want you to just look at that one verse but go back to the surrounding verses too. Do you remember when Terry preached on the temptation of Jesus? Satan took Jesus up to the top of the temple and told him to throw himself down. Then Satan quoted Psalms 91:11-12:

“He will command his angels concerning you,
to guard you,”

and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.” (ESV)

Then Terry said, “Satan should have chosen a different passage. He chose a really, really bad passage.” That was Terry’s way of getting excited. So Terry took us back to that Psalm, Psalm 91:11-12, which Satan quoted. But then he took us to the very next verse, Psalm 91:13, which says:

You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. (ESV)

This reminded us of the promise of Genesis 3:15 that one day one of Eve's offspring would crush the serpent's head, "he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." As Terry said, the serpent is trying to get Jesus to prove that he is the Son of God, but Jesus does it in a much deeper way. Jesus proves he is the Son of God at the cross. At the cross, Jesus tramples Satan through his own death. He is bruised, but we know he rises from the grave. It's not a permanent injury, but Satan's defeat is forever.

The gospel is that if you trust in Jesus, Jesus will take care of your Satan and sin problem. He'll forgive you and free you from the serpent's power. This is the big story of the Bible. God rescues his people by becoming one of us. The Bereans would have searched the Scripture and found this to be true.

Can I encourage you to read your Bible? The famous Church Father Augustine converted to Christianity when he was sitting underneath a fig tree and heard a child chanting, "Take and read, take and read." He thought God was telling him to take his word and read it. God's word changed his life.

But are there other ways to be Berean? To listen carefully? To test the Scriptures?

1. Compare what the preacher says to what the Bible says. See if they match. Compare it against the whole Scriptures, the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the general story of the Bible.

When I'm preaching, open your Bibles, look down, ask if what I'm saying matches up with what the Bible says. Write down any questions you have and then go home and read some more. If what I say doesn't match the Bible, you can throw a pie in my face, preferably Banana cream pie. Or bring a pie and we can chat.

2. Study the Scriptures in community with others.

Our culture loves "rugged individualism." I can do it by myself, with nobody else's help. But the synagogue was a corporate environment. Individual Jews didn't have copies of the Hebrew Bible. They would have had a Rabbi come and help them, and all together, they would have read and wrestled with it. I appreciate YouTube. I appreciate blogs and articles. I appreciate commentaries. Use all those things to help you study. But there's something really special about wrestling through an issue with a fellow believer. That's why it's really healthy to participate in Christian Education or to pair up and study the Bible together with a fellow believer. When I study the Bible in community, I learn things I'd never see on my own.

How to listen to a sermon: 1) Receive with an open heart; 2) Research the Scriptures; and . . .

3) Respond in faith.

Verse 12 says, "Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men." The people responded. They believed. What is the Lord saying to you right now? How is the Holy Spirit nudging you? Are you going to respond?

Maybe you've never met Jesus, and the nudge is to give your life to Christ. Don't ignore the Holy Spirit's nudge on your heart. This is the time to respond. Repent, believe, and God will transform you.

Jesus told a parable of a sower sowing seeds on different types of soil. His message is the seed. He had this to say about what happens to good soil and seed.

Luke 8:15 (ESV)

As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. (see also James 1:22)

I want to be the good soil that bears good fruit. It all starts with hearing the word and holding it fast. That means to believe it and do what it says. This is not a call to perfection. It's a call to Spirit-empowered obedience. The Holy Spirit helps us listen to God's Word and respond in faith.

How to listen to a sermon: 1) receive with an open heart; 2) research the Scriptures, and respond in faith.

Receive, research, respond.

The goal of sermons is not to remember every single one. I've eaten about 36,000 meals in my lifetime, and I can only remember a few, typically the really special ones.¹ I remember my mom making a really special ice-cream cake for my 11th or 12th Birthday, and one of my best friends eating a lot more than me. I can remember Monica making me a meal for the first time. I think it was some type of cheesy potato dish. I can't remember what I eat most days, but I can tell you the kinds of meals, and what they taste like, and how good they are. Those meals have sustained me, filled me, given me energy, and kept me going.

You're never going to remember all the sermons I preach, but you can remember the kinds of things God is teaching you and what the Bible is saying through its story. You can know that sometimes it tastes spicy, and other times it's sweet, but all of the time, God wants to fill you and grow you.

John tells us in his gospel in its very first verses that Jesus was the "Word." That means when we hear a sermon, and it's faithful to Scripture, and it's touched by the Holy Spirit, we can actually hear Jesus speaking. That somehow, Jesus, the word embodied, speaks through sermons. I want to hear him. I want to hear Jesus speak. *Receive, research, respond.*

Philippians 4:8 (ESV)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen to [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of sermons? Do you like them? Do you prefer other parts of the church service?
2. How many sermons do you think you've listened to? Do you feel like you need to listen differently to sermons going forward? How so?
3. What does it mean to receive a sermon with an open heart? What's the right heart-attitude look like? What are some practical things we can do to prepare?
4. What does it mean to review the Scriptures? What do the Bereans do? What are some general principles we can apply to our study?
5. How important is the Old Testament to understand the New Testament? What should we do when we encounter a verse in the New Testament that references the Old?
6. Where are some places in the Old Testament, beyond the ones we mentioned, that speak of Jesus?
7. What are some pros and cons of reviewing by ourselves versus in-community?
8. Why does it matter if we do what we hear? How important is the application? What are some ways to apply this sermon to your life this week?

Sources

¹ 33 (years) x 365 (days) x 3 (meals a day) = 36,135

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