

How to be an Expository Listener

Expository preaching is a method of preaching that draws its central focus from the text of Scripture itself. This approach prioritizes letting the text of the Bible speak for itself, systematically unpacking its meaning, context, and application. Expository preaching is more than a style; it's a commitment to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. But for it to have its fullest effect, the listener must also actively engage with the message, not as a passive consumer but as a participant whose mind and heart are open to God's truth.

This article will explore what expository preaching is, why it's biblically important, and how the role of the listener can transform the preaching event from a simple "hearing" to a profound act of worship that glorifies God.

What is Expository Preaching?

In expository preaching, the preacher's goal is to "expose" the meaning of the biblical text, staying true to its context and its intent. This often means working through books of the Bible, verse by verse, and explaining the original meaning as intended by God. The preacher is committed to revealing not personal ideas or culturally-driven interpretations, but the clear teaching of Scripture, aiming to declare "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Characteristics of Expository Preaching:

1. **Text-Centered:** The primary source of authority is the Bible. The preacher draws from the text rather than adding to it.
2. **Contextual Faithfulness:** The meaning of a verse or passage is explained within its surrounding context, taking into account historical, cultural, and linguistic factors.
3. **Application Focused:** While grounded in the ancient text, expository preaching applies its eternal truths to the modern-day listener.

Expository preaching is necessary because it aligns with the biblical mandate for faithful teaching and preserves the truth from distortion. Scripture is the Word of God, divinely inspired and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Expository preaching acknowledges this truth by proclaiming God's Word clearly and reverently, allowing it to do its transformative work in the hearts of listeners.

The Role of the Listener in Expository Preaching

The listener in an expository sermon is not a passive spectator but an active participant. God's Word, when faithfully preached, is intended to engage the mind, stir the heart, and lead to change. Jesus Himself frequently called people to "hear" His words with understanding and respond. James also emphasizes, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). To be an effective expository listener is to approach the preached Word with reverence, readiness, and a spirit of obedience.

Why Listening is an Active Role

Expository listening requires preparation, attentiveness, and a commitment to apply what is heard. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that "the word of God is living and active," implying that the preaching of Scripture is meant to engage and transform the listener. By listening actively, we honor God's intent for His Word, which is to penetrate our hearts and minds and accomplish His purposes (Isaiah 55:11).

The stakes are high. To be an indifferent or passive listener is to miss the very purpose of the preached Word. Jesus often ended His parables by saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15), signaling that hearing isn't enough; understanding and responding are required.

Practical Steps to Be an Expository Listener

Below are practical steps that can help listeners engage deeply and meaningfully in an expository sermon, making the listening experience impactful and glorifying to God.

1. Prepare Your Heart Before the Sermon

Prepare for the sermon before you arrive at church. Pray for a heart that is teachable and open to correction. Psalm 139:23-24 is an excellent prayer for this: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” This prepares you to listen without defensiveness, expecting God to speak to you.

2. Approach with a Berean Mindset

Acts 17:11 speaks of the Bereans, who “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” The Bereans were neither cynical nor gullible; they listened with open hearts and tested what they heard against Scripture. Like them, come to each sermon with eagerness to learn and readiness to confirm the teaching in your Bible.

3. Listen with Expectation and Reverence

Approach the preaching moment as an encounter with God’s Word, where God Himself speaks through His appointed messenger. Scripture commands us to listen with reverence: “Take care then how you hear” (Luke 8:18). Ask yourself before the sermon, “What does God want to teach, correct, or encourage me in today?”

4. Take Notes or Journal Thoughts

Taking notes can be an effective way to retain and reflect on what you’re hearing. It forces you to listen actively and organize your thoughts. After the sermon, review your notes and reflect on the key points. Highlight verses or applications that particularly stood out to you, and consider discussing these with fellow believers to reinforce and apply what you’ve learned.

5. Engage in Reflection and Self-Examination

James 1:23-24 compares a hearer of the Word who does not act on it to someone who looks in a mirror and forgets their appearance. Reflect on how the sermon applies to your own life. Ask yourself questions like:

- What sin, habit, or thought pattern is God calling me to change?
- How does this truth affect my view of God, myself, or others?
- What practical steps can I take this week in response to this message?

This reflection is the turning point from simply hearing the Word to actually doing the Word.

6. Pray Through the Message

After listening to the sermon, pray through what you heard. Thank God for the truths He revealed, and ask for His help to apply them. For example, if the sermon was on humility, pray for a humble heart and strength to walk in humility throughout the week. Prayer cements the sermon’s truths into our hearts and acknowledges our dependence on God to live out His commands.

7. Discuss and Apply in Community

Hebrews 10:24-25 reminds us to encourage one another and stir each other to good works. Discussing the sermon with fellow believers reinforces its lessons and can offer insights you may have missed. This is often practiced in small group Bible studies or fellowship discussions, but it can be as simple as having a conversation after church. Share what impacted you and listen to how others were affected by the message.

8. Follow Through with Obedience

The ultimate test of expository listening is obedience. Jesus said, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17). Commit to taking concrete action based on what you’ve learned. This might be confessing a sin, adopting a new spiritual habit, or reaching out to someone with the gospel. Obedience seals the message in your heart and brings glory to God.

Listening as an Act of Worship

To be an expository listener is to view the sermon as an active, worshipful encounter with God’s Word. It’s a discipline that honors the preaching of Scripture and glorifies God by making His Word the foundation for life change.

Approach each sermon with a heart that says, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:9). When the people of Israel gathered to hear the law read by Ezra, they stood, listened attentively, and responded in worship and repentance (Nehemiah 8:5-6). Similarly, expository listeners should come to the sermon with a sense of expectancy and a desire to see God glorified in their response. May our listening not only transform us but lead to lives that reflect His truth to the world.

