

Helping Johnny Listen

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Taking Full Advantage of the Sermons We Hear

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WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

HELPING JOHNNY LISTEN

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*To all the faithful preachers of God's word every week across our globe,
may this book help increase the fruit of your ministries as your people
are molded into better listeners to God's sermons through your mouths.*

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Preface

IN 1966, RUDOLF FLESCH wrote *Why Johnny Can't Read: and what you can do about it*. His point in writing this book was mostly to give advice on how to help people read. Over time, many books have been written concerning Johnny. He has not been able to write, tell the difference between right and wrong, add, concentrate, sell, brand ideas, preach, and many more things. Over the years, Johnny has stood for a mythical character of the average person, both male and female.

I have entitled this book, *Helping Johnny Listen*, because I am not so concerned with the problems the average person experiences in listening to the preaching of God's Word. I am concerned with helping them become the listeners that God created them to be. My concern as I write is the common individual in the common seat at the common church. I want to help this common individual think through responsibilities and activities they can engage in so that when the Word of God is preached, they are able to hear the words that God has for them. It is my aim to help people who listen to sermons to get the most from what they hear. Hence the subtitle: *Taking Full Advantage of the Sermons We Hear*.

The book begins with the connection between preaching and listening. I have called it the preaching intersection. The purpose of this chapter is to raise the awareness of the need of preaching and if preaching, then listening. Chapter 2 deals with what happens before the preaching event. Chapter 3 deals with ways to listen with an ear towards the discernment of the truth. In my estimation, Chapter 4 is the most important because listening is ultimately fulfilled when the person responds to the words of the sermon. The last chapter deals with common obstacles that seem to keep the listener from fulfilling their duty to the sermon.

Most of this research was done for a Doctorate of Ministries program through Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge all of my professors for their

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help thinking through many of these issues. In particular are Dr. Don McCall and President Jim Jeffery.

To Dr. Sandy, you have made this text readable, thank you for your help.

To Bryan Hodge, a college friend, thank you for convincing me to have this published.

To those at my church, Grace Bible Church in Hutchinson, Kansas, who have sat through many lectures and sermons, I am grateful to you and your continual response to the word of God preached. Specifically for those who have read it and given feedback: Jodi Fish, Curt Thompson, and my pastor, Rick Goertzen.

As with most people, I am a result of the influence of my parents, so thank you. In particular I am indebted to my mother, who taught me the English language. I apologize for the mistakes that you, and not many others, will see.

To Monique, Karsten, JT, and Anni, thank you for allowing me time away to complete this project. Thank you for your patience, your grace, and your willingness to share me with the church. I love you all and pray that as you children get older, you will mature to become effective listeners to God's word preached.

Most importantly, to my Lord Jesus. It has only been through your grace and mercy that this book has been completed. Thank you for accomplishing salvation through which we can now hear your voice through the voice of our preachers.

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS FOR Christians. This book is for Christians who concern themselves with God's word. This book is for Christians who concern themselves with the preaching of God's word. If that is you, you need to read this book. If it is not you, do not waste your time; rather, find people who fit that description and give the book to them.

Over the past several years, there has been a wealth of material calling pastors back to their God-given responsibility to preach his word without shame or embarrassment. Yet, there is relatively little information addressed to the people in the church as they sit under the weekly preaching of the word of God. How are they to listen to the preaching of God's word? What are they to do when the Bible is preached to them the way God intended preaching to take place? How are people to respond to biblical preaching?

I will never forget the first time I considered this problem. I was sitting at a national conference for pastors, looking out at over 3,000 men who were receiving instructions on going back to their churches and preaching more boldly, accurately, and passionately. I sat there thinking that their people have no idea of what is about to hit them next week. Their people have no concept of what it means to respond to the preaching they are soon to receive. Their people need to understand what it means to listen to preaching from God's word. At that moment, I felt a burden for the people who sit in the pews every week. Michael Fabarez accurately noted:

The average preacher has spent thousands of hours reading, attending classes, learning biblical languages, and honing skills in order to communicate the life-changing Word of God in an effective way. The average congregation, on the other hand, has received little or no training on how to listen to and integrate the sermons they hear each week . . . There are no seminars, workshops, or conferences designed to prepare your audience on how to receive the life-changing messages you proclaim

week after week. This is amazing when you consider that the Bible gives more instruction on how to receive God's truth properly than it gives on how to proclaim it properly. God is very concerned with how preachers preach. But we tend to neglect His concern with how listeners listen.¹

It is my general contention that people who call themselves Christian struggle to listen to the preaching of God's word. The listening problem extends much deeper than just being church related; it is, in fact, a problem that can be traced to being human. Certainly there are some people who have developed good listening skills; but generally speaking, people do not listen well. The problem with listening started at the very beginning of time when Adam and Eve failed to listen to God giving instructions concerning what they could or could not eat. Since that time, inherent in mankind is the natural tendency not to listen, not to respond. Ask the wife who tries to talk to her husband while he is watching a football game. Ask the parents who try to talk to their child to explain how to take out the garbage. Finally, ask the pastor who continually preaches God's word while looking at a crowd that is sleepy, distracted, disinterested, or immune to his words. People have a listening problem!

