

How to Listen to Sermons

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How to listen to sermons

We expect preachers to get some training on how to prepare and preach their sermons but what about training on how to listen to sermons? Whilst this should not remove responsibility from the preacher to train hard and work hard at this important task, it may help each of us to get more out of church and to be better fed.

Here we are going to look at some different types of sermons and different situations and think about how to listen to them and respond to them well. Of course, my suggestions here will betray a view on how the preacher should be approaching the situation so this may also give opportunity for those of us who do preach to think about our responsibility too.

How to listen to Expository Sermons

Are you sitting comfortably? The answer is “probably not” if you are in the typical church pew or crammed into a packed hall with little leg room. So hopefully the sermon will be short, sharp and snappy though you’ve got a feeling that it might not be. Expository sermons have a reputation for being long don’t they? I remember the two young people who turned up at our FIEC church in Kent having been used to a quick ten minute homily at their local church and being shocked when the preacher hit the 45 minute mark. “45 minutes! That wasn’t a sermon! It was three sermons” they exclaimed.

An expository sermon is not....

Now let’s get this cleared up from the start, an expository sermon does not have to be long. Our college chapel had a morning service each day where the whole thing lasted 30 minutes allowing just 10 minutes for the talk. The sermons were still expositions. However, there is a sense when preaching that the sermon length should be determined not by an arbitrary rule but rather by how long is needed to unpack, understand and apply the text.

While we are at it, there are a few other things that an exposition does not need to be, in fact explicitly should not be.

It should not end up being a meander through the passage, verse by verse, stopping at each verse and picking out a specific point, no matter how tenuous. Rather an expository sermon takes a section of Scripture and attempt to understand the purpose and application of the whole thing. The listening should get a sense of the logical flow of the text and how the different elements hang together. For example, if you are preaching through Mark’s Gospel and you are given Mark 11:1-25 to preach on, you will have three specific incidents: the arrival at Jerusalem, the cursing of the fig tree and the clearing of the temple. These should not then become three semi-detached mini sermons. Rather, the hearer should go away with the sense that these events hang together thematically as well as chronologically.

The expository sermon should not be simply a technical exegesis of the text. The aim is not to just fill heads with knowledge but open hearts to God’s Word. This is not meant to be a dry lecture. The sermon should apply God’s Word so that it answers the “so what” question.

It does not need to be intellectual, designed to appeal only to people who are well educated and highly literate. A good exposition should reach into the hearts of everyone from the young teenager through to the 90 year old, from the Professor to the person who dropped out of school without any qualifications. This is because it is the proclamation of God’s Word to God’s people.

An expository sermon is....

Now, we’ve got that out of the way, what is an expository sermon. Well first of all, it should be the normal bread and butter of church life. There are lots of different types of sermons and it’s good to use the whole range as and when needed. However, I would expect 90% of the preaching in a healthy church to follow this approach. Why?

An expository sermon, especially when it is part of an expository series where the preacher works systematically through a book of the Bible protects preacher and congregation from hobby horses. It means that we preach through the whole Bible and get the whole counsel of God. It means that we are guarded against the temptation to duck a subject because it is potentially controversial. A few weeks back I preached on Mark 10. I couldn't avoid Jesus' words on divorce and re-marriage even though they go against our culture. In September I will get to Mark 13. Not everyone in the congregation will agree on eschatology. Some may get very hot under the collar. People may even choose to leave if they don't agree with me on the 2nd coming. I might be tempted to stay clear of such controversial topics but I have no choice because they come up naturally. It also puts a guard in against the temptation to pick a subject in order to preach against particular people/issues or in favour of specific issues (e.g. giving).

An expository sermon starts with God's Word. It means that we are being shaped by God's priorities. What does he major on? Where does he put the emphasis.

An expository sermon should be about taking a section of Scripture finding out what it says , understanding its meaning and applying it to our lives.

How do we listen?

Knowing what an expository sermon is trying to do will help us to know how to listen and what to watch out for.

