

It is my desires for the next several weeks to preach a series of sermons entitled—Back to basics—wherein we will consider several of the most common disciplines or activities of the Christian life, such as—how to read Scripture, how to pray, how to praise, how to obey God, and how to mortify sin—this morning I want to begin with—how to hear sermons—there has been much said about the responsibilities of the preacher [and rightly so], but little is made of the responsibilities of the hearer, CHS—“But in proportion as it is solemn work to preach, it is also solemn work to hear...”

Our text is part of a parable usually referred to as the parable of the sower or four soils—it could rightly be called, The parable of the four hears—it describes four kinds of people (described by four kinds of soil) who hear the gospel message (described as seed)—[1] there is hardened soil described in v12—“those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved (Mathew tells us the reason being, they did not understand the message), [2] there is the rocky soil in v13—“but the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away...”—that is, these people hear the gospel, profess to believe it, but prove to be but temporary or counterfeit Christians, [3] there is the thorny soil, v14—“now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity...”—that is, they remain to be nominal or professing Christians, who have never been savingly and vitally attached to Christ, and [4] there is the good soil, v15—“but the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience...”—that is, they become true Christians...

Notice that our Savior specifically describes each person as hearing the message, v12—“those by the wayside are the ones who hear...” v13—“when they hear...” v14—“when they have heard...” v15—“having heard the word with a noble and good heart...”—thus I suggest to you that the parable could rightly be called—The parable of the four hearers...”—v18 is then our Savior’s application to the parable—“therefore take heed how you hear...”

Shorter Catechism Q. 90—“How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation? A. That the Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives...”—notice our puritan forefathers taught three things concerning the hearing of sermons, notice—[1] things necessary before the sermon—“we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer...” [2] things necessary during the sermon—“receive it with faith and love...” and [3] things necessary after the sermon—“lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives...”—thus I want to organize my instruction to you this morning under three headings...

- I. Before the Sermon
- II. During the Sermon
- III. After the Sermon

I. Before the Sermon

A. Pray diligently

1. This of course is where we must begin—we must diligently plead to God that He would bless both preacher and hearer alike...
2. Ps.127:1—“unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it...”—that is, unless the Lord blesses both preacher and hearer, they preach and hear in vain...
3. Notice [1] we must pray specifically—by this I mean we must pray for those who will hear the word specifically and by name...
4. Eph.6:18—“with all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...”

5. Let me ask you—when was the last time that you prayed during the week that your wife, husband, or child would benefit from the preached word...
6. But we must not only pray for our family we must pray for the brethren—that is we must pray for those who regularly attend our services...
7. But I go further we should also pray that the Lord would bless those who might visit our church, which implies we pray that persons would visit our church...
8. We must pray that those who typical or occasionally worship with us would have nothing to prevent them from coming...
9. We must pray for specific people but we must also pray for specific things—that is, we need to pray that the Lord would deal with us according to our needs...
10. Some of us need to be instructed, others encouraged, others corrected—but in short we all need either to be saved or sanctified...
11. But then also we must pray specifically for the preacher that he would know the special blessing and presence of God...
12. 2Thess.3:1—“brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified...”—that is, that the gospel may come not in word only but in the power of the Holy Spirit...
13. Notice [2] we must pray expectantly—by this I mean we pray with a sense of holy anticipation that God is going to do good things in our midst...
14. I have to confess, on Sunday mornings I typically get excited at the prospect of what God can do if He so chose...
15. What if He fell upon His word with the powerful presence of His Holy Spirit—what if He was pleased to bring us a reviving similar to the first and second great awakenings...
16. Lk.11:9-10—“so I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened...”
17. I dare say those words of James may be true of many of us—“you have not because you ask not...”—that is, we find so little blessing in the preached word because we ask so little...
18. It is for this purpose that we have the music play 10 minutes before the service—that we might prayerfully prepare our hearts for worship...
19. At times it amazes me what I see and hear when I enter this room before the service—people talking loudly and acting as if we were at a baseball game...
20. But my brethren—we are about to enter into the very special presence of God—let us take these few minutes to plead with Him for His gracious blessing...

B. Prepare practically

1. By this I mean we must so order the week and especially Saturday night, that we can get to bed on time and have the least amount of responsibilities on Sunday morning...
2. In our home this entails, getting all dresses out and ironed on Saturday night—my wife does all of her cooking that’s possible...
3. This way when we wake up on Sunday morning, there are relatively speaking, few things that need to be done...
4. In short, we must spend Saturday preparing our homes that we have the maximum amount of time on Sunday mornings to prepare our hearts...
5. It saddens me greatly to hear of Christian people who regularly stay up late on Saturday nights watching TV, and thus come to the house of God tired and unable to focus...
6. It has been a practice in our home that regardless what is scheduled on a Saturday night, if it will force us to stay out late we don’t go...
7. If we are truly convinced of the importance of the events on the Lord’s Day—then we must guard our Saturday nights at all cost...
8. May I here make a plea to heads of homes—you my friend have the responsibility to ensure that your family arrives at church on time...

