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# How to Listen to a Sermon

## Various

*Devon Berry*

**Introduction** Before we get going today, I realized I omitted one obvious word of instruction to you last week at the end of the message. If you are interested in becoming a member at Clearcreek Chapel – and if you are planning on sticking around, *you should be* – to get that process started requires contacting the church office and requesting and application for membership. Better yet, begin by seeking out an elder and discussing membership with them.

As many of you know, I am a researcher. The type of research I do often involves surveys – asking groups of people questions about certain aspects of their lives. Those certain aspects that I am most interested in as a researcher have a lot to do with a person’s religious practices, beliefs, and attitudes. But because I work in a secular setting, it is not often that I get to ask the question in just the way I’d like to. For example, instead of asking about “God,” I’m often required to ask about a “higher power” or “that which is transcendent.” This is a far cry from the way the Bible puts things. This morning, however, I have the good fortune of being able to wear both hats, researcher and pastor, even if for just a moment. I’m going to conduct a quick survey asking the questions just the way I’d like to.

How transparent do you feel today? Should we do this with eyes open or eyes closed? I think kindness to our guests would recommend that we conduct an anonymous survey. We are going to be using a clever response system today, developed by me in my academic ivory tower. It is called the digit-response method. I’m going to ask you a series of statements. If you strongly agree, indicate this by raising all five of your fingers into the air. If you strongly disagree, indicate this by raising one finger into the air. If you are somewhere in between, please indicate this by raising two, three, or four fingers into the air. Let’s begin with a practice statement: The Ohio State Buckeyes will lose to the University of Michigan Wolverines this fall.

Okay, now that we’re warmed up, let’s move to some more important questions. Let’s have everyone close their eyes.:

1. In general, after hearing the preaching on a Sunday mornings, I feel hopeful and emboldened – my soul is revived.
2. In general, as a result of hearing the Word of God taught over time, I feel better prepared to handle life skillfully – I’m wiser.
3. When I hear Bible truth clearly stated, proclaimed, or made much of, I spontaneously experience joy toward God – my heart rejoices.
4. I understand the world better with God’s Word than without – my eyes are enlightened.
5. I really can’t think of anything I want more than to know God through his Word – I desire the Word more than wealth, more than tasty food.
6. Obeying Bible teaching keeps me from being foolish and brings me many good things – honoring God’s words in my life warns me and rewards me.

The survey is complete, you may open your eyes. What you just participated in was Psalm 19:7-11 presented to you as a lens through which to evaluate your own response in life to the Word. In Psalm 19, David accurately records what God says the Word will do in the life of his children. So, how were your scores? Fives all the way through? Ones? Or Somewhere in between? Can you, like David – a sinner like you or me – speak from experience the words of Psalm 19: 7-11. Listen closely.

*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

If Psalm 19:7-11 does not resonate in your deepest parts, I would like to suggest that your difficulty lie in one of several places: You do not anticipate the Word, you do not prepare for the Word, you are not serious about the word, you are not growing in your understanding of the word, or you do not comprehend what truly lies central to all the Word. Be clear-minded: The Word is a primary means of grace in the believers life – it is enablement for godly living and glory giving. Preaching (and teaching) are primary means for receiving the Word, and therefore grace. How you respond to preaching is one of the most important indicators of the health of the soul. We'll walk through each of these "places" together this morning as we consider how to listen to a sermon.

## **With Anticipation**

First, in response to this question, we should recognize that we are to come to the preaching of the Word with anticipation. I do not speak of the cheaper anticipation that we get from getting ready to go to a nice dinner, a movie we really want to see, or even on a big vacation – this is entirely different. What we are talking about is a deep-seated anticipation that is not characterized by events, but rather by a disposition, an attitude, by an intimate knowledge – In Psalm 119:129-136, the author says it like this:

*Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your word gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant because I long for your commandments. Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your way with those who love your name. Keep steady my steps according to your promise and let no iniquity get dominion over me. Redeem me from man's oppression, that I may keep your precepts. Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes. My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.*

The Psalmist's regard for the Word is evidenced across the whole of life, in every emotion, dimension, event, or temptation. So here is a pastoral question that I hope is on some of your minds at this very moment: How do I come to want the Word like that? I think that

Scripture gives us several answers to this question, but I want to point you to one that seems to be written all over Psalm 119.

Verse 140 of this chapter captures it very succinctly: *Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it*. Oh, what an insight! What a jewel. In living out God's promises, the Psalmist comes to love them. In this verse, an obedience that looks like trusting God's promises is hinged with love of God's Word.

