

Listen, Learn & Live
A Blog on Listening to Sermons
Based on "Listen Up!" by Christopher Ash

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Here at Faith Fellowship Church, we are embarking on a 4-week sermon series that will take a look at just how we should approach listening to sermons. At the outset of this, we would like to give God-glorifying appreciation to Christopher Ash, who works as the Director of the Cornhill Training Course in London, England. We have the privilege of learning from his booklet "Listen Up!" which was published in 2009 by The Good Book Company, and is currently given to first-time visitors at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. That being said, we ultimately recognize the gifting and empowering from God Almighty as the original Author & Preserver of The Infallible & Authoritative Word of God which we are called to study, teach, reprove through, correct by, and instruct in so that we may be complete and thoroughly prepared for every good work (2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16&17).

Preface

As somewhat of a preface, we might ask, "Why have a booklet or a sermon series on listening to Bible teaching & preaching?" It seems like such a thing is as necessary as writing a booklet on "How to watch TV." Just think about it, how hard can it be? You push the "ON" button, sit down with your bowl of ice cream or popcorn, and just...absorb... It actually seems like reading about operating the remote control would be more profitable because there are definitely some complex and confusing remote controllers out there!

However, when it comes to Biblical doctrine and exhortation, Jesus had something important to say about listening. In Luke 8:18, He said it Himself: "Consider carefully how you listen," which is a warning to us that listening to sermons- which ultimately are founded on God's Word- is a risky undertaking. It's risky because there is an immense responsibility that gets placed in our laps to think through what is being taught, and then put into practice what we have learned. The way you listen can either damage your health, or bring you closer to final rescue. Either way, you won't leave unchanged.

In 1 Peter 1:23-25, God reveals the power, authority and eternity of the Word of God:

Being born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable seed, by the Word of God, which lives and abides forever. "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower fades away: but the spoken Word of the Lord endures forever." And this is the word by which the gospel is preached unto you.

God's Word has the power to bring salvation to people, and because it is eternal, it will neither lose its power nor its authority when preached. This is why we preach the commandments of God, and not the challenges of men; God promises to bless His Word, not ours (Isaiah 55:10&11).

In order to fully hear, understand and obey what is being preached in a sermon, we would be wise to follow seven steps or “ingredients” for healthy sermon listening.

Step 1: Expect God to speak – Be on the edge of your seat.

Sam could really do without sermons. Hey, he wasn't a spoiled sport- there were lots of things he liked about church, especially the friends he made and the music whenever the new praise team was leading worship- it was just that he didn't like the sermons. He felt he had to put up with the sermons because it would look a bit off if he walked out when the preacher started. The sermon just seemed dull. Faced with the entertainment choice, it was a no-brainer: friends & music won by a landslide.

Theresa was really looking forward to the sermon. Last Sunday, she had gone up to the pastor and said, "I'm so looking forward to next Sunday. I can't wait!" He looked pleased, if not a bit surprised, but she wasn't flattering. Theresa really did look forward to the sermon with a sense of eager anticipation. She wondered what God was going to say to her. She felt as if someone had told her to expect a telephone call from the President, and that she was waiting by the phone all week. When the sermon started, she was eagerly paying close attention.

Theresa was right, and Sam was a fool. Why? Simply because Theresa was eagerly waiting for the sermon delivery as if it were coming from God Himself; she was on the edge of her seat because Jesus has given the authority of God Himself to the pastor who preaches the Bible accurately & prayerfully. Ultimately, this is how Jesus governs His church, through the written Word of Scripture not simply being read, but also exhorted. While the Bible makes it clear that we are to read and study God's Word, it is also just as vital that all people, without exception, hear the Bible preached. Going back to the three verses from 1 Peter 1, we see that people were “born again” through “the Word of God” which contains “the gospel that [was] preached” to the recipients of Peter's letter. The apostle Paul also wrote to the church of Thessalonica, expressing his joy & thanksgiving to God for the fact that when they first heard the good news, they “welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13) Yes, the words they heard were spoken by human preachers, but the key is in their discerning & recognizing that these words were at the same time the actual words of God. In light of this awesome truth, we see a warning: Listen like your life depends on it (Titus 1:9)! It is not the eloquence of word-crafters or the giftedness of an orator, nor is it because one is ordained, has titles, degrees or qualifications, nor is it that someone is recognized by churches, denominations or boards, that holds the authority in a spoken sermon. It is when one faithfully opens the Bible and teaches with sound hermeneutics that God Himself is pleased. There is a great responsibility to preach the Word of God in unadulterated form, as Titus 2:11-15 so clearly teaches. When he preaches, the Christian preacher doesn't offer new or fresh ideas to add to the Bible; instead, he authoritatively speaks what God wants spoken.

We would be wise to listen to this type of sermon like our life depended on it. There is tension when you preach the Word. There should be nothing casual about our listening, as if it were

simply just someone speaking, and out of that mindset, we need to pray, “Lord, speak to me, I am listening.”