First of all, because the aim is to find out exactly what Scripture says, we need to listen with our Bible's open and follow along with the preacher. It is helpful to have a Bible or app that you can read comfortably. I'm old fashioned and I think you can't beat gold old hard copy but if you prefer to read on an electronic platform I suggest that you have a big enough screen to see as much of the text as possible in a good font sized. The preacher may wish to cross-refer to other passages so be ready to turn these up with him (though personally I think it is best if they stay focused in the main passage). As you follow on, be careful to check that both you and the preacher are responding to what the text actually says, not what you think it says.

There may be some follow up work to do. The preacher cannot cover everything in his sermon. He has probably spent several hours preparing something then condensed into 30 minutes. He may refer you to wider reading, those cross references etc. He will probably have looked at more than one translation and you may want to go away and read the passage again in those translations. Some people find it helpful to take notes so they can follow up.

Listen out for the overarching theme and application. Usually when we are preparing expositions, we try to sum up the overall message in one sentence. We also then go on to identify from this the main application, known as "the behavioural change." This application may not be something to do. It may be:

A truth to grasp and understand more clearly and believe more strongly

An emotional response such as repentance, joy and thanksgiving or hope.

Something to do differently

A whole new way of thinking about something

By the way, have you notice how our world is very “me” orientated and so we instinctively tune in for what we can get out of the message personally? However, we are called to be part of God’s people and so we should expect the application to start of corporately. So I should not rush to discover what “God is saying to me.” Rather, I will want to hear what God is saying to the church and then I will want to find out where I fit in this. What can I contribute towards helping the church to obey. For example, there may be a call to be more welcoming, loving and hospitable as a church. I need to hear that as an application for the church first. This means I won’t just rush off to do my own thing but consider how I can work with others to help us become friendlier.

How do you know what this main theme/application is? Well good clues include, an opening question or concluding statement. Also you may notice a recurring word, phrase or sentence. As you get to know a preacher, you will also notice non-verbal clues. They may move away from the lectern and come closer to the congregation, or if they normally walk about a lot may return to a stationary position at the lectern. There may be a hand gesture or they may take off their glasses. You will begin to recognise and watch out for these hints.

Watch out, the main application may not come at the end. In fact preachers will often interweave application throughout the sermon. For example, I often try to make my headings application points.

Listen with discernment. Good expository preaching sticks close to the text. Make sure the preacher does this. Think things through. Are they right? Is the emphasis right? How would I understand and apply this bit?

Listen expecting God to speak. You are engaging closely with God’s Word and the goal here is simply to bring out or expose what God is saying. We listen knowing that we will hear God through Scripture. This should fill us with excitement, expectation, awe and reverence.

Listening to Doctrinal Sermons

Sometimes the aim of a sermon is to help us grasp a specific Biblical truth more clearly. This should not surprise us. We keep insisting that what we believe affects how we live. We may use a one off sermon or even a short series of sermons to teach on a particular doctrine. For example, I've preached doctrinal series on The Trinity and on The Atonement. Some people have preached their way through a creed or statement of faith.

We preach doctrinal sermons to put the focus on a particular truth which the church needs to know. This may be especially important when a specific error or heresy is being pushed either locally or on the wider Christian stage. For example, my series on the Atonement came about because some people were saying that Jesus did not bear the penalty for our sin on The Cross and to claim that he did was tantamount to "cosmic child abuse." However, we don't just preach doctrine defensively. I preached on The Trinity because it is such a central tenant of our faith and yet very few Christians have a grasp of how wonderful this doctrine is.

The risk with a Doctrinal Sermon is that it can become a bit of a lecture. We can also end up with a kind of bible safari where we tour through the Bible finding relevant verses. I prefer not to do this even when speaking on topics and find benefit on sticking in one or maybe two Bible passages for each talk. This means that if I want to look at several passages then I find it better to preach several sermons. However, sometimes it is necessary to look at a number of passages.

A doctrinal sermon therefore should be rooted in Scripture. The preacher should still have done their exegesis on any Bible passages used. So just as with a normal expository sermon, you should be listening with your Bible open making sure that the speaker is doing justice to the natural meaning of passages referenced.

Think about how what you are hearing about the doctrine relates to other Biblical truths. It's helpful (and a good preacher should do this) to draw the links in when looking at a passage. The Bible writers haven't just given us a text book in systematic theology and so even as we discover something about God's character or human nature when we look at the relevant passages, we will see that those things contribute to the particular point that the Biblical author is making about specific circumstances.

