

“The Danger of Listening to Sermons”
Scripture Text: James 1:22-25, Psalm 119:10-16, Deuteronomy 6:6-9

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Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez

This morning, I will be preaching somewhat of an unusual sermon. It is a sermon on how to listen to sermons. For that reason, it will be a little different than our normal preaching, which is why I’ve selected three texts, which I will refer to throughout the message today. I will also note that while I am focusing primarily on how we should listen to sermons, it also applies to our reading of Scripture (though I will not be highlighting that as much).

With that said, let’s turn now to the reading of God’s Word:

James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Psalm 119:10 With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!

11 I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.

12 Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes!

13 With my lips I declare
all the rules of your mouth.

14 In the way of your testimonies I delight
as much as in all riches.

15 I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.

16 I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

Deuteronomy 6:6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This is the Word of the Lord: (*Thanks be to God*)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray together.

O Lord, as we come to the preaching of your word, we ask that you would open my mouth to boldly proclaim your word. And with the Psalmist we pray that you would open our eyes that we

might behold the wonders of your law. For we ask you this in Jesus' name, Amen. *[From Ephesians 6:18-19, Psalm 119:18]*

Introduction

Are you suffering from infobesity? This term speaks to the idea of being overstuffed with information, and figuratively “biting off more than you can chew” or in this case more than you can digest.

While it would seem that having more information available to us would be a good thing, studies show that one in five Americans admit to feeling overloaded with information.¹

Infobesity or information overload is the state of being so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information, available at our fingertips that the over-information actually serves to confuse rather than help.²

And while it might sound outrageous, I think that Christians today have come to a place of overloading or overfeeding themselves with sermons, without taking the time to digest them.

Never has there been a time in all of the history of mankind, where an individual has had millions of sermons available at their fingertips as they do today. We have instant access to the best sermons available in the world, in written, audio and video, and we have them in our pockets!

This is, of course, an incredible blessing. We all appreciate the way God has spoken through men of God throughout the centuries. We delight in their passionate appeals, and have grown in tremendous ways. It is through technology that God's Word has spread around the world! For this we praise God!

And yet, with that blessing of sermons at our fingertips, comes its dangers. What sort of dangers? The danger of listening to sermon upon sermon, but not hearing them. Listening to sermons, longing to grow, feeling convicted by them, feeling inspired to change, and then walking out the door and completely forgetting everything that has just moved you to change and doing nothing to actually change.

One preacher noted:

“The number and accessibility of podcasts, with godly men rightly exegeting the word of God, is a gift of grace. [But] for the sermon-podcast junkies out there: be careful. You can listen to so many podcasts that you train your mind to hear a sermon with no response. Sermons can become means of entertainment instead of transformation....Be wary of listening to sermons so much that they become mere entertainment. Sermons are not popcorn. [Instead of binging sermons]....consider re-listening to a sermon that has spoken to you deeply. Reflect on it. Sermons are to be savored.” [Jake Chambers]

¹ Oksana Tunikova, “Are We Consuming Too Much Information?”

² Ibid.

Now, before you get upset with me for getting on your case about listening to too many sermons, don't hear what I'm not saying! I am not saying you should stop listening to preaching. I'm not saying that you should stop. I want to reiterate this.

What I am doing is calling you to be careful. Be careful if you have become a sermon-podcast junkie or a sermon binger. If your sermon listening has become nothing but listening, be careful, for it may be that sermons for you, are becoming white noise.

And I know that listening to several sermons throughout the week comes from an earnest desire to grow in your faith. I know that first hand:

When I was a student at Covenant College, I was so eager to grow in my faith that I sometimes went to four different churches on a Sunday! I'd go to the 8 am service at Lookout Mountain Pres., then I'd rush down to Sunday School at 1st Pres. Chattanooga, then head over to the 11 am service at the OPC church downtown, and would close the Lord's Day with an evening service at Reformed Presbyterian Church.