One example of the reverence seen in the account of Nehemiah 8 when Ezra read and explained the Law to the nation of Israel. As soon as the priest and preacher Ezra opened the book of the Law and subsequently expounded the meaning to the people, immediately all the people stood up as a mark of respect and attentiveness. In the same way, there ought to be a reverent hush as the Bible is read and preached. Sometimes we’ll laugh at ourselves or the preacher might use humor in his sermon, but we better never be flippant or careless when it comes to the Word of God.

It’s important to consider how we view attending church. For instance, kids have curfews & bedtimes throughout the week in order to be rested & ready for school the next day, but when it comes to a Saturday night, the mindset is usually, “Oh, they can stay up later tonight ‘cause it’s only church tomorrow.” Some people are so drowsy in church on Sunday morning, maybe a curfew for them would be a good thing! During hockey games in Canada, it’s a common practice to use the facilities prior to the start of the period so that you don’t get up during the play and either obstruct someone’s view or miss any of the action for yourself. Sometimes in church it seems like people wait until the sermon begins for them to make a beeline for the restrooms, when really they should be getting everything taken care of prior to the sermon so that they can be there for the entire thing. What we must be aware of is that we won’t instinctively hear preaching as the Word of God naturally, taking it simply as a person speaking. One of the wonderful things the Spirit of God does is to open our ears so that we receive it not just as the voice of people, but as the voice of God. That is why we need to pray as we mentioned before: “Lord, speak to me, I am listening.”

Step 2: Admit God knows better than you.

Victoria hated Sunday’s sermon! She was very popular at school- everybody liked her. She considered herself to be a Christian, but wanted badly to remain with all the different groups at school, no matter what their beliefs. The sermon had cut pretty straight regarding what Jesus says about the cost of discipleship and the need to be open about your faith to others. Victoria could see that if she really did that, some of her “friends” wouldn’t be quite so friendly. As she went home, her thoughts turned to whether the Bible was really quite as simple as the preacher made it. Surely there were other ways of reading the Bible that made it easier to fit in with everybody at school...weren’t there?

Doug felt deeply convicted by the Bible passage preached on Sunday. He’d always been happy enough with his well-paid job and comfortable lifestyle; being a Christian just seemed to add an extra layer of comfort, respectability and peace of mind. Now, as he listened to Jesus commanding His disciples, he was unsettled. Could Jesus want him to change, radically alter his giving, and perhaps even change his job? Yes, the Bible passage really did seem to mean that. Doug went home humbled & thoughtful.

What we must understand about listening to sermons is that we must come humbly to the Word of God. The question we must ask ourselves is, "When God speaks, do I bend my knee in submission?"

Victoria and Doug both understood the sermons, but their responses were totally different. Victoria wanted to find a way around it, but Doug bowed before the teaching of God. How seriously we take the Word of God is a direct reflection of what we believe. This is a crystal-clear example of what Matthew 7:24-27 teaches, where both men heard, both men understood, but one obeyed, and the other didn't.

Are there any problems with coming humbly to God's Word humbly? Most certainly! How about not liking when our sin or weakness is pointed out, or the conviction that we are going to have to change? What we need to understand is that we don't come to the sermon as blank sheets of paper; instead, we come to the sermon with our lives already scribbled over. We believe certain things are reasonable, and others unreasonable, and we accept some behaviors as normal, and others as not normal. For the most part, we don't get these beliefs and assumptions about what's normal, believable & acceptable from the Bible; we get them from our culture. TV, radio talk shows, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, magazines, and even our parents, friends & experiences from the past all shape us and our view on life. So what we really want is for the Bible to tell us we're okay, what we've done is okay, and what we believe is okay.

In reality, 2 Corinthians 10:4&5 teaches us that what we think naturally is not okay! Instead of coming to the Bible as a clean sheet, I come scribbled on, unable to think straight, speak right or act as I should. Ultimately, I am a messed up person apart from Christ!

"This could be painful" means I must expect the Bible to command me to repentance rather than reassure me that I'm okay. It will never make me comfortable or complacent in my sin. As Timothy was leading the church of Ephesus, Paul warned him in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 to stick to the Word of God in his preaching. While comfortable doctrine makes me feel good about myself, it doesn't hurt; health-giving doctrine does hurt.

Why do you think faithful Bible teaching isn't more common? Simply because faithful Bible teaching will always cause offense. Sermons about church government, current affairs, terrible sins of the world, or about the fascinations of religions & philosophies will not upset me. The Word of God, however, spoken by a faithful Bible preacher will get under my skin, and cut to my very core (Hebrews 4:12&13). James 1:21 exhorts us to get rid of all immorality & evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the Word of God implanted in me. I sure shouldn't expect to like it- in fact, sometimes I might even feel insulted, just like one of the experts of the Law who approached Jesus in Luke 11:45. Jesus had just gotten done denouncing the hypocritical Pharisees, and one of the religious leaders (presumably not a Pharisee himself) interrupted Him and said, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also." He listened to Jesus' sermon, he understood it perfectly, and he didn't like it at all. You might think, "I don't like Biblical preaching, I find it so offensive," and that's quite true- it is!

