

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—

Lesson 47—How are we to read and hear the Word of God for efficacy? Q. 90¹

What to do before:

- I. Prepare to hear the Word, Gen 35.2-3. God may sovereignly bless the unprepared (Isa 65.1), but the only ground of hope we have for a blessing in God's house is upon our due preparation, Ex 19.9-11.
 - A. Prepare your life.
 1. Order your affairs beforehand, WCF 21.7-8.
 2. Josephus tells us that the Jews had such a reverence for the Sabbath that they did no business after 3 p.m. on the Day of Preparation.
 3. Cradock, "On Saturday night, shut up the eyes of your heart against the world as Nehemiah did the gates of Jerusalem (Neh 13.19-20)." "Leave the world at the foot of the mountain when you ascend it in worship. Only then will you be able to hear well, Gen 22.5."
 4. However we do it, the greatest service we can do ourselves in this regard is to prayerfully and studiously put the mind into a state of *preparedness* which befits the solemnity and importance of the Lord's Day. And what is the importance of that day?
 - a) It is a Day we are commanded to observe. Heb 10.25.
 - b) Public worship is for the honor of Christ in the world. It is where His people meet together in His name to profess their subjection to His laws, to receive His orders, to seek His help, and to pay Him the tribute of praise.
 - c) Public worship is where Christ is pleased to save souls, Rom 10.14-17. Preaching is Christ's net to gather souls for deliverance and salvation.
 - d) Public worship is Christ's meeting place with His people, Ex 20.24; 25.22. Those who seek Him should wait on Him there.
 - e) Public worship is where the delights of Christ and His people meet, Ps 87.2. The ordinances of God are a taste of heaven on earth.
 - f) Public worship is necessary for all God's people. It's where they receive all they need from Christ to live for Him in this life.
 5. In a real sense, we get out of the Sabbath what we put into it. God must bless; but He requires us to prepare, and He never promises to bless the lazy, negligent, and careless.
 - a) Cradock, "Truly, usually people profit by sermons according to their expectations."
 - B. Prepare your heart.
 1. Consider *where* it is you're going and before *Whom* you will stand.
 - a) You're going to the house of Almighty God, to Him who created all things out of nothing, and holds your every breath in His hand. He is GOD, Heb 12.28-29.
 - b) You're going to meet with the great God of heaven and earth, a God that is not to be trifled with (Lev 10.3). When the Israelites were to hear God speak, the Lord told Moses to have them sanctify themselves beforehand (Ex 19.9-11).
 - c) Learn to say with Jacob, "Surely, the LORD is in this place" (Gen 28.16). It's impossible to profit from worship when your heart is filled with vain and carnal thoughts and desires.
 2. You must stir up your heart with the awesomeness and greatness of worship, 1Pet 2.2.
 - a) A meek, humble, and teachable spirit joined with a tender heart will stand ready to receive the impressions of God's truth (Acts 10.33). The sermon works to change, transform, and bless this person because he listens with a tender heart to the *God* of the Word.
 - C. Prepare your mind.
 1. Read the Scripture passages. Look over the liturgy. Look over the sermon outline. Prepare your mind to be instructed, guided, counseled, corrected, and equipped.

¹ See also Samuel Cradock's *Seven Rules for Hearing the Word Preached*.
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2. Mortify your pride and cultivate humility, lest you be hardened instead of softened, and lest you appear before the Well of Salvation with a cup already full of self and get nothing.
- D. *Why* is this preparation necessary? Because God has commanded and it's a sin to neglect it, Lk 8.18.
 1. Though the voice is on earth, the Speaker is in heaven, Acts 10.33.
- II. Pray for the ministry of the Word. Resolve to so order your Lord's Day morning that you make time for prayer.
 - A. For the minister, 2Th 3.1; Col 4.3-4.
 1. It's rare to see a lively people under a dead ministry. Pray for the Lord's presence to be with the minister and for the Lord's Spirit to speak by him. It's in *your own interest* to pray for him.
 2. Cradock, "Pray that the Lord would teach him what he should teach the saints, and would direct and enable him to declare His mind to His people for their salvation and edification. Pray that he would be greatly helped by the Holy Spirit in his preparations, studies, and preaching. If the Apostle Paul coveted the prayers of the church, then so does your pastor (Rom 15.30; Eph 6.18-20; Col 4.3-4)."
 3. Baxter, "It is no small matter to stand up in the face of a congregation and deliver a message of salvation or damnation from the living God in the name of the Redeemer. And it is no easy matter to speak so plainly that the ignorant may understand, so seriously that the deadest heart may feel, and so convincingly that contradicting cavilers may be silenced."
 - B. For yourself, Ps 119.18; 2Tim 3.16-17.
 1. Pray the Word will be brought home to you with specificity and efficacy, 1Sam 3.10.
 2. The Lord's Word will not return empty. Every sermon will either harden or soften you; it'll either drive you a step closer to heaven or hell. How, then, should you pray for yourself to listen?
 3. Cradock, "Pray that the Lord would fix your mind and make it serious, that He would enlighten your mind and open your heart (Acts 16.14) to understand and receive His truths, that you would have a heart to believe and embrace the truth in love, that truth would not float around in your thoughts to no purpose, but would sink down in your heart (Rom 10.10), for a faith only in the mind is no better than a devil's faith (Js 2.19). Pray that the Spirit would use the preached Word to subdue your lusts and corruptions."
 - C. For the blessing of the Spirit, Pr 1.23; Acts 2.17-18.
 1. Pray that the ordinances would not go forth without the Spirit who gives them life and power.
 2. Pray for the outpouring of the Spirit, for the fruits of Pentecost, not in the speaking of tongues, but in the quickening of your spirit and sanctifying of your life for the glory of God.

