

# Making the Sermon Come Alive in My Heart

by Donald S. Whitney

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*To truly hear God speak through a sermon, we must prepare our hearts by putting aside sin, listen with humility, and apply the Word to our individual lives.*

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 33:30, Matthew 11:15, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, James 1:21-22

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Obedience To God"

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## Description

Donald S. Whitney emphasizes the importance of preparing our hearts before hearing God speak through a sermon, urging believers to put away sin and unholy distractions. He highlights the need to listen with humility, focusing on receiving the Word of God rather than critiquing the messenger. Whitney encourages applying the sermon's teachings by becoming doers of the Word, not just hearers, stressing the significance of intentional obedience to God's Word for spiritual growth and blessings.

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## Transcript

We need to prepare our hearts before we can hear God speak through a sermon. James' phrase "filthiness and all that remains of wickedness" refers generally to any type of sin. When James writes of "putting [it] aside," he uses a term that describes taking off an old, dirty coat and laying it aside. In other words, he counsels, the best way to prepare to hear a holy God is to put away anything in your life that is unholy.

The Greek word translated in verse 21 as "wickedness" is used outside the New Testament for the wax that forms in the ear. Sin is like that. It can block our spiritual ears so that we cannot hear what God is saying to us. The Lord may be speaking clearly through the sermon, and yet we may not hear Him.

Putting aside sin requires us to examine our hearts, looking for anything in our lives that would hamper our spiritual hearing. Before you go to church, carve out a few minutes to pray for your ability to receive what you hear. Ask God to search your heart. He may place His finger on a particular sin. If so, confess it, and ask the Lord not to let it impede your intake of truth.

Pray that God would help you overcome common Sunday morning problems that interfere with listening to the sermon, such as anger toward a family member who made you late. Any sin that comes to mind should prompt confession and repentance in order to better hear God's pure and holy Word.

Listening With Humility

The second half of verse 21 describes our responsibility during a sermon: "in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls." James is writing to those in whom the Word of God has already been implanted by God (see v. 18), that is, to believers in Christ. So when he speaks of the "saving of the soul," James is referring to the ongoing process of sanctification--becoming more like Christ--in each believer's life.

What does it mean to receive the Word in humility? To listen with humility, we must remember that we are coming to hear the Word of God, not just a pastor's sermon. Often, we may get hung up on superficial things that distract us. Perhaps we don't like a certain pastor's preaching style or some annoying mannerism. We must not let such personal issues derail our attention to the preaching of God's Word. When we listen with humility, we're more alert for the message of God than for flaws in the messenger or his delivery.

Not every word the preacher speaks will be divinely inspired by God. But if your pastor's sermons are based on the Bible, then you are hearing the Word of God. God is speaking, and He is speaking to you.

To receive the Word of God in humility also means to think about how it applies to us individually. With some issues, we may be tempted to think that the sermon doesn't have much to do with us. We may even pridefully think, "This sermon is for \_\_\_\_\_, not for me." But we need to humbly acknowledge that every sermon is for each of us.

This is even true for topics and passages we've heard preached many times and assume that we know well. Instead of thinking, I know this already, we need to ask the Lord to give us deeper insight and fresh ideas about how to apply familiar truths to our lives. Because every verse used in the sermon was inspired by God (see 2 Tim. 3:16), we should assume that there is some way to apply it to our lives.

The Apostle Paul was exhilarated by how the people of Thessalonica responded to his preaching. "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). These people heard what Paul preached and said to themselves, God is speaking to me.

The gospel is described as a seed that grows when it's in a receptive environment. Listening with humility means allowing God's Word to take root in your soul and life. Jesus used this analogy in the parable of the soils (see Luke 8:4-15). The Word of God that is sown during a sermon will only flourish in a heart with receptive soil.

Unfortunately, the hearts of many who hear the Word are hard packed, and the Word finds no receptivity. With others, the thorns of earthly concerns will choke out the fruitfulness of the Word, and an abundant harvest of fruit will result. The way we receive the Word of God as it is preached indicates the kind of soil we are.

### Applying What You Hear

James then exhorts his readers to respond obediently to the Word they've humbly received. "But prove yourselves doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22). Our responsibility after the sermon is to intentionally apply God's Word. While a good preacher demonstrates the application of his sermon text to various kinds of hearers, it is impossible for him to personalize the

application for everyone. Unfortunately, we must take the initiative to apply what we hear and thus "prove [ourselves] doers of the word, and not merely hearers."

Make it your goal to determine at least one response to every scripturally sound sermon you hear. The most appropriate response to many sermons may be confession, praise, or thanksgiving. Maybe a sermon has challenged what you believe about a particular verse or doctrine, and you need to think about and study the issue further on your own.

Perhaps you were convicted to reconcile a relationship, confront someone who's wronged you, or confess a sin against an individual. Perhaps there is a habit to break or to start. If no application of the message seems obvious, think about how the sermon might apply in different areas of your life, such as home, work, church, school, finances, etc.

Ezekiel spoke about the importance of intentionally applying the Word. God warned Ezekiel that some who claim to be His people would respond to the prophet's message by saying to each other,

"Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice." --Ezekiel 33:30-33

God was displeased with these people because, despite hearing the words of His spokesman, they didn't "put them into practice." They did not consider God's words any more important than an entertainer's ("one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well").

Hearing God's Word without doing it is dangerous. According to James 1:22, it is a delusion to think that mere exposure to the truth, and perhaps admiration of it, is sufficient. In verse 25, James emphasizes that it is not the man who forgets what he has heard, but he who does it that will be blessed.

#### Having Ears to Hear

If you had a weekly meeting with your boss and coworkers to discuss priorities for the coming week, you would do your part to get ready for the meeting. During the meeting, you would pay attention to what your boss had to say. When the meeting was finished, you would go back over your notes and action items and get to work on your assignments.

Or imagine that you have a weekly appointment with a golf or tennis pro, or maybe a music lesson. During the week, you would practice diligently to master the skills your instructor taught you in your last session. During your half hour with the instructor, you would soak in everything your teacher told you. From then on, you would try to apply all you had heard.

Do you take the preaching of the Word--the Word of God Almighty, the One who created us and who determines our eternal destiny--as seriously as a weekly appointment with a boss, a coach, a counselor, or a customer? We should prepare for these kinds of meetings, but we also need to prepare to meet with God.

As Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15). We must remember the critical responsibility each of us has to humbly receive the Word as it is preached and respond in obedience to it.

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