9. What if the president of the United States has scheduled you a hearing—would you show up 5, 10, or 15 minutes late...
10. I dare think that you would be on time [probably early]—well, we gather on the Lord's Day at the special invitation of the God of heaven and earth...
11. And my brethren, since things must be done in an orderly fashion, we have chosen a specific time to enter that special and unique presence...
12. What are we telling God when we habitually [and dare I say carelessly], choose to enter that special presence late and ill prepared...

C. Repent sincerely

1. By this I mean we must search our hearts for all unconfessed sin and apply ourselves afresh to the fountain open for sin and uncleanness...
2. Thus it might be necessary to spend some time on Saturday searching the heart for any undealt with sins against God or unsettled controversy with our brethren...
3. 1Pet.2:1-2—“therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, 2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious...”
4. Notice [1] there is repenting, v1—“therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking...”
5. This entails a personal examination, wherein all known sin is confessed, mourned over, and fresh grace procured...
6. This may even entail open domestic confession of sin—that is, it may be necessary to openly confess our sins to our spouses and/or children...
7. Notice [2] there is desiring, v2—“as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby...”
8. The idea is that we must first empty our hearts of all that would hinder our spiritual appetite—to put it bluntly—we must vomit out all our sins...
9. We must create within our souls a hunger for the pure milk of the word—we must come with a spiritual hunger and thirst...
10. I dare say that there are some of us, who on a regular basis come to the public worship, and in particular to the preached word, weighed down with sins unconfessed and neglected...
11. And so we come to the ministry of God's word with dull and indifferent hearts, with spiritual appetites hindered by undealt with sin...
12. This may be the very reason why some of you fail to receive any evident blessing from the preached word—your hearts are too full of everything else that the word finds no room...
13. Let me change the imagery from hungering to plowing—if the word of God is as seed then our hearts are soil in need of plowing...
14. We must plow up our hearts that the seed would find good soil, and that it would bring forth fruit—thirty, sixty, even a hundred fold...

II. During the Sermon

A. Listen aggressively

1. By this I mean to hear a sermon rightly is not a passive discipline—but you must participate with attentive and active listening...
2. This is no doubt where many Christians err—they think that hearing a sermon is similar to watching a movie...
3. When a person watches TV they don't have to sustain any prolonged ideas, and in many, if not most cases, they don't even have to think...
4. But hearing a sermon is absolutely the opposite—it takes mental and intellectual sweat—it demands effort and hard work...

5. It is a faulty view of worship that the preacher does all the work and the hearer merely sits back and enjoys...
6. Have you ever heard a person profess that they got little out of a sermon—well my question would be—How much did you put into it...
7. Where did we ever get the notion that we can get anything for free—no my friends, there is a true sense in which we get from the sermon only what is put into it...
8. We must remember that hearing the sermon is as much a part of worship as is preaching, praying, and singing...
9. We as new covenant priests are to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God—would you offer a lame and blemished sacrifice...
10. Lk.19:47-48—“and he was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him, and were unable to do anything; for all the people were very attentive to hear him...”
11. The word translated “were very attentive” literally means “to hang upon”—and refers to the closest possible connection between the hearer and speaker...
12. They were hanging upon every word that dropped from His mouth—that is, they were listening with an aggressive attentiveness...
13. Let me suggest a few helps—[1] prepare for battle—in coming to the ministry of the word of God we come to a fierce battle...
14. Thomas Watson—“The devil is not one who refuses to come to church; he attends, but not with any good intent; he takes away the word from men. How many have been robbed of the sermon and their souls both at once...”
15. Because the enemies of our souls know the potential good that might come from sermons, they level their guns at us when we gather before the preached word...
16. Notice [2] deflect distractions—whenever a wayward thought comes to mind dismiss it with all swiftness...
17. Notice [3] cry out to God—our puritan forefathers referred to this as ejaculatory prayer, that is, those short sudden pleas for help while in the midst of our duties...

