

How to Listen to the Bible Effectively

***Listening Characteristics that produce effective
application of the Bible***

Acts 17:10-12

INTRODUCTION

We return this morning to our beginning of the year, 3-part series on how we can create an atmosphere of applying the Bible.

As we preach, teach, listen and learn, how do we do all of that within an arena conducive to being actively transformed by the Scriptures?

Clearly, regularly ensuring within a sermon a clear delineation of specific and practical ways a passage of Scripture should impact us is helpful in having an atmosphere of biblical application.

But more than the preacher's efforts are necessary if we are to create a congregational expectation that we are all making wise use of the Scripture.

We need everyone intentionally involved if we want application of Scripture to be the air we breathe.

So what will it take for us not only to love the Scripture – love the accurate explanation of the Scripture – but also love the application of the Scripture – to our lives personally – to the life of our congregation – to our evangelism – to our engagement of the culture?

Last week we began by looking at the foundational convictions necessary if anyone is going to do anything profitable with the Bible.

What is the Bible good for – we have to have specific convictions – not merely affirmations – but convictions – before we will live in an atmosphere of application:

That the Bible instructs us in how to think

That the Bible confronts us in what is wrong

That the Bible corrects us in how to change

That the Bible trains us in how to live

If those are your internal convictions – you will intentionally pursue application of the Scripture when you hear it preached – as you study it in a group – when you read it in your personal time.

But let's expand on what we said last week.

God has revealed himself and his eternal, sanctifying will through a book.

That why the convictions we talked about last week are so critical to its use.

But also, the primary means God has chosen to instill the content of the Bible is through its being preached and taught.

Which means if we want to effectively apply the Bible, we need to be very mindful of the way we **listen** to it taught and preached.

We actually do quite a bit of listening around here:

Think about this:

If a person attending a Sunday morning service 46 out of 52 weeks a year – they would hear about 46 hours of Biblical preaching.

If that same person attended the same number of Equipping classes – that would be an additional 46 hours of Bible teaching they hear.

If they also attended a Growth Group twice a month, for 9 months – and discussed the sermon with others for about a half hour, they could take in another 9 hours of conversation about the Bible.

If they were in a women's or men's Bible study/discipleship group and met every other week for an hour and a half and attended about 20 out of the 26 opportunities – they would add another 30 hours of study and conversation over the Bible.

If that same person were really eager and attended 10 out of our 14 Sunday evening gatherings and heard the ½ hour sermons preached, they would take in another 5 hours of Bible teaching.

Altogether – such a person at SWBC would be listening to around 136 hours of Bible teaching every year.

And that would not include additional conferences, additional services or what you might listen to on your commute or in your home from the web or on the radio.

At a minimum, it is likely that the average member of SWBC could be taking in at least 22 to 23 minutes of listening to the Scriptures every single day of each year – and perhaps quite a bit more.

Like I've said, we do quite a bit of listening around here.

I've actually preached a number of sermons on how to listen – but this one will come from a bit of different direction.

We could helpfully talk about some practical mechanics on what makes listening more effective

Taking notes, isolating yourself from known distractions, paying attention to what will make you mentally sharp (sleep, diet) – and many more practical details that are genuinely helpful.

When it comes to consistently and effectively applying the Bible, attention to the integrity of our mindset toward listening to the Word is more critical than the intentionality of our mechanics for listening to the Word.

And if you want to see the kind of integrity of mindset toward listening to the word – one of the best biblical examples we could consider is that of the ancient Bereans.

Little is really known about this ancient city (one of the earliest cities in ancient Macedonia to be conquered by the Romans – 168 BC)

And the only time it is even mentioned in all of Scripture is here in our one short passage of Acts 17:10-12.

But the legacy they leave us is one that lingers powerfully in how to effectively listen to the Word.

How do we know that they listened to the word effectively?
How do we know that their listening produced application?

V 12 – after hearing – many of them believed.

How the Bereans listened to Paul’s preaching is an excellent depiction of the kinds of listening characteristics that should comprise our own listening to the Scripture if we want to apply it effectively.

What then are the listening characteristics we see in the Bereans that we should emulate in our own hearing of the Bible?

If we want to see effective application of Scripture in our own lives, we should cultivate these 5 listening characteristics

I. LISTEN WITH AN HONEST HEART

What do I mean by an “honest” heart? – I mean a heart that is transparent – as transparent and authentic as is possible for sinners like us to be.

