

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 7 November 2021**

Children's Talk: Rest in the Lord

- I'm going to be talking to the adults today about sermons.
 - Why there is a sermon as part of the worship service and how they might get the most out of it.
- I'm thinking about similar questions for you guys.
 - Why come to church? What is the point of coming to church?
 - There are lots of right answers to this question. (To worship the Lord; to connect with other people; to learn from the Lord's Word.)
- I want to talk about one particular goal of coming to church: to rest in the Lord.
 - Psalm 37 says, "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him...."
 - And one of the commandments is about having a day of rest.
 - Exodus 20:8-10 (NKJV, modified)
 - ⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of Jehovah your God. In it you shall do no work....
- Why do we need a day of rest?
 - Because you do a lot of hard work during the week.
 - Working hard to do your school work.
 - Working hard with your sport.
 - Working hard to be kind to other people at home.
 - And it's good that you work hard but everyone—including you—need to have times of rest, not just "Go, go, go!" all the time.
- Here's a tricky thing: going to church can still involve hard work.
 - Sometimes it's hard work to get ready for church—to find the right clothes, to get out the door in time, to not be in a bad mood.
 - And then it can be hard work to pay attention.
 - It can be hard work to restrain yourself and only eat a certain number of treats from the tea table.
 - And then even playing with your friends and being kind can be hard work too.
- So I want to encourage you to try to find a few moments when you're at church to try to rest in the Lord.
 - To stop working hard and just be with the Lord for a bit.
 - Maybe before the service starts.
 - Maybe while singing songs.
 - Maybe during the prayer.
 - Maybe during Godly Play.
- You work really hard and that's good.
 - But the Lord also wants you to have a chance to rest.
 - Matthew 11:28-30 (NKJV)
 - [Jesus said to them] ²⁸ "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." *Amen.*

A Sermon About Sermons

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
7 November 2021

Intro

- Imagine that you are one of the people who had grown up with Jesus in Nazareth.
- Now you're an adult; you still live in Nazareth; you're married and in your early 30s.
- You've recently heard that Jesus has been preaching in some synagogues around the region and everyone says that He's amazing.
 - You've also heard some incredible stories about Him healing people.
- Then one Sabbath you go to your local synagogue and you see that Jesus is there and it looks like He's going to do the reading.
 - He stands up; they hand Him the scroll of the book of Isaiah.
 - He unrolls it until He finds a particular place and starts reading.
 - It's a passage that is somewhat familiar to you.
 - It's one of the prophecies about the Messiah who will one day come to rescue Israel.
- Jesus finishes reading, hands the scroll back, and sits down.
- And all the people in the whole synagogue—including you—are just staring at Jesus.
- Finally Jesus says, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).
 - People are confused and stunned by this.
 - And then there's this murmuring in the synagogue as people are saying to each other, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"
- And then Jesus speaks again and says, "You will surely say this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country' " (Luke 4:23).
 - And, honestly, you were thinking that—you had been thinking that, if Jesus really can heal people, then He should remember where He's from and help some of the sick people from His home town.
- Then Jesus says, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:24-27).
 - And His point is clear: He's saying that He's some sort of prophet like Elijah and Elisha but He's not going to use His supposed power to help His own people out.
 - And you know what? It just makes you see red.
 - Who does this guy think He is?
 - Coming back to town, acting like He's better than everyone else.
 - And then saying that He's not going to help us out.
- And so you're not surprised that the people in the synagogue have heard enough and they get up and start forcing Jesus out of the synagogue and out of the city.
 - This guy needs to get out!