Our listening skills are more selfish than we think. It's been said that it's very hard to get a person to understand & accept something when their salary depends on their not understanding & accepting it. In the same way, it is very hard to get me to understand & accept the teaching of the Bible when my comfort, my lifestyle, my complacency, and my selfishness all depend on my *not* understanding & accepting it. One of the elders here at FFC has said in the past, "When you clearly and concisely explain something to someone, and they say, 'I don't understand,' they really mean, 'I don't like what you just said.'" How much of our "ignorance" or "inability to understand" is really a subtle defense against having to acknowledge our sin and change?

Conclusion

As we serve side by side in 2011 here at Faith Fellowship Church, we need to listen humbly to the teaching of God's Word. To do so is to be realistic about Who God Is, and who we are. Ultimately, in evading what the Bible commands, "there's more than one way to skin a cat."

One way people evade the Bible's commands is the simple way: "The Bible is wrong, I don't agree with it, and it's it."

A common way that's utilized is seen within religious circles, where we are not so forthright with direct rejection of the Word of God, but will instead find a clever way to reinterpret the Bible so that we can persuade ourselves that, although it appears at first glance to be commanding us personally, it really doesn't. This preserves our self-deception and public image of piety while at the same time safeguarding our rebellion against God.

Lastly, there's the comfortable way where people say, "Yes, I know Christian people of past centuries have consistently taken this passage at face value, but now we know better- we're more advanced." The person who desires to disregard what the Bible says bows to the pressure that it doesn't comfortably fit with political correctness or with the materialism of our culture.

To listen humbly is to admit that the Bible is right, and I am wrong! God is God, and I am the one who needs to change. On our own, we'll never bend the knee humbly before the Word of God. By nature, we always rebel. We need to pray for the gracious work of the Spirit of God to humble our proud hearts.

Practical Homework

1. Read next week's passage at home ahead of time.
2. Pray for the pastors, elders and teachers at FFC.
3. Pray for yourself, that the Holy Spirit will grow a heartfelt expectation in you of God Himself speaking to you personally as His Word is preached & taught.
4. Train to come fresh & ready to pay close attention.
5. Deliberately quiet your mind & heart before the sermon, and say to yourself, "This is when God speaks to me."

6. Answer the question, "What parts of Bible passage that was preached this week convicted my beliefs and lifestyle?"
7. Pray for the work of God's Spirit to enable you to submit to what the Bible clearly says, and that you will allow Him to change you through His power.

Tuesday, January 18, 2011

Step 3: Brain Washed, or Bible Bathed? Check the preacher says what the passage says.

As far as Jack is concerned, if his flow of thought actually mixes with the pastor's flow of thought in the sermon, it's right on. If he enjoys the topic, if he senses that the preacher has brought his "A" game, if he likes the analogies & stories that the pastor uses, if it's humorous, and if he connects with the personality of the pastor, he's all in. But he finds it terribly awkward if he is asked by someone who was not at the service what the sermon was about- even though he was thoroughly entertained by the stories. Maybe, if the pastor is very clear, Jack just may be able to tell you what he said, but he would definitely be at a loss if you asked him what the Bible passage was, and how the preaching related to the passage. Most of the time, Jack doesn't even have a Bible open.

Elaina was considered by all her friends as a deep thinker. She was someone who read the Bible passage ahead of time before Sunday rolled around, so that when they stood as a congregation to read the Bible in unison on Sunday morning at the beginning of the sermon, she was already wondering what the pastor was going to pull out of the text. As Elaina listened to the pastor speaking, she was mentally trying to decipher how the pastor had crafted the sermon from this particular passage. Elaina is the kind of person who will dutifully- and often tiresomely- go up to the preacher afterwards and ask the pastor where the 2nd point of the sermon came from. She had realized some time ago that pastors aren't used to that!

Are you a lazy listener? Jack sure was, and yet Elaina was wise. We must remember: the art of listening is intended to be an activity in which your senses are involved rather than passive. So if the pastor is preaching & claiming the authority of God, we'd be wise to be actively engaged, studying along and not just simply lapping it up. Acts 17:10-12 reminds us of this when we see the life of the Bereans:

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.

Wednesday, January 19, 2011

Are you the type of person who is susceptible to being brain-washed? TV has had an ill-effect on our culture, specifically in the area of listening. The art of listening is intended to be an

activity in which your senses are involved, rather than a passive activity where you basically turn your brain on autopilot. If you were to be asked, "Do you want to be brainwashed?" you would immediately respond, "No way!" In the same way, we should never listen to or watch anything without being engaged, using the discernment God gives us (our "critical faculties"). Even more than that, this is much more serious than watching TV or movies- rather than simply listening to something & soaking it in, we need to observe, observe, observe! Jesus Himself said that in Matthew 7:15-20 when He said,

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

The bottom line is that we need to be fruit inspectors, rather than simply hearers.

Thursday, January 20, 2011

In his booklet, "Listen Up!" Christopher Ash says, "We need to check that the pastor is actually using the only available authority, which is a borrowed authority that only comes from teaching what the Bible passage teaches. So, we need to listen carefully to the passage and ask whether what the preacher says is what the passage says." (pgs. 9&10) The question is, what is the emphasis of the sermon? Is it fanciful stories? Delivery? Emotional responses? Is it aimed at the intellect? Is it a call through Scripture to consider your ways, confess your sin & repent? Instead of contemplating critical questions about delivery, personality, or communication skills, ask whether the meat of the sermon is the message, unpacked and pressed home with application.

