

## If Anyone Listens

*1 Peter 4:11*

**T**he new minister stood at the church door greeting the members as they left the Sunday morning service. Most of the people were very generous telling the new minister how much they liked his message, except for one man who said, “That was a very dull and boring sermon, pastor.”

A few minutes later, the same man again appeared in line and said, “I don’t think you did much preparation for your message.” Once again, the man appeared, this time muttering, “You really blew it. You didn’t have a thing to say, pastor.”

Finally, the pastor could stand it no longer. He went to one of the deacons and inquired about the man. “Oh, don’t let that guy bother you,” said the deacon. “He’s a little slow. All he does is go around repeating whatever he hears other people saying.”

Several years ago, the *British Weekly* printed a letter to the editor, which read, “Dear Sir: I notice that ministers seem to set a great deal of importance on their sermons and spend a great deal of time in preparing them. I have been attending services quite regularly for the past thirty years and during that time, if I estimate correctly, I have listened to no less than three thousand sermons. But, to my consternation, I discover I cannot remember a single one of them. I wonder if a minister’s time might be more profitably spent on something else?”

The editor received a veritable avalanche of responses, most of them angry, for several weeks. Finally, the argument was closed when one additional letter was printed. It read: “My Dear Sir: I have been married for thirty years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals—mostly of my wife’s cooking. Suddenly I have discovered that I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet, I received nourishment from every one of them. I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago.”

There are some, even in the church, to whom “sermon” is a dirty word. In many churches, and in many hearts, the sermon is a necessary evil, something which must be endured for one reason or another. In the heat of a passionate argument, one may tell another, “Don’t preach to me!” We don’t want to listen to someone tell us what to do or how to live, and that attitude carries over many times into the way we listen—or don’t listen—to the message on Sundays or Wednesday nights.

Standing at a pulpit to preach the Word of God has always been a sacred task, one heavy with responsibility. And with the schedules and lifestyles we all have these days, life is even more complicated than ever. So when people have committed themselves to being in worship on a regular basis, I personally consider that to be a sacred trust—that people have trusted me enough that when they come to worship they’re not going to hear some barely warmed-up pabulum that’s more nauseating than anything.

When he preaches, the preacher must know what he’s talking about. That requires prayer and study and sometimes experience.

From 1 Peter 4:11 we can discover two very important truths. The first one is very clearly seen, but the second is more implied than anything else. First, as we saw last week, **whoever shares God’s Word must be careful what he says and how he says it.** So that brings us to this second truth. Let’s pick up this jewel of God’s Word, hold it up to the Light, and see what wonderful things God has to say to us through it. The second truth is...

**If these are God’s Words, those who listen must be careful how they listen.**

Attending a professional baseball game in St. Louis several years ago, I was intrigued by the people who continuously climbed and reclinced the steps of the stadium, attempting to make a little money by selling refreshments. Back and forth, up and down, through the entire game, these salesmen called out with excitement and fervency the names of the items they were selling. I was fascinated by them, first, because of their obvious commitment to what they were doing, and second, because often they called out to people who were interested in something else—the ball game.

Preaching is a lot like that, in that it requires a commitment that often forces the preacher to his study when he could be doing almost anything else. It requires a heart that is set afire by the Spirit of God in enthusiastic joy. Someone said once that “all preachers should be sure of what they are saying. Someone in the audience might be listening.” But many times preaching requires that the preacher share a message to people who aren’t listening, whose minds and spirits are elsewhere.

That particular problem is nothing new. God had warned Ezekiel of the strong possibility that the people would not listen to him:

*The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says.” **And whether they listen or fail to listen**—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. You must speak my words to them, **whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious**” (Ezekiel 2:4-7).*

**Whether they listen or fail to listen**—words which are relevant even in our day. Take the typical Sunday morning worship service in the typical church anywhere in America. Most of the people present have not come with a keen expectation to hear God speaking to them in their life situations, and knowing what passes for preaching in many churches these days, I am not surprised. They have come for a variety of reasons, some of them noble, some not so noble. Many have come out of a sense of duty or habit, and find themselves sitting in a church service merely waiting for the final “Amen,” so they can either go to Sunday dinner or head for home.

