

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin today by giving you a little five-question quiz. These questions are taken from sermons I preached the last two months. Here they are on the power point. I won't ask you how well you did. I'll just say this. How well you did or didn't do is half and half – half me the preacher and half you the hearer - and that's what I'm going to preach about today, what God requires of preachers and hearers. Turn to Ezekiel 3:1-11, 27, and we'll see what that is.

## **Preachers**

Let's start with preachers in verses 1-3.

In 597 BC, the Babylonians exiled Ezekiel and thousands of Jews to Babylon. Then in 593 BC, God called him to be His prophet to those exiles. Chapters 2 and 3 record that call and the scroll in 3:1 is what it's essentially about. The scroll there clearly represents something and 2:10, which describes it, reveals what the something is. It's God's word that He gave Ezekiel through the dreams and visions in his book.

Now, that scroll, by way of analogy, has its counterpart for preachers today. That counterpart is the Bible. The Bible is God's word to preachers just as surely as the dreams and visions were His word to Ezekiel. And they must do with that word exactly what Ezekiel did with the word God gave him. What is that? It's two things, both of which I want to explain. These are God's requirements of preachers.

## **Requirements of Preachers**

First, they must eat it. That's what Ezekiel does in verses 2 and 3. He eats it and it fills his body and tastes like honey or, in modern terms, a Milky Way, when he does. That action symbolizes Ezekiel receiving and internalizing God's word. Verses like 1:4, 15, 27, 28, and 2:9 reveal how he did that as a practical matter. He absorbed himself in and

contemplated the details of the dreams and visions God gave him.

That's what Ezekiel did and so must preachers. They must eat God's word. They must absorb themselves in and contemplate the details of the Bible. That means, as a practical matter, that they study it consistently, thoughtfully, thoroughly, and exactly. That is, in my view, a minimum expectation that hearers should have of preachers!

Let's make that personal. You have the right to expect that I am doing that. And if I'm not, you have the right to demand I start. So, am I? Yes, I am. I'm studying the Bible consistently, thoughtfully, thoroughly, and exactly. This sermon in fact came out of a four-month verse-by-verse study of Ezekiel, with a commentary, that I did last year on my own time. I've done that several times with every book in the Bible and continue to do so. I'm currently studying the book of Daniel.

There's a reason for that. It's because preachers can only preach what they know. The Bible contains the best information about the most important matters in human life. But preachers can communicate that information only if they know it. And they can know it only if they study it consistently, thoughtfully, thoroughly, and exactly.

So that's the first thing God requires of preachers. They must eat God's word. They must absorb themselves in and contemplate the details of the Bible.

The second thing He requires is found in verses 4 and 11. Ezekiel is to go to the house of Israel, the Jews, and speak God's word to them. The counterpart of the house of Israel, by way of analogy, is the congregations of preachers. And they must do with their congregations what Ezekiel did with the house of Israel. Speak God's word to them. Notice I said speak "God's word."

Some years ago, a man told me his pastor doesn't preach the Bible. He preaches positive thinking, he said, but not the Bible. I read some of his sermon manuscripts and the man is right. They aren't sermons. They're motivational speeches like Tony Robbins or Wayne Dyer give.

There's nothing wrong with motivational speeches but they certainly

aren't preaching. Preaching communicates God's word by doing two things. First, it explains what a Biblical text actually means. Second, it explains how what the text means actually applies to the hearers.

Let's go back to question #4, a sermon I preached on Galatians 6:1. You who get the sermon manuscript saw that its body had six headings: "Trespass," "Restore," "Be Certain," "Be Gentle," "Be Humble," and "Be Spiritual." Compare those six headings to the verse and you'll see that they were taken from it. I actually preached the verse in other words.

My point is this. Preachers are preaching only if they're communicating God's word – only if they're explaining #1, what a Biblical text means and #2, how what it means applies to the hearers.

The hearers though don't always like it when they do. That was the case with Ezekiel and the exiles. God tells him in verses 7 and 11 that they're going to dislike what he says. But God promises in verses 8-9 to give him the toughness and courage he needs to say it anyway.

Preachers today have the same problem that Ezekiel did. People sometimes dislike what the Bible says. And it takes toughness and courage to preach it when they do. But preach it they must. There's no greater unfaithfulness to a calling or disservice to a people than when they don't. Martin Luther said it this way, **"If you preach the Gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time you are not preaching the Gospel at all."** Those are strong words but true. If preachers only preach those parts of the Bible that people want to hear, then they aren't preaching the Bible at all.

So, I must preach the whole Bible to you whether you like it or not. Five people commented how brave I was for preaching that sermon about how disciples of Jesus should dress, sort of like Ezekiel was in verses 8-9. But just the opposite is true. The real reason I preached it is because I'm a coward. If I don't preach the whole gospel, then I'm not preaching it at all and I wouldn't want to be in my shoes at judgment.

