

## **Orthodoxy: The Lord's Word Heard**

New City Catechism Question 42: How is the Word of God to be read and heard?

Answer: With diligence, preparation, and prayer; so that we may accept it with faith, store it in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

God works in our hearts through the reading and preaching of his Word. During the time of Ezra, the Law had been disregarded for years and slowly disappeared from Israel's society. When God called the nation to repentance and Ezra read the Word to the entire congregation of Israel, they were cut to the heart, because they understood God's Word. Hearing the Scriptures radically changed them both individually and corporately.

One skill that is seldom taught today is how to be an active listener. As Ezra read the Law to Israel, the people were prepared to hear it, and they hung onto every word. If we want a desire for God's Word like Israel, we need to approach the reading and hearing of Scripture with the proper attitude and method.

First, our attitude must be diligent when approaching Scripture. It would have done Israel little good to hear the Law read once by Ezra and then return to a life without the continued hearing of the Scriptures. In the same way that Israel reincorporated the Law into their daily and weekly habits, we need to make regular consumption of Scripture a habit. This is why our sermons are expository in nature. Each Sunday, we look at a passage of Scripture, figure out what it means, and apply it to our lives, and we often do this through entire books of the Bible. This builds the habit of weekly Scripture consumption. However, we also need to be diligent in the daily reading of Scripture during a devotional time. Most days will feel extraordinarily average, but over time God is forming us into the image of Christ through the diligent reading of his Word.

Second, we must prepare to approach Scripture. A plan goes a long way for forming habits. One way to prepare for reading Scripture daily is to get on a Bible reading plan. Christ Covenant Church also created the Formation Devotional that is packed with Scripture. However, even more important than organizing a reading plan, we must prepare our hearts to be challenged by truth revealed in the Bible. Prepare to be conformed to the image of Christ and to kill sin. Before the preaching of God's Word on Sunday, prepare to listen actively with an attitude of worship.

Third, part of our preparation is prayer. We always need to approach the reading of Scripture with prayer. Pray that the Holy Spirit would illumine the text, because without God's help, we would be lost in the darkness of our sin, unable to understand the meaning of the text. Pray prayers of thanksgiving that God has revealed his will to us in his Word. Before our Sunday service, pray that God would speak through the preaching of his Word and that our congregation would be affected.

Turning now to the method of approaching Scripture, we must first accept its teaching with faith. Since we are sinful to our core, part of us will always reject the truth revealed in Scripture. As believers, we need to fight our sinful unbelief. Avoid picking and choosing convenient Scriptures that we readily want to believe, and rejoice in the full counsel of God's Word, even when the teaching is difficult to accept.

Second, we should treasure Scripture and store it in our hearts. David hid God's Word in his heart that he might not sin against God (Ps. 119:11). When we approach Scripture, we should treasure what we learn, commit it to memory, and keep that teaching on our mind. When you read the Bible in the morning, find one truth to meditate

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on and pray through during your day. After hearing God's Word preached on Sunday, take a moment over lunch to reflect on the sermon. These are ways to keep Scripture on our minds and in our hearts.

Finally, we must approach Scripture with the intention of being transformed. When we read the Bible, we need to know what it teaches and apply that teaching to our lives. Where am I living in sin? What good work does this passage prepare me to do? How does this change the way I interact with others? We should never leave the reading or preaching of Scripture unchanged. No matter how seemingly small, applying a passage of Scripture will change us. Over time, approaching Scripture with the proper attitude and method will conform us to the image of Christ.

For more information on how to approach the hearing of God's Word during our Sunday gathering, check out the short booklet *Listen Up!: A Practical Guide to Listening to Sermons*. There are several copies on the bookshelf outside of the sanctuary.

## Unity in Our Differences

The gospel of Jesus Christ binds up a fractured world. Man lives in strife, hatred, and division, but God lives and reigns as one. Therefore, one of the evidences that God has visited the earth with his salvation is the unity of his newfound household, the church. In our Formation Devotional opening prayer on Wednesday June 10th we prayed,

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (BCP 225)

The church is bound together in love to God expressed in obedience to his pleasure. The pleasure of God is to take strangers, aliens, and people divided by all their differences and unite them together in Christ filling them with his Spirit so that they would walk together in love. And in this powerful evidential work of grace in his church he would lead the world to believe in Jesus Christ who was sent to rescue the world fractured and broken in sin. Therefore the unity of the church has an evangelical purpose, but it can also serve a civil purpose for the common good.

When the church lives in its diverse unity with its many differences it is a house in order. The church as an ordered house can be a great blessing to a community or city as it sits on its hill. The church can provide a template for respectful dialogue when she lives in the biblical virtues of faith, hope, and love, and not in the incivility of rancor, division, and destruction.

One of the ways we express the virtues of faith, hope, and love in our church is in the beauty of forbearance. Forbearance is the active commitment to maintain Christian community through disagreement, as an extension of virtue and as a reflection-of the unity in Christ that binds the church together. In English forbearance means to hold back. It is the activity of abstaining from acting on a judgment. God forbears everyday in exacting his just judgement on the wicked in the earth. But there is a fuller expression of what it means for us to forbear in the church that expresses a relational aspect. We forbear in the church when we are bearing for or with. This is not just a voluntary restraint but the activity of carrying something or someone for a period of time. This necessitates patience and affection to someone motivating them to carry the burden of disagreement in the relationship.

Paul writes of this forbearance in Colossians,

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. - Colossians 3:12-15

Paul is not ignoring the problems that the churches in Colossae and Laodicea are facing. He is not just telling them to get along. But he is giving them a gospel centered approach to maintaining community in the midst of disagreement and differences. If they claim to follow Christ then their relationship in community should reflect that in his compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and love. As Christ has paid their debt in full, so they are to pay one another's debts in forgiving one another. They are to clothe themselves in the fullness of his love for them so that they do not need to get love, but that they can give love to one another. They are to live in his peace, his justifying grace that gives them peace with God and with one another as his one body in both his death and resurrection. And this will fill them with gratitude rather than complaining, arguing, and judging. The forbearance we practice in a season of disagreement is a reflection of our gratitude for—and an extension of—the forbearance God in Christ shows us in the face of our alienation. In the end, our maintenance of church unity in the face of difference itself testifies to our faith: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). This is not only a blessing to God's church, it is also salt and light to a world in darkness.