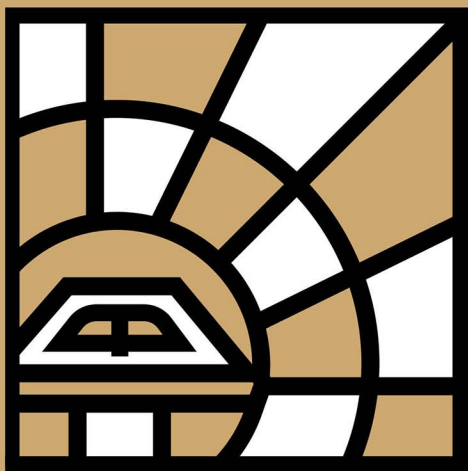


IX 9Marks

How Do I Get the Most from My Pastor's Sermons?



**Gunner
Gundersen**

Church Questions

Endorsements for the Church Questions Series

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These minibooks are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

“Where can we Christians find reliable answers to our common questions about life together at church—without having to plow through long, expensive books? The Church Questions booklets meet our need with answers that are biblical, thoughtful, and practical. For pastors, this series will prove a trustworthy resource for guiding church members toward deeper wisdom and stronger unity.”

Ray Ortlund, President, Renewal Ministries

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Take care then how you hear.

Luke 8:18



Preaching is hard work, and it takes practice—studying, preparing, praying, outlining, illustrating, delivering. It's a holy calling and a sacred art with eternal ramifications. For these reasons, there are many books about preaching.

But listening is also hard work, and it takes practice—praying, preparing, focusing, believing, obeying, responding. Listening is also a holy calling and a sacred act with eternal ramifications. Yet there are so few books about listening.

This is especially strange since there are far more people hearing sermons than preaching them.

The goal of this book is to help you listen to sermons. Not just any sermons but your pastor's sermons. As we'll see, hearing God's word preached is a privilege, and hearing his word from a pastor who loves you, prays for you, and prepared for you is a special expression of God's love for you.

Yet we don't just want to hear God's word preached; we want to get the most from it. My hope is to help you do just that.¹

Heed the Call to Hear

We tend to assume that preaching is active, requiring heart, grace, effort, and skill, while listening is passive, requiring little besides showing up and staying awake. Isn't the preacher the pilot doing all the work while we passengers just stay in our seats until landing?

Yet the Bible communicates that hearing is an urgent responsibility. As Moses delivers God's commandments to the Israelites, he calls, "*Hear, O Israel*" (Deut. 6:4). Jesus urges, "Take care then how you *hear*, for to the one who has,

more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away” (Luke 8:18).

As a Christian, I’ve heard sermons nearly every week since 1998. When I was a pastor, I preached nearly every week for seven years. Whenever I’m a listener, I hope for good preaching. Whenever I’m privileged to preach, I pray for good listeners. God wants his church filled with both.

In baseball, two basic acts are performed in every game: throwing and catching.² There are other important actions, but over and over, one player throws the ball, and a teammate catches it. Without throwing, there is no game; without catching, there is no game. Preaching and hearing are the throwing and catching of gathered worship. But this is no game. As Moses said, God’s word is “your very life” (Deut. 32:47). Preachers around the world can deliver God’s word week by week, but his word must be caught—not with the hands but with the heart.

Sometimes in biblical history God’s word arrived with awesome intensity. When Israel

camped at Mount Sinai, God descended in fire and storm. Moses climbed up to meet him, and angels helped deliver the divine law (Ex. 19; Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2). Moses returned with two stone slabs, engraved by the very finger of God (Ex. 31:18). When God spoke from Sinai, his delivery was potent and urgent.

At other times God's word arrived with surprising normalcy. Amos said, "I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' Now therefore hear the word of the LORD" (Amos 7:14–16). Though Amos spoke with far less grandeur, God's message still held eternal weight.

