

Reading: Acts 17:10-15

Theme: How to listen with benefit to God's word preached.

Charles Spurgeon in his book "Lectures to My Students" wrote of wrongly spiritualising things from the Bible and gives humorous, but sad examples. He also broke off to write of one old country preacher he heard when he was a young man, who spoke on and rightly spiritualised Proverbs 12:27 (AV) "*The slothful man roasteth not that which he took in hunting:*" The preacher pointed out this was a lazy, slothful man who went out hunting, took trouble, effort and eventually caught an animal, got it home and was too lazy to cook it! The man could have said how clever he was and how well he had done in catching it, could have spoken about the chase. The old preacher said the man would get no benefit from it. It needed further attention to prepare and cook it, so it could be eaten, digested etc. Yet this man, was content to laze the time away and do nothing.

Spurgeon recalls the preacher went on to apply that verse to his congregation - by challenging them that to catch a good sermon, they may have walked many miles to do so, yet when there, they did not benefit from it, because of their laziness. The old preacher went on to show how to cook or roast the sermon - first catch a sermon, a good, ripe, gospel sermon; then skin and pluck away that which is of the preachers infirmities, then run the spit of memory through it from end to end, then turn it round on the roasting spit of meditation, in front of the fire of a really warm and earnest heart. It will be cooked to provide real spiritual nourishment. Spurgeon commended the old preacher!

Perhaps I've said enough in quoting Spurgeon! Maybe I should call this message "*How to give a sermon a good roasting!*" Or develop some of those ideas, but I felt I couldn't do such an approach justice, so I'll stay with title I've given it!

I hope to give some helpful, practical pointers to help us all learn how to benefit from hearing God's word preached i.e. a sermon. I

pray we've come to feed our minds and souls on God's word, but often we are like that lazy man and get no benefit from it. Martin Luther said something to the effect concerning that just going to hear God's word and think that it will do us good, is like going to a meal, sitting there with our mouth open, waiting for a piece of roast chicken to fly in! When we go out for a meal, we have to do our part. My 5 headings all begin with P and I hope are a bunch of sweet peas! I was going to say that I had a plethora of pragmatic practical P's, pertaining to profiting from preaching - thought that was going a bit too far!

1. Preparation.

Believe it or not most preachers, including me, will prepare a sermon and not just get up and ramble! Somewhere there will be in introduction, a few main points and a conclusion. I try to do such, but I own they not always clear, concise, relevant or interesting, but just occasionally, they are. Yet you may not receive any benefit from the message because *you* have not *prepared* your heart and mind.

A preacher is to realise people come with a variety of things on their minds - distractions, worries, tiredness and the like. A preacher has to try and make a sermon as relevant, applicable and interesting as he can. This is part of both preparing the message and his own heart in readiness to deliver it. Have you realised that preaching is a two-way thing - that as a member of the congregation *you* have to prepare to receive the word of God preached?

It can be that you as an individual may come cold and indifferent as a believer, yet God can speak to you in a remarkable way, make you able to understand, realise and apply God's word to yourself. You may not have been expecting it, may be surprised by it, but our God is a God of surprises and surprising grace. Yet, in the normal run of things, God expects us to prepare to come and hear His word. We are not to be careless, indifferent, or come and hope a word from

God will somehow squeeze itself into our minds and hearts past all the things we've got spinning around in our minds and hearts.

It is good to take a while before the service to quieten our hearts and minds - read the Bible, praying, reminding ourselves we are to worship God and that preaching, the sermon is the part where God *is most likely* to be presented to us, with the Lord Jesus spoken of - all He's done and it is to be applied and worked out regarding our lives. Do we recognise that the sermon is not a time to switch off, but to turn on, tune in, listen and understand maybe for the first time or afresh of the things God has done, is doing and will do for us? To our Christian forefathers, preaching was the highest point of worship!

Come prepared to hear God's word being proclaimed. Yes, through a man with his own weaknesses and inabilities, but come prepared expecting God to speak. I try and choose hymns, songs that will aid our expectation; I try and pick up on the theme of the sermon to go before and also follow on from the sermon, to prepare for and reinforce the theme and thrust of the sermon. We are to realise God has ordained, has chosen preaching as the God appointed public means of spreading the gospel and for instructing, building up his people. It is not private Bible reading and study as opposed to public preaching, but both are necessary and complementary. We read the Bereans did both on a daily basis (Acts 17:11). We too need to prepare our hearts and minds to hear God's word and come in anticipation of God speaking to us.

2. Prayer.

Prayer is part of this preparation - not just quietly praying at the start of the meeting, as good as that is, but praying for preacher and yourself throughout the week that the word preached would be of benefit to both congregation and the preacher. Pray for the preacher's preparation, the pressures he has, the passage he will be preaching on if that's known, that God would speak with power and might and

all would be moved deeply by God's word. Also pray the word would deal powerfully with the preacher in his preparation and delivery, as well as with the congregation, including yourself. Pray that the *preparation and preaching* of God may have the Holy Spirit's power and authority to achieve all God wants it to achieve in us and others. We can so easily pray for God to use the sermon to deal with... Yet pray God's word would do more than just resolve things in other people's lives, but deal with our lives. Have big expectations in prayer for the message.

As you pray for the preacher, pray for your own selves, that God would speak to you at your point of need - whether that need is felt or not; that God would deal with you and your life, as well as other's lives. Part of our self-preparation is to be ready to pray, as did Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:9 "*Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.*" Prayer is vitally important.

3. Perception.

I've already touched on this, that we perceive, recognise what is occurring. Not just a man standing up and spouting, but, hopefully, a man who has sought God for the message to bring at that time. Preaching is God ordained. It is not for testing people's patience, ability to listen, or to parade knowledge and learning. Preaching is to declare the wonderful and awesome things God has done, is doing and will do for us. Such themes will include the wonders of the gospel, to hear of God clearly, relevantly, of His command to repent, believe on the Lord Jesus, be saved, rescued and have eternal life.