What to do during:

- I. Attend unto it diligently.
 - A. To attend upon the Word is to stretch out your neck so that you might bring your ear near and lose nothing. It's to hang upon the Word of God, Lk 19.48.
 - B. To attend upon the Word is to shake every sermon like you would the branch of a tree so that all its fruit may fall into your hands. J. Edwards said the Great Awakening in New England in the 18th c. was the immediate result of *an uncommon attention* being given to the preached Word of God.
 - C. Those who stop into worship as on the way to some better place will get nothing but a few crumbs from the Lord's Table. But those who make it their only business to meet with God by bringing themselves under the preached Word will go home with every jar filled, Pr 8.34.
 - D. *Bend* the heart and mind to the Word. *Listen* diligently, purposely, expectantly, Pr 2.1-2; Acts 17.11.
 - E. It's not enough to hear the *words*. You must hear the *message* itself, Acts 16.14.
 - F. We must carefully listen to and ponder every word. Why? Because what we hear is the truth of GOD upon which our eternal happiness or misery depends, Heb 2.1-3.
- II. Receive it rightly.
 - A. With faith.

1. Faith is the mouth and hand of the soul by which we receive whatever the Lord says to us. We are to receive every word of God as *true*, with childlike, implicit faith, whether it be doctrines, precepts, promises, threatenings, or prophecies, Ps 119.128, 160.
 2. And we're to respond in faith to each word accordingly: to the doctrines with acquiescence, to the precepts with obedience, to the promises with hope, to the threatenings with fear, to the prophecies with expectation, and to it all with humble praise.
- B. With love.
1. We must love every word of God, prizing it as more precious than our daily food, as more desirable than honey from the comb, Ps 19.7-11; 119.72, 162; 1Pet 2.2.
- III. Lay it up in your heart, Col 3.16.
- A. Our hearts and memories are to be storehouses for the Word of God, Ps 119.11. How can we expect any good from the Word of GOD if we let it go in one ear and out the other? But those who store it up, get good from it, not only upon the hearing of it but upon every return to it.
 - B. Cradock, "Nothing makes the wholesome food of God's Word taste so good and do so well as an appetite for it (Mt 5.6). Some people come to the sermon already full of the world and therefore with no spiritual appetite for it. Would that the saints would wait upon the words of the herald of their Saviour like those who waited upon Job's words (Job 29.23)! Would that they had the affections of David for it (Ps 42.1-2)! Would that they would pant after Christ, who is altogether lovely, as the world pants after its deceitful pleasures that satisfy not! Then we would see sermons work! But when people come with no appetite, with no desire for the Christ of heaven and already full of the dust of the earth, and sit down to be seen by men, the most blessed gospel-truths are to them but as tasteless as the white of an egg. Rather than relish the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, they find it stale and say with those in Amos 8.5, "When will the Sabbath be over!?""

What do do after:

- I. Meditate upon it in your heart, Ps 1.2.
 - A. Meditation fuels the affections, which fuels the prayers, which fuels the actions. The reason the preached Word has so little impact upon our lives is because we don't do anything intentional or practical with it afterwards. We leave the Word in the sanctuary.
- II. Talk of it with your brethren, Dt 6.6-7.
 - A. Holy conference or conversation is a key to spiritual growth and understanding and strengthens accountability for application.
- III. Practice it in your life, Lk 8.15.
 - A. It must be your end-goal in all hearing to practice what you hear, Js 1.22. Listen that you may do—without any limitation or restriction, but with a resolve that *whatever* you hear God requires of you, you will set out by His grace *to do*, Ps 2.12-13.
 - B. Newton, "It is absurd to read or study the Scripture with any other view than to receive its doctrines, submit to its reproofs, and obey its precepts that we may be made wise unto salvation. All disquisitions and criticisms that stop short of this, that do not amend the heart as well as furnish the mind, are empty and dangerous."
 - C. Resolve by God's grace to go do as you hear. Ryle, "*Tomorrow* is the devil's day, but *today* is God's. Satan doesn't care how spiritual your intentions are, or how holy your resolutions, if only they are determined to be done *tomorrow*."

Inferences

- I. No wonder most of the hearers of the gospel get no good out of it. They don't prepare to get good.
- II. This is the way to get good from the preached Word, even when it is poorly offered to you. If God can speak truth by a donkey, he can speak truth by the most feeble of men.
- III. Cradock, "Don't ground your expectations on anything in the minister. If you come to hear a man, then you will leave after hearing a man; but if you come to hear God, then you will meet with God in His Word and leave after hearing from God in His Word (compare Acts 9.7; 22.9). Therefore expect your blessings, not from the minister—who is but a man, a jar of clay and nothing more—but from God's promise to bless those who attend upon His Word (Prov 8.17; Jer 29.13; Amos 5.4)."