

## Your Role in Expository Preaching, Part 2: Attention

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Let's be honest. At one point or another, all of us have criticized the preacher. Roast preacher is often a top menu choice after Sunday morning services. Some of the typical complaints: the sermon was too long, or too short; the preacher didn't use enough illustrations, or he illustrated too much; the sermon was too deep, or too shallow. Whether we have legitimate points or not, whether our complaints are warranted or not, preachers have to be the most commonly, most frequently scrutinized orators ever.

With the proliferation of modern media, preachers today face an unprecedented challenge of being compared with other preachers. Do you ever find yourself wishing you had one of those famous radio/television/Internet preachers in your local church pulpit? Measuring your pastor against the supremely gifted isn't just unfair or ungracious; it's detrimental to your spiritual growth. It's not the preacher, the human instrument, that's the main issue for you (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-7). God uses *what the preacher preaches* to change lives—that's where your attention needs to be focused.

So, how can you get your eyes off the man—his style, his dress, his mannerisms—and fix your gaze on God and His Word? What will it take to get the taste of roast preacher out of your mouth and to start feasting on soul-nourishing truth?

As discussed in the previous article, anticipating what God will teach you in the sermon is a good start. I gave you plenty to think about in that regard, so **click here** if you need a reminder or missed the article. The last point I made in that article was about prayerfulness—praying for your preacher and your understanding of what he's preaching. That's an issue of attention, which is the subject I'd like to take up now.

### Appreciate Expository Preaching

Giving the proper attention to expository preaching will never happen if you don't learn to appreciate it. And you'll never appreciate expository preaching until you understand how crucial it is, how vital it is in God's plan to sanctify you.

According to the Puritan pastor Jeremiah Burroughs,

In the hearing of God's Word we profess our dependence upon God, for the knowing of His mind, and the way to eternal life....Remember that you come to tender up your homage to God, to sit at God's feet, and there to profess your submission to Him. That is one end of your coming to hear sermons. (

## *Gospel Worship)*

It's in this act of worship—listening attentively to your pastor's sermon—that God changes your thinking, leads you to repentance, grows you in wisdom, and conforms you to the image of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Expository preaching is, and always has been, God's *chief tool* for growing you in His grace. Jesus said, "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Since the point of the expository sermon is to get at the truth of God's Word, paying attention to expository preaching week after week is the surest path of sanctification. As such, it deserves your closest attention.

I couldn't possibly overstate the case by saying that within the context of corporate worship, preaching is the *primary means* whereby God dispenses His strengthening grace into your life. Your spiritual advancement hinges on how determined you are to assemble with other Christians (cf. Heb. 10:25), and how ardently you pay attention when God's Word is faithfully proclaimed.

God has called, equipped, and gifted godly pastors—yes, even your pastor!—to preach His Word to you. God's goodness in this regard means you are responsible to listen attentively to what He says through His servants.

### **Stay Faithful to the Local Church**

If you are going to listen and give your attention to the expository preaching event, you've got to be in church, regularly. I know that's not a news flash. It's not rocket science or brain surgery either. But it is a discipline so tremendously important, and yet so terribly neglected.

There are those today who flit about from church to church, taking a little from here, a little from there. Others claim to be part of the universal, invisible church—"The church isn't a building. Why trouble myself with the inferior, brick-and-mortar version of the higher, transcendent reality?" Still others prefer to listen to preachers on the radio or the Internet—they value anonymity and eschew the authority and accountability of the local church.

The writer to the Hebrews thought differently: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, *not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some*, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near" (Heb. 10:24-25, emphasis added).

You can't grow in Christ if you're not committed to, and regularly attending, a local church. Yes, personal reading, study, and meditation on the Scripture are all important—crucial, in fact. But those private disciplines do not replace the corporate gathering and the transforming event of preaching. Without regular church attendance, you will inevitably suffer great harm. You will begin to shrivel up

spiritually and be of little use to those around you.

Bottom line—If you're going to listen attentively, you've got to be there. God uses your pastor, faithfully preparing and preaching every week, to deliver timeless truths for your growth. You need to join with others who love you, who will help you apply the truth to your life. Nothing can substitute—not even good preaching which you may hear elsewhere—for your habitual attendance to the weekly services of your own local church.

## **Receive the Word**

The more you appreciate expository preaching and stay faithful to your local church, the closer you'll be to the intended result of giving attention to expository preaching—receiving the Word. To receive the Word is to see your life transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Moses spoke to the heart of receiving the Word in Deuteronomy 32: “Take to heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life” (vv. 46-47). What could be more important? Your very *life* is at stake in receiving the Word.

Some people seem to think appreciating good preaching and regular church attendance is receiving the Word. According to Jay Adams, there's more involved:

Preaching is one of God's chief means of sowing seed and helping fruit grow: it is a way of watering and fertilizing the crop. But you must break up the hard clods that have formed in your soul over the week, turn under the weeds, and prepare the good soil to receive the good seed. (*A Consumer's Guide to Preaching*)

Receiving the Word requires effort and often involves discomfort—it's a confrontation with the perfect character and standards of God. Again, Adams writes, “Like disobedient children, people do not want to listen. Even believers, habituated in ways of disobedience, have great difficulty listening to God....It has been easier for sinners to blame preachers than to admit their own reluctance to listen” (*A Consumer's Guide to Preaching*).

If you have been critical of your pastor's sermons, if you've believed he just doesn't measure up to others you've heard, it might be your own personal sin that's the main issue! Perhaps you need to confess to the Lord your partiality and ask Him to help you love your pastor's preaching. See if God will not open up to you a storehouse of blessing from the sermons you hear in your own church.

Confession is a good place to start in order to receive the Word. When you take the time to confess all known sin, the Lord will remove hindrances and your heart will open to hearing the truth (cf. 1

Peter 2:1-2). Confessing and forsaking your sin readies your heart to “receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21).

As your pastor preaches and the sermon progresses, you are exposed to the inspired “sword” of the Word (cf. Heb. 4:12). The Spirit of God can then bring you under conviction of sin, leading you to true repentance. When you practice a lifestyle of repentance, you’ll find an increased desire to hear more of God’s truth, which promotes even more spiritual growth.

It’s a reciprocative relationship—receiving the Word leads to repentance, and repentance leads to receiving the Word. And it all starts by being content, satisfied with the pastor God gave you, and staying attentive to what God is teaching you through his expository sermons. Simply stated: Your increasing holiness depends on how you listen to God’s appointed herald.

Don’t roast your preacher every Sunday. He may not be the most gifted or most prominent of God’s servants; but he’s God’s man for your greater growth in the gospel. God will *certainly* use your receptivity to your pastor’s sermons for your spiritual good. Your life in Christ, your growth in grace, and your joy in the Lord depends on how you listen, how you pay attention to expository preaching.

How is it going for you? Diagnose yourself with the following questions: Do you appreciate expository preaching as God’s chief tool for your spiritual growth? Do you put yourself and your family under the regular, verse-by-verse exposition of the Scriptures in a local Christian assembly? As you listen, are you receptive? Do you prepare to receive the Word by frequently confessing and repenting of your sins?

As the answers to those questions become “yes” in your life, the Lord will bless you abundantly with the riches of His grace, unfolded in His Word. Stay tuned for the final article in this series, in which we will look at the need for personal application of the sermon in your life.

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