If what we believe affects how we live, then we should listen ready to act and obey. Doctrinal sermons should not just fill us with head knowledge. For example our sermons on The Trinity brought out some important applications about church life including the need to approach church as a family not as consumers as well as to avoid the twin traps of secularism and superstition. It was really encouraging when following the sermons on "God is Love" and "The Father and The Son" that we had people asking about how they could get more involved in "the family."

Doctrine sermons will encourage us to love the truth. We should listen expecting to grow in discernment. Sometimes the preacher will deal head on, explicitly with an example of false teaching that the doctrine is designed to correct, sometimes this will be more implicit. As we listen, we should think through the implications, comparing and contrasting the truth with the lie. This will help us to be on our guard against error. Watch to see how false teachers have twisted Scripture to make it

looks like it supports their lie, try to identify the inconsistencies in their approach, consider how believing the lie would affect how you live.

Doctrine involves declaring the glories of God. We learn about his character, his names and his works. We are reminded of our own fallenness and finiteness. Doctrine pushes us towards grace. So we should listen with thanksgiving. Doctrine is part of worship and the preacher becomes our worship leader as our hearts overflow with joy and praise.

How to listen to a topical Sermon

Instead of focusing on a specific Bible passage and drawing out the things it has to say, a topical sermon starts with an issue and tries to find out what the Bible says about it. For example, the sermon might deal with an issue in church life such as prayer, giving, worship or evangelism. A topical sermon may deal with particular challenges we face in life such as suffering, temptation, balancing family life etc. Sometimes the topic will be to do with apologetics and might deal with questions such as “Science and the Bible? Or “Can you prove that there is a God?”

My personal preference, even when preaching on a topic is to stick with a specific Bible passage and see what it has to say about it. This enables me to focus on doing a good job of exegeting the passage properly, understanding its context and its primary purpose. However, quite often, a topical sermon will draw on various Bible passages to explain, illustrate or prove a point.

The temptation when listening to a topical sermon is to simply listen out for the specific information and advice that will be given on the subject. If the preacher is talking about marriage, then I will take note of all he says about how to be a good husband, to work on my communication, be forgiving, take time to listen etc. The risk is that I treat listening to the sermon like reading a self help book. If I do this, then I will treat what is said like any other piece of advice and I will judge it pragmatically: does it feel right to me? Will it work?

Similarly, the preacher may be tempted to select Bible passages which seem to prove his point and even to read his preferred application into them. This is known as eisegesis and is the opposite of exegesis. Exegesis involves drawing the meaning out of a text and we do this with expository preaching, eisegesis means reading meaning into a text.

So, as hearers, we should be listening out not just for the application but for the Biblical basis as well. We should be asking why the preacher has chosen particular Bible passages and checking that we understand their meaning and context.

Like any other sermon, we still want to hear and obey the application. We should not just treat the topic as a matter of interest or curiosity. It's also important not to pick and choose which topical sermons we pay attention to. If a preacher chooses to speak on a subject to the whole church and not just to a specialist group, then we should assume that God has something to say to us, even if the subject does not relate directly to us. For example, if a sermon is about being a good leader and you are not a church leader then you can still gain so much from this.

First of all, you will want to pray for your leaders and so the sermon will help you know what to pray for them.

Secondly you will want to be a good church member who respects and submits to godly church leaders. A sermon on leadership will tell you a lot about what the leaders are seeking to do and will help you to respond to what they ask of you.

Thirdly, in many churches, the whole congregation are involved in choosing church leaders and so you will want to know how to go about choosing the right sort of leaders in the right way.

Fourthly, you may not be a leader now but this may be something that one day you are called to. The sermon may even be the means by which God begins to speak to you about this.

Fifthly, whilst the specific examples in the application may not relate directly to your situation, you will find that these are underpinned by good Gospel principles and you will be able to apply them analogously to your own situation.

