

I. The Foundational Principle and Practice of Listening to Sermons

- A. The Foundational Principle of Listening to Sermons:** The primary means prescribed (*principle*) and used (*practical*) by God, both for the calling of sinners to Christ and the building up of saints in faith and godliness, is the preaching of the Word of God in public worship. Sermons are not for entertainment, but worship; they are not merely instructional, but prophetic (in the sense of proclaiming God's Word); they are not beneficial only when something new is learned, but also when something old is remembered.
- 1) Acts 2:42, 'And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.'
 - 2) Hebrews 12:25, 'See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.'
 - 3) Rom 10:14, 17, 'How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.'
 - 4) Larger Catechism 155, How is the Word made effectual to salvation? The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.
- B. The Foundational Practice of Listening to Sermons:** Because the preached Word is the central means of grace in worship, as well as for the Christian faith and life, Christians are to listen to sermons with both (1) *Attention*, and (2) *Retention*.
- 1) Sermons are, therefore, to be heard by the congregation in the public worship: they are neither primarily to be read by the Christian, nor primarily to be recorded via notes or tape to be listened to again later. Sermons are meant to be heard and heeded in the moment of their preaching by the listeners.
 - 2) The Point Proved by Illustration: In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, it is by eating consecrated bread and wine in the time of public worship that we are fed on the Body and Blood of our Saviour. We know that to eat bread and drink wine in our homes later that day, and again throughout the week, does not provide the sacramental nourishment received in worship. So it is with the preaching of God's Word. As with the sacrament (which is the Visible Word), Christians partake of the preached Word in worship, and in that moment receive the grace of God speaking to His people through the Holy Spirit and the Word, which then is applied by faith throughout the week.
- C. Answering Objections to the Foundational Principle and Practice of Listening to Sermons**
- 1) Objection 1: *But I have a hard time listening and remembering sermons!*
 - a) The point of sanctification: The purpose of developing in ordinary life, as well as in the Christian faith and life, is to mature in all aspects. We expect a toddler to be able to sit through a picture book, a young child through chapter books, and adolescents through lengthy lectures; yet for some reason we leave such developmental expectations at the door for life in the Church. This is, of course, absurd. We should view our ability to listen to sermons with attention and retention as a

matter of maturing and sanctification. This takes work and discipline on the part of the listener. Christians should seek to recover the disciplines of listening and rote memorization.

- b) The point of faith:** We must believe that, though we are weak and frail, yet the Father instructs His children and Christ leads His Bride by the Spirit through the preaching of the Word. Who among us comes to the Table with perfect preparation and perfect faith? And yet are we not fed? It is the content, consistent Christian who faithfully attends the means of grace Lord's Day by Lord's Day who will be sufficiently nourished by the Lord.
 - c) The kindness of the Lord:** Let us not forget that the Lord pities us as a Father pities His children (e.g., particularly the young and physically/mentally infirmed).
 - i.** Acts 20:7-12, 'On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.'
 - ii.** We know the infirmities of our young ones, and their struggles to listen to our instructions with comprehension, and so we bear with them and continue to instruct them. If you, who are evil, do this, how much more your Father in heaven?
- 2) Objection 2:** *But everyone learns in different ways!*
- a)** This should be granted - and yet the principle and end result is not different. Folks may learn in different manners, but they are not learning different things. We are not to learn only the material of a sermon, but also the discipline of listening to sermons as an act of public worship.
 - b) The point proved by illustration:** The end result of sanctification is the same, that is, to be conformed more to the righteousness of Christ. The path of that work is different for others. A man and a woman both need to learn to be temperate in ways befitting their station; but often the contemporary man needs to learn boldness and the contemporary woman meekness. So with sanctification and maturing in listening to sermons: The one who is rigidly taking notes to retain the message but does not actually attend the sermon should cut back on note-taking; the one who is attending the sermon without any retention should start taking notes. The goal is the same: to worship God by heeding sermons with attention and retention.
- 3) Objection 3:** *But we have all this technology that allows us to listen to sermons and have notes easily accessible!* Never before has a society been able to listen to countless hours of excellent preaching, read countless excellent books, or print countless resources so easily.
- a)** Which are undeniably excellent resources, and are evidences of the Kingdom of God advancing. We have full liberty to utilize as much of these resources for our sanctification, insofar as they do not hinder our other duties (e.g. church, family

and vocation).

