

GET INVOLVED IN YOUR PASTOR'S SERMON

by Garrett J. DeWeese

A wealth of spiritual instruction and edification hides within most sermons. But how can we mine it? Here are some helpful tips.

"How'd you like the pastor's sermon this morning?"

"It was okay. I really liked the story about the old horse and the sports car..."

And so goes the typical going-home from-church conversation. All too often the pastor's sermon is discussed only in terms of its entertainment value or, perhaps, its emotional appeal. We have come to treat the sermon the same way we do the TV: sit in front of the screen and let the program do the work. The church is filled with lazy sermon listeners.

It shouldn't be that way, and it doesn't have to be. We can become involved in our pastor's sermons. The benefits of involvement are great. We hear and understand more, we remember better, we can apply its lesson more effectively, and as an added benefit we might make the pastor a better preacher.

WHAT THE SERMON IS

In most evangelical churches, the pastor's sermon constitutes a major focus of the Sunday worship service. We believe that God's Word is vitally important, and the public proclamation or preaching of His Word is a method God uses to accomplish His purposes in and among us. Preaching helps the Christian grow in his or her knowledge of and obedience to the Word.

When your pastor rises to deliver his sermon on Sunday morning, he is different from a comedian reciting a monologue or a politician spouting rhetoric. He comes with a message from God to you. As a typical pastor of an evangelical church he has spent ten to twenty hours — maybe more — preparing for this thirty-minute sermon. He has studied the passage carefully (perhaps using Hebrew or Greek); he has

read commentaries on the text; he has meditated on how the passage applies to his congregation; and he has endeavored to put the results of his studies into an engaging and highly communicative form. As a faithful minister of God's Word, he has saturated his preparation with prayer and believes the Holy Spirit has shown him the precise aspect of God's truth which He wants communicated in this sermon.

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The same Holy Spirit is within you. As you yield to Him He prepares you to receive the particular lesson conveyed in the sermon. The sermon is really a message from God to you. As the pastor is active in transmitting the message, you must be actively involved in receiving it. What could be more important than God's message to you?

HOW I CAN GET INVOLVED

"Okay, so I ought to be involved in the sermon. But how? All I can do is listen, right?" Not quite. You can listen, or you can listen *actively*. Involvement makes the difference.

Most of us are not good listeners. We don't get much practice. Television conditions us to listen for only about ten minutes at a shot. Even then we have pictures to help us understand. In fact,

studies show that the average person listens at only 25% efficiency.

Many colleges recognize this fact. On some campuses the most popular freshman courses are those on how to become better active listeners.

Listening is a skill which can be learned and improved. Our mere ability to hear does not mean we can listen well. So if your pastor's sermon is really a message from God to you, you should try to listen better.

Research on listening suggests there are at least five things you can do to become a more active, involved listener.

1. *Prepare to listen.* If your pastor spends upwards of ten hours preparing for his part of the sermon, you ought to spend at least a little time preparing for your part.

First, you can prepare through prayer. On Saturday night or Sunday morning, ask God to teach you through the sermon. Then, just before the service starts, during the quietness of the prelude, you can clear your mind again of the spilled milk at breakfast or the threat of rain on the afternoon picnic, and commit the time to God.

Second, you can prepare by familiarizing yourself with what you will be listening to. Studies show this adds significantly to comprehension and retention of material presented.

Many pastors preach consecutively through a book of the Bible; others announce their sermon text in advance or print it in the bulletin. If you read the passage at least once, you will be much better prepared to listen actively. You might anticipate how the pastor will develop his message, be aware of problems

he might clear up, or be thinking of possible applications.

If your pastor isn't in the habit of announcing his text ahead of time, you might tell him how that would help you understand his sermons better — something he surely desires!