I don't care who you are, but that is too much! In a desire to seek the Lord with all my heart, I was seeking to expose myself to as much preaching as possible. I was seeking to grow through exposure listening. I wasn't meditating and hiding God's Word in my heart. I was running out the door to listen to the next sermon.

Now, maybe you aren't that crazy. But it could be that you are doing something similar, even if you are listening to one sermon a week. You could be listening to it, but not connecting it to your life. It could be that you are being exposed to God's word, but that you are not living it out.

In James 1, we are reminded of the importance of going beyond listening and hearing: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." [James 1:22]

The Solution

So that is the problem. What is the solution?

As I noted in my last sermon "The Danger of Picking Favorite Preachers," [<https://www.faithtacoma.org/none/the-danger-of-picking-favorite-preachers-1-corinthians-110-25-21-5>] God has ordained the *reading* but *especially the preaching* of the word to be his tool for changing us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God uses the preaching of the word to conform us into his image. [Westminster Larger Catechism #155.]

For that reason, when we come here, and when we listen to sermons elsewhere, we must be careful to understand why we come. It is not for entertainment. Also, it is not simply to be encouraged or convicted for a moment. That is valuable, but more than that we are coming to be transformed. To be changed.

So how can we avoid falling into being people who only listen to sermons? The solution is not to stop listening to sermons. The solution includes slowing down and understanding the important difference between *listening to sermons* and doing the hard work of *hearing and putting the sermons into practice*.

And some ways we can do that are by:

1. Preparing to hear God's Word,
2. Treasuring God's Word in our hearts,
3. Sharing God's Word with others,
4. Putting God's Word into practice in our lives.

I. Preparing to hear God's Word

Preparing for God's Word is the first step in being intentional about putting God's Word into practice. And the people of God prepare to practice God's Word, by refocusing their hearts before hearing God's Word and remembering what is taking place.

We have been "***granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.***"

Each Sunday, morning and evening, in the preaching and in the reading of Scriptures, God has granted us the incredible blessing of knowing the glorious mysteries of the kingdom of God that are hidden to all who do not know him.

And so, it is no wonder that the Psalmist exclaims, blessed is the one who God chooses to bring near to dwell in his courts! [Psalm 65:4] For in the courts of the Lord, we are given life and access to the mysteries of his kingdom.

And so, as we come to his courts, we come with eager anticipation. We come to his courts seeking life and spiritual nourishment. For we do not live on bread alone, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." We come ***longing*** for spiritual nourishment as newborn babes, desiring the pure spiritual milk of the word that grows us in him. [Matthew 4:4, 1 Peter 2:1-2]

Knowing this, that every Lord's Day we are given words from the mouth of our Holy Father, the Sovereign King of Kings, and the Alpha and Omega, should give us pause, and a desire to prepare our hearts so that we guard our steps when we go to the house of God. [Eccl. 5:1]

Now, there are many pages written on how to prepare to hear the Word of God on Sunday morning. I will be borrowing from a helpful compilation of sermons called "*Take Care How You Listen.*" [John Piper] Our focus will be primarily on what practical steps you can take on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. I will note that these might seem straightforward and almost condescending. But sometimes it is the simple things that are right before our eyes that we miss. So with that said, here are five ways to prepare:

First: Pray for your heart and pray for the preacher

Since it is God who is ultimately speaking to us, we would do well to prepare our hearts through prayer.

Within the past week, and possibly even the last couple of days, I have no doubt you have been offended or impacted by something significant in your life. We can be quick to fix things in our own strength. To think about and rethink conversations and interactions we've had. All that to say, we all have things in our lives that are pulling us every which way.

But this is God's dedicated and scheduled time with us. So, take time Saturday night and Sunday morning to ask God to prepare your heart to be humble and ready to listen to his word. Ask the Lord to give you a heart for him, a soft, teachable spirit, and the ability to focus on hearing him.