- b)** Which are most helpful to study a particular subject of inquiry or to be able to practice listening to sermons.
 - c)** Yet which cannot replace God's prescribed means of grace, particularly considering the public preaching of the Word of God. Nor can we expect the same manner of the Spirit's operation. Let us therefore beware confusing emotional stirring because of reading/listening to someone we like with the effectual operation of the Spirit through the actual, only and true means of grace.
 - d)** Yet which are not necessary for sanctification. What is required of God's people? Weekly public worship on the Lord's Day, daily family prayer and catechism, and daily devotion to God in prayer and His Word. While it is good to be able to redeem the time (such as on long drives or in free time) with profitable material, the means of grace alone can be considered sufficient and necessary for the sanctification, piety, and perseverance of God's people.
- 4) Objection 4: But such and such is simply a better preacher than my pastors!**
- a)** Again, it can well be granted. But we should be content with the providence of God, and prefer grace over gifts, those who actually have the rule over us than those who do not.
 - b)** If there is a manner in which the delivery is not conducive to preaching, it can be sharpened up (preachers and hearers alike are to cultivate such gifts of preaching and hearing respectively) and received in humility. Neh 8:8, 'They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.'
 - c)** Larger Catechism 159, How is the word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto? They that are called to labour in the ministry of the word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

D. Overview of the Approach of this Lecture

- r)** Eph 6:4, 'Fathers . . . bring them up in the discipline (παιδεία) and instruction (νουθεσία) of the Lord.'
 - a)** These are terms used in Classic Greek regarding the two elements of instruction:
 - i.** Of παιδεία, Education - that is, the general instruction provided to those who would be free citizens in the *polis*. Plato, 'The education we speak of is training from childhood in goodness, which makes a man eagerly desirous of becoming a perfect citizen, understanding how both to rule and be ruled righteously.' (Laws, 644).
 - ii.** Of νουθεσία, Training - that is, the specific instruction provided for the use of a particular trade. The word ουθεσία strictly means *admonition* and was used by Plato to describe the training of musicians to play at particular moments by the ουθεσία of the baton.
 - b)** Through preaching, our Heavenly Father brings us up into the *Education* and *Training* of the LORD.
 - i.** *Education* - that is, the Christian worldview of rightly-ordered love, faith,

loyalty and affections.

- ii. *Training* - that is, the particular aspects of godliness as they pertain to our station and vocation in life as pilgrims in this world.
- 2) We will consider the development of how to listen to sermons with *attention* and *retention* in the fashion of the Classical Trivium —
 - a) *Grammar*: The most basic level of learning, this is the ability to restate the material facts of a sermon (sermon text, particular doctrines, applications).
 - b) *Logic, or Dialectic*: The intermediary level of development, this is the ability to not only restate the material of a Sermon, but then examine and evaluate the structure of the Sermon and how its argument was derived from the Text in order to interact with the material with others (such as in sermon discussion).
 - c) *Rhetoric*: The advanced level of development, this is the ability to attend and retain the material of a Sermon, to examine its structure and argument, and then (i) improve upon (make use of) that material for use throughout the week, (ii) make further contributions to the material presented in the sermon during discussion or private study (additional doctrines and applications), and (iii) to present such material to others in a precise and concise manner.

II. The Trivium of Development in Listening to Sermons

A. The Grammar of Listening to Sermons

- 1) Description of development:
 - a) Able to restate the basic material of the sermon (the sermon text, as well as particular doctrine and applications presented in the sermon)
- 2) Helpful ways to cultivate this skill:
 - a) Before the sermon:
 - i. Read the sermon text beforehand, if known
 - ii. Read any sermon notes available beforehand, if provided
 - iii. Mark down any questions you have about the text or notes beforehand and see if they will answered during the sermon
 - iv. Pray before worship
 - v. Pray during the service with the minister
 - b) During the sermon:
 - i. Listen to the sermon, repeating in your mind what is said, confessing it
 - ii. Taking notes is particularly helpful in the beginning of the Grammar stage of development
 - Start small in note-taking, writing down particular sub-points and sentences, and not being as concerned with the structure
 - Write down questions and then return to listening to the sermon (this is sound advice at all times)
 - The goal is to remember particular aspects of the sermon, so find helpful ways to remember whether that be writing quotes, shorthand, or doodling the thought (but remember the point is not entertainment, but attentive worship)
 - c) Be methodical in processing and recalling the sermon:
 - i. By asking helpful questions in logical progression
 - What was the sermon text?
 - What does the Scripture passage say? (Quote as close as possible)