Even when God speaks without special effects today, we should listen. In Luke 16:19–31, Jesus tells a story about a man who goes to Hades. In agony, he pleads with Abraham to send a resurrected man to warn his five brothers to repent. He assumes that seeing a miracle will change their hearts—surely his loved ones

will listen. But Abraham says that if they won't honor "Moses and the Prophets"—the written Scriptures they already have—then no special messenger will awaken them.

With God's help, we must learn to hear the urgency of Scripture through the normalcy of preaching. His preached word is a key means of grace to save sinners, comfort sufferers, and sanctify his people. Each time Scripture is preached in our presence, God is lavishing his grace on us, working despite our weakness. Over time we may grow familiar with the structure of a service and the process of preaching. Yet these sacred words that point us to Christ are always a precious gift. They are a lighthouse over dark seas. They are always urgent, whether they come with thunder or a whisper. Therefore we must heed the call to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard" (Heb. 2:1).

After all, wind can blow with profound force, but it must be caught and harnessed for its energy to achieve its potential. As the wind loves a mast of sails, the Spirit loves a room of souls, unfurled and ready, billowing out in obedient faith.

Treasure the Word

We find a poignant example of this readiness among the Kimyal tribe in West Papua, Indonesia. Surrounded by his village, a pastor named Siud once prayed,

O God, . . . the plan which you had from the beginning, regarding your Kimyals, . . . the month that you had set, the day that you had set, has come to pass today. O my Father, . . . the promise that you gave Simeon that he would see Jesus Christ and hold him in his arms before he died—I also have been waiting under that same promise, O God. You looked at all the different languages and chose which ones will be put into your word. You thought that we should see your word in our language. Today, the day you had chosen for this to be fulfilled, has come to pass. . . . Today, you have placed your word into my hands. . . . You have placed it here in our land.³

Pastor Siud, the converted son of a shaman, prayed this emotional prayer beside a small plane while holding a newly delivered parcel containing the first copies of the New Testament in his language. The work had begun in 1963, when Siud was just a boy. Halted by missionary deaths, the project was later resumed and finally completed—in 2010.

In the West, access to Scripture is the norm. Bibles are everywhere, in dozens of translations. When my family moved cross-country in 2010—just months after Siud held his first Kimyal New Testament—I had to off-load extra English Bibles accumulated over the years. While my unused Bibles were getting in the way, the Kimyals were weeping over theirs. Having the truth at our fingertips is a forgotten privilege.

So is hearing the truth preached.

Another pastor, Richard Wurmbrand, spent fourteen years in Romanian prisons. He later wrote *Tortured for Christ* to encourage the persecuted church and awaken the “free church.” In prison, the price of preaching was severe. But

it never outweighed the privilege. Wurmbrand recounted,

It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners, as it is in captive nations today. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their terms. It was a deal: we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching; they were happy beating us—so everyone was happy.⁴

If Scripture is such a treasure and preaching such a privilege, then hearing Scripture preached must be priceless. Jesus told his disciples that “many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matt. 13:17).

God’s word is holy, sacred, pure, and unique. Moses said that it’s “your very life” (Deut. 32:47). David said that the Scriptures are sweeter than

honey and better than gold (Ps. 19:10). Satan knew that the way to upend the world was to twist God's word, and Jesus knew that the way to defeat him was to uphold it (Gen. 3:1; Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). In a world of lies, "the words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Ps. 12:6).

Not a single word of God's promises failed in Joshua's day (Josh. 21:45). Jesus said that even the tiniest marks in the Hebrew Scriptures would come to pass—like the dot of an *i* or the cross of a *t* (Matt. 5:18). So pure are God's promises that John warned that adding to or subtracting from the final prophecy God had given him would have eternal consequences (Rev. 22:18–19).

Getting the most from your pastor's sermons begins with treasuring God and his word. Where Christ is valued, preaching will be prized. Where Scripture is held sacred, sermons will be sought. When we revere God's word and remember the privilege we have in hearing it preached, we will listen afresh.