

The multitude of four thousand people were following Jesus for three days in the wilderness. They were listening to him preach. They were feeding on the words of eternal life spoken by the Son of God himself. But they had nothing to eat. Jesus therefore had compassion on them. He took seven loaves of bread, gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to feed the people. He took a few small fish and did the same. He fed the multitude. He satisfied them. By this great miracle, our Lord showed what kind of teacher he is and what kind of teaching he has. He is a kind teacher. When he teaches us his Word, he isn't doing so as a slavedriver with a whip. No, he is driven by compassion to give to us the words of eternal life.

Jesus told his apostles to preach the gospel, to baptize, and to teach all things he has commanded. He is the good Shepherd who gave his life up for his sheep. His sheep hear his voice. Like the multitude who spent three days in the wilderness with Jesus, his church continues to live on the preaching of his Word. It's how he gives us faith and continues to strengthen our faith. Of course, he knows how often we get bored. He knows how hard of hearing we can be. And yet, he doesn't reject us. He shows compassion. He is kind. He wants us to listen to the preaching of his Word, because this is how he gives us rest for our souls and strength to face the trials and temptations of this life.

So this morning, as we gather again to hear the preaching of God's Word, I would like for us to consider how we hear this preaching. The Third Commandment says, "Remember to keep the Sabbath Day holy." This means that we should "fear and love God so that we may not despise preaching and his Word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." Those who preach God's Word need to learn how to preach. But those who listen to God's Word also need to learn how to listen. We shouldn't talk to our brother or sister while God's Word is being proclaimed. We shouldn't tell jokes, play around with our friends, or otherwise distract ourselves and others from hearing the sermon. As Jesus says, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear!" Every one of us, whether in the pulpit or the pew, is called to listen to the Word of God.

But what should we listen for? St. Paul says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, showing what is wrong, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). He says that the Scriptures were written to warn us (1 Cor 10:11). He also says that the Scriptures were written to teach us with the patience and encouragement from the Scriptures. This is all so that we would have the hope of everlasting life (Rom 15:4). When you listen to the Word of God being proclaimed, these are the things you listen for. You listen for the pure teaching. You also listen for the sermon to preach against false teaching. Listen for the sermon to correct misunderstandings about what is pleasing to God and what is sinful. Listen for the sermon to show how God's Word trains us to live the Christian

life. Listen for how God's Word gives us patience, encouragement, and comfort in the midst of trials and temptations. Let's consider each of these things in turn.

First and foremost, the preaching of God's Word teaches. It teaches the Christian doctrine revealed in the Bible. All parts of biblical doctrine center on Christ and what he did to save us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. That God declares the sinner righteous in his sight for the sake of Jesus' obedient suffering and death in his place, and that God gives the sinner the faith to believe that God receives him into his favor and forgives all his sins because of Jesus – this is at the heart of everything taught in the Bible. This means that all biblical doctrine is life-giving. Whether we are learning about God creating the universe by the power of his Word, making man – both male and female – in his own image, establishing the estate of marriage and the gift of children, or we are learning about sin, temptation, prayer, and the Christian life, every single one of these topics of Christian doctrine revealed in the Bible is tied together in that chief topic of Christ the Savior of poor sinners.

For example, our text for today is about Jesus feeding the 4,000 with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. This touches on the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the Word. Jesus is the Creator who made all things by his almighty Word. As true God, the Son of the Father, he has the power to feed both our bodies as well as our souls. This passage also teaches about the holy Christian church. We gather around our Lord's Word in the wilderness of this life. In the meantime, Jesus has compassion on his church, not allowing them to faint or lose heart over the many trials in this life. This passage also teaches about the ministry of the Word. As he had his disciples distribute the bread and the fish, they were merely his humble ministers handing out what he commanded them to hand out. But Christ was the one feeding the people. In the same way, Jesus calls his pastors to preach the gospel and administer his sacraments to his flock. The pastors don't add anything to what Christ has given, no more than his disciples added to the bread and the fish. But by our Lord's command and promise, his beloved lambs are fed with the words of eternal life.