- And, once you're out of the city, people see the cliff of the hill that the city is built on and then some of the people have a new idea: they grab Jesus and are going to throw Him down the cliff.
- But then—somehow—He just walks through the middle of them all and leaves with nobody stopping Him.
- What a sermon!
- We're talking about sermons today and it seemed like a good idea to start with an example of a sermon that Jesus preached.
 - We'll talk more later on about some of the dynamics in the story, but you can already see some key elements of a good sermon here:
 - Good selection of passages and stories from scripture;
 - effective delivery;
 - helping people see those scriptures in a new light;
 - and a clear message that moved people to action.
- In this case the people listening also ended up wanting to throw the Preacher off a cliff; but that doesn't mean that it was a bad sermon.
- This is going to be a sermon about sermons.
 - Admittedly that's a bit meta—a bit self-referential.
 - But, if you're hearing this sermon, then you're someone who, at least occasionally, listens to sermons, and if you're someone who attends church regularly, you might hear thousands of sermons in your lifetime.
 - So it seems like it could be useful to talk about what a sermon is for and how you can get the most out of them.
- There's lots that we could talk about.
 - Many, many books have been written about sermons.
 - But, in order to narrow that down we're going to focus more on being on the receiving end of sermons than on the work composing and delivering a sermon.
 - If you're interested in that side of things, I would love to chat to you about it and could recommend some really good, thought-provoking books on the subject.
- We're going to start by talking about why we have sermons at all.
- Then we'll get into more specifics about the purpose of sermons.
- And then we'll end by talking about how to get the most out of even a mediocre sermon.

Why Do We Have Sermons?

- The word "sermon" doesn't actually occur in the Bible.
- We refer to various times that Jesus taught as sermons—like "The Sermon on the Mount"—but it was only much later that people started referring to those sections of teaching as sermons.
- We don't have clear teaching in the literal sense about what a sermon should be but we do have the Lord's example to follow.
- Listen to this passage from the teachings of the New Church about how the function of the Sabbath day changed when the Lord came into the world based on what He chose to do on the Sabbath day.

- *True Christianity* §301

- When the Lord came into the world... the Sabbath day was turned into a day for instruction in divine things, for rest from labours, for meditating on things related to salvation and eternal life, and for loving our neighbour.

It is clear that the Sabbath became a day for instruction in divine things, because the Lord taught on the Sabbath day in the Temple and in synagogues (Mark 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31-32; 13:10)

- The Lord regularly taught on the Sabbath and so it became a “day for instruction in divine things” and “for meditating on things related to salvation and eternal life”.
- In addition to the Lord’s personal example, He also commanded His disciples to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).
- So the simplest answer to why we have sermons is because the Lord taught people on the Sabbath and commanded His disciples to preach to and teach people.
- But notice that there were two other new purposes for the Sabbath day, based on what the Lord did on the Sabbath: it was still a day for “rest from labours” and it also became a day “for loving our neighbour”.
 - How often have you spent part of your Sunday intentionally “loving your neighbour”?
 - Several decades ago, a New Church minister I know planted a church in a location in the States where there had never been a New Church congregation before.
 - He worked hard at it but it didn’t end up lasting.
 - One of his observations in thinking back on what happened is that he now thinks that it was wrong that the main thing that the congregation did when they got together was just listen to him preach.
 - He wonders if things would have gone better if, when they got together each week, the congregation members had done more to love and support each other and more to love and support people in the broader community.
- Having good sermons and teaching is important for the health of a church but it’s certainly not the only important thing.
- I’m not sure what it would look like but I think we at New Church Westville could do more to love our neighbours on Sundays.

What is the Purpose of a Sermon?

- Let’s talk now about the purpose of a sermon.
 - There are a lot of good ways to talk about the purpose of a sermon.
 - Here’s my favourite at the moment: the purpose of a sermon is to provide an opportunity for the Lord to teach and lead a person to heaven.
 - To provide an opportunity for the Lord to teach and lead a person to heaven.
- This idea is based on some passages that I love from the teachings of the New Church.
- Some of the passages are from a book called *Divine Providence*.
 - This book explains that there are certain “laws of Divine Providence” or rules according to which the Lord operates in order to care for us intimately while always preserving our free will.
 - One of the things that the Lord has to do is somehow take a bunch of ignorant and selfish human beings and have them learn enough truth so that those that want to can

choose to live according to that truth and come closer to the Lord and live a more heavenly life.

