



Lesson 14: How to Get the Most from a Sermon

Mortimer Adler wrote an influential book called “How to Read a Book.” Odd title—how could one read that book if he didn’t know how to read a book? Adler’s book focuses on what questions to ask and what to look for as you read, how to analyze the author’s arguments, how to mark up the book for later use. Millions have found Adler’s book very helpful.

Just like people don’t know how to read a book, they don’t know how to listen to a sermon. Millions every week find the messages they hear dull, boring and irrelevant simply because they have not learned how to enjoy and profit from a message.

What can you do to make a sermon more personally meaningful?¹

I. Prior to the sermon: prepare yourself.

Most people think that a sermon begins when the speaker opens his mouth to start preaching. But getting the most out of a sermon starts prior to the message.

- A. During the week: The more we personally worship the Lord during the week (in Bible study, prayer, song, righteous living, etc.), the more prepared we will be to corporately worship him come Sunday. If church services are the only time you spend in worship, you’ll likely not get much from the message.

Pray for the speaker throughout the week, asking for God to help him prepare and preach the appropriate messages. When we pray thus, it creates within us an expectancy and anticipation that God may use the message to directly minister to us. Congregations often get what they pray for in this regard.

- B. Saturday night: Don’t stay out so late on Saturday night that you can’t function on Sunday morning. Get to bed early enough to get a good night’s sleep. Have Sunday morning planned out beforehand (clothing, breakfast, travel plans, etc.). Begin thinking about and planning for the Lord’s Day the night before.

Here’s an Idea: Plan a special “Lord’s Day Eve” meal and family time on Saturday night to prepare for Sunday. Include Scripture reading and prayer after the meal with a focus on teaching the children different aspects of church life. Take time to get everything ready to go for Sunday morning. Create anticipation and excitement within your family for the Lord’s Day.

C. Sunday morning:

1. Spend time in personal worship at home (Bible reading and prayer) before leaving for church. Ask God to prepare your own heart for worship and to bless the worship service, especially the preaching.
 2. It may be wise to eat only a light breakfast to prevent lethargy.
 3. Allow plenty of time to get ready and get to church early. Plan to arrive at least 10 minutes prior to the beginning of the service.
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4. At church, prior to the service:
- Greet others warmly. Look for visitors or new people to meet and greet.
 - Look over the bulletin. Read through the Scripture text and/or outline if given.
 - Think about the purpose of the service—to bring honor and glory to God, to worship, to receive encouragement, to be challenged and to be taught.
 - Think about God’s perfect character and attributes – wisdom, power, glory, grace, mercy, etc.
 - Spend time in silent contemplation. Prepare your heart for the service to follow.
 - Try to anticipate and eliminate distractions both with yourself and with your family members. Prepare yourself to pay attention.
 - Humble yourself before the Lord by confessing sin. Thank God for his mercy toward you and his invitation for you to come boldly before the throne of grace. Ask God to help the speaker communicate clearly and to help you understand and apply the message.
 - Think about how God might use you to encourage or challenge someone else.

Remember that the speaker has put a lot of time and effort into his message with the express purpose of helping and exhorting the audience. Show that you appreciate and value his efforts by remaining alert and showing that you are interested.

II. During the sermon:

- A. Try to listen carefully. Good preaching appeals first to the mind, so your mind must be fully engaged. Being attentive requires self-discipline. Our minds tend to wander and daydream. But listening to the message is a part of the worship we offer to God. It’s a prime opportunity for us to hear what God is teaching us. Don’t insult the speaker (or God) by daydreaming, tuning out, horsing around or snoozing during the message.
- B. Maintain eye contact with the speaker. This gives you something to focus on and gives the speaker the impression that you are listening.
- C. Turn to the appropriate passages in the Bible and read along silently. It’s beneficial to see the biblical text the message is coming from so you can evaluate what the speaker is saying (C.f., Acts 17:11). The rustling of pages is one extra sound most pastors enjoy hearing during their messages.
- D. Respond positively with nonverbal cues – smile, laugh, nod your head, say “Amen.”
- E. Take notes or follow the outline if one is provided. Write your own outline and see how it compares to the published one. Taking notes is an excellent way to stay focussed during the message.

- F. Think about how to respond personally to the message (c.f., James 1:22). Good preaching always applies the Bible to daily life.
- What sins must I confess and forsake?
 - What duties must I fulfill? What commands must I obey?
 - What comforts and promises can I count on?
 - How does this message encourage or challenge me?
 - How must I change my attitudes and/or behaviors?

From the Westminster Confession:

It is required of these that hear the Word preached that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness and readiness of mind; meditate upon it; hide it in their hearts; and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

III. Review after the service.

- Talk to the speaker about your impression of the sermon, either good or bad.
- Quiz family members or friends about the main points of the sermon.
- Discuss the purpose of the sermon and how one should respond to it.
- Discuss anything about the sermon that was confusing or hard to understand.
- Discuss the other parts of the service—music, prayer, etc.
- Avoid being overly critical of the “performance” of the preacher. Focus instead on the content of the message.

Note the quote: “Something important happens when we hear a good sermon: God speaks to us. Through the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit, He uses His Word to calm our fears, comfort our sorrows, disturb our consciences, expose our sins, proclaim His grace, and reassure us in the faith. But these are all affairs of the heart, not just matters of the mind, so listening to a sermon can never be a merely intellectual exercise. We need to receive Biblical truth in our hearts, allowing what God says to influence what we love, what we desire and what we praise.”²

Listening to a sermon requires a prepared soul, an alert mind, and open Bible and a receptive heart. But the best way to tell whether we are listening is by the way we live.
