

The Game Plan

Getting The Most Out Of Sunday Service

Sunday can be a confusing day. We know WHAT to do on Sundays. We arrive, sit and stand on command, sing, pray, give, and listen to a sermon. Then, we leave. We go on about our busy lives and God's Word leaves little, if any, impact upon our hearts. "But how is this helpful?" we ask. Like an athlete in training, one cannot simply show up to a event and expect to receive the full benefit or perform at one's best.

The struggle is that many of us do not know how to prepare ourselves for Sunday, how to engage in active worship and singing, how to listen to the Word preached, and how to apply the message of the Word throughout the week. In this short article, I want to provide a few, practical suggestions for being, not just hearers of the Word, but doers of the Word.

I. Before The Service

A. Pray Throughout The Week

The Apostle Paul taught, in Ephesians 3:14-16, that there is a direct relationship between prayer and spiritual growth. Further, the testimony of Jesus, in Matthew 7:24-27, is clear that He desires fervent prayer. We must spend passionate, regular time in prayer leading up to Sunday, asking God for awareness of sin that needs to be confessed, attentiveness, clarity, understanding, and the courage to obey. It is also of necessity that we, those seeking to obey Christ, pray for the Pastor, that he would have boldness, accuracy, passion, and that he too would be committed to obeying the Word.

B. Read

If the Pastor is preaching through a book of the Bible, it is fairly easy to determine what the coming sermon will be. Yet, the key is not simply to know the text, but to study it. In Acts 17:10-11, the Bible tells of the people of Berea. These people heard the Apostle Paul's preaching, but also spent time searching the Scriptures for themselves in order to better understand and evaluate Paul's words. Such is our responsibility as well.

C. Resolve Conflict

In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus discusses the practice of sacrifice and the Church. He teaches that conflict between believers is to be resolved before engaging in worship. Only at this point can a person's heart be truly pure before God and able to receive and obey the Word.

D. Rest

We should rest well enough the night before so that we are not too tired to pay attention in the service on Sunday. Personal habits and practices should be attended to wisely. Though, for most, Saturday is a coveted day off, God is greater and deserves our affection. Get enough sleep Saturday night so that you will be attentive for worship the next morning.

II. During The Service

A. Sing With Purpose

Scripture is filled with testimony to music's power and use. It can arouse inspiration, conviction, joy, or sorrow. It can be a very godly, enjoyable, and effective means to prepare hearts to receive the Word. Jesus discussed sowing the Word in a parable in Matthew 13. Music helps prepare the soil to receive the seed. Worship music should focus on God above all else, His person, character, work on man's behalf, and calling for man's obedience. We should focus on what a song says about God and express thankfulness for and commitment to such truths.

B. Pray With Desperation

King David experienced the most growth in his life during times of desperation. It was during his more calm time in life that he chose to sin. Yet, when he expressed his need for God's grace, strength, and provision, primarily throughout the Psalms, God worked in mighty ways in his life. We too must not let our minds wander, but we must express dependence on God, the desire to hear from God, and the desire to be changed by Him, for all worshippers are sinners who daily need grace.

III. During The Sermon

A. Put Aside Distractions

There is so much going on in our world that, during the rare chance to have children being looked after by another and to have one person talking while a response is not being demanded, our minds have a tendency to drift. It is a "perfect storm" type of situation. However, there is a reason Jesus teaches us, in Matthew 6:25-34, not to worry about the future, but rather to, in essence, "be here now." God desires that His people consciously set aside distractions, trusting that there will be other times to think about them and to get them done, and to focus on what He has to say to them.

B. Listen To Learn

Hearing and listening are two very different things. Countless people hear multiple sermons every Sunday. Yet, there is often a disconnect between what is heard and real life. This is because we either do not know how to listen, or because we simply do not care. Learning to care requires the work of God. Apathy towards the preaching of the Word is a matter of heart motivation and must be met with confession to God, commitment, and change.

Learning to listen means knowing something about the structure of a sermon. First, we must define the big idea, the main point of a sermon: what God, in light of our redemption by Christ, calls us to do. At First Baptist Church, this is usually stated in a “God wants you to...” format. Each sermon should explain what, where, when, why, or how this calling should be obeyed. The main points are given in order to explain these goals. There will also be comments made during the sermon that ought to be applied as well. God has a way of moving in a sermon that goes far beyond the intent of the Pastor. Often, comments made that were not the focus of the Pastor’s message can be very meaningful and helpful to a person struggling with an unknown need.

C. Write To Remember And Reinforce

At our Church, we have a note taking page in our bulletin designed around the Pastor’s sermon. Taking notes is an important aspect of memory and later application. Yet, not everything needs to be, or can be, written down. The main point of the sermon, the sub points, and significant information learned should be written down to be recalled and studied later.

IV. After The Service

A. Ask The Pastor Questions You May Have

It is of necessity that we ask questions of the Pastor. This is for at least two reasons. First, if one listener has not understood a point, others will also have misunderstood and the issue may need to be clarified by the Pastor. Second, God holds each of us responsible for obedience to the preached Word. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand that which we are to obey. Few obligations are as frustrating as the ones which are not understood. Seek the Pastor out throughout the week to ask him any questions the sermon has impressed upon you.

B. Read The Passage With Notes Multiple Times

Often what happens in most Gospel-believing Churches is that the Pastor preaches on Sunday morning, but then the text is forgotten and the listener is ready to move on. The sermon, however, is meant to be studied and applied throughout the week. This involves making time throughout the week to read

the text and to review the notes written. This is what is often referred to as one’s “quiet time,” or “devotions.” The Apostle Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:15, reminds us of the importance of being people who study and apply the Word of God.

C. List Personal Ways To Apply The Sermon

This can be where the process quickly begins to breakdown because this is where the work begins. It is not complicated or difficult to understand how to apply a sermon. A practical suggestion might be to list 3-5 specific actions to take to live out the the main idea of the sermon, trusting in God’s work in the Gospel and through His Spirit to give you the strength to obey. However, the breakdown comes in that we struggle to obey and to remain dedicated to Christ. Luke 14:25-35 describes the commitment it takes to truly be a follower of Christ. It takes thought, it takes perseverance, and it takes trust.

D. Enlist Others

In 1 Corinthians 12, the Bible describes the Church as a body, more specifically the body of Christ. It is made up of arms, legs, hands, and feet. Each person within the body has a part to play. God designed the Church this way so that we, as a body, would be able to run the Christian race together (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Church is responsible to help one another stand firm in the midst of life. This is done through confession (James 5:16), accountability (Matthew 18:15-23), prayer (2 Corinthians 13:7), and help (Galatians 6:1-2). Seek out one, two, or several godly, trusted friends. Ask them join with you in regularly checking on one another and helping one another to keep growing.