Yet the preaching, teaching of God's word is also to build up, strengthen and equip believers. The word of God not only makes us wise to salvation, but it is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man and woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. Preaching opens up and applies God's word - its commands, teachings, principles and guidelines in ways that we can follow and understand. That is why

when God's word is preached, it is not time to switch off, daydream, mindlessly doodle or scribble things, but the time to concentrate. Realise the devil would have us fail to give our attention, but think about this, that or the other and we do not benefit from God's word.

Realise what an important and precious privilege we have to sit under the preaching of God's word. JC Ryle said *"I warn that everyone who loves their soul to be jealous as to the preaching they regularly hear in the place of worship they regularly attend. If they deliberately settle down under a ministry that is unsound is a very unwise person. If false doctrine is preached in a church, a person who loves their soul is not right in going to that church."* He wrote that over 100 years ago - we need to note that in our confusing days. Even though we know this church here has its faults and failings, yet it and its pastor try to proclaim God's word clearly and relevantly.

4. Prospering.

To get the most out of the sermon there are a couple of practical ways you can help yourselves during the preaching. It is worth following the preacher with an open Bible - whether it's a Bible app on your mobile or an actual Bible. When the preacher mentions and quotes a Bible references, look it up. Some preachers jump around the Bible more than others, so you'll have to be quick, especially using a mobile! It does a preacher good to hear pages rustle and see people look up a text as it means they are following him - even if it is to relieve their boredom and it is a better sound than snoring or yawning!

Some people find it helps them to concentrate if they make notes. These do not have to be detailed notes, but just catching the flow of the message. Some people use spider diagrams to follow the main points and the flow. As a young believer I began to make notes to help me concentrate, to follow the sermon and have chance to go over it later. A number here do that and the young people's, children's questions in the morning service are designed to

encourage them to follow the sermon and have a basic outline, but they also have space to pad things out. You can make notes on bits of paper, but a notebook is better to keep and note main points, headings (*not necessarily everything that is said*) from a number or series of sermons. Beware of the danger that this can be an end in itself and we do not let the word of God deal with us, as it becomes an academic exercise with no application to our lives.

One of the worst things you can do in a sermon is to watch your watch! I've preached in some churches with a clock behind me!! It's useful to have the clock opposite the preacher as they can be aware of how long they have been preaching for! If you are clock watchers, you will then be missing out on trying to follow God's word. If a preacher has lost you, give him another chance when he comes to his next point. Using headings, points are a good thing for preachers - as their use can help the congregation - as you move from one point to another, it gives them another chance to resume their efforts to follow you! It's also good to use "windows" - examples, illustrations to drive home a point, or it is like... One of the worst things a preacher can do is to say "Finally" or "In closing" and then carry on for some time after that. False hope! Paul could do it in his letters, but we are not to do so our sermons!

As a congregation remember we are listening to God's word preached by a mortal, yet realise it deserves to be listened to carefully, as in some cases it could make the difference between heaven or hell if we are an unbeliever; the difference of success or failure in our lives if we are a Christian and it may equip us for future use and service.

Whether or not you make notes, if you do not understand something then ask. Most preachers are glad to try and answer your questions. But, do not hog the preacher, but wait for an opportune moment, thank him and then ask for clarification, to explain what he said, did he mean... Even ask if what he said was right! These are some

pointers to prospering from the sermon as it is being preached, but it does not stop there:

5. Ponder.

Think it through, reread any notes, chat about it with other people. In the pondering of a sermon, there needs to be personal application. If we have prayed “*Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.*” We can think about what did we personally learn to apply to ourselves. Whether any words spoke personally to our own lives - encouragement, warning or instruction? What if the sermon pointed out secret sins and guilt? What if it dealt with our personal difficulties? In all cases, own God is speaking to you and deal with the sin, the coldness, the indifference and thank Him for encouragements, strength and help to go on.

The Lord may speak to us through a sermon as if we are the only one there and He meets us at our point of need. Ponder things, look at how the sermon’s principles apply to us, do not let the preacher have to spoon-feed us i.e. here is a principle, this is how it is to be applied to Mr X, Mrs Q, to young person Z in such and such a situation. Sometimes we need that, other times we are to ponder, to think over God’s word and apply it personally to our own lives.

We are to also ponder what is said in the sermon to make sure it is true to God’s word. This is what the Bereans did with Paul! No preacher will be upset by that, unless it’s done in a carping, superior, nit-picking way. There are those who sit in judgement on sermons, preachers and often they like to put preachers in their place. I know of a number in Wales and also England. This type of approach is criticism. What I’m talking of is thinking through a sermon to see if it is right and true to the general tenor of God’s word and not did the preacher side with our own particular views, but was God’s word faithfully preached within acceptable understandings. Yes, error needs to be exposed, mistaken understanding needs to be corrected

even in preachers, heresy needs to be removed, but always to be done in a gracious loving way.

Regrettably, some preachers are forever beating one drum and one note - both in and out of the pulpit and they expect all to beat and sound along with them. Some preachers can be often negative, but if we preach, we are to sound not only the negatives, but also the positive notes of the gospel blessings in their richness and hope. We should also do this in our assessment of the sermon - note the negatives and equally note, but emphasise the positives.

As we ponder the word preached, we are to ensure we are not just notetakers, hearers, but doers of God's word in our own lives. Only as God's word preached affects us – physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally and practically, will we really benefit from it. My prayer, aim and desire is to faithfully preach God's word for both the eternal and temporal benefit of those who listen, so that it will bring glory to God.