John 3:16 *How to Eat a Sermon: Knife and Fork: Questions to Ask*

***How to Stay Awake***

There is a strange little story in Acts chapter 20. It’s a story about preaching. And it’s not exactly an advertisement for how exciting listening to a sermon can be.

Last week I made reference to Paul’s second missionary journey. This story comes from Paul’s third missionary journey. And he is again in the city of Troas, which is where he received the dream that prompted him to travel from Asia to Europe. This time, he’s working his way backwards, from Europe back into Asia. Here’s the story, **Acts 20:7-12:**

**7**On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. **8**There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. **9**Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. **10**Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!” **11**Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. **12**The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

If you have ever struggled to stay awake during a sermon, then you can relate to poor young Eutychus. Here he is in a crowded, upstairs rooms. There a bunch of lamps in the room pulling the oxygen out of the air. It’s warm. It’s late. And Paul just keeps talking and talking.

In fact, Luke, who is the author of Acts and was an eyewitness to this story, doesn’t even try to disguise that the preacher is a big part of the problem. He says in verse 7 that Paul “kept on talking until midnight.” And verse 9 says “Paul talked on and on.”

It was a situation ripe for dozing off, and young Eutychus did exactly that. But, because of his precarious position on the open window sill, the consequences of Eutychus’s nap were disastrous. He nodded off, his body fell out to the ground, and he died. (The whole thing makes me want to pause and just say to those of you in balcony: “If you start to feel sleepy, make sure you are leaning backwards.”)

Now, I suppose there are several reasons this story is in the Bible. One is because this is what happened. The Bible is a faithful witness to historical events, and if somebody fell out of a window during an all-night preaching marathon, that’s probably noteworthy. A second reason is because there is a miracle involved. Verse 9 says Eutychus was dead. It’s possible that he was just knocked unconscious. But either way, Paul wrapped him in a bear hug and he made a miraculous recovery. That’s a big deal.

But another reason this story is here, I think, is to acknowledge that it can be hard to stay focused and attentive during a sermon. Any scenario that involves one person speaking—uninterrupted—for a long period of time while the audience sits in a prone position can be ripe for drifting off. If not actual sleep, we all know the ease with which our minds can wander and the daydreaming begin.

So, what is the prescription? How do we resist the temptation to distraction and drowsiness? We are in the midst of a series called *How to Eat a Sermon*, and I am attempting to give you practical skills to help you get the most out of the sermons you here. And the key, as I’ve said for the last couple of weeks, is to be an active listener. We need to think of listening as a skill which we can practice and improve at.

And the key to active listening is to ask questions.

I have referred several times already to Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren and their book: *How to Read a Book.* Here’s what they say about asking questions (I’ve substituted “listening” where they write about “reading”):

Ask questions while you [listen]—questions that you yourself must try to answer in the course of [listening]…[Listening to speech] on any level beyond the elementary is essentially an effort on your part to ask…questions (and to answer them to the best of your ability). That should never be forgotten. And that is why there is all the difference in the world between the demanding and the undemanding [listener]. The latter asks no questions—and gets no answers.

One of the best compliments I ever received as a preacher came from a new attendee who said to me: “Listening to one of your sermons is like having a conversation.” I took that as a compliment because she was saying that I was doing a good job of anticipating and answering her questions as they came up.

But it also said much about her listening skills. Because if my preaching felt like a conversation to her that meant she was engaged, asking questions of the sermon, and listening for the answers.

So today, I want to give you three questions that you ask during every sermon. These are like the utensils—the knife and fork--that listeners can use as they eat the sermon. There are three main questions, with three sub-questions under the third.

***What do I learn about myself?***

First, ask **“What do I learn about myself?”** That is, what does the Bible passage teach about mankind in relation to God?

As you listen to a sermon, you should be asking yourself: “What does this sermon say about the human condition that makes the answers of the Bible necessary?” Or, more simply, “What is the problem the sermon is seeking to answer?”

These questions get at the purpose for the sermon. This is the reason you should listen.

Bryan Chapell is an pastor and author of a book for preachers. He talks about something he calls the **Fallen-Condition Focus (FCF).** He says that because we live in a world that is fallen, and because we ourselves are fallen, the whole point of preaching is to address the consequences of that fallenness. Chapell writes:

The corrupted state of our world and our being cry for God’s aid. He responds with His Word, focusing on some facet of our need in every portion…*The FCF is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or for whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage.*

Frequently, the problem the sermon addresses will be a specific sin in our lives like greed or lust or anger. When we hear such messages, we must honestly assess our lives to see if such sin is present. For a sermon to be effective there can be no “ducking out of the way” so that the preacher’s words hit the people in the next pew back. Good listeners will take each message they hear to heart and be honest with themselves when their own sin is exposed.