And as you enter the sanctuary on Sunday morning, I would encourage you to seek to be still. Consider arriving earlier than you need to so that you can pray, meditate on the text to be preached and look over the words we will sing and confess. Prepare your heart.

And pray for your pastor

From time to time my wife and I have had people over for homemade pizza. We have everything ready to go, but people add their own ingredients before it goes in the oven. Over time, I've noticed that when people help make their pizza, it changes things. They have more buy-in and have a vested interest in it turning out well.

I think the same thing happens when it comes to preaching and prayer. If you take the time to pray for your preachers, you are *much more likely* to get something out of the sermon than if you do not pray. Your prayers are heard by God, and you have a vested interest in that sermon. After all, that sermon was covered in your prayers!

Second: Stir up your hearts to hear God's word, by turning away from worldly entertainment the night before and turning toward that which is noble and pure.

After a full week, it is easy to simply veg in front of the TV, social media, or gaming. On this point, John Piper writes these words:

It astonishes me how many Christians watch the same banal, empty, silly, trivial, titillating, suggestive, immodest TV shows that most unbelievers watch—and then wonder why their spiritual lives are weak and their worship experience is shallow with no intensity. If you really want to hear the word of God the way he means to be heard in truth and joy and power, turn off the television on Saturday night and read something true and great and beautiful and pure and honorable and excellent and worthy of praise (see Philippians 4:8). Then watch your heart unshriveled and begin to hunger for the word of God. [Piper, 22]

Rather than filling our minds and hearts with worldly entertainment on Saturday night, before we go to church, spend that time turning toward what is good and pure. Shut off the social media, tune out the fleshly influence, and train your heart to long for more.

Third: Get a good night's rest on Saturday night.

While it can be difficult to wake up in the morning, for me and many of you it can be even harder to go to bed on time. While an alarm clock wakes you to get up and go, it is a much harder decision to cut off the TV, put down the phone or the book. It is harder to turn down going out with friends just to ensure you are rested for church.

Of course, truth be told, if we had a major test or presentation the next day, we would likely be sure to plan to have a good night's rest. But for some reason, we make all sorts of justifications for why it is okay to be exhausted in church.

The problem is that we can often fall into the lie that we don't really know *why* we are always so tired. Friends! If we are tired because we are choosing to stay up late for a little more fun, **that** is why we are tired!

I know this might seem patronizing, but rather than continue the pattern of staying up late on Saturday nights, make a plan to get 8 hours of sleep and do your backwards math calculations. Rather than wake up stressed, tired, and grumpy on Sunday morning, fighting for the shower, the kitchen, or whatever it may be, give yourself more time, energy, and patience on Sunday mornings by going to be earlier and planning out your morning better. Plan to arrive early, and your morning will go far better, and your hearts and energy will be better predisposed to hear God's word. [Piper, 23]

Fourth: Keep from Grumbling and Criticism

As I mentioned before, there can often be bickering at home and on the way to church. It is no coincidence that the flesh fights hardest as we go to church. But as Proverbs 19:11 says, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."

Take Saturday nights and Sunday mornings off from grumbling, fighting and criticism. If you can overlook an offense, do so! It will do wonders for your heart as you go into worship, and it will bless all those around you - your spouse, your children, and many others.

How many times has one insignificant discussion or fight, or stubborn attitude turned into something that has ruined your Sunday morning and your Sunday worship, preventing you from truly listening and practicing God's Word?

Take Sundays off from work and take Saturday and Sundays off from bickering and fighting!

Fifth: Take some time this afternoon to tailor this list for your Saturday nights and Sundays. What changes do you need to make in order to prepare to hear God's Word? As a family or as an individual, make a plan for tonight or next week and set a reminder to put it into action. Let me know how it goes!