What does this look like? It looks like Genesis 12, Abram leaving his homeland for a largely unrevealed adventure on the word of God's promise. It looks like 1 Samuel 17, David, for love of God's glory and righteous indignation, **running** full on at the giant Goliath to slay him. It looks like Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, letting the king know that "we have no need to answer you in this matter..."<sup>1</sup> live or die, rescued or left to burn, we will not bow down. It looks like Acts 7, Stephen proclaiming Christ as the fulfillment of all God's plans and then laying the betrayal and murder of Christ at the Jews feet – even as they rushed at him, even as the stones smashed into the side of his skull. It looks like Acts 26, Paul, in chains, before King Agrippa giving witness to the transforming power of the gospel while Festus accuses him of madness. These all were those who had tried God's promises and declared by their lives, that they loved them.

I love my wife. Why? In part because she is well tried. I have lived life with her for nine years and I have repeatedly watched her faithfully conduct herself in all of her life's affairs. This endears her to me. What would happen if you got married and then attempted to live your life apart from your spouse... what do you think trust would look like after a couple of months, if not days? Yet many persons who profess, take this route. They never try or trust God's promises. Life goes on as it always has. Married to Christ, but apparently living separated lives.

If you struggle to anticipate the preaching of Scripture, the reading and hearing of God's Word, let me suggest that one reason **may be** is that you have never truly lived as if his Words are true! Trusting in his promises will deeply shape your life and radically, yet often gradually, change you. Truth transforms. Where no transformation is present, then there is no Truth.

Perhaps it has all been intellectual assent for you. You simply **say** to yourself, "I believe that is true." What is this like? This is like saying you trust a bridge you have never crossed. Or saying you trust your teen but making them come home every Friday night at 8:00 pm. It is no wonder that Sunday preaching is ho hum for you – it's like reading a travel magazine, no matter how great the article is, how attractive the pictures are, after awhile, you realize that it is just ink and paper, a subscription you paid for, and somewhere you'll probably never go anyway... ho hum... I think I'll mentally start the laundry, mow the lawn, do my homework, daydream...

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 3:16

Over the past several months I have been challenging my flock from the book of Hebrews – let me take you there to make a final survey of how people live who anticipate and believe God’s promises. Turn with me to:

*Hebrews 10:32-34, 11:6, 11:24-26, 11:35b, 12:1-2, Hebrews 13:12-13*

Here you see people, you see your very own Christ, banking on the promises of God. Trusting them, trying them, living them. What do you think a Sunday morning sermon sounded like to these people – like the sweetest music ever known? What do you think a Sunday evening message tasted like to these people – like desperately needed food for the starved and drink for the parched? Life and death were in the balance and they trusted God for every last breath. Where had they learned to trust his promises this way, to look to the reward this way, to take risk this way? It was outside the camp. Outside the safety of the city gates. But few of us know this type of hunger for his promises. Why? Because we are stuffed grotesquely full of this world, living like our kingdoms are here on Earth, content to remain in the city where comfort, safety, and security reign. Risky obedience is the farthest thing from our mind, living in a way that requires trust in his word is rarely on the radar. *We have not tried his promises. Therefore, we do not love his promises.*

How to begin to change this? Ask yourself this question, what act of obedience today would require risk and/or sacrifice of comfort, security, treasure, or safety? For some of you, it would simply be initiating intimacy with your spouse in the bedroom. For others of you it would be giving money to the church to the extent that you were required to *give up* some comfort or luxury. For others it would be throwing your computer out the second floor window of your home, allowing all the images of pornography to smash on the sidewalk below. For some it might simply be walking away from the off-color joke being told around a locker or water cooler. For some it might be going to a parent and asking for forgiveness for sinful attitudes and behaviors. For others it might be initiating a conversation of spiritual in nature with your child... What is it for you? Beloved, do not delay entering into this life of trusting his promises, leaving the camp, abandoning the city gates. This is not about being a better Christian, oh no! This is about finding Christ – it is where he is, outside the camp. Go there. Live in a way that clearly demonstrates that you trust his words. Do this, and believe me, you will begin to hear sermons in ways you have never heard them before – and you will shout, *“Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it.”*

## **With Preparation**

In addition to coming with anticipation, we must come to a sermon prepared. Coming to the hearing of the Word prepared is both a matter of our hearts and our behaviors. I think the example of the Bereans in Acts 17 is helpful. Verse 11 says, *“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”* We can note from earlier in the chapter what exactly it was the Bereans were responding to – verses 2-3 tell us that Paul’s pattern was to reason with his hearers from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that Jesus was the Christ. What made the Jews in Berea more noble than the Jews in Thessalo-

nica? Well for one, they did not run Paul out of town, and secondly, they took Paul's preaching seriously enough to go to the Word to test it. The text here implies that there was an interactive nature between three entities: The preacher, the hearers, and the Word. Note this cycle: Paul, from the Word, delivers words. The Bereans, from Paul's words, go to the Word. The Word cycles from God, through the preacher, to the people, back to the Word, and this, verse 12 tells us, produced belief in the God of the Word. An important thing to note is that this happened daily – suggesting a regular interaction between preaching, personal study, and the Word. The Bereans eagerly *prepared* by paralleling their own Bible reading and study with Paul's preaching. So a good preparation for the public preaching of the Word is the private consumption of the Word. It will be the seasoning that brings out the flavor – salt on your French fries, if you will.