A heart that is open to listen – and doesn’t put up dishonest intellectual – emotional – cultural – physical – biological barriers as excuses for why a person may not listen openly to someone speaking.

What would that possibly look like:

- The preacher doesn’t share my mid-west values
- The teacher doesn’t know of my diagnosed mental condition
- The one speaking is not aware of my religious background
- The preacher doesn’t appreciate the physical disorder I struggle with
- The speaker isn’t taking into consideration my inability to hear him because of my painful past experiences

with parents, bad church experiences, family issues, past or present job stresses, etc.

All of which may be real – and may have an effect on how you tend to process – but none of our experiences actually adjust the truth of the Bible – they merely impact the openness by which we may listen to it.

In other words – we need to consider what our challenges might be and make a concerted effort to have an open, transparent, honest hearing of the Bible – despite all of our surrounding social/personal challenges.

Think about this in terms of the occasion that Paul approaches this gathering in the little city of Berea.

These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica

To fully appreciate this statement – see it in light of what happened in Thessalonica (a significant city in the northeast corner of the Grecian peninsula).

Look at Paul's approach to teaching in this city:

17:1-3

And there was some effectiveness to the preaching – God opened hearts and some people believed – some of these were significant people in society as well.

But look at the responses of those who did not welcome the word preached:

Vv 5-8

- Jealous motivations (these are not an honest evaluation of the truth) – upset because so many were being

- persuaded by Paul and not by them – they were losing religious influence – friendships – status – and it motivated them not to consider the truth – but to put up dishonest barriers toward it.
- Appeal to the most likely people to stir up strife (i.e., finding the bitter people who love to stir up trouble) – this is not honest evaluation of truth.
 - Spread their dishonest evaluations of Paul – and attack prominent people in order to distract others from what was being taught
 - Overstate their case – and make it sound far worse and more widespread than it actually was
 - Look to dishonestly malign the reputation of the speaker rather than engage in what he was actually saying

Why would they do this – why would they be jealous?

Because they don't want to change – and if they were honest with what Paul taught – change would disrobe them of a false lifestyle they had created – publicized – staked their fortunes to – and kept them comfortable.

Listening with an honest heart that would consider the importance of the application of the truth presented was more exposing and humbling than they were willing to allow.

Perhaps they had convinced other people of their approach to life – their personal convictions of what is true/false – and gained a following, friendships, business deals, etc. from this false approach to life.

So they pitch a dishonest fit in order to not listen – or have anyone else listen to what was being preached.

Maybe we don't consider how life-altering the gospel message Paul preached was, especially to the Jewish population.

Paul's message would change your diet – from an Old Covenant one that was so restrictive – to a New Covenant one that was far more open.

It would change your convictions about how you read and responded to the Bible – remember how counter-cultural Jesus' teachings were to the average Jewish mindset?

It would perhaps change your social standing – where you would accept a slave as a brother – a woman as an equal person – a child as more than a servant – the poor as family

Paul's message would have meant what you have believed for so long was at best incomplete and at worse, completely wrong.

Paul's message may have completely overturned personal reputation, family relationships, future inheritance, business endeavors, social standing, and so much more if it were listened to with an open and honest heart.

The vast majority of the Thessalonian population would not listen – because they were dishonest with themselves and about those who are speaking – with the aim that they could avoid having to be confronted with changing their ways in light of God's word.

That's what makes the Berean's so striking in how they listened to Paul's preaching

V 10 – Paul and Silas are shipped away at night and head 40 miles southwest to another city – off the main highway of travel – to an out of the way city where they might be safe from the anger of the Thessalonian people.

And they do what they always do – go to the synagogue and begin preaching about Jesus.

V 11 – the Bereans were more “noble-minded”

Term is used 3x in the NT – sometimes refers to a person of noble birth, or someone socially influential – but someone higher than the average or base of society – a person of higher position.

Applied here – not a reference to their social standing – but to their approach to listening – more noble – more morally upstanding -a higher, not so base or low approach – in other words – they listened with an honest heart.

Ready to hear whatever might be said from the Scriptures – because Paul was teaching from the Scriptures.

Likely a people who had convictions that valued the Scripture more than they valued their own personal influence or status among others.

They listened with an honest heart.

What is it that makes for an honest heart?

