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## How to Listen to an Expository Sermon

REAGAN ROSE ([HTTPS://WWW.TMS.EDU/BIO/RROSE/](https://www.tms.edu/bio/rrose/)) | FEBRUARY 14, 2018

The last couple of decades have seen a resurgence in expository preaching in churches—sermons which truly explain and apply the biblical text. But an expository sermon is hard work to prepare. That’s why Paul writes that faithful elders, and especially those who labor hard at preaching and teaching, are worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17 (<https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1%20Tim.%205.17>)). With all that effort from faithful preachers, is there more that those of us in the pew can be doing to ensure we are being faithful listeners?

Some pastors spend upwards of 20–30 hours per week preparing the Sunday message. How sad it is, therefore, that so much of his preparation—effort intended to feed *our* souls—is often lost on inattentive listeners. What’s worse, the Lord has designed the ministry of the preached Word to be a special means of sanctification to His people. God’s Word does God’s work (Isa. 55:10–11 (<https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Isa.%2055.10%E2%80%9311>)). Yet, we forego that gracious boon when we allow our minds to wander during the preaching of the Word.

The reason we are inattentive listeners is that while many preachers spend years honing the craft of sermon preparation, even attending years of post-graduate schooling, the average congregant has never been taught *how* to listen to an expository sermon.

Listening to a sermon, like reading, or like preparing a sermon, is a skill. It can be learned. Listening can be done well or poorly. You may object to this assessment, saying you have listened to many sermons, but any mother of young children can tell you that there is a

world of difference between hearing and listening. Listening is more than just hearing the words. Listening involves processing, questioning, and criticizing what is being heard. I fear that many Christians have never truly listened to a sermon in their life.

## **THE GOAL OF LISTENING**

Perhaps we do not place as high of an importance on listening as we ought because we misunderstand the goal of listening to a sermon. How often have you been asked, post-service, “Wasn’t that a great sermon?” But what makes a sermon great? Is it that the sermon was short? Is it that you learned something new? Is it that it made you laugh or cry? Is it that the preacher held your attention throughout? There’s nothing wrong with these things, but we must understand that the goal of listening to a sermon is not to be entertained, to learn Bible trivia, or to experience a range of emotions. The goal of listening to a sermon is that you would have your mind transformed by the Word such that your life would be changed more into the image of Christ by the power of the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God (James 1:22 (<https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/James%201.22>); Rom. 12:2 (<https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Rom.%2012.2>)).

Expository sermon listening, therefore, is serious business. So, let’s look at three sermon listening skills that can help us to get the most out of the Lord’s Day message. There are some obvious things we will not cover. You should already be previewing the passage before church and reviewing it afterwards, but I want to focus on what you should be doing *during* the preaching of the Word.

## **LISTEN ACTIVELY**

In a baseball game, there is a big difference between an active catcher and a passive one. I know this because I have been hit in the head by a baseball (several times). An active catcher is focused, he is anticipating the throw and watching all of the runners. He is fully engaged. The passive catcher, on the other hand, is simply enjoying the day and just happy to be outside. Every batter-up and butterfly breaks his focus. At best he is only catching some of the pitches, and making some of the easy plays.

The same is true of listeners. A passive listener sits in church and hopes that with enough coffee, and if the pastor is really on his game that day, he will go home with a few helpful takeaways for his Christian life. But we must do more than simply sit there and hope a sermon point or two just happen to fall into our metaphorical mitt. If you aren't listening actively, you are missing out!

So how do you actively listen to a sermon? Take notes.

Grab a notebook or a sheet of paper. At the top of the page write down the sermon title, the date, the preacher's name, and the text(s) he is preaching from. Then, simply follow along and outline the structure of the sermon as the preacher makes his points.

But this is key: The point of taking sermon notes is not to create a historical record of that sermon. You are not a stenographer (unless you are, in which case thank you for your service to the justice system. But there's no court on Sunday so give it a rest). I rarely look back at my notes after I review them the week the sermon was given. The point of taking notes during a sermon is *synthesis*, you are seeking to take what the preacher is saying from the Bible and combine it with what you already know of the Bible and of your own Christian

life. It's like scratch paper on a math test. You're just working it out. Those notes are simply the forge where the sermon and your knowledge are melded together such that your understanding grows and your sanctification is fueled.

## **LISTEN WITH QUESTIONS**

To be a good sermon listener means being engaged, and being engaged means asking good questions. Like what? First, "What is this sermon about?" A good expository sermon has one main point, proposition, or thesis which is drawn from the text (though it may be supported by other texts). Sometimes the pastor comes right out and tells you his point, but other times it may be more difficult to discern. The question you want to answer is "what is the thesis or proposition being argued in this sermon?" It may be that you will not be entirely certain until mid-way or even all the way through the sermon, but once you think you have the main point, write it down. This will lead to more questions.

Second, ask, "How do the sub-points of this sermon support that main thesis?" Many expository preachers use outlines that are very opaque, "Three Reasons to Stop Sinning," that makes your job as a listener easier because you've been given the skeleton of the sermon's argument. But, depending on the preacher, you may have to figure these out for yourself. There should be a clear connection between these sub-points and the main thesis. You should also try to follow the argumentation within these sub-points. What passages is he using to support this point? How does this follow the biblical text which the sermon is based on? Are there other texts that support this point? What areas in my life need to change because of these truths? How does this change how I understand who God is?