Pastor Russ put a book in my hands at our last elders meeting, several days before I began this series. It is entitled, *What is a Healthy Church Member?* by Thabiti Anyabwile<sup>2</sup>. This is always a bit of a discouraging occasion, because the thought that immediately comes to my self-focused mind is, "Oh great, now I'm going to find out everything I should have said, four days before this series begins." The temptation is to not even open the book. But I did, and am happy that I did. Mr. Anyabwile introduced me to the idea of *expositional listening*. Now you know that we are all about expositional preaching at the Chapel, but let me introduce you to the idea of expositional listening with an extended quote from this book:

*...expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the main point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture. If churches are to be healthy, the pastors and teachers must be committed to discovering the meaning of Scripture and allowing that meaning to drive the agenda with their congregations... so too should the Christians' listening agenda be driven by the meaning of Scripture. When we listen to the preaching of the Word, we should not listen primarily for "practical how-to advice," though Scripture teaches us much about everyday matters... Rather, as members of Christian churches we should listen primarily for the voice and message of God as revealed in his Word... Expositional listening is listening for the meaning of a passage of Scripture and accepting that meaning as the main idea to be grasped for our personal and corporate lives as Christians.*

I put this idea on under the "Preparation" heading in this sermon, because the recommendations given to *hear* a sermon expositionally, fall largely into preparatory activities. Consider these things:

1. Meditate on the sermon passage during your private reading and study.
2. Invest in a good set of commentaries (see your Elder for suggestions).
3. Talk and pray with friends about the sermon after church (the quiet flock).
4. Listen to and act on the sermon throughout the week (family application).
5. Develop the habit of addressing any questions about the text itself (flock).

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<sup>2</sup> Anyabwile, T. (2008). *What is a Health Church Member?* Crossway Books. Wheaton, IL.

6. Cultivate humility, avoid being a professional sermon listener, which is a potential hazard in a teaching church.<sup>3</sup>

A few practical words that will further enable us in our preparation. First, pay mind to what you do on Saturday night. Avoid activities and schedules that will make you little more than the living dead on Sunday morning. Youth, for those of you who profess, a mark of your maturity will be your deciding that you are home by a time on Saturday night that allows you to get more than enough sleep to be awake on Sunday morning. This is not the kind of rule your parent should have to make for you – you should be doing this without prompting as a way of honoring the Word in your life. Couples who are dating, hold each other accountable to this kind of practice. It is kind and God-honoring to send your significant other home at a decent hour on Saturday night. Second, do as much preparation on Saturday for Sunday morning as possible so that distractions and upsets are limited as much as possible. And third, examine your heart closely Saturday night or early Sunday morning. If there is even a hint of reticence to going to join God's people for worship, repent to God and ask for grace to change your desires. If we are honest, I bet there is a lot of work we could do, including myself, in making practical preparations for Sundays – help each other in this.

## **With Seriousness**

Next, we should listen to a sermon with seriousness. I do not mean sober Norwegian stoicness, but rather a willful intent to be 100% mentally and emotionally available to the preaching. That takes concentration and willful intensity. It is easy to look across the auditorium and see youth goofing off or talking when they should be listening and criticize them in our hearts. I suspect, however, that often the only difference between them and you is that they are not sophisticated enough to mask the fact that they are completely distracted. Whereas you, look tuned in, but are a million miles away. In the end, there is no difference except perhaps you do not distract your neighbor. But why should we listen to a sermon with seriousness?

### **Because it is God Speaking**

We must be clear minded and biblical about what is happening when preaching occurs. Biblical preaching involves a man, the Word of God, and the work of God. Consider first the Word of God. Preaching always hovers over the Word of God. By God's words all of creation has come into existence.<sup>4</sup> By God's words skeletons in the Valley of Dry Bones were given sinew, flesh, skin, and then breath.<sup>5</sup> By God's words came the living Word into the world and dwelt among us.<sup>6</sup> And God has ordained the Scriptures to be those means by which he would communicate with us.<sup>7</sup> Tickets to hear Sarah Palin or Barack

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:8, Colossians 2:18

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:1, Hebrews 11:3

<sup>5</sup> Ezekial 37

<sup>6</sup> John 1

<sup>7</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Obama speak right now are pretty hot items... try to imagine getting tickets to hear God speak. Would that not be utterly and absolutely amazing? Well guess what? Your ticket has already been punched this morning. We are sitting under His Word.