The life and vitality of worship in many churches has been replaced with the deadness and mediocrity of ritual, and the sad thing is that either they do not notice when this occurs, or they do not care. Ecclesiastes 5:1 gives us a warning in this regard: “*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to **listen** rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know what they are doing.*”

The apostle Paul had some words of advice for a young preacher named Timothy, who was struggling to make the words of Christ relevant to the people in his day. Paul told him that regardless of the circumstances, he should “*Preach the Word.*” That advice was all the more important because of the fact that Jesus was returning, and the day would come when people would not want to listen to sound doctrine. Instead, they would gather around themselves teachers and preachers who could be easily controlled, men who would say only what their listeners wanted to hear. Paul was saying to Timothy, “Be very, very careful to preach the Word of God, especially in view of the fact that the day is coming when people will not listen.”

So if these are God’s Words, those who listen should be careful how they listen. How should we listen? Well, listening to a sermon begins a long time before the

preacher opens his mouth. In fact, it should begin even before you walk in the door of the church building. Listening to a sermon begins when you start praying for the preacher, even before you know what the sermon is about. So **first, we should pray. Pray for the one doing the preaching. But you should also pray for yourself**, asking God to open up your heart to receive whatever message He has for you that day. After all, if these are God's Words, and God truly has something to say to you personally, don't you want to be sure to get it? How tragic it would be to walk away from worship services Sunday after Sunday and never hear from God! It does none of us any good at all if we come with our hearts unprepared.

**Second, we should listen with keen anticipation.** One little boy knelt at his bedside one Sunday evening after attending the church services that morning. He prayed, "Dear God, we had a good time at church today, but I wish you had been there."

If God should happen to be present and speak in many churches today, most would never know it, because there is a serious lack of anticipation. We come expecting no encounter with God; we leave having had no encounter with God. We don't come with a spiritual hunger to be satisfied; we come with a spiritual numbness which prevents us from feeling anything. When you and I get up on Sunday mornings with eagerness and enthusiasm because we truly expect to hear God speaking to us, guess what happens? He does!

There is expectancy in the hearts of those gathered, but it doesn't come from people who anticipate hearing a well-organized, challenging sermon or a rehearsed, polished message in music. It comes from people who sincerely expect to meet God, to hear God, to encounter God—and to come away from that experience with their faces aglow with the presence of Christ.

**Third, we should listen attentively.** Every once in a while something will happen in a service that grabs our attention, but it may not be God Himself on which we are focused. Instead, it may be such deeply spiritual things as the pastor's socks didn't match, or one or two members of the choir fell asleep, or someone dared to select a congregational hymn unfamiliar to half of the congregation. Those become the central thoughts people like that take home with them. They have come to the worship service, but they worshipped no one and nothing but their own selfish ideas and desires. They're not paying attention to what God is saying to them and those around them.

Oh, but things are much different in the congregation which has focused on the Living Lord Jesus Christ! That church takes seriously the words of the psalmist: “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness” (Psalm 29:2); “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker” (Psalm 95:6); or “Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy” (Psalm 99:5).

But there’s one more aspect of listening, especially when you’re listen to the Words of God. **We should listen responsively.** That means that we arrive at God’s House, whether it be morning or evening, Wednesday night or any other time, we come not only expecting to hear from God, but we come determined in our hearts that whatever God says, we will do. We respond to him with hearts open and full of faith, ready to obey Him in what He says.

The beautiful thing about this is that it doesn’t have to happen to everyone else before it can happen to you! But once it truly happens to you, and happens on a regular basis, changing your life in the process, it spreads to other believers, so that they, too, come to anticipate a feast time in the worship services of the church.

So while you’re praying for me that I might always preach as though Christ were standing behind me with His hand on my shoulder, pray that all of us will be careful to seek out what God is saying to us, and to listen carefully so that we miss nothing of what He says. “*The end of all things is near,*” Peter wrote in 4:7, and he was right. For that reason,

**Whoever shares God’s Word must be careful about what he says and how he says it.**

**If these are God’s Words, those who listen must be careful how they listen.**

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