- What was one thing you learned? (Doctrine)
 - What was one thing you will apply? (Application)
 - ii.** By increasing and progressing within the Grammar stage
 - Begin with the 'one-nugget' rule: Find one thing in the sermon that you are going to commit to memory and apply that day or week
 - Begin with note-taking and then seek to remember the material without notes
 - Have patience, knowing that sometimes you will fail in retaining the sermon, and seek to improve upon it afterward in discussion
 - Rejoice in even the small things you are able to recall
- 3) Helpful ways to progress from Grammar to Dialectic:**
- a) Knowing the Scriptures.** When one is learning to play an instrument and sing at the same time, the advice often given is be able to do one without even having to think about it. Since the Christian hearing the sermon does not know the sermon but can know the Scriptures, knowing the sermon text (its content and meaning) will help in being able to be even more attentive to the sermon and retentive of its content.
 - b) Know the Catechism.** Knowing the Catechism will help bridge the gap of content and form, grammar and logic. This is because in the catechism, the content of the Christian faith is memorized (grammar) in a manner that is thoroughly methodical and structured (logic). This will be able to be applied to listen to preaching, which has catechetical elements to it.
 - c) Practice and Evaluate.**
 - i.** Continue to be faithful in worship and listening to the sermon
 - ii.** Be ever-striving to grow step-by-step, developing methodically
 - iii.** Talk to others who are more mature about listening to sermons and learn from them
 - iv.** Find if there are consistent triggers which tempt your mind to drift (e.g., sitting in the back and being distracted by those up front, having to go to the bathroom, at a particular time you begin to get tired), make adjustments accordingly (e.g., sit up front, go to the bathroom beforehand, have a bottle of water to help stay awake), and be on guard against those temptations.

B. The Logic, or Dialectic, of Listening to Sermons

- 1) Description of development:**
 - a)** Has retained the basic information presented in the sermon
 - b)** Is able to identify the structure of the sermon based upon the text
 - c)** Is able to evaluate and apply the argument of the sermon
- 2) Helpful ways to cultivate this skill:**
 - a)** Having progressed past the point of note-taking in the Grammar stage, reintroduce notes-taking. But this time, it is for not only the retention of content, but also for the identifying of the Scriptural and sermonic form/structure.
 - b) Know how Scripture interprets Scripture.** Having a running understanding of how Old Testament passages are fulfilled and referenced in the New Testament is a helpful way to anticipate and retain the argument of a biblical/expositional sermon.

- c) Look for *a priori* arguments and presuppositions in the Scriptures and in the Sermon which will cultivate a biblical worldview (e.g. the self-existence of God; the household nature of the covenant; the Creator-creature distinction)
 - d) Begin to identify common patterns which are used for structuring doctrine and application, which may help you not only anticipate the logic of the sermon, but also retain it. Following are some examples of such patterns —
 - i. The logical movement from Exposition — Doctrine — Application; as well as Head — Heart — Hands
 - ii. The *Ordo Salutis* (Election, Calling, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification, Perseverance, Glorification) is a common formula for drawing out doctrines and applications
 - iii. Progressive movement of doctrine/applications from Internal to External (e.g. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth), and vice versa
 - iv. Progressive movement of doctrine/applications from Lesser to Greater, and vice versa (e.g., if kings of earth are fear the Lord, how much more mere commoners such as us)
 - e) Learn to identify key structures in the various literary genre of Scripture (e.g., poetic parallelism, narrative scenes, epistolary doctrine-application, prophetic judgment-restoration).
 - f) Learn the structures and themes of the various books of the Bible. In addition to reading through the Bible, a good study Bible (such as the *Reformation Heritage Study Bible* or the *ESV Study Bible*) will usually include an outline of the book.
- 3) Helpful ways to progress from Dialectic to Rhetoric
- a) If preaching is *lectio continua*, keep a record of your notes and/or the sermon notes to which you can refer again in future studies.
 - b) Talk to your ministers about how they prepare for sermons to learn their particular style of sermon structure and argumentation.
 - c) Ask questions and engage about the argumentation of the sermon for the purpose of growing in faith and obedience (not for the sake of mere theological debate).
 - d) Before the service, read through the passage and try to write a basic outline of the text. After the service, compare your outline to the minister's.
 - e) On your own, outline books of the Bible (beginning with the short epistles, such as 1 John) or diagramming particular sections of the book of Romans (e.g. 3:19-31).
 - f) Go back to the catechism (particularly the Larger Catechism), and outline the structure. Pick a few of the longer answers and diagram some of the sentences. Do the same with the Confession of Faith.
 - g) Read particularly Puritan Paperbacks (Banner of Truth) and Puritan Commentaries (e.g. Matthew Henry's Commentary on the whole Bible). These were men who were thoroughly and methodically committed to the art of attention and retention of sermons and educational material.