Consider second the work of God. This point is quite simple – God works through his words. This is of course most clearly seen in the incarnation. John 1 tells us that Christ is God's word. The ultimate work, the cross-work, was done through Christ, God's word. But God continues to work through his word, consider these truths:

*Psalm 1:2-3 ...but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does he prospers.*

*Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

*John 17:17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.<sup>8</sup>*

In these verses we see the word strengthening, maturing, prospering, convicting, judging, and transforming. Most gloriously, however, we see the Word, through preaching, functioning as the vehicle for the gospel itself:

*Romans 10:13-14 For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*

*1 Peter 1:23 ...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God... and this word is the good news was preached to you.*

Consider thirdly the man. In 1 Timothy 4, Paul gives Timothy a very solemn and sober charge:

*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season...*

It is through imperfect, yet godly, men that God has chosen to deliver his word through preaching. He does not do it through nature (though something can be learned of God by nature), he does not do it through introspection, he does not do it through other religions, and he does not do it through politicians. So we see that it is through preaching that we hear God's word, are saved, and are transformed. God has chosen to use words to do his

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<sup>8</sup> see John Piper's sermon *The Place of Preaching in Worship*  
([http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/sermons/bydate/1998/1029\\_The\\_Place\\_of\\_Preaching\\_in\\_Worship/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/sermons/bydate/1998/1029_The_Place_of_Preaching_in_Worship/))

work and he has chosen men to work through his word. May we pay a high and holy attention to preaching.

### **Because His Word is Our Food**

Briefly, and related to the above, we must come to the sermon with seriousness because it is our food, our nutrition. As we have just seen, God uses his word to save and transform us. His word, Peter tells us<sup>9</sup>, is spiritual milk by which we grow up into salvation. Christ, quoting Moses, tells Satan that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God<sup>10</sup>. Through his word, God feeds his people. This is why it is so mind boggling and hard to understand where the other half of you are on Sunday nights or at flocks. Given all that the Bible teaches about preaching and the Word, what could you possibly be thinking? It is one thing to occasionally forget to come to the dinner table, or to be kept from it by circumstances, but to systematically choose not to come to the table... It leads to malnourishment. Every Sunday you draw a line right down the middle of your plate, you walk over to the trash, and scrape ½ of the meal into it. On Wednesdays you pick up your dessert bowl and totally empty it into the disposal. You think, perhaps, that can fill up the other half of the plate with personal study, devotions, or quiet times, or a radio program. Beloved, you cannot. Scripture is relatively quiet on such practices. But on preaching, the case is clear and strong. Neglect preaching and neglect your soul. *I know that some are kept from services for legitimate reasons which are out of their control*, but I doubt that is the case for most. I beseech you, change your ways for the good of this people and for the good of your own selves. Give the Word its rightful place. As I have often said, there is no better place you could be than here, under the preaching of the Word.

I want you to hear my admonition correctly. It is not, “You’re going to sit here until that plate is clean!” It is rather, “mmm, ahhh, this is absolutely scrumptious! hey, you’re looking a little thin and gaunt, your ribs are showing, pull a chair up, there’s plenty and you can’t hardly live without food like this!”

### **Because His Word Warns Us**

Lastly, we must come to preaching with seriousness because by his word we are warned. You’ll remember last Sunday evening that Pastor Russ reminded us that the book of Hebrews itself is a sermon and it certainly contains some very serious warnings. Psalm 19:11 tells us that God’s servant is warned by his word and the Proverbs are full of practical warnings for life. Further, in Colossians 1:24-29, Paul makes it clear that “warning” is akin to teaching and is part of *proclaiming Christ*. Whether it is warning against sin and foolishness or warning against turning away from the gospel, preaching and teaching functions as the dummy light on the dashboard. However, don’t fool yourself, you will not see the dummy light unless you are actually in the car, that is, in earshot of preaching.

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 2:2

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:2-3



## With Growing Understanding

So we must listen to a sermon with anticipation, with preparation, with seriousness, and now we must listen with growing understanding. Let me present you with an Old Testament picture of what this can look like. Turn with me to Nehemiah 8. This chapter is so full, that I want to publically challenge someone, perhaps in the Antioch School, to prepare a 2-part sermon series on this chapter at some point in the near future to strengthen the influence of this passage on the church. As for this morning, we'll only touch on a few limited points. [*Read Nehemiah 8:1-12*].

