

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Your Role in Expository Preaching, Part 1: Anticipation

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Have you ever arrived at church on Sunday in a, let's call it, a less-than-ready condition for worship? Maybe you were up too late the night before, argued with your wife while getting ready, barked at the kids, kicked the dog. By the time you get to church, you're truly *not* ready to listen to a sermon!

But getting your mind and heart ready is exactly what expository preaching requires. Listening to an expository sermon, *really* listening—as in thinking, praying, following the argument, concentrating on the meaning and its application to your life—that's hard work.

Merely hearing a sermon is easy; it requires a properly functioning auditory system, but it's essentially a passive exercise. Actively listening to the preaching of God's Word requires mental alertness, focused attention, and a receptive heart. That's the kind of listening Solomon implored his son to do:

My son, if you will *receive* my sayings, and *treasure* my commandments within you, *make your ear attentive* to wisdom, *incline your heart* to understanding; for if you *cry* for discernment, *lift your voice* for understanding; if you *seek* her as silver, and *search for* her as for hidden treasures...(Proverbs 2:1-4, emphasis mine)

That describes an activity that's quite active, requiring energy and effort, and that's exactly what God would have us do each Sunday when we sit down in the pew.

If the public proclamation of the Bible is the primary means of change in a believer's life (and it is: 1 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17), then it's vital that we get ourselves ready to listen. You've got to anticipate the sermon every week. Here's how...

Prepare Your Attitude

Your basic outlook as a ready listener should be to identify yourself as the target of the message. In other words, put the bulls-eye on your own chest and expect the Spirit to bring conviction to your conscience. The whole purpose of sitting in the listener's seat is exposure to the message for the purpose of personal confrontation, information, conviction, motivation, and transformation.

Your job is not to critique the preacher, evaluating how well he's doing, how clever or interesting he is, or how well structured his sermon is. You're not there to admire or criticize a piece of oratorical art. You are there to receive God's Word personally from one of God's ministers. The object of the preaching event is to anticipate change in your thinking, attitude, and behavior. You should eagerly prepare yourself with a high level of spiritual anticipation.

Prepare Your Body

Just before Jesus was betrayed, He asked His disciples to stand watch while He prayed in anticipation of the cross. Apparently, they were not physically ready to comply. “[Jesus] came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’” (Matthew 26:40-41).

Yes, the flesh is weak. No argument there, right? With each passing year, our bodies grow older and weaker, becoming more of an impediment to our spiritual lives. We can stem the tide of physical decline, and its adverse affect on listening, by being in the best physical condition possible.

Your body works best with adequate rest, well-balanced meals, and proper exercise. “Adequate,” “well-balanced,” and “proper” will vary, depending on the person, but you’ve got to take these things seriously if you want your mind to be alert and ready to comprehend an expository sermon. This isn’t just a question of how you spend Saturday evenings and early Sunday mornings; it’s a question of your whole lifestyle.

Think about it. You don’t generally listen well when you are tired or hungry; your mind tends to drift and wander. That’s common when you haven’t been taking good care of your body. On the other hand, proper exercise and rest ensures good respiration and circulation that helps you stay awake and attentive. That’s essential for hearing God’s message in a refreshing and dynamic way.

Prepare Your Heart

Expository preaching is a spiritual event through which Almighty God Himself speaks His Word to the hearts of men and women so they can know, understand, and obey His will. That means prayer—open communion with the living God—is an essential element in getting your heart ready to hear what God wants to say to you. So get ready to listen by praying about two distinct, yet inseparable, subjects: pray for the preacher and pray for your understanding.

First of all, pray for the preacher as he communicates God’s message to you. In fact, Paul solicited prayer from others and considered it foundational to an effective apostolic ministry (cf. Romans 15:30-32; Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 4:2-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1). Gardiner Spring shares Paul’s sentiment when he says,

If a people are looking for rich sermons from their minister, their prayers must supply him with the needed material; if they seek for faithful sermons, their prayers must urge him, by a full and uncompromising manifestation of the truth, to commend himself to every man’s conscience in the sight of God (see 2 Corinthians 4:2). If God’s people are going to expect powerful and successful sermons, their prayers must make him a blessing to the souls of men! (Gardiner Spring, *A Plea to Pray for Pastors*, 3)

Your prayer life is essential to the effectiveness of the expository sermon. And don’t you think your fervent prayers for your pastor will help you to listen more effectively in anticipation of what God will say to you through his sermon? You’ll be looking for the answer to your prayers every Sunday!

The second subject of your preparatory prayers should be for understanding, that God would give

you the ability to comprehend what He communicates through the preacher. That's how Paul prayed on behalf of others. He said, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know" your hope, your riches, and God's power toward you (Ephesians 1:18-19). Paul also prayed, "that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding," so that you'll grow in Christ and please God.

Want an example, a model to follow? As you anticipate the next sermon you hear, follow the prayer of the psalmist: "Deal bountifully with Your servant, that I may live and keep Your Word. Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law" (Psalm 119:17-18). When you pray that way from the heart, God will answer and teach you what pleases Him through your pastor's preaching ministry.

Armed with a ready attitude, a rested and healthy body, and a tuned-up prayer life, you'll be ready to do the hard work of listening to good expository preaching. God will bless and prosper you, equipping you to do the work of the ministry.

There's more to say about your role in expository preaching, so don't go away. In the next installment, I'll aim to get your attention as we focus on the preaching event itself.

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