C. The Rhetoric of Listening to Sermons

r) Description of development:

- a) Able to attend and retain the basic information of the sermon
- b) Able to identify structure and evaluate the argument of the sermon
- c) Able to present and explain the material presented in the sermon in a precise and concise manner

- d) Able to contribute further material to what was presented in the sermon
- e) Able to make use of what was preached as foundational to other material the hearer presents throughout the week to others
- 2) Helpful ways to practice (and cultivate) this skill:
 - a) Family prayer/catechism/worship and Christian education in the home
 - b) Planning and leading group or personal Bible studies
 - c) Sharing the Gospel and apologetics
 - d) Doctrinal conversations with others
 - e) Private study, writings and reflections upon the Scriptures
- 3) I am able to interact rhetorically with the sermons, now what?
 - a) We are to humbly approach each worship service and sermon as a grace given to us by the Lord, and not as if we have heard it all or are above re-hearing precious old truths and commands. Phil 3:1, 'Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.'
 - b) We are to continue to grow and cultivate our ability to attend and retain the hearing and preaching of God's Word; but also we are to be content in the act itself of worshipping God by submitting ourselves to His Word in adoration and love.
 - c) Let us look forward to the hope we have in the resurrection, where we shall have new bodies which do not get weary during sermons, new minds which do not get distracted, new hearts that are never dull, and new hands to perfectly do the will of God. For it is there we shall be before the Incarnate Word for all eternity, and have the LORD God as our portion and inheritance.

III. Additional Uses from the Points

A. On children in the public worship and listening to sermons —

- 1) To Parents:
 - a) You will likely not be able to really listen with full attention to a sermon for some time until the kids are older. This can be discouraging: (i) In the moment, because you feel impious yourself; and, (ii) When you are able to attend sermons as before, because you may be a little rusty in being able to listen well to a whole sermon.
 - b) Do not be discouraged, but trust the Lord and His grace —
 - i. For yourself: That His means are efficacious and He will feed and persevere you, for you are certainly doing His will in having your children (who through baptism are under the covenant of grace) under the means of grace as well.
 - ii. For your children: The Lord is sovereign and gracious; and just as you matured and are maturing in faith, so He will mature your children
 - c) Heed well the counsel of mature parents who have raised their children well in the Lord, and receive it as a kindness and not as an insult.
- 2) To Children: You have a duty to listen to and try to remember and apply sermons as an act of worship to the Lord. You are required to keep holy the Sabbath, and not just your parents.
- 3) To Those Who Do Not Have Children in the Service:
 - a) Everyone has a duty to attend the worship of God, regardless of external distractions. Furthermore you are not to be a distraction to the children during worship.
 - b) Particularly, if you have children who are older and can speak a word of encour-

agement or exhortation to newer parents, that is the primary way we are to grow in faith and obedience from generation to generation (handing down the faith).

B. The beneficial use of self-knowledge, that is, to know your level of maturity in this manner.

1) For contentment:

a) Zech 4:10, 'For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice'

b) It is possible that you may have progressed as far as you are going to (due to physical limitation or because the Lord may take you home soon), and yet it is all of grace we have been brought this far.

2) For cultivating skills and graces: It is hard to know how we need to get where we are going if we do not know where we are.

3) Remember that listening to sermons is an act of worship and is not something which comes easy!

C. Practice makes better (though, not perfect)!

1) For we are to be attentive to all the other means of grace as well (Bible Reading, Prayer, Psalm-singing, Sacraments, Vows, Benediction).

2) We should make immediate use of the sermon by our conversations with one another, as well as immediately repenting from sins of which we were convicted of in the preaching.

3) One possible way of practicing the attention and retention of sermons is to have one evening during the middle of the week to go back over the sermon.

4) Another way to grow in listening to sermons is to grow in the discipline of listening altogether. A practice one could have would be to have intentional conversations, with then intent of practicing listening, by repeating what the other person says after they conclude a thought or read a brief passage of something. One of the greatest cultural hinderances to listen to sermons is our cultural inability altogether to listen and memorize.

5) Another method is to practice the discipline of listening by listening to books, podcasts, lectures, or sermons during the week, and follow the same method. Again, this is helpful because it isolates listening as a particular rudiment to be cultivated and honed.

D. Have faith in the Lord — Not only to bear our infirmities and forgive our sins of lacking attention and retention of the Word of God preached, but also to grow us in the education and training of the Lord.

E. Remember the distinction between attention, retention and true piety. James 1:22-25, 'But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.'