B. Listen reverently

1. By this I mean we are to sit before the word of God as little children—letting the word judge us and not we the word...
2. Let me suggest two helps—[1] we must remember the nature of the word heard—that is, we have come to the word of God...
3. We have not come to hear the opinions of a mere man—we have not come to here the flowerily rhetoric of a learned doctor...
4. No—we come to sit at the feet of the Holy God of Israel—we come to assemble before the God of heaven and of earth...
5. We come to hear His word—we come to hear the very mind of God—we come to hear the very voice of our Savior...
6. 1Thess.2:13—“for this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe...”
7. Now it has to be admitted at the outset that when an apostle of Christ preached the word it was in a unique sense the word of God...
8. But we mustn’t overly clarify—for when a man, who’s been called of God, stands before the people—he speaks in the stead of God as much as if Christ Himself stood in the pulpit...
9. Now does this mean we are to simply believe everything the preacher tells us—no—but it does mean that we come to the preached word anxious to hear the very voice of our Savior...
10. Thomas Watson—“If a judge gives a charge upon the bench, all listen. If a king speaks, all pay attention. When we come to the word, we should think within ourselves—we are to hear God in this preacher...”

11. Thomas Boston—“Though the voice is on earth, the speaker is in heaven, and we should consider it so as to come to hear what God says to us...”
12. Notice [2] we must remember the ability of the word preached—that is, we come to that word able to save and sanctify our souls...
13. Jas.1:21—“therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls...”
14. Notice [a] how we are receive the word—“receive with meekness the implanted word...”—the imagery is that of a seed sown in the ground...
15. Notice [b] why we are to receive it—“which is able to save your souls...”—that is, receive it as it is—that word able to save your soul...
16. Oh my friends let us sit before the word as hungry beggars in need of bread—let us sit before the preaching as guilty sinners who need pardon...
17. We come to that word that was power in it—power to save your souls—power to build you up, to encourage, correct, and sanctify your soul...
18. David Clarkson—“the gospel, according as it is heard, is a great mercy or a great judgment, a blessing or a curse, therefore great reason to take heed. The abuse of the greatest mercy may curse it...”

C. Listen believingly

1. By this I mean we must personally apply the preaching to our own individual case—we are to apply every word first and foremostly to ourselves...
2. Heb.4:2—“for indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it...”
3. There is a sense in which we need to expos our hearts to the preached word—we must open the gates of our hearts to let the King of glory in...
4. Jeremiah Burroughs—“As there must be attending to the Word of God, so must there be an opening of the heart to receive what God speaks to you...”
5. Thus every threat, exhortation, rebuke, and promise must be taken to heart and applied to our own individual case...
6. George Swinnock—“When the glad tidings of peace are preached, let thine heart leap with hope...When the law comes in like an acidic, eating out the festered flesh and corruption...when the threatenings, like wine, search the wound, and the promises, like oil, heal it. Then it comes with authority and majesty. If search be made by a reproof for thy beloved sin, do not, like Rachel, hide it, neither do thou fret when thy sore is touched, but hold thine arm forth to that knife which should prick thy vein, and let out thy bad blood. Be not angry when a prophet smites thee in the name of the Lord; believe it, he that hates thy sins most, loves thee best...”

III. After the Sermon

A. Pray

1. Here we come back to where we began—we must pray that the Spirit of Christ would write what we heard across our hearts and minds...
2. That was a wise statement of Spurgeon when he said—“come from your knees to the sermon, and come from the sermon to your knees...”
3. We must pray that God would bless His word to our hearts and minds—we must plead that we will be more than mere hearers of the word...
4. How many times have you and I made a resolve or a specific commitment to change in a certain area, only to forget all about it by Monday or Tuesday...

B. Ponder

1. By this I mean we must intentionally and intellectually reflect upon what we were taught within the sermon...

2. Heb.2:1—“for this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it...”
3. To this end let me suggest a few practical helps—[1] take notes during sermon or else commit to memory the main points or headings...
4. This will allow us to reflect upon the sermon at a later time—it will enable us to meditate upon the great truths taught...
5. Notice [2] discuss the sermon among your family members—make the morning sermon the subject of discussion around the lunch table...
6. Fewer things are more beneficial than lively discussion, Prov.27:17—“as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another...”
7. Notice [3] we should search out the things taught to ensure they are in keeping with the overall tenor and teaching of Scripture...
8. Acts 17:11—“the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true...”

C. Practice

1. This of course is the final and ultimate end of preaching—that our lives would be practically and eternally changed, Lk.11:29—“blessed *are* those who hear the word of God and keep it...”
2. Jas.1:21—“receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...”
3. Oh my brethren, simply listening to sermons will profit no one, unless they find their way into our hearts and lives...
4. How do you know that you are benefiting from the preached word—ask yourself—am I becoming more aware of my sins and humbled for them...
5. Is Christ becoming more central to all of my thoughts—am I becoming a better churchman, husband, wife, father, mother, or child...