- It doesn't work to just force feed the knowledge into us or—like in the movie *The Matrix*—just shove a cable in the back of our brains and instantly upload all the knowledge that we need.
- And so, instead, the Lord uses the written Word and teaching and preaching from it to lead people, in freedom, to learn the truth that they need.
- Here's one of the laws of Divine Providence:
 - *Divine Providence* §154
 - It Is a Law of Divine Providence That We Should Be Led and Taught by the Lord, from Heaven, by Means of the Word, and Teaching and Preaching from the Word, and That This Should Happen While to All Appearances We Are Acting Independently
- This law is then explained in more detail.
- The passages explain that the Lord's Word is love itself and wisdom itself and so when a person is taught by the Word they are taught by the Lord Himself who is Divine love and Divine wisdom (*Divine Providence* §172:5).
- And then the passages say this:
 - *Divine Providence* §172:6
 - The Word has to be taught through the agency of parents, teachers, preachers, books, and especially by hearing it read. But still it is not taught by these intermediaries, but by the Lord through them. [Preachers] can, indeed, speak the Word, and convey it to the understanding of many; but they cannot introduce it into anyone's heart, and what is not in the heart perishes in the intellect.
- When you hear the Lord's Word being read and preached about, the Lord is teaching you directly.
 - That's why I say that the purpose of a sermon is to provide an opportunity for the Lord to teach and lead a person to heaven.
 - Like the passage said, as a preacher, I might play a role in helping you come to understand something from the Lord's Word but it's only the Lord who can make it really click for you and it's certainly only the Lord who can make it touch your heart.
- Therefore a good preacher, in any sermon, should always be striving to bring the Lord's Word to you so that You can be taught and led by the Lord in His Word.
- Listen to this passage about what a good priest does:
 - *Doctrine of Charity* §160
 - A priest does... the work of the ministry honestly, justly, and faithfully, when it is the salvation of souls that affects him; and in proportion as this affects him, truths affect him, because by them he is to lead souls to heaven; and he is leading souls to heaven by means of truths when he leads them to the Lord. His love is then diligently to teach truths from the Word, because when he teaches them from the Word he is teaching them from the Lord. For the Lord not only is the Word (John 1:1, 2, 14), but He is also the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6), and He is the Door. He, therefore, who enters into the sheepfold through the Lord as the door, is a good shepherd; but he who does not enter into the sheepfold through the Lord as the door, is a bad shepherd, who is called a thief and a robber (John 10:1-9).

- I love that passage and it reminds me that my goal in writing a sermon should not be just to tell you something interesting but should always be to lead you to the Lord.

We Might Not Want the Lord to Teach Us

- It sounds nice to be taught and led by the Lord directly but it's useful to realise that there is something in us that is not at all comfortable with that and will try to avoid that at all costs.
- In chapel at Kainon School this past week I was talking to the children about the giving of the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai and I was struck by what happens right after the 10 Commandments are given.
 - Exodus 20:18-19
 - ¹⁸ Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."
- We would sometimes rather have an intermediary than deal with God directly.
 - Dealing with the implications that God Himself might be speaking to us is sometimes too terrifying and confronting.
- I think that that's part of why the people in Nazareth had the reaction that they did to Jesus' sermon that I talked about at the beginning.
 - It was much easier and more comfortable to think of Jesus as a guy that they grew up with.
 - Especially if we grew up in the church we can have a similar attitude towards Jesus—He's a nice guy that we grew up with and have some nice memories about.
 - To think of Him as the Messiah and their Saviour was too much for the people.
 - And to think of Jesus Christ from the Bible as the actual God of the universe and someone who is wanting to be present in your life can be rather overwhelming.
 - The people in Nazareth couldn't integrate the idea that Jesus was the Messiah and so they shoved Him right out of their city—which is symbolic of how we might want to push the idea of Jesus being Divine right the way out of our belief system.

How Can You Get the Most Out of a Mediocre Sermon?

- Now let's talk about how to get the most out of a sermon, even a mediocre one.
- Actually, before we do that let's go on a tangent for a second about mediocre sermons.
- It's going to happen.
- We preachers just don't always manage to preach good sermons.
 - We need to know when don't do so well.
 - I read in one book on preaching that, according to one study, "78% of churchgoers never give the preacher any feedback about their sermon" (p.23 *The Art of Effective Preaching* by Rev. Frank S. Rose and Dr. Jeremy H. Rose).
 - I have benefited so much from the brave souls who have had the courage to tell me that they didn't like a particular sermon.
 - Sometimes the sermon has just been overly long or convoluted.