We've looked at what it means to prepare to hear God's Word. Now we will briefly examine what God's Word teaches us about *how we should respond* to the preaching of the Word. Three themes, drawn from our Scripture passages:

- 1) Treasure God's Preached Word (Psalms)
- 2) Share it (Deuteronomy)
- 3) Practice it (James)

Takeaways:

Many of you may know that as Pastor of Family and Student Ministries here at FPC, part of my ministry is that I have the privilege of working with our youth.

Each Wednesday, at the beginning of the message, I remind them that at the end I will be calling on several of them for their “takeaways.” And let me tell you, this had the added effect of helping people pay much more attention! I’ve been tempted to try calling on people here...but we would run out of time.

Now take aways are not meant to be a time where people regurgitate the whole message, or tell me what the main points of my message were, but rather, a time where the students share **what the Lord has impressed upon them.**

Takeaways are as simple as they sound, but the practice has profound implications.

See, a takeaway does these three things:

1. It requires us to meditate and engage the message (treasure it)
2. It requires us to process it in such a way that we can share it (share it)
3. It pushes us all to think about how the message applies to our lives (practice it)

And I would ask that you consider for your personal growth in this area, that you would aim to have at least one takeaway from every message you hear and every reading you do in God’s Word.

And, that you would do it for these three reasons, to hide God’s Word in your heart, to share it with others and to apply it to your daily living.

And that is why I’ve selected the three passages before us for consideration. See, each passage calls the hearer of God’s Word to take action. The Psalm calls us to treasure God’s Word. Deuteronomy focuses on the need to share it, and James highlights the need to practice the Word.

Treasure It

Beginning in Psalm 119, we see that the proper response to God’s Word is to pursue it and store it in your heart.

In Spurgeon’s commentary on the Psalms we read that there is a significant difference between reading or hearing God’s Word and making it the center of your heart’s desires. Listen to these words:

“When [people] ...***only read*** the letter of the Book, the word of promise and instruction is deprived of much its power. Neither will the laying of it up in the mere memory avail. The word must be known and prized, and laid up in the heart; it must occupy the ***affection as well as the understanding***; the whole mind requires to be impregnated with the word of God. [Spurgeon, 165]

These strong words are meant to draw our attention to the Psalm’s solemn approach. He is serious about God’s Word, and he goes after God’s Word with all of his heart. He finds joy in it and spends time thinking about it deeply. He meditates on it.

This is of course much different than the person who merely reads God's Word or listens to it and walks away with little to no change. Whose heart is unmoved, and life remains the same.

As we read and listen to God's Word, the Psalmist reminds us that God expects that we prepare for and treasure God's Word deep into our hearts. And that is what I want to challenge you to. Before you begin reading the Bible for your daily devotions, or listening to a sermon, plan on seeking at least one takeaway that you are going to treasure and grow in. Write it down, pray over it at the time of the silent prayer at the end of the service. Consider it throughout the week.

Make sure you have at least one takeaway. One thing that you can treasure in your heart.

Share it

Then, share it. After you have focused on what it is that you have taken away from the sermon, within the next few hours (sooner is better), do your best to share that take away in such a way that you can continue to treasure God's Word by now passing it along to others and reinforcing it in your life.

As the saying goes, "he who teaches, learns twice." So teach others what you have learned, and in so doing reinforce in your heart what you have learned by sharing it with others.

Who might you share it with? Someone here in the church, someone at home, someone far away (by phone), a neighbor or a family member. Take time to meditate on God's word, and to share it with those around you.

Deut. 6:4-9 taught this lesson.

Israel was given God's Word and was instructed in this way:

"And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

God's Word was to invade all areas of life. Not only were they to carry God's Word in their hearts, they were to teach it to their family day and night, when hanging out at home, and when travelling. AND they were to put it out there for all to see. It was to be on their foreheads, on their hands, their doorposts and on their gates.

The spirit of this instruction seemed to point to the idea that God's people should carry his Word with them at all times and it was not just for their own spiritual growth, it was so that it would influence all their relationships!