To give another example, I from time to time find myself preaching on subjects such as divorce and re-marriage. Now, normally, I won't choose to do this as a specific topical sermon, it is usually actually the case that the subject came up as we worked through an expository series on Mark's Gospel. Most members of our congregation are not divorced or facing divorce, though some have been through very difficult relationship issues. However, the subject is very relevant to all because:

- There won't be a person in the church who does not know at least one family facing the pressures of breakup. Listening to a sermon about divorce should challenge us to pray for those whose relationships are in trouble. We should also want to know how to relate to others and support them as they go through these circumstances.
- Although we may not be experiencing difficulties in our relationships now, we still want to hear godly wisdom now so that should we face challenges in the future, we will know how to respond. Indeed, even for those who are not yet married, hearing what Jesus has to say about marriage and divorce helps them to consider the seriousness of marriage and to think carefully about the relationships they engage in.
- Although divorce may not be immediately relevant to many of us, the underlying principle of faithfulness in relationships is relevant as we think about family life, friendships, church life, work commitments etc.

Finally, I suggest you listen sparingly. Well to some extent you don't have much choice about what is served up to you do you? So this is really an appeal to congregations and preachers alike. Please commit to serving a good diet of teaching anchored in expository preaching. Topical studies have their place but do not allow them to overwhelm the teaching menu!

How to listen to evangelistic sermons (If you are already a Christian)

At any one time in a gathering there will be Christians and non-Christians present. This presents the preacher with a challenge. Does he primarily focus on preaching to the Christians to edify and build them up or does he focus on evangelising the enquirers. Either way, he risks leaving part of the audience behind. Or does he? One helpful way of approaching the sermon is to preach at one type of listener but with the expectation that the others present will in effect be able to overhear and by analogy apply the sermon to themselves. So if my main application is for Christians, the non-Christian should be able to trace the Gospel through what I say. Likewise, there should be something for even mature believers in an evangelistic talk. So, if I'm the believer in the congregation, how should I listen to an evangelistic sermon?

1. Listen Prayerfully

There will be non-Christians in the congregation. It may well be that I have invited some of them along. Certainly there should be people I am actively getting to know and befriend amongst the audience. So when I hear a Gospel message, it should encourage me to pray for them as they listen that God's Word will take root in their hearts.

I will also be listening out both for what is being said and what isn't being said so that in conversation afterwards, I'm ready to follow up with my friends, to reinforce the points made and where necessary to fill in the gaps. I will be thinking about the specific context and outlook of the friend I will be talking to. I may also be convicted about people who are not there. You know that feeling "I wish so and so had been here to hear this." Well this should move me to pray for them, for opportunities to speak with them and tell them about what I've heard and to invite them along to future events.

2. Listen Thankfully

It should warm my heart to hear the Gospel preach. I should never grow tired of this. There will be the sense that "the old tunes are the best." I will be reminded of what Christ has done for me. Preaching the Gospel and Listening to the Gospel is first and foremost an act of worship. We are praising God. Gospel messages will give us a deeper insight into the character of God and the work of Christ.¹

3. Listen Repentantly

The Gospel is the answer to how to live as Christians now. There are two aspects to this. As I am reminded of what Christ has done for me, I will be challenged about how I am going on and growing as a Christian. Justification spurs us on to Sanctification.

Secondly, when I am convicted of sin and failing in my life, then it's not additional rules or self-help steps that I need. I need God's Grace. I need the Gospel to be applied again.²

¹ This is essentially what John Piper does in his book *Desiring God*

² On this, see Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, NavPress (2006)

4. Listen Teachably

One of the reasons why I preach evangelistic sermons is to help Christians see evangelism and apologetics modelled. For the same reason, I listen to talks and read books designed primarily for enquirers.³

So when I listen to an evangelistic sermon, I am looking to see how the preacher models presenting the Gospel. That way, I can learn for when I'm in a position to share my faith one to one and in small groups. Although the preacher is usually not in direct dialogue with people asking questions and responding, a good evangelist will be anticipating and responding to the questions that unbelievers will have. So I can learn how to respond sensitively to questions and objections. I can learn how to avoid red herrings. I can see how the preacher takes the listener directly to Jesus. I will learn both from what they do well and also from what they don't do well (because no preacher will be perfect). So sometimes I will think "I want to try and do it like that" whilst at other times I will think "I would have dealt with that differently." You may want to find an opportunity later on to talk to the preacher about his sermon so you can learn more (though in the immediate aftermath, both his focus and yours should normally be on responding to enquirers).

