

## *The Hard Work of Hearing Sermons*

I write this just after completing my translation of Matthew 17:1-13. Greek is getting easier. Old Testament passages still take a while – but even Hebrew is becoming less of a challenge.

Yet it's still work – a small part of the work required for faithful sermon prep.

I suspect we all understand that preparing sermons is a challenging task for the preacher who wants to be faithful to his calling. To be sure, there are those who get sermons from the Internet. There are others who simply use (or, more accurately, *mis-use*) their sermon text as the launching pad for another tirade, political speech, or self-help lecture.

But among ministers who desire to be faithful to their calling, sermon preparation involves labor. They translate the text from the original language; study the grammar and words; research the culture and context of the original writer and audience. Much research is required simply to understand, as fully as possible, the original meaning of a passage. Then they have to bring that passage into *today*. They must understand how it applies to *us* – in our distinct era, within our culture, amid the challenges and distractions our people face.

It's not a small job – and every week, the work rises up anew. Done properly, sermon preparation requires far more time than most ministers can give it. I personally end each week praying that God will forgive me for the multitude of details, facts, applications and challenges that I have missed.

But we make a substantial error if we think that the minister is the only one for whom the sermon means work.

Last week, I witnessed a discussion about sermons on an e-mail forum. The discussion began with a comment about the acceptable length for sermons. That led to questions about what makes a sermon good or bad, helpful or ... not.

What struck me was the attitude among many participants that they are to be *served*. They expect the minister to learn their needs – how long they can concentrate, whether visual aids help them to focus, what topics they want to hear. The person in the pew was regarded as a consumer to be served; while the preacher was seen as a waiter, for whom “the customer is always right.”

Now, I'll be the first to say that a preacher should be a servant. Ministers must be willing to hear constructive criticism, using it to improve their service.

But on the pulpit, the minister is no waiter. He's not called to make people feel good, to entertain, to captivate, to inspire. He's called to proclaim the Word of the King, which has been entrusted to him.

If the preacher's sermons inspire, captivate, or encourage, that's a good thing – as long as the result has come from God. But if those feelings come from the preacher himself – effects arising from his carefully planned manner of presentation – then he has no place in the pulpit.

Let me say it again: the minister stands before God's people as *a messenger of the King*. And he has *no business* proclaiming anything that has not come from the King to this particular group of the King's subjects.

That puts a particular responsibility on those who *hear* the preaching.

If you're attending lectures at the community college, you expect to hear things that will educate, interest or improve you. If the lectures lack, there's no sense in wasting your time! If you're attending the theatre, you expect to be entertained. If the show fails to entertain, you have no reason to go back.

But at church, amid the gathering of the saints, it's neither an entertainer nor a scholar to whom we listen. It is God Himself, speaking through a (weak, sinful, broken) man whom He has called. By the power of His Spirit, He uses that man to create faith in the hearts of His people, then to mature and strengthen that faith, week by week.

We need to ask how we can *maximize* our growth. What can we do to benefit more from the preaching of God's Word? What *responsibilities* do we have as “sermon hearers”?

First of all, we need to *prepare carefully*.

Our first thoughts of Sunday morning's sermon should not be in the pew. Almost every week, the text for the following week is listed in the bulletin. Read that text the day before. Read its context. Ponder the text, considering its meaning for the original readers. This helps you to become familiar with the text, allowing you to focus more on meaning and application during the sermon.

We also should prepare by praying. Apart from the work of the Lord, we can do nothing (John 15:5); the preacher can't preach properly, the hearer can't listen properly, and the heart can't grow properly. Only the Lord can reveal the Truth that speaks of Him (1 Cor. 2:10). So let us ask the Lord to empower the preacher to preach *faithfully* and the hearers to listen *understandingly*.

Second, we need to do our best to *receive profitably*.

When you come to worship, remember that you're entering the throne room, expecting to hear the voice of the King. Come with *awe* before Him!

After the Scripture reading, keep your Bible open. The Bereans were commended (Acts 17:11) for examining the Scriptures to determine the truth of what the apostles taught them. This is an example for us! We must “test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21).

And take notes! Whether by detailed outlines or scribbled snippets, note the things you learned about the text, applications that move you, explanations you should study, etc. This will help you to recall the sermon later – but more importantly, it will force you to *think* about the sermon as it is being preached.

Third, we need to *take it eagerly* as we leave worship.

The sermon is something you should consider, ponder and meditate about through the day – even the week. Review your notes to see if there’s anything you don’t understand. If there is, study it, and if necessary ask for help. Pray about the applications, asking God to transform you according to His will.

Discuss the sermon. Discuss it with members after church; with your family around the table; with the kids, to ensure they understood it. Discuss it in your own heart, asking how God wants to change you through His Word.

The work of a preacher is hard. And so is the work of a listener. Yet in each case, it is God who calls us to this work – and He will use it for our good.

Confident of this, let us perform this work eagerly. And may the Lord transform us by the powerful Word He speaks to us each week!