So Ezra proclaims the word of God to the people and all who are able to understand attend to it. The people engage in God-centered worship. And then, the Levites, the priests, "*helped the people to understand the Law...and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.*" This process elicited a strong response from the people indicating some level of interaction with the teaching.

So what is happening here? I would argue that we are seeing the appropriate use of the word in the corporate setting. This is, perhaps, what John Piper would refer to as expository exultation. What is clear is that the people's understanding was gained through men of God reading and explaining and helping the people learn. The word was not simply to be heard, it was to be understood. You see the exact same implication in Acts 17 where Paul is "reasoning" with those in the synagogues, and in 2 Timothy 2:2 where Timothy, the pastor, is instructed to be patient with his people, as he teaches, exhorts, reproves, and rebukes them.

The Word was never intended to be simply heard. It is not enough for you or me to say "showing up" is what Sunday preaching is about. It's not. We must be those who engage the Word for understanding and learning. Believers are to be on a life-long journey of growing in their understanding of the Word. Will some grow in understanding more quickly than others? Yes. Will growing take place in spurts for some? Yes. Will some benefit more from a certain series or a certain preacher? Yes. But all must be always increasing in understanding, that we might be *...built up as the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...*<sup>11</sup>

We should make a few observations as we exit this section. First, the Elders are responsible to teach you the whole counsel of God<sup>12</sup>. Why do we study Exodus? Daniel? Ezekial? Because the Lord intends to use this for our profit in teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. So even though a text may be hard, or a book long and arduous, do not despair! It is God's will that we consider all of his Word for our good and his glory. This, then is a strong caution against grumbling in your heart or to others about a certain series.

Second, will all of you find that different Elder's teaching and preaching styles appeal to you more than others? Certainly. Is there any sin in that? No. Where might we error then?

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<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 4:11-16

<sup>12</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

When we begin, in our hearts, to esteem a certain pastor's or teacher's preaching or teaching more than another's. In doing this, we listen a little less intently to the styles we like less, take a little less seriously the persons we are not as naturally attracted to. There is sin in that. Brothers and sisters, the Lord has given you these men as your shepherds and the Word makes patently clear that a) Elders are not to be followed in a way that creates disunity in the body – that is, “I follow Russ!, I follow Chad!, etc.” b) all elders are to be regarded with honor; c) elders are to be imitated in their faith and godliness; d) elders are to be submitted to; and e) elders are to be helped by you in making their job of watching over your souls a joy<sup>13</sup>. Mind that this does not mean pretend like you live problem-free lives, it means come to your Elders with an honoring attitude and ready to follow their lead, bearing in mind, beloved, that those men that God has called to serve and shepherd you, work tirelessly and often under great duress to serve you well.

Lastly, your Elders and teachers are imperfect men growing in their own skills and abilities in communicating the Word. Trust in the means that God has set forth to guide and shepherd his flock. Throughout all of history he has used imperfect men to accomplish his good and perfect will. Unless we stop following Christ, follow us. And pray much for us.

## With One Central Truth in Mind

On to our last point, then. It is simple. The lens set forth by Christ himself on the road to Emmaus, in Luke 24, is the lens through which we should hear every sermon. Here it is from the text: *...everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled...* You should always listen to a sermon looking for Christ and the redemptive plan that God has set out in history to accomplish through his Son. We must be Christ-centered listeners.

We have covered a lot of ground this morning. I hope you are walking away today with a renewed sense of the importance of preaching in the church and how it is you should prepare for and listen to it. As I was coming home from work this past Tuesday, a Willie Nelson version of the Elvis Presley song, “You Were Always on My Mind” came on. For whatever reason, I started listening pretty closely to the words. It turns out that this is a pretty sad song. Basically its Elvis lamenting he had been a terrible lover, or spouse, or person because he had all these regrets of things he had not done but should have. Apparently, his lover is supposed to be comforted by the fact that while he was living like she was not on his mind, she really was. This is the difference, I suppose, between intention and action... and the cover up is pretty thin. The same can happen when it comes to the church. Many of you “have these things on your mind” – my family's life should portray a higher view of the church, I should give more attention to the sermon, I should really become a member, etc. but action never results. We can do better than Elvis and Willie. Be to the church what God has called you to be. For the good of your own souls, and for God's glory, live in a way that demonstrates a high view of preaching. Let's Pray.

## Conclusion

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Timothy 4:12, 5:17, Hebrews 13:7, 17