In the story of the Last Supper, when Jesus predicted that one of his close disciples would betray Him, each one of them responded by asking: “Lord, is it I?” In the same manner, when we hear a sermon that talks about the problems of sin and rebellion in our world; instead of deciding that it describes someone else, we each should examine our own lives and ask: “Lord, is it I?”

But our sinfulness is not the only consequence of living in a fallen world. Issues like poverty and grief and parenting struggles are also needs that spring from our fallen condition which the scriptures address. Chapell writes: “An FCF need not be something for which we are culpable. It simply needs to be an aspect of the human condition that requires the instruction, admonition, and/or comfort of scripture.”

To give an example, let’s consider one of the most famous verses in the Bible, **John 3:16:**

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The Fallen Condition Focus of this verse is that we are at risk of perishing. A sermon based on this verse is most likely going to be about how we can avoid this horrible fate.

A more specific problem is addressed by a passage like **1 Peter 3:1** which says:

1Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives.

The consequence of living in a fallen world in this verse is that sometimes believers will be married to non-believers. The sermon on this passage is probably going to talk about maintaining both your marriage and your relationship with God when you and your spouse see things from a different spiritual perspective.

The **questions** for you to be asking are:

* What do I learn about myself?
* What does this sermon say about me or the world I live in?
* What is the problem this sermon is seeking to answer?

Often, you’ll find clues to the sermon’s purpose near the beginning. Sometimes it is spelled out right in the title, such as a sermon called “How Can I Maintain My Integrity when My Boss Has None?”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Other times, the preacher will use the introduction to frame the problem. This might be done through a current event, an illustration from a popular movie, a quote, a personal story or any of a myriad of other ways.

Still other ways to get at a sermon’s Fallen Condition Focus is by comparing the situation of the human author or original audience to our own situation today. Similarly, in narrative portions of scripture, you might draw parallels between the Biblical character and your own life.

When you find yourself responding to the preacher with thoughts like: “Yeah, I’ve wondered about that myself” or “I wish I knew how to deal with that problem;” you know you are on your way to understanding what the sermon has to say about you.

And so, as you listen to a sermon--or as you study any other passages of Scripture--it is a good idea to ask what the passage is telling you about yourself in relation to God. What is the need that the sermon exposes in the human condition that cries out for God’s help?

***What do I learn about God?***

The second question to ask is **What do I learn about God?** This question springs from a fundamental belief that God is the main character in the Bible and thus every passage tells us something about Him.

As you listen to the sermon, you should be asking: “What is the sermon teaching about the nature and character and actions of God?” Or, more simply, “How is God answering the problem of this sermon?”

These questions get at the grace of the sermon. This is how God meets our need.

If every scripture passage is seeking to address a problem, every sermon should look to God’s grace as the answer to that problem.

Returning to **John 3:16**, then, we see that if our Fallen Condition Focus is that we are destined to perish, then the important thing we learn about God is that He so loved us that He gave His one and only Son in order to prevent that from happening. God’s grace is evident in the gift of His Son.

Similarly, as you listen to a sermon on David and Goliath you are likely to encounter **David’s declaration to Goliath:**

45…”You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. 46This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. Today… the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.” (1 Samuel 17:45-46)

These verses remind us that the main point of this story is not David’s bravery, but God’s desire to be recognized as the one and only God. David conquers because he is zealous for God’s glory.

Every time you listen to a sermon **you should be asking**:

* What do I learn about God?
* How is God the hero in this sermon?
* What has He done, or promised, or taught that brings His grace into my life?

Asking these questions helps us avoid the very un-Christian notion that if we just try harder we can fix ourselves. **Ephesians 2:8-9** reminds us:

8For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—9not by works, so that no one can boast.

Any time we leave a sermon thinking we can make a difference in our lives or the world without the grace of God we are contradicting these verses and our faith is essentially sub-Christian.

***What Should I Do?***

The third question to ask is **“What should I Do?”** What sort of response does the Bible passage, and the sermon, call for form us? This is the question of application.

As you listen to the sermon you should be asking: “What claims is God making on my life in this message?” Or, more simply, “How is my life going to be different?”

These questions get at the “so what?” of the sermon. This is how God wants us to respond.

While it is important to remember that God’s grace is the only hope any of us have of overcoming the fallen nature of the world, that does not mean that we only sit passively and wait for God to change things. God’s Word has a purpose. He has spoken for a reason and He expects us to respond to His words.

**James 1:22** says:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Then James compares a person who listens to the word but does not do it to a person who looks in a mirror only to immediately forget what he or she looks like. James argument is that God’s perfect law, when it is truly heard, can’t help but change us. And so he challenges us to keep a tight rein on our tongues, to look after orphans and widows, and keep ourselves from being polluted by the world.