A heart that knows it answers to God – who sees and knows everything about and in us.

A heart that will be honest about the pretenses you may have created among others so that they would see you in a certain way – with a particular image.

A heart that isn't afraid to be humbled by God – welcomes it because they are convinced of the greater good to be exposed by God and thus transformed by God – than to preserve a perceived self-image.

This is a character trait – not just a technique that makes listening effective.

If God is most important to you – then the defenses come down in light of his word.

If you are convicted that the Scriptures are the basis for how you should think – what is wrong – how you should change – and how you should live – then the heart holds lightly to the public image you want to have – thought you had – the lies you've told others about yourself – the excuses you have made about why you can't really follow God's word.

And honesty is a liberating way to live – it is hard to keep up with the half-truths – the subtle lies – the false public persona.

In order to maintain a life dishonest about the truth – you have to turn against some – turn others against some – in order to prop up your false life. And it is a brutal and exhausting way to live.

But if you would simply come to God's word being honest in your heart – knowing that God sees and knows and when he exposes – you see that he is loving and caring to pull you from what is spiritually killing you – to liberate you into what is genuine freedom of life.

An honest heart is a heart that welcomes whatever the Bible has to say – even if it exposes you as being less than what people thought you were.

Or exposes your convictions as not even good preferences.

Or challenges your behaviors as wrong-headed.
 Or makes your perceived image less than what you have desired.

But only in the best and most liberating way – in a way that gives you an honest heart before God – and that will be life-transforming.

If we came each week putting ourselves and all of our life's aims and purposes on the altar of God's truth – honest before God himself – we will see our application to what we listen to be far more effective.

A dishonest heart will never apply what it hears – it will always seek to hide itself at best – rid itself of the truth at worse.

*We will apply only what we are honestly ready to hear
 – but a corresponding 2nd listening characteristic
 for effective application is seen in the next
 phrase:*

II. LISTEN WITH AN OBJECTIVE MIND

Obviously this is related to the first listening characteristic – and it is here in the passage as well.

The phrase is literally – “whoever received the word with all readiness”

And grammatically it is giving the reason why the Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians in the way they listened to the word.

For they received the word with great eagerness

“great” eagerness = lit “all” – the highest possible eagerness.
 “eagerness” = always translated as “readiness” in the NASB –
 openness – willingness to listen – complete readiness to
 hear whatever the Bible wishes to say.

How impactful would the word of God be if that is how we entered
 the sanctuary every Sunday?

It is as if they came with quill and parchment in hand – Bible
 scrolls open – because their minds were eager – zealous –
 ready to receive God’s word.

That comes from a conviction about what the Word of God
 really is.

By the way – Paul did say that some of the
 Thessalonians were of this kind of mindset too – 1 Thess
 2:13

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NASB95)

*13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you
 received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it
 not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God,
 which also performs its work in you who believe.*

Here is what is so fascinating about this group of Bereans – they
 did not know Paul – nor did they know what had happened in
 Thessalonica – they had not heard about Jesus, his life,
 death, resurrection or the coming of the Spirit.

They had every reason in the world to be hesitant, resistant,
 biased against him, suspect of him – but they were not.

Paul presented himself openly to them – and they listened
 openly to him.

How many past experiences keep you from listening objectively?

Are you a true son or daughter of the Show-Me State? – You are biased against until you see what you want?

There may be some common sense to wanting to see the facts before you believe,

But if your default disposition is one of distrust, doubt, protectiveness, and disfavor – you will have a hard time listening objectively.

Listening objectively does not mean listen with an empty mind – or a mind so open that you can be persuaded by any preacher holding and quoting a Bible.

Objectively means you don't use yourself or your personal experiences as the ground floor for testing truth.

You use the truth to test truth – and our backgrounds and personal experiences are not always the best or unbiased barometers to use as the standard for what is right or wrong.

Be open to hear the word when it is preached by keeping your suspicions and experiences in their proper place – not as the ground floor for determining truth.

How many people will not listen objectively – because they are jaded from their past?

Listening objectively does not mean listen without rigorous examination (as we will see).

It's the truest expression of being a "Show-me" kind of person

I'm ready to listen – now show me – I'm open to be convinced if you can legitimately show me.

Again – this is a character trait more than it is a technique. It is a mindset – not just a listening mechanic – and it will have dramatic effect on how we develop an atmosphere of application to hearing the Bible taught.