## **LISTEN CRITICALLY**

Part of being a good listener is not just asking questions, but questioning the sermon itself. Did the pastor prove his proposition? Did what he said really come from the text of the Bible? Are there passages that you know of which seem to contradict his conclusions? I'm not saying you should be a pugnacious pest who is simply waiting for the pastor to mess up, but we must be good Bereans (Acts 17:11 (<https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Acts%2017.11>)). Besides, I am sure your pastor does not want you swallowing all he says without question. He wants you to be discerning.

Take the questions and criticisms you've written down and see if you can find the answers for yourself. Is there something you're not seeing? Perhaps you have a misunderstanding of a passage that seems to contradict the sermon. Perhaps the preacher misspoke or was simply wrong. Chase these questions down. Find the answer. Work at it. This is your spiritual growth we are talking about.

Expository preaching from a faithful pastor is a blessing from God. Why then do we often sit glassy eyed in the pew while the pastor lays out the Word, in its glory, for our benefit? Our thoughts should be on God, but instead we day dream about the Triple Dipper we are going to order at Chili's after the service. Meanwhile, the man of God presents the feast he has laboriously prepared for our spiritual benefit. Let me assure you: The spiritual savor and nutrition of a good expository sermon, well-received, beats a microwaved mozzarella stick every time. So, don't just sit there with your mouth open. Do some chewing. Do some listening. And let the preached Word transform you.



(<https://www.tms.edu/bio/rrose/>)

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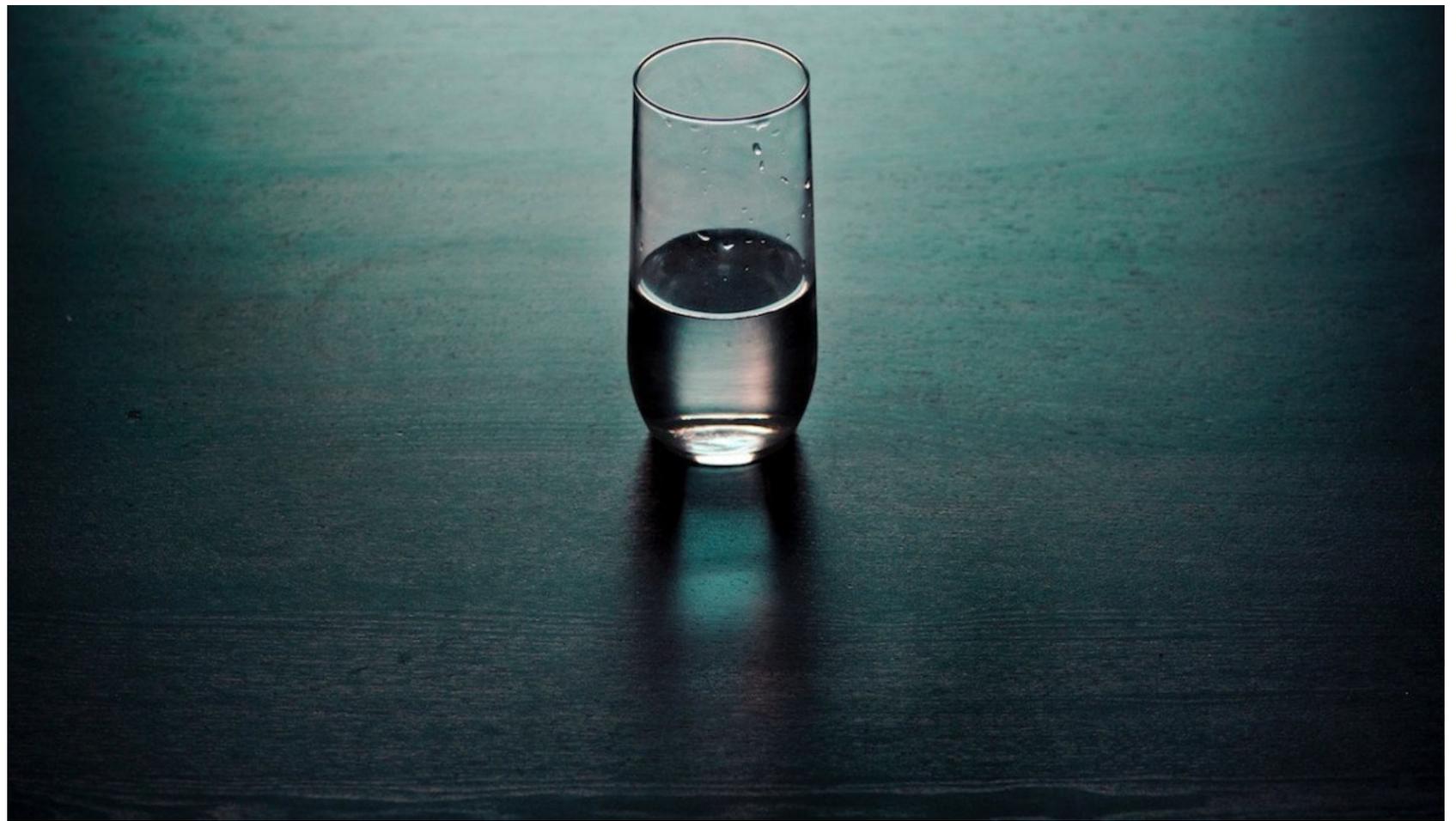
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