2. *Listen expectantly.* Let's face it — not every sermon we hear will be a winner. Some will be downright dull. But that is no excuse to “tune out” mentally. G.K. Chesterton once said, “There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject — only uninterested people.” Since you are not going to leave the service, make the best of it. Remember, the sermon is still God's message. So, involve yourself in expecting to find an oasis of interest in the desert of words. Ask, “How can I use this information? When will I have a chance to try this application?” Or if nothing else, “If I had to give a talk on this passage someday, how would I do it differently?”

3. *Listen for the main idea.* Too often we remember sermons only by the illustrations. For many people the best sermons are those most closely resembling Johnny Carson's monologue. Or we remember statistics, facts, names, dates — everything but the central thrust of the message.

Most good preachers try to unify their sermon around one main idea. They will have supporting ideas, of course. But their sermon is really the development of one main idea. Listen actively for this.

Come to the sermon asking yourself, “What is he trying to say? What is the main idea?” Some preachers make it easy to discover their main idea; others camouflage it; a few probably haven't even thought of it themselves. No matter.

If you can arrive at an understanding of the main thrust of the sermon — even if the preacher is not conscious of having a main thrust — you will have at least one important thought the Holy Spirit can use in your life during the coming week.

For example, the last sermon I heard was on Hebrews 11. The idea was, “The only guaranteed result of living by faith is God's approval.” That thought has stuck in my mind. Involved listening helped me

discover it.

4. *Concentrate.* This seems obvious, but is easier said than done. Three things will help you concentrate: working at it, avoiding distractions, and taking notes.

a) *Working at it.* Concentrating is hard work. It takes actual physical effort. For better or for worse, most church pews are so diabolically designed that you could never get too comfortable, but at the same time you should be comfortable enough to devote your effort to listening instead of squirming.

Actually, this part of active listening can begin the night before. The Late Late Show might be fascinating, but it also might destroy your ability to concentrate on God's message for you the next morning. The time to decide which is more important is early Saturday night.

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b) *Avoiding distractions.* You can be distracted by external factors. You might suddenly notice the amusing way Mrs. Peabody's new hat bounces every time she nods; you might be distracted by Deacon Doe's misbehaving children; or if you are single, you might be thoroughly engrossed in plotting how to meet that new visitor before he or she leaves.

Or you might be distracted by internal diversions, such as the preacher's use of a word which evokes an emotional reaction. Each of us has such words to which he reacts emotionally. Examples are “abortion,” “liberal,” “new right,” “fundamentalist,” and so on. Determine beforehand not to let the preacher's use of one distract you from listening.

Certain illustrations might cause you to daydream, and you must be mentally prepared to refuse to take those side trips.

c) *Taking notes.* The discipline required for you to think about what the preacher says and write it down in brief form keeps you from being distracted too easily. And it offers two further benefits. You will remember much more of a message and remember it longer if you take even brief notes. Also, note taking helps you clarify in your thinking just what the main idea of the sermon is.

Many pastors now print an outline of the main points of their sermons and include it in the bulletin as an aid to note taking. You might suggest this to your pastor. Surely he wants you to remember better what he says.

If you don't have the preacher's outline, don't let yourself become frustrated trying to take notes in outline form. Just try jotting down the ideas you think he is communicating, underline or star the more important ones, and note some pertinent applications. You'll be amazed at how much more you get out of the sermon by involving yourself this way.

5. *Capitalize on thought speed.* Most of us speak at about 125 words a minute, but we can listen at from 450 to 640 words a minute. Obviously, then, you have a lot of “spare time” on your mind during a sermon. If you are involved in the sermon, you can put that time to good use.

Review where the preacher has been (when he says “thirdly,” think immediately of what points one and two were). Anticipate where he is going (how is he going to relate that to verse nine?). Summarize the development so far (keep working on that main idea). Look for omissions or unstated implications.

As you train yourself to do these things, you will use your excess time advantageously and will be less prone to mental wandering.

So there they are — five ways to become a more involved and active listener. As you employ these guides, you not only will be a better listener, you will retain more of the sermon in your mind for the Holy Spirit to use in your life.

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