Good teaching and learning involves opportunities to put into practice what we have learnt. So actively seek them out. When you are at work on Monday morning and a colleague asks you at tea break "What did you do at the weekend." You have a great opportunity to say "I heard a really helpful talk. I think you would have found it helpful too..."

We come to faith through the preaching of the Gospel, but we also stay, go on and grow through the preaching of the Gospel. This means that even an evangelistic talk is for our encouragement, edification and correction. Enjoy listening.

³ Good places to start for this include: Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God*, C.S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* and Barry Cooper & Paul Williams, *If You Could Ask God One Question*.

How to listen to a character study sermon

Years ago my dad did a series of Bible studies which he called “An A-Z of Old Testament Characters.” I’m not sure if he managed to find someone for every letter, but there was certainly enough mileage to keep the series going for a good while.

It’s no surprise that character studies have proved popular. We all love a good true life story, that’s why biographies and memoirs sell well. The Bible is packed full of fascinating characters, heroes and rogues, oppressors, victims and saviours, godly women and not so godly women, rich and poor, weak and strong, wise and foolish. The stories are fascinating to read or listen to and packed full of helpful lessons for life. And therein lies both the strength and the weakness of a character study.

Whilst the character study can provide those helpful life lessons, it can also set up some nasty traps for the preacher and for the congregation. First of all, the risk is that we simply end up being moralising. That’s why you get the Sunday School lessons about David that teach us to be good friends (with Jonathan), kind (to Mephibosheth) and brave in the face of life’s giants (Goliath). Secondly, if we are not careful, we turn some characters into monsters and others into saints (of the Catholic with an St prefix kind). Character studies are particularly dangerous if they uproot the person out of his context and draw the lessons we think are implied from their life rather than what the Bible is actually teaching us about them and what God did to, for, with and through them.

So when listening to a character study sermon, first of all listen out for the context. Where in the Bible do we find them, what is going on? What are the primary teaching points that this part of the Bible is teaching.

Secondly listen out for how they point us to Christ. They should do, because all Scripture does this. Now, this does not mean that the person will be perfect. However, there’s a sense in which both their strengths and weaknesses point us to Jesus. This approach to teaching is known as “Types” especially when looking at Old Testament events and characters. The Old Testament character is a type or model that highlights characteristics properly fulfilled in the New Testament anti-type.

For example, when we look at King David, then we see the following things that point us towards Jesus. He is the true, good King of Israel, a shepherd who protects, he loves God with his whole heart, at times he faces rejection, danger and exile, he defeats the enemies of God’s people. This means that when we read about him defeating Goliath, the first thing we are meant to learn is not to be brave and face our giants but rather that King Jesus has already defeated the giant, Sin. We identify not with David, the anointed ruler but with the army of God’s people who watch as their champion wins the day. This does not mean that we can’t learn all sorts of ethical lessons from David’s life but we have to learn the big Gospel lesson first.

But to say that David is a Type of Christ does not mean that he is to be equated with Christ. David sinned. David put others in danger like the priests of Nob, David failed to go out to battle with his army, committed adultery, tried to cover it up and had a good, loyal man murdered. Yet even those things point us first to Christ. They remind us that Jesus was the only one without sin. He was the perfect and greater King. They remind us that David needed a saviour too, so that when Paul (Romans 4:1-12) wants to teach us about Abraham and David, the main thing he wants us to learn is that they were justified by faith.

So, when you listen to a character study, resolve to learn from that person, to imitate their good points and learn from their mistakes so that you can avoid the, but more importantly, all learn from their faith, the one and only means to be justified and most of all learn from them as they point you to the central Biblical character.

How to listen to sermons when it's the last thing I feel like doing

Sometimes the last thing you want to be doing is listening to a sermon. It might simply be that you are exhausted and too tired to take in what is being said, sometimes it's because what is being said is too painful, too close to the bone, sometimes it's the other extreme, what is being said just doesn't seem relevant. Sometimes it's nothing to do with the content but about how we react to the preacher themselves. Here are some thoughts about those situations.

