

June 6, 2021

“Listening to a Sermon”
Acts 17:1-15

FCF: Not knowing how to listen to a sermon

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The gospel has implications for how we listen
(magnet) to a sermon.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Knowing the purpose of a thing changes what you do with it. And knowing something about a message determines how you receive it. What is it? Who is it for? Who is it from? Why was it written? Those are good questions. They apply to a letter in the mail, a post on your wall, a call from home, an alert on your phone. And one more thing - a sermon that you hear.

We need to consider this. As we approach my sabbatical, this is something we all need to look at. I will be visiting other churches. You will be hearing guest preachers. That said, it's really a question we should be considering all the time. We've been looking at "listening". "What does it mean to listen to criticism? To the news?" But what does it mean to listen to a sermon? Jesus gives us a warning here (**READ Mark 4:24-25**). So this is worth our considering.

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 17:1-15**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Luke, the author of Acts, intends for his readers to see a contrast between what happened in Thessalonica and Berea. It's worth noting that Paul was purposeful in going to Thessalonica. He passed by other places to get there. Why? It was the capital of the province of Macedonia, its largest and most prosperous city. Paul's journey to Berea was under different circumstances. It was a different place - a city in the foothills south of the Macedonian plain, of little importance historically or politically. And the reception Paul encountered there was quite different as well.

Each of these cities heard the same message from the same messenger. And yet they each responded in very different ways. Luke is holding that in front of us, drawing our attention to it, wanting us to see what it means to receive the Word of God. The Word of God shows us how to receive the Word of God. It shows us how to listen to it. The gospel has implications for this sort of listening as well. Not just listening to criticism and listening to the news but to a sermon. The gospel has implications for how we listen to absolutely everything, including a sermon.

How so? Our text speaks to this. First, the inner posture. Second, the outer response.

I. THE INNER POSTURE

First, our inner posture. That is, our attitude and approach, our heart's position as we encounter God's Word. Note the stark contrast between what we see in Thessalonica and Berea.

A) Not from Idolatry

This is a warning about idolatry. Verses 5-9 give an account of what could have been seen and heard. But we also have a description of what was going on within (**READ Acts 17:5a**).

1. The plain meaning

They were jealous, envious. There was a new guy in town with this novel (if not blasphemous) message. And quite a few folks - who they had been trying to reach - were persuaded to join him. To make matters worse, some of those folks had money. And they took that with them.

2. The deeper issue

But what's the deeper issue here? They were losing power and influence. However orthodox their profession, however much of the Scriptures they knew and the traditions they loved, that was their god. The desire for power and influence is what held their hearts. It was an idol.

B) But with Nobility

We see something very different going on with the Bereans (**READ Acts 17:11a**).

1. The almost plain meaning

Originally, this word had to do with being high or well born, of noble birth. But this nobility had also come to describe a person's character as being fair, tolerant, thoughtful, open-minded.

2. The deeper issue

So what's the deep issue here? From Luke's perspective, these were humble, teachable hearts. They were spiritually hungry. They knew that we are finite fallen creatures who need to hear from God. We do not have all the answers and it's dangerous and arrogant to think otherwise.

That was the inner posture of the Bereans. And it is being commended.

Application:

What are some takeaways here? We don't want to be hearers who are clueless or close-minded or perpetually and needlessly critical, hearing only what we want to hear. But there's something else. Given who we are and who God is, we should expect the Bible to challenge us, for there to be times when it makes us uncomfortable, even to hurt. Just like many a medicine.

The gospel has implications for how we listen to a sermon, including our inner posture.

II. THE OUTER RESPONSE

Moving from that, we need to look at the outer response. We need to consider the fruit born of this soil, the structure that rises from such a foundation. And, again, we have a contrast.

A) Not Hostile Resistance

Ours is not to be the hostile resistance we see in Thessalonica (**READ Acts 17:5-9**).

1. Tracking the flow of events

Let's track the flow of events, just noting the verbs used - taking, forming, setting, attacking, seeking, dragging, shouting, disturbing. This was real persecution calling for perseverance.

2. Tracing the root

Let's trace the root of this. Where did this come from? It all goes back to that inner posture. The hostility was born out of idolatry. It always is. So they would do whatever it took to worship their god. We all do that in one way or another. And it shows what we actually worship.

B) But Earnest Receptiveness

Ours is to be the earnest receptiveness we see with the Bereans (**READ Acts 17:11-12**).

1. Considering the scene

So let's consider this scene. They received, welcomed, Paul's message with eagerness, with a readiness of mind and spirit. They examined the Scriptures (for them, the Old Testament) to see if what they were hearing was true. It was like a judicial investigation, looking to God's Word as their highest authority. One scholar noted "They combined receptivity with critical questioning."

2. Exploring the cause

Now let's explore the cause here. Why were they responding this way? Again, it goes back to that inner posture. There was a true integrity and a lack of unexamined bias. They were striving to be open, knowing that none of us has arrived, no matter how far along the road we may be.

That was the outer response of the Bereans. And it is being commended.

Application:

The Christian stance on the Scriptures is clear (**READ 2 Timothy 3:16-17**). Recognizing the potential benefits, we should sit under a sermon just as the sick in Jesus' day came to the Pool of Bethesda, with great hope of being blessed. And, not only that, with a great resolve to carry out what we hear. We not only do not want to be clueless, close-minded, or critical hearers. We should aspire to be not just hearers of any such type but doers, doers of the Word we have heard.

The gospel has implications for how we listen to a sermon, including our outer response.

CONCLUSION:

Why is this so important? Why is this worth taking the time to consider? Because it is no light thing to hear God speak. Charles Simeon was an English Anglican clergyman who lived from 1759 to 1836. He served at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge for 54 years. He has been a ministry model for John Piper and the late John Stott. He was a great preacher, a fine mentor, and a major force in the church and the revivals of that period. He wrote a short treatise entitled "Directions: How to Hear Sermons." It's quite helpful. In it, he makes a point we would do well to recover in our day. Simeon notes that the preacher is an ambassador for God who speaks on Christ's behalf. To the extent he preaches what is based on the Scriptures, his words, as far as they are consistent with the mind of God, are to be considered as God's. Think of that. Think about the implications of what Simeon was saying. It means that, to the degree the preacher is speaking in a way that is in accord with the Bible, what he says must be received as if God Himself is speaking to us. That's a stunning thing to think about. But the logic is inescapable.

This is why it matters how we hear a sermon. It really matters. It harkens back to Jesus' words (**READ Mark 4:24-25**). It matters how we hear God speaking, how we hear a sermon. So there are huge stakes when we consider that inner posture and outer response. The gospel has implications for how we listen to absolutely everything, including and especially to a sermon.

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