Dr. Ralph Nichols has often been called the "father of listening," and a significant amount of information about the process of listening in the field of education today has been credited to him from research he conducted at the University of Minnesota in the 1960s and 1970s. He made this observation about listening:

Behind the widespread inability to listen lies what, in my opinion, is a major oversight in our system of classroom instruction. We have focused our attention upon reading, considering it the primary medium by which we learn, and we have practically forgotten the art of listening. About six years are devoted to formal reading instruction in our school systems. Little emphasis is placed on speaking, and almost no attention has been given to the skill of listening. Listening training—if you could possibly call it training—has often consisted of a long series of admonitions extending from the first grade through college: "Pay attention!" "Now get this!" "Open up your ears!" "Listen!"²

1. Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, 151–52.
2. Nichols and Stevens, *Are You Listening*, 10–11.

He was correct in his assessment of the educational classroom, probably even conservative. Students are taught from an early age the importance of writing and reading. Much of the educational classroom experience is given to learning letters, forming sentences, and sounding out vowels; and rightly, it should be. Reading and writing are vitally important. Even when children reach secondary education, they are taught for a few years the art of speaking. Yet how often are students taught to listen?

Although human beings in general are not good listeners in any subject, attempting to listen to someone preach from the Bible is even harder. It is harder because of the spiritual dynamic that is taking place when the preacher stands up to preach. As the Apostle Paul said, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:11–12). The preaching event is unlike any other speaking event, for the audience must deal not only with the physical liabilities of listening but also with a spiritual battle that is taking place in which their natural sinful condition does not want them to change and neither does the enemy of Christ. To be effective listeners to preaching, individuals must have all the abilities of the person who listens to the president of the United States give the State of the Union address; but they must also have the resolve of someone striving to be like Jesus spiritually. This is something that happens multiple times a week in the lives of Christians who are faithful in attending church where they hear several sermons a week.

One word of clarification may be helpful at this point. Is there a difference between *hearing*, *listening*, and *obeying*? According to Merriam-Webster³, the differences between these terms are slight yet very important. Hearing is defined as “the process, function, or power of perceiving sound; specifically, the special sense by which noises and tones are received as stimuli.” Listening is defined as “to pay attention to sound; to hear something with thoughtful attention, give consideration.” Obeying is defined as “to follow the commands or guidance of.” At least in the English language, these terms are used as steps in a process: Something is first heard. Then when it is given attention or given consideration, it is said to have been listened to. That produces action or obedience. Listening, then, is the hinge upon which hearing becomes obedience. Throughout this book, the term *listen* will be used

3. <http://www.merriam-webster.com>, (accessed, January 28, 2010).

in this sense: “hearing something that produces obedience.” It will be impossible to talk about listening to sermons if the assumption is not made that what has been heard in that sermon makes an impact upon the person, which results in change in that individual’s life.

Reflecting on the beginning of man, how was Adam and Eve’s failure to listen manifested? Their failure to listen was evidenced in the fact that they did not obey what God had told them to do. What is found in the Scriptures is a clear connection between listening to God’s truth and obeying what it says. That is the purpose of this book: to help Christians, who concern themselves with God’s word being preached, get the most out of each sermon they listen to so that they can have maximum life change.

I write this not from some ivory tower looking down on listeners, but as a person who sits in the pew next to them. I get to preach often, but the majority of my time in church is spent in the pew. This book contains principles that I have tried to work out in my own life over the course of the last fifteen years of sitting under godly preachers who faithfully brought forth God’s word each and every week with the goal of seeing life change in me. For that, I am forever thankful. The preachers I have sat under and the preachers I know take tremendous responsibility in this process, but it is time for the listeners to take some responsibility as well. It is time for those who listen to sermons to understand better their responsibility in listening to their preachers, to their sermons, and ultimately to God.

This is not something to gloss over or something that should be ignored. There are too many people in churches who mean well but are poor listeners. There are too many people in churches who have never been taught what it means to develop good listening skills, particularly when sermons are preached. The church is one generation away from being like the nation of Israel, as God described them to the prophet Ezekiel,

But as for you, son of man, your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another, each to his brother, saying, “Come now and hear what the message is which comes forth from the Lord.” They come to you as people come, and sit before you as My people and hear your words, but they do not do them, for they do the lustful desires expressed by their mouth, and their heart goes after their

gain. “Behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words but they do not practice them.” (Ezek 33:30–32)

It is time for the preacher’s sermon to be more than just elevator music. Some say that we are already there, that for many people the preacher is like background noise in their lives. But there is hope for the church. There is hope if people are taught what it means to listen properly and effectively to the preaching of God’s word. To that end, this book has been written.