When I was a first year seminary student learning to preach my professor, Dr. Michael Bullmore, would tell us repeatedly: "The Bible is not just informative speech, it is persuasive speech." He encouraged us to find ways to apply what we were preaching to the lives of our listeners.

Likewise, Chapell tells new preachers that if they can’t answer the question “So what? What do you want me to do?” they have not preached. Chapell writes: “Biblical preaching moves from doctrinal exposition to life instruction…preaching without application may serve the mind, but preaching with application requires service to Christ.”

A certain measure of application is done by the preacher. One of the common compliments people have for a preacher they enjoy listening to is that he or she is practical and shows how the text affects people's lives. When I preach I frequently give challenges and suggestions for things people can do in response to the sermon. But when I do that I can only give examples of things people might do. I can't give specific application to every person. I can only be general and suggestive.

And so, it is the job of the person listening to the sermon to ask: "What does God want me to do based upon this passage?" It is important that people are actively engaging their own lives and seeking to find ways God might be asking them to respond to His Word. Throughout the message you should be echoing the question the crowds asked Peter at Pentecost: "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

So here is my group of sub-questions. Under the question: What shall I do? I find it helpful to think in terms Head, Heart, and Hands. I believe every Christian sermon will call us to make changes in one or more of these categories.

***Head***

Some sermons call us to make a **change in our thinking**. When we hold false ideas about God or the world it will point our lives in the wrong direction. Sometimes scripture intends to renew our minds (Romans 12:2).

Returning to our sample text in **John 3:16,** we see that a sermon on this verse is likely to apply to our heads:

16For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Clearly, the weight of this passage is calling us to believe in Jesus. It calls for a change in thinking about who God is and what He has done for us.

In order to determine the “head” application of a sermon ask questions like:

* Does this sermon change my understanding of God?
* Does this sermon challenge popular opinion on this subject?
* What do I now believe because of this sermon?

***Heart***

Some sermons **appeal to our emotions.** Sometimes the point of a sermon is for us to have courage, or hope, or peace.

Several weeks ago I mentioned that **Isaiah 6** is not the kind of passage that lends itself to action steps. When Isaiah saw God seated on His throne with the train of His robe filling the temple while the doorposts shook and angels called to each other “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty”, the feeling is an overwhelming sense of awe. The point of a sermon on this passage will not necessarily be that we should go home and do something, but that we would trust and revere such a magnificent God.

John Piper tells the story of a day when he preached on this passage as a young father sat in the front row. This man had just learned his child had a serious illness. Piper knew nothing of this young man’s situation and nothing he said directly applied to the man’s current needs. Rather, Piper sought to present a God-exalting view of God’s holiness. And yet, when the sermon was over this young father sought Piper out and told him it was exactly what he needed to hear in that situation, because it filled him with confidence in God’s sovereignty despite his trying circumstances.

In order to determine the “heart” application of a sermon ask questions like:

* Does this sermon call me to trust God more?
* Does this sermon make me feel more love or fear or respect (etc.) for God?
* How do I feel differently because of this sermon?

***Hands***

Some sermons call us to **take direct action.** Sometimes, as when Jesus urged the rich young ruler to go give everything to the poor (Matthew 19:21), we just have to do something.

Consider **Ephesians 6:4**, which says:

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

A sermon on this passage might inspire young parents to institute a pattern of Bible reading at bed time to go along with family devotions at the supper table. A father of teenagers might be moved by the same sermon to apologize to his children for losing his temper with them. While the same sermon might also challenge a young woman with no children of her own to call her parents and thank them for the godly example they set for her life. In each case, the application results in a definite action on the part of the listener.

In order to determine the “hands” application of a sermon **ask questions like**:

* What new habits should I develop because of this sermon?
* What things should I remove from my life because of this sermon?
* What should I do as a direct result of hearing this message?

***Our Only Comfort***

I am a preacher in the Reformed Church of America. One of our standard documents is the Heidelberg Catechism, a nearly 500 year old document that begins by asking: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The answer: “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful servant Jesus Christ.”

The second question then asks: “What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?” The answer is:

Three things:

first, how great my sin and misery are;

second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery;

third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.

This answer serves as a sort of table of contents for the rest of the Catechism, which is divided into three sections which every Catechism student knows by the mnemonics “Guilt, Grace, Gratitude” or “Sin, Salvation, Service.”

This outline can also serve as a helpful guide for the three questions I am urging you to ask whenever you listen to a sermon:

What do I learn about myself? (How great my sin and misery are.)

What do I learn about God? (How I am set free.)

What should I do? (How I am to thank God.)

Together, these three questions form an outline for the gospel. In every sermon we listen to we should be on the lookout for the contours of this gospel.

1. Ibid, p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)