

How to listen to the sermon

This is a guide to the ordinary format the sermon in our service. It is intended to help you follow along, seeking the Holy Spirit to yield responses of faith and repentance. As you get more practiced in listening to the sermon you will find that you automatically listen to any sermon for these kinds of things, even if the format is different.

- ♦ **Introduction:** This section reviews the biblical context of the passage being preached. Ordinarily this involves reviewing the immediately prior passage, usually preached in the previous sermon. Then it completes with tying this to the subject of the passage to be preached today.
- ♦ **Gospel focusing question:** This is a question that ties the subject of the passage to the gospel in a Christian life application. Keeping this question in mind will help focus on how the gospel is present in the passage.
- ♦ **Text Explanation:** This is a simple explanation of what the passage is about. Ordinarily there is one big topic in view. This will be similar to what you might read in a commentary.
- ♦ **So What?! [The Law's 3 Uses]:** This section seeks to draw out gospel-based applications relevant to the passage's big topic. To do this, the sermon reflects on the three uses of God's law (see WCF 19.4; WLC 93-94, 97).
 - **Law's second use:** the civil use, the restraint of sin, both disobedience and flesh-based obedience are *denied*. Here the Spirit uses the Law to warn us away from falling into sin or offering flesh-based obedience. The right response to this use is to fear the Lord through listening more closely to what He is saying.
 - **Law's first use:** the pedagogic use, the conviction of sin, both disobedience and flesh-based obedience are *condemned*. Here the Spirit uses the Law to shows us what our sins deserve and the hopelessness of our own obedience to remove God's judgment. The right response to this use is to run to Jesus, expressing repentance and faith in His finished work in His life-death-resurrection.
 - **Law's third use:** the norming use, the obedience of love, both inward and outward faith-based obedience are *affirmed*. Here the Spirit uses the law to show us how, relying on God's grace and mercy in Jesus, to respond in obedience to His law. The right response to this use is growing conformity to God's law, both in our souls and in our lives.
- ♦ **What about Jesus? [The Gospel's Resource]:** This concluding section explores how Jesus (who He is and what He does) is the resource for the repentance and faith suggested in the previous section. Here we're also considering how the Spirit makes the grace and mercy of Christ available in our lives. These will yield the twin results of Jesus's joy increasingly filling us up and His glory increasingly reflecting through us.

Preparing for listening to the sermon: Really? Advice on how to listen to a sermon? Well, admitting that a child of God still struggles with sin and that only what is done in faith has God's promise of blessing, yes, yes indeed the Bible teaches something to us about how to effectively listen to a sermon. That is, God tells us in his word how he makes it profitable to our faith so that we grow in the gospel of his Son Christ. Here are a few considerations to prayerfully keep in mind.

First, we need to remember that God promises to use His word in worship as a means of grace. That is, God uses the Bible to grow us in our understanding of the gospel, our desire to believe it, and our choosing to obey it. This is especially true of the function of preaching. God particularly promises his children steady and real growth in grace through this means.^[1]

Second, our response to God's promises must always be faith-rooted obedience. This is particularly true when listening to a sermon. The Bible actually says quite a bit about what such

^[1] For more on this principle, see Q89 in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (WSC), and Q155-159 in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC).

faith in God's use of the sermon looks like. God tells that such faith demonstrates itself in the following ways: ^[2]

- ♦ Paying attention to the sermon with diligence (Pro 8:34).
- ♦ Taking appropriate preparations beforehand to listen (1Pe 2:1-2; Lk 8:18; Ps 119:18; Eph 6:18-19).
- ♦ Examining what is preached by the Scriptures (Ac 17:11).
- ♦ Receiving the truth preached with faith (Heb 4:2), love (2Th 2:10), and meekness (Jas 1:21).
- ♦ Having an active willingness to receive the truth preached as God's very own word (Ac 17:11; 1Th 2:13).
- ♦ After listening, taking what was preach and meditating on it (Lk 9:44; Heb 2:1), retaining it in one's faith (Pro 2:1; Ps 119:11), using it in one's life (Lk 24:14; Dt 6:6-7), and yielding the Spirit-produced fruits of obedience taught in it (Lk 8:15; Jas 1:25).

Admittedly, this partial list of the faith-duties regarding sermon listening is quite a bit. It would be easy to look at such a list and respond, "There is no way! I can't do all that! Forget it!" Yet be encouraged! As you pray to the Holy Spirit, seeking his help in preparing to listen to the sermon, admit the first two sentiments readily and without fear. God already knows that there is no way we can even begin to do all this.

And then, trust the Spirit to bless you. Where he shows your need for repentance, express it confident that because Jesus is perfect God the Father will forgive and cleanse you. And where there is need for faith, express it with the same confidence. The Spirit will grow the fruits of obedience listed here in your life. You will find yourself, much to your own amazement at times, getting more and more out of the sermons offered during our worship. You will grow in the grace and mercy of Christ.

^[2] See WSC Q90 and WLC Q160 for further information.