

How to Listen to a Sermon

by Dr. Fred H. Walters, Ph. D

If one has been a Christian for 50 years, then you will have listened to over 2,500 sermons, and yet few of us can recall the topics, Scriptures, or points of more than a few sermons. In talking to Christian workers, I find that few younger (and older) people have attention spans longer than 20 minutes, and audio-visual aids do not hold people's attention as much as they used to. The average preacher despairs on the response and results of carefully crafted sermons delivered to seemingly unresponsive ears and often wonders if the congregation is awake.

This is the flip side of preparing a sermon, and it seems that the average congregational member doesn't prepare himself for the sermon. A sermon is not a lecture or a bunch of warm stories. The Sermon is a message from God, using the Bible as its focus, delivered to people in a congregation. It may be factual, motivational, devotional, or persuasive in nature, and its delivery may be made by people with varying gifts and backgrounds, but in all cases, it must be true to its purpose: to direct and instruct the people of God.

In listening to a sermon, several aspects need to be mentioned:

(1) The listener must be prepared physically and emotionally to receive the message. Adequate sleep and an attentive heart are necessary to obtain maximum benefit. Many times a message falls flat because of the audience and not the preacher.

(2) The audience must hear actively, not passively. The *King James Version* has the word "hear" instead of "listen", and *Vines [Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words]* by W.E. Vine. Thomas Nelson Publishers.] has multiple definitions of "hear". Note that hearing can be tuned out as background noise, or hearing can be active as in actively listening, focusing intently on each word and thought. A personal perusal of "hear", "heard", and other synonyms in a concordance can yield profitable thoughts, such as:

Neh 8:2 "hear with understanding"

The Psalms "hear my prayer" (i.e. **Ps 4:1; 39:12; 54:2; 84:8; 102:1; 143:1**)

Proverbs "wisdom" in **Prov 13:8; 18:13; 22:17** or **Ecclesiastes (Eccl 5:1; 7:5)**

Take heed in what you hear (**Ezk 33:31**)

Hearing can be an imperative like the *Shema* (a command) [**Dt 6:4**] as well as a means. The loss of hearing is often a greater handicap than blindness, and having heard something we are often called to respond or *do* something.

(3) In actively hearing a message, there are several things we can do to prevent our mind from wandering or drifting. We can consciously note the Scriptures and points or structure of the message. We can write points in a notebook or a piece of paper to meditate on later, and we can encourage the preacher by amens or appropriate responses. Things such as a disorganized, inexperienced, boring speaker or a person with annoying mannerisms are part of life, but active hearing along with a focused mind can yield a nugget of gold out of a ton of ore.

We not only can hear God in our personal Bible study, prayer and friendships, but we can also hear Him through the spoken word from the pulpit. May we be truly responsive to His guidance and direction.

NOTE BY FRANK: This well-written exhortation is addressed by Dr. Walters to those people out in the *pews* who have to listen to us preach! ☺ But this little paper also gives us preachers in the *pulpit* some valuable info on what are the needs of those who listen to us out in the pews! We preachers must go out of our way to prepare sermons that help people *listen* to us well. The burden of the responsibility is on *our* shoulders. Dr. Walters has given some excellent challenges and suggestions for our hearers too!