I'm too tired

We've all been there whether through work or family pressures or health. We've barely been able to keep our eyes open during the talk. Even the apostle Paul had someone fall asleep when he was preaching. What do I do? Well, the first thing is don't feel guilty, the sermon is not meant to be a test of our mental and physical stamina. I'm not of course thinking here of people who are being irresponsible, staying up needlessly late, failing to say no etc but for those who are genuinely at a stage in life when exhaustion is the unavoidable reality.

It may be that the best thing to do is not to sit in for the sermon, go home and get some rest, step outside for a breather, take the morning off. This should not be a regular habit and if we cannot make a specific service then we still need to use other opportunities to meet with God's people. That might mean choosing to attend at a different time. At Bearwood Chapel, we host a number of weekend congregations. The reason we do this is similar to church planting. New churches are often planted to meet a geographical need, we provide somewhere for believers in a locality to meet so that distance is not a barrier. We planted congregations that share geographical space because we realised that sometimes the barrier is not distance but time. For some people 9:30 on a Sunday morning is the best time to meet for others, it's 6pm in the evening. Some people choose specifically to come at night because they struggle with mornings, others are fading by the evening and so mornings are better.

You may already be in the service and not able to get out very easily. So what do you do then? Again, not feeling guilty when you don't take things in is important. However, I wouldn't underestimate the hidden benefits of simply being there and relaxing in an environment where God's Word is being proclaimed. Don't be surprised if later on you find out that you've picked something up without realising it.

This makes it all the more important that you follow up on the sermon. Don't just simply sleep through it. If the sermon was recorded, get the MP3 and listen again at a time when you are more alert, get the notes from the preacher so you can read them, ask if you can talk about the message with him. Why not discuss the sermon with others? Some of our Home Groups pick up on the Sunday teaching to enable people who were there to reinforce what they've learnt and for those who missed it to catch up.

The Message is too close to the bone

A sermon that touches on marriage and divorce, bereavement, same sex attraction, singleness or childlessness etc might be particularly painful to sit through if you've recent experience of one of those things. Sometimes, something can hit us hard without warning, it raises issues and feelings that we thought were dealt with long ago or at least buried somewhere deep.

When I get the chance, I try where possible to talk with people about what might be affected before it comes up. I don't always manage to do this though but we do publish our sermon series upfront. I also try to share the detail of potentially sensitive sermons with our leadership team in advance.

However, the aim of warning and preparing people is not so they can avoid the sermon. We automatically assume that painful feelings are to be avoided but actually it is these very things that God uses to work in our lives. So, don't run away from painful emotions. Also, don't be embarrassed. You should not need to put on a mask in church. Church should be a safe place for people to respond emotionally.

Be aware that you may find it harder to process things intellectually but sitting and listening is not just an intellectual process. One vital thing you are doing here is making a statement that you are obedient to God and willing to sit under His Word. This is important in and of itself.

Find a good, supportive friend to sit with during the service and to pray with before and after.

Remember that the preacher is not preaching to get at you. This is why expository preaching is so vital. The preacher hasn't carefully chosen a topic with you in mind. God's Word has determined the agenda.

The message does not seem specifically relevant to me

Whilst some messages seem too close for comfort, others can be at the other extreme. There does not seem to be an application that is directly relevant to me. This could be because there doesn't seem to be any application at all and the preacher seems to be simply explaining the passage without telling me what to do about, the preacher is only giving general principles not specific application or because application appears to be for others not me.

We have already talked a little about what to do in these situations (see previous posts). Of course, there is no excuse for us preachers to fail to make relevant application but hearers can still do something about it. First of all, whilst this does not get the preacher off the hook, why not work through the implications of what he has said and discover for yourself how those principles apply to your own life? Secondly, go and ask the preacher. Talk to him about your own situation and ask him to help you apply what he has said to it. A good preacher should be only too willing to do this. Thirdly, as we have seen before, you can take on the role of "over-hearer." Listen to how the application works to others and then by way of analogy think through the implications for yourself.