Some people are all about following the sermon outlines and taking notes, using them as focus aids. Others find taking notes a distraction, and would rather devote themselves to listening intently. Whatever strategy you use, keep this question at the forefront of your mind: "Where did the pastor get that from?" Ash also says that any Christian should "...be able to see at least roughly whether the preacher is building the sermon from the passage, or just using the passage as a springboard for saying what they wanted to say anyway." (pgs. 10&11) If pastors can show they got it from the Bible, then the only response of a Christian is to humbly submit to the authority of God's Word. If it isn't, then it's simply one person's opinion against another.

It's not Academia that is necessary, but humble devotedness. You don't have to have a degree to be an active listener. Yes, some people have more experience reading & studying books, and some of these skills can come in handy when studying the Bible, but any one of us can understand the Bible enough, when it is clearly & accurately taught in a language that's easily understood. In our natural state, we don't think straight, which Isaiah 55:8 makes clear:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

Thankfully, John 14:26 shows us the “antidote” to this state when it records the words of Jesus, Who promised,

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.

Remember it is the work of God, by His Spirit, to open up our minds so that we listen openly & think clearly, and so that we also discern whether a sermon is true to the Bible. In our natural state, we do not straight. We need to pray for His work in us to accomplish this!

Friday, January 21, 2011

Step 4: Hear the sermon in church.

Hannah could be referred to as a fanatical sermon-listener. In fact, she has hundreds of sermons downloaded onto her iPod from preachers all over the world. When does she have the time to listen? Riding the bus, driving, running, when she’s getting ready in the morning, and when she’s going to sleep at night. She’s put in at least a couple hundred hours of listening. Her listening has led her to believe that she doesn’t have to be in church very often anymore- in fact, she doesn’t even really have a desire to go. Why should she, when she can listen to these great sermons right off the Internet?

Garth isn’t always so keen to hear the sermon. His attention seems to wander, and he wonders if he has some sort of attention deficiency. Yet, he shows up at his home church no matter how he feels, week by week, to listen to the pastor he’s grown up listening to. “Yeah,” he admits, “maybe our pastor isn’t what would be considered a superstar, but he’s one who knows me personally. If I have a question, I can go to him, and I know that he really cares for me and prays for me.” When he shakes his pastor’s hand, his pastor exhibits a genuine interest in him. Because of that reason alone, he would much rather listen to him preach the Word of God.

Garth has latched onto a fundamental, yet often missed, fact about preaching. The normal place for preaching is the gathering of the saints of the local body- church. As Christians, we are to come together to hear sermons corporately, not solo. In fact, the very word “church” means an assembly of saints who gather in the flesh together. Christopher Ash writes,

“There is no such thing as ‘virtual church.’ The assembly of the people of Israel in the Sinai desert was called (literally) ‘the congregation in the wilderness.’ (Acts 7:38)” (pg. 12)

When we see the church defined in the Bible, we see that it is the Body of Christ, which is defined by the call of the word of God to gather under the Word of God, and since the Old Testament, God’s people have done just that. Deuteronomy 4:10 sets the paradigm for this:

Especially concerning the day you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb, when the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'

Remember that God always takes the initiative to summon us! When He does so, it is always with the distinct purpose of sitting under the Word of God so that we can be shaped corporately by Word of God. We are a Body, not a bunch of different limbs. God's purpose is not to shape a bunch of people to be like Christ as individuals, but to form a body made up of Christ-like people. In another portion of his booklet "Listen Up!", Ash writes,

"...preaching is properly done only when the people of God in a local church gather. When we listen to an mp3 recording of a sermon, we are not listening to preaching, but to an echo of preaching that happened in the past." (pgs. 12&13)

It's the same thing as playing a sports video game. When you play a game, you're not actually there, you don't actually experience what goes on, and it's not really real. In the same way, listening to recorded sermons and forsaking the local church can never be more than second best when compared to being there in person with people of God in the local church. It is much more beneficial to listen to the pastor you know and who knows you, than to hear a recording of some well-known preacher you don't know and who has no idea who you are!

Saturday, January 22, 2011

As we lay down the importance of hearing the sermon in church, we need to ask, "What are the ramifications?" What comes from being with the local church body and hearing teaching from God's Word together?

One of the main things is the accountability to each other in our response. Hearing while being together is by far better than hearing it alone because we can talk together about the sermon afterwards.

Another result is in serving together. When we listen together, we know what each other has heard, and then we lovingly hold each other accountable to what we now know. If I listen alone, no one knows what I've heard. This is Hebrews 10:24&25 in a nutshell.

Finally, there is teamwork (Ephesians 4:16). When we listen together, we respond together. The Bible is mostly addressed to the people of God together; "you" is most often read in the plural ("you all"). The Bible's purpose is to make and shape the people of God, which is the local church. In this, we must ask, "What is God saying to us?" instead of, "What is God saying to me?"