When our hearts are honest in how we listen – and our minds are objective in the way we listen, we are more likely to apply what we hear – consider a 3rd listening characteristic essential for effective application of Scripture:

III. LISTEN WITH A JUDICIAL APPROACH

What I don't mean by this statement is – set yourself up as the judge and standard of what is right and wrong.

But think of this – when we are listening to Scripture – and how it confronts and shows change – how it tells us how to think – and how we should live – we are being drawn to a point of decision

We are being called to evaluate and make a judgment – a decision.

As a good judge sits on the bench and evaluates the case presented in front of him by two sides both arguing for him to decide in accordance with the law,

So we sit on the bench of personal decision, weighing what best accords with God's word so as to impact how we think and eventually act.

Look at how the Bereans approached listening to Paul:

Examining . . . to see whether these things were so

The word for “examine” is a term that comes from the word “krinw” which means to judge

It was a legal term that contained the idea of carefully investigating an issue with the aim of making a consequential decision about it.

One commentator indicates that it referred to a legal process like a trial.

They did not negatively put Paul’s words on trial to doubt him
They rigorously put his words on trial to know what was true.

“examining” = present tense participle – meaning they did it with everything he said about the Word of God. – they were continually examining his words.

They did this, likely because of the serious and potentially life-altering possibilities of what he was saying.

If Paul’s words are true – life must change – it is not small or trivial.

They did not approach Paul’s words like many in some religious contexts treat preaching
Like a form of conservative socializing – entertainment – something that you do for recreation, engagement, or mere personal betterment.

Life and death – heaven and hell – truth and falsehood were at stake – and that required careful – constant examination.

In fact, because of the nature of the word and what is said around it – this examination likely went on beyond his first sermon – and it happened before, during and after every sermon thereafter.

They likely studied it at home – in conversation with others – in conversation with Paul – with all the resources they could muster – with questions posed and answers expected.

Why – to win a Jewish Trivia contest at work?

Not likely – so that they would know what to do with it – how to live it – how it should shape their thinking – guide their feelings and govern their living.

It is always fascinating to me how so many Christians will tolerate small – trite – surface level and even sloppy approaches to Scripture from those who teach and preach

But we would never tolerate that from our doctors,
But we would never tolerate that kind of approach to their trade from our doctors, accountants, lawyers, judges – it likely reveals what convictions we have about how the Scripture is handled.

Isn't it interesting – Paul must have preached in such a way that it sparked their need to judicially examine the Scriptures – he wasn't telling them merely what was obvious from a cursory reading – he was teaching with a level of depth that compelled them to studiously examine to see if what he said was actually the case

Because if it was – everything had to change.

This judicial approach was the means to application of the Word.

An honest heart, an objective mind, and a judicial approach will produce an effective response – but a 4th listening characteristic that will be helpful for effective application of the Bible is found in v 11

IV. LISTEN WITH A SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT

This is really a very important point in the passage.

The Bereans did not make their personal convictions or preferences the standard – their culture – their government – patriotism –

The Bereans knew and were convicted that the Scriptures were the word of God – and anything claiming to be from God about such eternal matters but coincide with the rest of the Scriptures.

Notice what they were constantly examining as Paul was preaching to them:

Examining the Scriptures

Paul was preaching the OT Scriptures – 17:2 – it was his custom to enter into a Jewish synagogue and reason with them through the OT written revelation of God

But that was not his only Scriptural text – he was likely revealing the mystery that was hidden in the Scripture

How Christ had to come and live perfectly to satisfy the standard of God – be the perfect son that neither Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Israel, Moses, David, or any of the prophets could be

And how the perfect Son had to die in our place according to the Scriptures – as the perfect and final sacrifice in our place

How God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted Him to the position as the exalted and perfect Son

And how that Son was to return in judgment and in victory to finally gather his people

How all who believe – Jew and Gentile will comprise the new man – the church and display the character of the son until he comes as we proclaim his gospel and make disciples

And everything he taught about the New Testament revelation had to fit perfectly with the intention, logic, prophecy, and detail of all of the rest of the Scriptures.

What is more – these Bereans evidently knew their Bible well enough to be able to cross check Paul.

They were students of the Scripture – always learning – willing to learn more – regularly studying – always reading to study further.

With an honest, objective, judicial mindset – they combed through the Bible to ensure that what they were hearing was in line with what the Bible indicated.

