

# How to Hear a Sermon

From Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* (1673), as quoted in *Truth & Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life*, by J.I. Packer, InterVarsity Press, 1999, pp. 134ff)

## Directions for...Understanding the Word which you Hear.

- I. Read and meditate on the holy Scriptures much in private, and then you will be the better able to understand what is preached on it in public, and to try that doctrine, whether it be of God....
- II. Live under the clearest, [most] distinct, convincing teaching that you possibly can procure.... Ignorant teachers...are unlike[ly] to make you men of understanding; as erroneous teachers are unlike[ly] to make you orthodox and sound.
- III. Come not to hear with a careless heart...but come with a sense of the unspeakable weight, necessity, and consequence of the holy word which you are to hear: and when you understand how much you are concerned in it, and truly love it, as the word of life, it will greatly help your understanding of every particular truth....
- IV. Suffer not vain thoughts or drowsy negligence to hinder your attention...be as earnest and diligent in attending and learning, as you would have the preacher be in teaching....
- V. Meditate on what you hear when you come home....
- VI. Inquire, where you doubt, of those that can resolve and teach you. It showeth a careless mind, and a contempt of the word of God, in most people...that never come to ask the resolution of one doubt...though they have pastors...that have ability, and leisure, and willingness to help them.

## Directions for Remembering what you Hear.

- I. It greatly helpeth memory to have a full understanding of the matter spoken which you would remember....Therefore labour most for a clear understanding according to the last directions....
- II. Method is a very great help to memory.... Ministers must not only be methodical...but ...choose that method which is most easy to the hearers to understand and remember....
- III. Numbers are a great help to memory....
- IV. Names also and signal words are a great help to memory....Therefore preachers should contrive the force of every reason, use, direction, [etc.] as much as may be, into some one emphatical word. (And some do very profitably contrive each of these words to begin with the same letter, which is good for memory....) As if I were to direct you to the chiefest helps to your salvation, and should name, 1. Powerful preaching. 2. Prayer. 3. Prudence. 4. Piety. 5. Painfulness. 6. Patience. 7. Perseverance...the very names would help the hearers=memory....
- V. Grasp not at more than you are able to hold, lest thereby you lose all. If there be more particulars than you can possibly remember, lay hold on some which most concern you, and let go the rest....
- VI. Writing is an easy help for memory...
- VII. Peruse what you remember, or write it down, when you come home; and fix it speedily before it is lost....Pray over it, and confer on it with others.

- VIII. If you forget the very words, yet remember the main drift....And then you have not lost the sermon, though you have lost the words; as he hath not lost his food, that hath digested it, and turned it into flesh and blood.

**Directions for Holy Resolutions and Affections in Hearing....**

- I. Remember that ministers are the messengers of Christ, and come to you on his business and in his name....
- II. Remember that God is instructing you, and warning you, and treating with you, about no less than the saving of your souls....
- III. Make it your work with diligence to apply the word as you are hearing it.... You have work to do as well as the preacher, and should all the while be as busy as he: as helpless as the infant is, he must suck when the mother offereth him the breast; if you must be fed, yet you must open your mouths, and digest it, for another cannot digest it for you.... Therefore be all the while at work, and abhor an idle heart in hearing, as well as an idle minister.
- IV. Chew the cud, and call up all when you come home in secret, and by meditation preach it over to yourselves....
- V. Go to Christ by faith, for the quickening of his Spirit....Entreat him to...open your hearts, and speak to you by his Spirit, that you may be taught of God, and your hearts may be his epistles, and the tables where the everlasting law is written....

**Directions to bring what we Hear into Practice.**

- I. Be acquainted with the failings of your hearts and lives, and come on purpose to get directions and helps against those particular failings...say when you go out of doors, I go to Christ for physic [medicine or treatment] for my own disease....
- II. When you come home, let conscience in secret...repeat the sermon to you. Between God and yourselves, consider what there was delivered to you in the Lord's message, that your souls were most concerned in.
- III. Hear the most practical preachers you can well get...that are still [constantly] urging you to holiness of heart and life, and driving home every truth to practice....
- IV. Associate yourselves with the most holy, serious, practical Christians.
- V. Keep a just account of your practice; examine yourselves in the end of every day and week...Call yourselves to account every hour, what you are doing and how you do it ...and your hearts must be watched and followed like unfaithful servants, and like loitering scholars [school-children], and driven on to every duty, like a dull or tired horse.
- VI. Above all set your hearts to the deepest contemplations of the wonderful love of God in Christ, and the sweetness and excellency of a holy life, and the...glory which it tendeth to, that your souls may be in love with your dear Redeemer, and all that is holy, and love and obedience may be as natural to you. And then the practice of holy doctrine will be easy to you, when it is your delight.