Conclusion

As we serve side by side in 2011 here at Faith Fellowship Church, we need to come to the sermon with our minds and Bibles open, asking, "Do we actually want to know what God says?" We need to talk about the text rather than the stories. Some good questions are, "How can we respond to the Bible truths in the sermon?" and "There's something I don't fully understand about this passage- can you help me?"

We must also emphasize that being at church to hear the Word of God must be a priority. Encouraging others to come along so that we can hear it together is applicable to all of us, even when we have company from out of town, or if there is someone with an unbelieving & unwilling spouse. It's not how much you love going to church, but how easily you are distracted from going to church. Our first priority is to Christ and His Body. 1 Corinthians 7:12-14, Ephesians 5:25-27 and 1 Peter 3:1&2 all give specific teaching regarding church attendance for those with unbelieving spouses, for husbands and for wives.

We must pray for a deep love for our fellow brothers and sisters, as well as for a Spirit-given desire to sit together under the preaching of His Word!

Practical Homework

1. Read the passage, or listen carefully when it is read.
2. When do you discern as the main point of the passage? Is the main thrust of the sermon the same as the main point of the passage?
3. Are there any surprises in the passage? Does it say anything that we wouldn't expect it to say in a manner we wouldn't expect it to say it in?
4. Who was the passage originally written and/or spoken to? Remember, a text without a context is a pretext!
5. Why do you think God inspired the Bible-writer to write this passage? What is the purpose intended by God?
6. Pray as Martin Luther prayed, "Lord, teach me, teach me, teach men."

Tuesday, February 1, 2011

Step 5: Listen Week by Week

Audrey has had some over-the-edge experiences when listening to sermons. There've been times when what she's heard preached has really scratched her "itch," times when she can truthfully say that God spoke to her with clarity & power. She can tell some great stories of events in her life when her path took a drastic turn upwards for the better simply because of what was preached. However, she's only in church about one week out of three. You see, she has quite a full schedule: things like getting away for the weekend, or just staying home to "recharge" her batteries on Sunday morning. After all, she reasons, so often when she does go to church, the sermon reminds her of something that she is already aware of.

John is there for the sermon every week like clockwork. If you show up at his church and he's not there, it means that there is something terribly wrong. He hasn't been a Christian as long as Audrey has, and he doesn't know his Bible as well- he often struggles to find a text quickly- but he is improving in his Bible knowledge, and he is changing the more he applies his life to what he is learning through listening to sermons. He realized some time ago that he must have somewhat of a short memory because he needs to be reminded over and over of things that he has already heard. Still, it doesn't bother him at all to be reminded; in fact, he likes it. He has committed to being in church every week, and he has also developed a habit of letting the Bible sermon just soak into his mind again and again.

John is the one who will grow and become a clearer reflection of Jesus Christ. Audrey is likely to be a spiritual sparkler: full of fizz for a short time, but with no lasting light. The question is, "Why is being in a Bible-preaching church so urgent & important?" Why today? What do I need to hear today that I haven't already heard, or won't hear in the future? The still, small voice in the back of our head says, "Relax, kick back- there's plenty of time..."

Romans 10:14-17 gives us a simple but important equation: We must listen in order to confess; once we confess, God will give us the ability to repent; and once we repent, we can obey. The start of this equation is listening, and it stresses the importance of being in a Bible-preaching church each week to be able to listen intently to the sermon that is being preached.

This same passage in Romans also gives us a progression in the role of the preacher: they are sent in order to preach so that the people can hear and then believe & call on Jesus Christ. The question is, "How do I view Bible preaching?" Will every sermon scratch my specific "itch"? Maybe not. Is any Bible text relevant? Yes! 2 Timothy 3:16&17 and Romans 15:4 both make this clear to us. We all have surface sin & struggles that simply mask the deeper core issues of the heart, things like pride, selfishness, and self-centeredness. The heart issue is like going to a doctor to have skin scabs treated with a salve when the real problem is that there is a blood disease that needs to be dealt with. We can't try to deal with the surface problems- we need to go deeper than that and deal with the inner man. God knows what we need better than we do!

Wednesday, February 2, 2011

Do we view the Bible as a manuscript, or a magical mantra? 2 Peter 1:3&4 says,

...as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

In his booklet "Listen Up!", Christopher Ash writes, "...It's a misunderstanding to think that by some divine magic the Bible passage I happen to be reading today will be precisely what I need today, and then again tomorrow, and the next day." The Bible is intended by God to teach &

train us, to reveal Who God is to us, to show us who we are and how we may please & glorify Him. God *will* speak, but it just may be that He will not teach me what I think I need to hear.

The Bible is also God's scalpel to shape and mold us through repentance, and not behavior modification of trying to present ourselves as squeaky clean people. Our lives are a continual battle of denying ourselves and surrendering our minds to God, and we need to hear the Bible preached so that we don't take our own opinions and run with them. That being said, we not only need to know this today, but also tomorrow; we need to start learning it today, rather than procrastinate with our obedience. The equation of listen, confess, repent, and obey is something that needs to be repeated. As 2 Peter 1:12 says, we are constantly reminded of the truth of God Word when we hear it preached. We don't need a random series of sermon "fixes," but instead we need to sit together, week by week, under thoughtful, systematic expository preaching, and as we are taken patiently through the Bible in this way, we will observe Christlikeness in ourselves and others. What we like and what we hate will evidence this change (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our affections, our desires, our hatred of our own sin, our decisions, and who we allow to influence us will all be radically transformed through the power & leading of the Holy Spirit, and it is to this end of supernatural work that we must pray.