No preacher should be granted god-like status where his teaching should not be examined – studied – that the implications of what he is indicating as he teaches through the Bible are in accordance with what the rest of the Bible teaches.

This says something extraordinary about the Bible and its unity and inerrancy.

This says something extraordinary about accurately and deeply teaching the Bible – it should fit with the rest of the Bible.

This says something extraordinary about the realm of our focus – what does the Bible say – what does it mean by what it says – and then – what impact should it be having on us.

Is that your approach? Do you know how to open your Bible to a book and begin the process of accurately studying it?

Would you know how to evaluate biblical teaching as biblical?

This would be an excellent reason to learn more – study more – be discipled – disciple others – attend Equipping Classes – Growth Groups – discipleship groups.

This idea is an excellent reason why the Sermon Study Equipping Class is so beneficial – studying it each week personally – then hearing it preached – and studying it further

When was the last time you studied with significance and depth on your own or with others so that you could apply what it says.

I remember studying some very difficult theological subjects with a group of men early on a Thursday morning – and watching how men who had strong objections to God's sovereignty in all things – thought through – asked questions about – struggled with – pursued hard what all of the Bible said

about the subject – and then seeing them respond with joy and conviction – even tears – as the power of the word began to shape their convictions – change their feelings and then govern their lives.

It is glorious to see light bulbs go on in eager people zealously examining the Scriptures.

We will never apply beyond what we actually study in Scripture – one sermon will not do it – one series will not be enough.

Application is accurate and intense and practical when the context of your examination is the regular intake of the Scriptures themselves.

The Berean Jews were people with honest hearts, objective minds, a judicial approach, and a Scriptural comparison when they listened to Paul preach – and so should we – consider the 5th and final listening characteristic we see in the Bereans that we should emulate in our own listening to Scripture:

V. LISTEN WITH A DISCIPLINED RESPONSE

Notice how disciplined the Bereans were:

Examining . . . daily

This means Paul was not with them only for one week.

They likely did not meet only once a week.

If it was similar to other occasions in Paul's itinerate ministry – he would meet in public settings, and in private settings – house to house as it were – to think through the Scriptures with people.

It is much like the early church – daily meeting in the temple and from house to house – diligently giving themselves to the Apostles teaching.

Little worthwhile or significant happens in life without some kind of intentional disciplined approach to it.

Again – where we are convicted about the nature of the Bible – we change our schedules to align with what will give us the best ability to regularly engage the Scriptures.

We won't allow other commitments to overshadow this most fundamental commitment – that is to know God.

While there may be season of ebb and flow in terms of diligence – when someone looks at the general swath of a growing Christian's life, the regular disciplined study of the Bible will be clearly visible in their schedule.

And let's just say this again at this point
Discipline is not merely an externally applied willfulness.

Discipline comes from a drive that is more convinced of the value of the effort – than the momentary temptations to sleep in – skip out – do something else.

Providing financially for your family is likely a strong drive that keeps you going to work every day – even when you don't really feel like it.

Losing your livelihood and the consequences that follow are probably a compelling motivation.

Gym memberships swell in January with new and focused members and wane in March attendance because there is really a lack of conviction that thinks it is actually needed or necessary.

A change of diet that sticks is likely more associated with convictions that prevail.

A disciplined approach to the Bible comes from a mindset that believes with conviction what the Bible is actually good for.

Bible intake becomes a daily discipline when it is a heart-motivating conviction.

Undistracted by dishonest excuses

Unhindered by unobjective ideas

Unstopped by shallow approaches

Enlivened by ever growing knowledge

CONCLUSION

This is actually the approach to listening that produces application.

We will listen more deeply when we approach the integrity of our heart more significantly

Clearing any dishonest presuppositions

Avoiding the distractions of personal objections

Not being darkened by surface-level examinations

Not disillusioned through ignorant understanding

Not disheartened by short-lived interests

What keeps you from listening with this kind of mindset – likely more than just employing some new pragmatic mechanics.

And one more thought.

While we have applied this to professing Christians – consider the reality that the Bereans were not Christians – and they had this kind of approach to listening to Paul speak.

Yes – non-Christians can be honest about their heart toward God – they can think about objectively approaching the Bible – give attention to a judicial mindset – learn the Scripture in general and be disciplined – because they are motivated to know God.