What do I mean by this? Well take the example of Paul's instructions to slaves and owners in Ephesians 6. Paul makes his direct application to slaves, they are to obey their owners. He gives reasons for this. They are to remember that first and foremost they serve the Lord. So even when they have a bad master who does not care for them or reward them, God sees their good work and he will reward them. They will be paid! Now most of us do not find ourselves in slave-owner relationships so we often (correctly in my view) see something analogous here with workplace relationships (it isn't a direct read across) but we can learn about faithfulness in the workplace, respect for those in authority over us and a commitment to good work. We do these things because we serve a higher master and we know that he will reward us. But some of us are not in paid employment. Even still, there is work we have to do for others and people in authority that we should submit to. The teenager at school still has to work hard and do what her teacher asks her to

do (and maybe sometimes it feels a bit like slave labour to them!). They work hard, not just because they benefit from the end exams but because even as they write an essay or study for an exam, they are working for God's glory.

Sometimes the application does not seem immediately relevant. For example why would I want to listen to a sermon on old age and dying well when I am in the prime of life? Well whilst the challenges of old age may seem a long way off, it is actually good to pay attention to teaching on this now. That way I store up the lessons so that I can apply them later on in life. We live in an instant culture and we so desperately want to know what immediate relevance something has but sometimes the application is a long term investment. We often find that the crisis point where we need to hear God's truth is often the last place where we are able to grasp it for the first time. But when we have heard something in the past and committed it to memory, then God brings it to mind at the point we need it.

The preacher does not agree with me

It may be a matter of style, we tune into different styles and personalities. So what do I do when the preacher's tone of voice, pace, mannerisms, choice of vocabulary cause disengagement or distraction? Worse still, sometimes there's a personality clash or sometimes a breakdown in relationship that causes me to switch off from what they are saying. It could be that I've had a disagreement with them, maybe they've had strong words with me, maybe I've been offended by something they've said or done. It may even be that something that say in the sermon itself puts me off, a badly judged joke, a controversial political or theological point of view, an insensitive application. Preachers are human just like us, sometimes they get things wrong.

Remember that the preacher is family. Pray for them. Ask God to encourage them and to use them to speak to you. Remember that God could even use a donkey to speak to someone. God can use this man for all his faults to speak to you. It may be that you need to get right with them. Go and get reconciled, deal with the real underlying issue.

Be ready to be surprised as you discover over time that you have learnt to tune into their style and not to be distracted by their mannerisms. Trust God to speak through the preaching of His word to you.

How to listen to sermons together

Sermons are not meant to be listened to on your own. The very nature of preaching is that it is a corporate exercise, something that the whole church family shares in together. So how do we stop our response from being individualistic?

Pray together before listening

What about getting together with a few people before the service to pray for the preacher and the congregation? Pray that God will speak to the whole church as a body and to each of you as individuals.

Listen out for the corporate message

We've mentioned this before, but it's worth repeating. The first application of a sermon is often to the whole church. So listen out for this. Don't be rushing to find out what is in it personally for you. Listen out for what is being said to the whole church family and then think about how you can help the whole church obey God's Word.

Talk about what you have heard and learnt together

Why not discuss what you have learnt with others. Get together with the same people you prayed with beforehand. This will give you chance to clarify your understanding of the message and to pray for one another. Families can do this together as well during their Sunday mealtime.

It's important that these discussion times are not abused. The purpose is not to critique the sermon and criticise the preacher. There's a place for sermon critique but this is not it. The aim here is to help each other learn. If someone feels that they didn't get anything out of the sermon then encourage them and help them to hear what God is saying.

Give constructive feedback to the preacher

You may not realise it but preachers want to hear genuine feedback. Often, it is the silence after preaching that is the worst thing. Useful feedback should be specific. This enables the preacher to do two things. First of all, it helps them to improve. Secondly it helps them to help you. It becomes part of a conversation. Sometimes I realise that I've not given attention to something important in the message and so 1-1 I can follow up on this or I can give time to it in a future sermon. Sometimes I realise that someone has misheard what I was saying and so feedback gives me the opportunity to talk things through with them and clarify the matter.

Follow up and encourage each other

Don't leave things at the instant response. When God has spoken and challenged us, there can be an initial rush of zeal but that soon dies down after a few weeks. What about taking time to challenge or encourage each other a few weeks later. Remind someone of the encouragement you heard in the sermon, ask your friend how they are doing with that specific response that they shared with you.

Good preaching should lead to the church being built up into unity and each member being equipped for works of service.