- But there have also been a couple of times when the way I've talked about something has been harmful and I'm very grateful that certain people have been willing to explain to me how what I said affected them so that I've been able to learn how to handle those things better in the future.
- Please give us feedback.
- And now let's talk about how to get the most out of a sermon.

1. Have the Discipline to Process the Sermon

- The first suggestion is to have the discipline to process the sermon mentally.
- Try to articulate in your own words what the message of the sermon was.
 - If it's a not-so-great sermon, that may be quite a challenge but maybe you can pull the ideas together in a way that the preacher didn't quite manage to.
 - I find that it's possible to take in content but not really process it much.
 - One of my sons is very into Transformers at the moment.
 - There are various TV shows and movies about these robots that can transform into various vehicles and other things.
 - I've seen a couple of Transformers movies over the years and my son really wants me to tell him about them but I can't because I didn't bother to try to remember the plot or the characters.
 - In a similar way, I can listen to long podcasts and enjoy them but, if I don't do the work to think back on what was said or what I might want to remember from it, I don't tend to remember much.
 - So try to remember what was said in the sermon and process the ideas for yourself.

2. Reread the Readings

- Something that might help you remember what was said in the sermon is suggestion #2: reread the readings.
- That might help jog your memory but, more importantly, it will give you a chance to think about the readings from the Lord's Word for yourself and see what you notice.

3. Listen in a State of Humility and Worship

- The next suggestion is to try to listen in a state of humility and worship.
- A sermon can be a lot more impactful when experienced as part of a whole worship service with music and prayers and fellowship with other people afterwards.
- I was preaching in Cape Town this past weekend and so I went to watch the recording of Joel's children's talk and sermon from last week.
 - And it was nice to get to hear and see it.
 - And it was also hard to resist the urge to do other things while I was watching.
 - I found myself wanting to open up another tab in my internet browser and process some email while I still listened to the audio.
 - Or sort through things on my desk.
- This is something to consider when you're watching worship services online or after the fact.
 - What can you do to try to still have a state of humility and worship while you watch?
 - Our goal in listening to a sermon should go beyond just mentally processing the ideas in the sermon.
 - We should be trying to be humble and open to the Lord teaching and leading us.

- If you haven't been back to church in-person in a while, you might want to try it out again and see what it's like for you.

4. Look to Application in Your Life

- Another suggestion for how to get more out of a sermon is to look for application to your specific life.
- On one Sabbath day Jesus meets a man who has been unable to get up for thirty-eight years.
 - The Lord says to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk" and he is immediately made well and he picks up his bed and walks (John 5:8-9).
 - The teachings of the New Church tell us that this symbolises taking the teachings that we know and using them to live our lives.
- How can you take the teachings that are in a given sermon and use them to walk?
 - Preachers do have a responsibility to try to help people see how the teachings that they're talking about are useful and can be used but you also need to do the work to make connections for yourself.
 - In Joel's sermon last week that I watched later online he was talking about heavenly leadership and mostly focussing on leadership in society.
 - Towards the end he did point out that the same dynamics that play out in a country can also happen within a family.
 - That was the part that was most applicable for me.
 - But, in order to use those teachings, I had to do the work of thinking about how those teachings relate specifically to me in my family.

Conclusion

- One final thought to wrap things up.
- The role of the preacher and the sermons that we preach is similar, in a way, to the role of John the Baptist.
 - John had an important role to play but he also was very clear that he himself was nothing compared to the Lord and that his role was nothing compared to the Lord's role.
 - His role was to prepare the way for the Lord, not to be the Lord himself.
 - And once John had done his job he needed to get out of the way.
 - In one place he compares his role to that of the friend of the bridegroom at a wedding.
 - The friend of the bridegroom is not getting married to the bride but he's still very happy to get to be at the wedding.
 - John says, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:29-30).
- In your life, I hope that the importance of the quality of the sermon will gradually decrease and the importance of your individual relationships with the Lord will gradually increase.
 - So that, in any sermon, you will be able to hear the Lord teaching you and leading you to heaven.
- *Amen.*