Thursday, February 3, 2011

Step 6: Obey Day by Day

Conrad, for the most part, is pretty content the way he is. He finds Christianity interesting, he feels welcome at church, and he even enjoys it when the preacher delivers one of his knock-down sermons. It somehow makes him feel good to lament how terrible other people's behavior is, especially those people that are out in the world. He is adamant that the person sitting next to him obeys the Bible, as well as all people who claim Christ as Savior. The one element Conrad appears to be missing is that he actually needs to change.

Lorraine is deeply aware that she needs to change. It seems that every week she is convicted of some way in which she is not like Jesus Christ. It may be the cutting word that she uses in describing someone, the critical spirit in which she thinks, the jealousy that so often percolates within her, or even the manner in which she spends her money. Whatever it is, she comes to the sermon knowing she just can't risk staying the same. She has got to change. So, when she understands Bible teaching that cuts it straight, she aches to apply her life directly to it. She prays regularly, week by week, for a heart that responds right away, all the way with a happy heart to God's Word in loving & practical obedience.

What we see many times throughout Scripture is the difference between knowing and doing. James 1:22, for instance, exhorts us to, "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." The purpose of sermons is to convict us of areas we need to be changed & where we don't reflect Jesus Christ. After all, you believe what you do, not necessarily what you say. In Luke 8:15 we are taught the fruitfulness of Christlike character. The question is, "What does the crop look like hanging on the tree of your life?"

In preaching, 2 Timothy 4:1-5 shows the emphasis that Paul gave to Timothy on staying founded upon the Word of God. Verses earlier, he also reminded Timothy of the purpose & the profit of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16&17):

- doctrine – teaching what we are to believe
- reproof – exposing wrong/sinful thinking & actions
- correction – of those sinful thoughts & actions
- training in righteousness – taking up our cross daily & following Jesus

Ultimately, “Preaching is a comprehensive brief for believe and behavior.” (Christopher Ash)

Friday, February 4, 2011

So, what about the entertainment value of sermons? Even though we live in a culture where entertainment rules- we have no problems finding entertainment almost anywhere around us- we must not expect sermons to entertain us. One reason people have stopped coming to church is that if we as a church try to entertain, we will lose every time, which is why the Southern Baptist Church records that only 6 million out of 16 million professing born again Christians regularly attends a local church. Some churches have forgone preaching the sermon for flash. In response to this, Christopher Ash writes, “Most preachers are bound to fail, and mistaken to try.”

Mark 6:14-29 contains the account of King Herod coming to enjoy the preaching of John the Baptist, even though John was preaching against Herod’s incestuous marriage. The sad state of affairs was that Herod was entertained, but not convicted. Ezekiel 33:32 also records a similar instance, where people invited each other out to come and hear Ezekiel preach. Somehow it was entertaining, but yet they did not obey. What we see today is that Christian subcultures make celebrities out of preachers. There are some whose style, delivery, and manner are so smooth that we could listen to them for hours on end. Tastes differ just like music, and some will say, “We are of (Preacher A),” while others say, “We are of (Preacher B).” Paul warned of this when he wrote 1 Corinthians 3:3&4 under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

For where there is envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?

If we’re more attracted to style, tone, and delivery than we are to the sermon itself, we must admit that we are out to be entertained rather than taught.

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Saturday, February 5, 2011

We must remember that we don't have it in us to obey. 2 Timothy 2:25 teaches us that it is God Who grants repentance to people- we can't even repent without God working repentance in us. On our own we cannot obey; we're slaves of sin, unable to help ourselves. It is God who opens up the door of our minds, turns on the light bulb so that we can see and so that we can understand & respond to His message (Acts 16:14). This is a daily thing, not something that happens just at conversion. We need to pray for God to open our minds to His truth week by week.

The Bible's equation from Romans 10:14-17 isn't that hard, but it is of eternal importance: listen, confess, repent, and then obey. Our responsibility is to listen today like our lives depend on it. The dangerous deception that we all can succumb to is, "I can get right tomorrow, I have lots of time." Romans 1:18-32, however, reveals that the people who thought this same thing ended up not even wanting to heed God's warning later on in life. God gave them exactly what they wanted, and judicially poured out His judgment on them. Their sinful desires will result in them standing at the Great White Throne judgment prophesied in Revelation 20:11-15.

Spiritually, we are all apart from Christ. Our characteristics are:

- dead (Ephesians 2:1)
- children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3)
- blinded by Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4)
- judicially blinded by God (John 12:40)

- lovers of darkness (John 3:19)
- not seekers of God (Romans 3:11)
- spiritually ignorant (2 Corinthians 2:14)
- slaves to sin (Romans 6:17)

Before Christ, what are our credentials? Our works? Not a chance! Our faith? Yes, but only by grace (Ephesians 2:8&9). What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. The only good and righteous thing in our lives is Jesus Christ (Romans 7:18).