Those then are two of the things God requires of preachers. They

must eat God's word, the Bible, and preach it and preach it all.

## Hearers

But this passage also reveals what He requires of hearers. Verses 4-7 tell us who the hearers in this passage are. They're "the house of Israel," that is, God's people in exile. Their counterparts today, by way of analogy, are God's people in churches, that is, you.

Notice what God commands His people in exile and churches to do in verse 27, "**He who hears let him hear.**" That's the prototype of the celebrated saying that Jesus used, "**He who has ears to hear, let Him hear.**" He got it from Ezekiel. It may sound redundant to you but it isn't. An old saying helps us grasp what it means. Just being in a garage doesn't make you a car. In the same way, just having ears and being in a church doesn't make you a hearer. On the contrary, being a hearer requires three things of you, each of which I want us to examine.

## Requirements of Hearers

First, you must desire to hear God's word even when it "steps on your toes," meaning even when it hurts.

The Jewish exiles here didn't desire that. God describes them in verse 7 as "stubborn" and "obstinate." His word through Ezekiel stepped on their toes. So they essentially told him, "talk to the hand," as we say it today. They didn't want to hear it if it hurt and so didn't.

It's the very same way today. *Newsweek Magazine* had a cover article titled "A Time to Seek." That article identified the kind of sermons that people in America's pews want to hear. It's sermons that make the gospel fit them, not them fit the gospel. That implies several things. One of those is that they don't want to hear it if it hurts.

Let me ask you a question in that regard. Do you want to hear it? Stop for a moment and think of some of the things about which you are most passionate. What would think, feel, and do if God's word about those things stepped on your toes? Take hunting, for instance. The

Bible reveals several defining principles about creation and animals that should guide how you hunt. Suppose I correctly explain and apply those principles and it steps on your toes. Would you be immediately offended and get mad and maybe even leave the church? Or would you objectively and calmly examine the truth of what I said?

You get the point. That's the first thing being a hearer requires of you. Desire God's word even if it steps on your toes, even if it hurts.

The second thing it requires is that you actively listen to God's word. We see that in verse 10. God tells Ezekiel, as a hearer, to take what He says into his heart and listen closely to it. That's what Ezekiel as a hearer did and so should you. Actively listen. Actively listening involves doing two things.

First, attend to what the preacher is saying. That means place your mind on what he's saying and not something else. Pay close attention to it. Dr. Ralph Nichols claims that people think four to five times faster than they talk. That reality strongly tempts listeners to take mental excursions, like their golf games or tomorrow's sales report, then phase back to the preacher's words. But don't. Use the advantage that thought has over speech instead. Do things like take notes, analyze the logic of what's said, reflect on how it relates to what's gone before, and so on.

Active listening involves doing a second thing. Remember what the preacher is saying. Doing that requires intent. Experts say intending to remember puts the mind in a condition to remember. Studies confirm that. Those who intend to remember recall between 20 to 60% more than those who don't. We make available an almost word for word sermon manuscript to assist you in your intending. See Sandy if you want one.

But the key to remembering, in my view, is relevance. People usually remember things that "speak to their condition" as we Quakers say it, that profoundly affect them. So look for those things in sermons and when you find them, intend to remember them.

Let's go back to question five, for instance, and the three P's of practicing humility. I read them ten years ago in Dallas Willard's book

*Hearing God.* You heard them in a sermon I preached on July 20 titled *The First Virtue*. Various studies show that people remember 10% of what they read and 20% of what they hear. With that in mind, why did I remember the three P's by reading and you didn't by hearing?

It isn't because I'm smarter than you because I'm not. It's because I do two things when I read and hear that you probably don't. First, I actively look for things that profoundly speak to my condition. And second, I intend to remember them when I find them. Going back to the three P's, I grasped the treasure they were the moment I read them. I realized how transforming they'd be if I did them. So I intended to remember them. I read them over again several times and then thought about how to practice them. That in turn planted them firmly in my mind. The result is that I haven't forgotten them since.

That then is the second thing that being a hearer of God's word requires. You must actively listen to what the preacher is saying. You must attend to and remember it.

There's a third thing it requires. You must do it. That really is the principal thrust of the words "listen" in verse 6 and "hear" in verse 27. To listen to or hear what a preacher says means primarily to do it.

I'd like to say something to you about that. I practice what I preach. I'll never tell you to do something that I myself won't do. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. What's good for the hearer is good for the preacher. Take those three P's again. I want you to know I'm practicing them. I said *you should*. So, *I do*. It's the same way with everything I preach. You should practice it and so should I.

## **Conclusion**

I'd like to sum up everything I've said with an old French proverb. It declares, "**The spoken word belongs half to him who speaks and half to him who listens.**" That's exactly right. So, take care of your half and I'll take care of mine. The sermons at Bethel Friends will be good ones if we do.