

HOW TO GET MORE OUT OF A SERMON

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Worship is not a spectator sport, but an activity of mind and body directed to giving glory and adoration to God. All Christians who assemble together to worship God are expected to participate – pray together, sing together, contribute together, partake of the Lord's Supper together, and study the word of God together. Of all these acts of worship, the sermon is what will cause some to "check out" mentally. The preacher is seen as doing all the work, yet this is not the way it should be. No sermon is complete until you have someone to deliver it *and* someone to receive it. The most eloquent preacher will have no effectiveness if there is no one to listen and learn.

I am not worried about someone who wants to know how to get more out of a sermon. That person desires to learn. I am worried about the one who doesn't care if they get anything out of a sermon or not. This person is apathetic and unconcerned about their spiritual health and growth. I hope that most of us are constantly trying to learn how to get more out of each sermon we hear.

This, of course, presupposes that the sermon has something to get out of it which is not true with the sermons you hear in some places today. They are filled with mostly empty filler with little scriptural substance. You might learn a few new jokes, poignant stories, and devotional thoughts, but little to no serious exposition of God's word. Brethren end up malnourished and weak in the exercise of discerning truth from error (cf. Heb. 5:14).

Consider the following three suggestions as to how to get more out of a sermon:

PREPARATION – Make mental preparations to eagerly hear and understand God's word long before you go to worship services. Hearing God's word is not a lazy, recreational activity, but a serious and sober responsibility. Our attitude needs to be reverent as we prepare to approach the revealed mind of God. Prayer can certainly help prepare our minds as we ask God to help us have open hearts to receive His truths.

Young Samuel was told what to say when the Lord wanted to speak to him: "Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears" (1 Sam. 3:9). That attitude should precede hearing any sermon. Cornelius told Peter, "Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God" (Acts 10:33). We should be ready to hear with "readiness" of mind (Acts 17:11) and a hunger for righteousness (Matt. 5:6).

Preparation can also be physical. It is hard to concentrate when you are tired. Making sure you get plenty of rest before a sermon will help prevent you from taking a nap during the sermon! Listening to a sermon is taxing to the mind and takes energy. A tired body and mind will gain little from the study of God's word. Important learning opportunities should not be missed.

INTERACTION – Though a sermon is being preached by one individual, this does not mean that the hearer is not active. Good thinking and listening takes attentive mental activity. Our ears may be open, but they are not listening if the mind is not engaged. This is why Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matt. 13:9).

One can involve himself in the lesson by taking notes of the scriptures cited, the major points, and lessons learned. Questions can also be written down to consider later, or to ask the speaker afterward. We often start these practices as youngsters but stop doing it later on. It will help to keep the attention and to understand the point of the lesson. I have known older brethren who still take notes and can remember sermons from years past.

Of course, turning to the scriptures as they are cited will help us become very familiar with our Bibles, and will remind us to check everything by God's word (cf. Acts 17:11). Hearing Bible pages turning encourages any faithful preacher. A good gospel sermon will keep us busy taking notes and turning Bible pages. This does much good for our souls.

REFLECTION – The most critical time may be when the sermon has ended. Will it be quickly forgotten or serve to further feed the soul's growth? Knowing the great effort required to prepare an effective gospel sermon should persuade the hearer to reflect and meditate afterward to take full advantage of what has been delivered. Forgotten

sermons do no good. Sermons that touch the soul and change lives are those that cannot be forgotten. We need to reflect on the wonderful words of life that we hear in each sermon.

The Psalmist wrote, "I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways...revive me in Your way" (Psa. 119:15, 37). Meditation is reflecting on what we have learned so that it implants itself in our minds and lives. Just as prayer was a part of our preparation to hearing a sermon, prayer should be a part of our reflection on the sermon. Then ask, "How should these truths affect my life from now on?" The end result of reflection is application. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (Jas. 1:22).

If we are not getting anything out of a sermon, it may not entirely be the fault of the speaker. As hearers we must do our fair share to get the most out of every sermon.