Practical Homework

1. Keep count for the next year how many times you are in church to hear the sermon. Note the reasons why you are not there.
2. If you find you're away more than you realized, take whatever action is necessary to make sure you're at church regularly. Make your travel arrangements so that Sunday isn't a travel day. Make your schedule around your commitment to Christ & His body rather than visa versa.
3. Be aware of others as you listen to the sermon. Speak to them afterwards, not only about how we should respond as individuals, but about how the Bible passage shapes the church.
4. Pray often for the work of God's Spirit to shape both you as an individual & our church as a body of Christians together.
5. As you listen to a sermon, do you think of how others should change, or how you need to change?
6. What action do you need to change? Write down precisely what it is that needs to be radically amputated to obey today's sermon. It may be a change in attitude, the way you speak, or some action you need to stop/start doing. Whatever it is, write it down!
7. In a week's time, look at what you've written, and put yourself on trial. Has the sermon made any difference? (do this a month later, as well)

Monday, February 7, 2011

Step 7: Joyful Hearts Obey Right Away, All the Way – Do what the Bible says today, and rejoice!

Braydon loves good old Bible preaching. He is convinced that this is how God actually speaks to him. As the preacher begins, he's on the edge of his seat with a Bible on his lap and a pen in his hand, ready to take notes- he's all in. Braydon's compiled quite a file case of sermon notes, and has become quite adept at being a Berean that is checking to make sure that the sermon lines up with Scripture. Braydon is sold out on the Bible; he believes beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Bible is 100% accurate & trustworthy. The problem for Braydon is that his wife hasn't really noticed much of a change in his lifestyle during all this conviction and knowledge. In fact, in the 10 years since God saved him and he's been calling himself a Christian, he's gained a lot of knowledge, but hasn't really changed much. All this listening & learning hasn't really been incorporated into living.

Debbie isn't as good as Braydon at exegesis of Scripture. She often feels like she's inept when her small group gets together for study on Sunday evenings. Debbie is keenly aware that she has much to learn and so much she doesn't understand, and she still has a lot of questions. However, when she does grasp a Bible truth, it seems her conscience won't let go of it; it's not simply the task of filling out her sermon notes & filing them away, but she realizes that her life has to change to glorify God as she grows in understanding. It seems her knowledge of God always leads her to the question, "How can I apply my life to what I have learned?" She just can't seem to shake the truth of God's Word from her life. She realized recently that the Holy Spirit is leading her to meditate on what she has learned so that it becomes her own way of thinking. Some people have told her she is taking this all too seriously, but Debbie has actually experiences growing joy the more she applies her life to the truths of God's Word. By confessing her sin, she has found joy to be a virtue and a blessing that she has never experienced before. She sure does enjoy walking with God!

Hebrews 3:7-15 is all about joyful hearts obeying right away, all the way with a happy heart. In particular, though, verse 13 teaches us that there's no snooze button on conviction from the Holy Spirit. We are commanded through Scripture not to allow our hearts to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. or that you have plenty of time? Some people have what appears to be a real penchant to know more, but others realize that every sermon is urgent. Moses' final sermon in Deuteronomy 30 is highlighted by verse 15:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.

David's exhortation in Psalm 95:7&8 still rings true today:

For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you will hear His voice: 'Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, as in the day of trial in the wilderness'

We need the Gospel each and every day! Every time we sit under Bible preaching, we need to undergo the continual process of confession, being granted repentance by God, and trusting in Christ again. One of the deceptions today is that it is only non-believers who need to do this. Preaching that grows a church into a clearer reflection of Jesus Christ through the grace of God is a dual miracle. First, the sinful preacher must be shaped by grace to preach, and second, sinful listeners must be awakened by grace to listen together week by week with a humble, expectant attitude. Only God can do this. So, praying prior to the sermon is not a formality, it is an utter necessity! Unless God works, what we do in church each week will be a complete waste of time. God loves to change us through preaching; God loves it when we come to Him in humble adoration and expectant prayer. What we need to do is ask to be given fresh conviction, repentance upon confession, renewed & deeper faith for the day, joyful obedience, and a community committed to Christlikeness in the local church.

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

Hebrews 3:7-15 is all about joyful hearts obeying right away, all the way with a happy heart. In particular, though, verse 13 teaches us that there's no snooze button on conviction from the Holy Spirit. We are commanded through Scripture not to allow our hearts to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. At church, we don't just have a biblical counseling center- we are a biblical counseling church, and we're a team.

Confession produces repentance, which is what 2 Corinthians 7:10 clearly presents. When we come to treasure Christ above all else, we don't leave confession, repentance and faith behind; instead, it's our sustenance. Anyone who is of the mindset that daily confession is a thing of yesterday is self-deceived. We need to wake up each morning with the commitment to confess our sin to God and other people. In fact, we should go about our day *expecting* to confess our sin because it's going to happen, as Christopher Ash writes in "Listen Up!" on page 21: "The decision that we may have made yesterday is proved genuine by the fact that we do the same turning of the heart today." The present is conditional on the future.