Many in the ancient world apparently took this teaching so literally that they created phylacteries and frontlets also known as *tepillin*. Now, if you don't know what that is, you are not alone.

See, it seems that the Jews would make small leather boxes and would place Scripture passages in them. Then they would bind them on their foreheads with leather bands as a reminder that God's Word was to be on their minds.

They would also place a small leather box with Scripture on their dominant arm down to their hands, pointing toward the heart, signaling that God's Word was close to their hearts and the work and actions of their hands. [Nolland, 926]

And while they may have taken it *too literally*, the modern church might take it *too figuratively*.

How could we be more intentional about keeping God's Word before us at all times? In our minds, on our lips, in our hearts, in our work and our actions?

In our modern world, it would mean that our homes – our dinner tables, car-rides, our getting up in the morning and our lying down at night would be seasoned with the Word of God.

That our businesses, schools, sports, music lessons, shopping, neighborly relationships, and more would reflect our priorities in this world, and our desire for the world to see us for who we are. That they would see that the doorposts and gates of our lives are adorned both literally and figuratively with God's holy Word.

That means that discipleship is a big piece of this. Not only would we hide God's Word in our hearts, we would pass it on to others through discipleship. Formally and informally. In sit-down settings, and in every day momentary moments.

Hiding God's Word in your heart makes it much easier to share with unbelievers and to witness.

Practice it

In addition to hiding God's Word in our hearts, and sharing it with others, let us not just seek to win the whole world while forgetting our own responsibility.

James reminds us,

“But be *doers of the word*, and *not hearers only*, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. [James 1:22]

If you were to look at your health and decide to make some changes, perhaps decide that it was time to get to work on improving your workout routine, how would you start out? Let's say instead of going to the gym you decided you were going to do a less expensive in-home workout.

So say you buy a subscription for an online fitness program, and you get to work on it. You watch the videos, you learn the technique backwards and forwards, you establish a rotation that allows you do lower body on alternate days from upper body, and you finish the entire program in record time.

So you move onto the next one and the next one. Soon, you start to wonder if you could teach these classes, because you have mastered them all so quickly. The only problem is that you evaluate your health, and you realize that nothing has changed for your health-wise. Nothing has

changed at all. Because though you've been watching the online fitness videos faithfully, you haven't actually been doing any of the exercises yourself. You have been deceiving yourself.

Brothers and sisters, in the same way that watching training videos will do nothing for your health *unless you do the work*, neither will watching or listening to sermons produce the desired effect, if you do not put them into practice. Furthermore, if you are only a listener or viewer, you are deceiving yourself.

We might be the best at knowing God's Word, teaching it, or memorizing it, but if we do not practice it, we deceive ourselves. We might be the best at discipling and telling others about Jesus, but if we ourselves do not live what we teach, we are hypocrites.

James is telling us that we should not think that by reading or listening to God's Word that we are doing something admirable. It is a start, but it is not the goal. God's Word should *move to you to action*. God's Word, when properly heard, moves you to change.

The best way to hear God's Word is put it into practice. The best witness we can give to others to live a life that shows all around us that we are working out our faith with God's help.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, in conclusion, we all come to church, because we know that we need God. We come because we struggle and are heavy laden. We live in a world that is difficult and we need God's Word to fill us up and to encourage us and transform us.

And since that *is* what we want, we are on the right path. And yet, as we have seen, God calls us to more than just listening. He expects us to engage his Word. To *prepare* our hearts to hear it, to *treasure* it in our hearts, to *share* it with those around us, and to put it into *practice* in our daily living.

And so, as you hear this sermon, Pastor White's sermon this evening, and sermons in the future; and as you read God's Word every day, do not hear or read the Word and walk away forgetting what was said....but be hearers who persevere, and who live out that Word. For in this way, we will be followers who have ears to hear and eyes to see and who receive God's abundant blessing for us.

Amen.

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