Our responsibility is found in Hebrews 3:14. The question is, "What are you going to do? How are you going to respond?" Every time we heard the Word of God preached, we must respond today by agreeing with God, being granted repentance by God, and trusting in God. Ephesians 4:22-24 presents the biblical equation of how we are to live our lives each day. First, we are to confess- agree with God about- our sin, and see it the way God sees it (verse 22). Then, we are granted repentance- new knowledge- from God, which is a change in our thinking (verse 23). Finally, we trust in God through Christ and respond in faithful obedience (verse 24). It's not that we become a Christian each day, but, as James 1:21 so adequately states,

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Wednesday, February 9, 2011

This response of obedience to the preaching of the Word of God is true, no matter what part of the Bible is preached. 2 Timothy 3:16&17 reminds us that "all Scripture...is profitable..." and no portion of the Bible is intended by God to simply intrigue people. It always calls us to turn to God through confession, repentance, and obedience. Most importantly, this turning must be done today!

There is a story told of Satan training some of his demons for working amongst people and aiding the kingdom of darkness. Christopher Ash describes the events:

"The story is told of the devil training his junior devils. He asks them what they are going to tell human beings. One is going to try: 'There is no God.' The senior devil thinks it's worth a try, but doesn't think many will be foolish enough to fall for that. A second suggests: 'There is no judgment.' The senior devil thinks that's better, but still doubts he'll have much success,

because people have an inbuilt sense of accountability, an understanding that our actions have consequences. 'Any other ideas?' 'How about, 'There's no hurry'?' pipes up a third. The senior devil warmly congratulates him: 'That is exactly the message that will be most widely believed and will do the most harm.'"

Satan wants us to be posers who respond to sermons preached with a, "Hey, that was good stuff, it really hit the nail on the head; we'll have to do something about it... tomorrow." When we're really honest before God and with ourselves, we instinctively understand that tomorrow never comes. If we allow this mindset to deceive us, we will never respond. The church father Augustine prayed to God in a similar mindset regarding his sexual sin & purity: "Give me chastity, but not today." What we need to understand is that no response is a response. John 15:22 says,

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin

To listen to a sermon and not respond is worse than not hearing at all. The late pastor Charles Simeon once said that every sermon "...increases either our salvation or our condemnation." "I know" without "I do" is a self-condemning statement. So, when the devil comes and slyly whispers in our ear, "Why not respond tomorrow?" the response of one who treasures Christ above all else is, "No, today as I have heard His voice, I will not harden my heart." "This daily urgency of response will gradually, over the years, shape our character." (C. Ash, pg. 22)

Thursday, February 10, 2011

Psalm 1:1-3 - Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted... Moses understood this perfectly when he appealed to the Israelites for a response "today" in verses 15-20. If we are to walk in obedience to God's commands, then we must cry out to God to work in us today (Hebrews 4:16). When we surrender and commit to hearing and obeying God in the power of His Spirit, we will find joy that doesn't appear to make sense. Yes, it's uncomfortable to have our toes stepped on, but it is a far more wonderful and joyful experience to grasp, confess, repent, obey and have a clear conscience before God (Romans 8:1); listening to sermons actually becomes a source of deep joy, as David attests to in Psalm 51:8:

Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice.

The living God speaks to us today and calls us to walk in fellowship with Him, immersed in joyful obedience.

Friday, February 11, 2011

In Hebrews 3:7 through 4:16, we read the 2nd of 5 warnings given to the readers of Hebrews, which shows us that the present is conditional on the future. Verses 7&8 warn us not to harden our wills against God, just as Israel did (vv. 9&10) and was punished (vv. 11-17). Ultimately, we see that disobedience is the manifestation of unbelief (vv. 18&19). "Will you persevere?" is the question that underlines Hebrews 4:1-16, with the account of others who have made good starts, but failed to persevere (vv. 1-3b). The hope throughout all of this is found in verses 3c-10, which makes available the same promise to us as was given to the original readers of the Book of Hebrews: "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God!" (v. 9) Verses 11-13 show us the tools of perseverance, the grace of God which is the dynamic power within a believer that gives them the desire & the power to live in harmony with God & His Word. Feelings are nothing but gauges, whereas truth is the foundation on which we stand & live. Finally, Hebrews 4:14-16 provides the example of Jesus Christ to show us how to persevere: we see the work of Christ as our Great High Priest (v. 14), we see the compassion of Christ in His humanity (v. 15), and we see the entrance into the throne room of God through Jesus Christ our Intercessor (v. 16). When we as individuals seek the source of our justification and strength, we will either go to law or grace. When we go to law, we will fall like the unbelieving Israelites, but when we go to grace, we will persevere like Jesus Christ.

Practical Homework:

1. Confess- ask yourself how the preached passage shows you words, actions or attitudes that you need to change.
2. Repent- pray for the grace of God to remain in an attitude of humble confession of the sin that you've confessed, and allow the Holy Spirit to produce in you a new way of thinking.
3. Obedience- take proactive steps to change right now. Ask yourself, "In what way did the passage encourage me to trust in God through obedience?" Then, resolve to put that fresh trust into your life as God empowers you through His Holy Spirit.
4. Enjoy preaching- not as entertainment, but as God's regular gracious invitation to walk with Him, rejoicing in a clear conscience.