Now, if the sermon is going to include the pure teaching of God's Word, then it should also include the rejection of false doctrine. Christ's people need to be warned against the perverted lies that the devil mingles into God's pure teaching. For example, some people will deny that Jesus actually multiplied seven loaves and a few small fish to feed thousands of people. They deny all the miracles of Jesus. Instead, they claim that these are just made-up stories, which are meant to teach us how to share with one another and be content with what we have. You need to be warned against these kinds of false teachers who lead you away from the majesty of your Savior.

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A sermon should also correct sinful behavior. It's easy for us to fall into the habits of our sinful nature or approve of the sins promoted by the culture. We need to be warned against these things as well. For example, consider how Jesus says that the crowd has been with him for three days. This is written down to correct us when we get too lazy or distracted from listening to God's Word. If these people could listen to Jesus teach for three days without any concern about food, then certainly we should be able to listen to a sermon that is fifteen, twenty, thirty, or even an hour long if it is proclaiming to us the pure Word of God. And we should be able to do so while not thinking about what we are going to have for lunch. Complaining that the church service goes longer than an hour is shameful, and no Christian should seriously complain about that. It's good for us to hear such correction and admonition from God's Word.

A sermon should also serve to train us in Christian living. It should teach us to curb our own sinful flesh and follow the example of Christ. As St. Paul says in our Epistle lesson from Romans 6, don't let your bodies be slaves to sin. Because Christ has set you free from sin, and he promises you eternal life.

Finally, a sermon should give you patience, encouragement, and comfort to walk through the trials of this life. This patience doesn't come from your own resilience or willpower. No, it comes only from the patience and comfort of God in Christ Jesus. Consider again our Gospel lesson. Look at how Christ teaches the people patience, yet he also seeks to comfort them and encouragement. He has compassion. We need his patience, comfort, and encouragement all the time. We still face temptations. The devil, the world, and our own sinful nature continue to harass us. It is only in the patience and comfort of God's Word where we find rest for our souls in the blessed hope of everlasting life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

When you listen to a sermon, you are listening for God's Word to teach you, warn you, train you, and comfort you. In all of this, God's Word gives you hope. Jesus is our kind teacher and compassionate Lord. He teaches us and warns us with the rod of his law. He rebukes us of our sins and leads us in what is good and right. But he doesn't just leave us with a few instructions so that we can fend for ourselves. His doctrine is not some list of rules and principles for us to apply to ourselves in an attempt to make our lives better. No, at the heart of everything our Lord teaches us is the good news of his life, death, and resurrection. At the heart of everything he says to us is his compassion and kindness for us poor sinners.

Jesus gives you his Word, because he knows that you need a good conscience. He knows how easy it is for you to faint and lose strength because of your sin. He knows how quickly you can get overwhelmed by guilt. This is why he gives you his Word. Yes, he has a lot to teach you. Yes, he warns you against sin and error. He certainly trains you. But at the heart

of it all is his compassion and comfort for you. He came to fulfill his Word for you, to take all your sin upon himself, to give you peace with God, and to satisfy you with his goodness and mercy.

If you find yourself struggling to hear God's Word, then listen to what Jesus says. He says, "I have compassion." If you are trying to train your children to listen to God's Word, frustrated that you can't seem to get everyone to sit still, listen to what Jesus says. He says, "I have compassion." If you find yourself grappling with what God's Word says, overwhelmed by your own sin and inability to apply the Bible's teaching to your life, then listen to what Jesus says. "I have compassion." These words of our Savior are the bloodlife of every word he speaks in the Scriptures. They are the force of all of what he teaches. To know that all your sins have been taken away, that God is at peace with you, that his Son clothes you with his own righteousness, and that his Holy Spirit intercedes for you with groaning that is too deep for words – to know this is to know what God's Word is about. It is about giving you hope – a sure hope and confidence – to stand before God by the merits of Jesus Christ.

So of all the things you listen for in a sermon, listen for the gospel. Listen for Christ who lived for you, bore all your sins for you, died for you, was raised for you, and who lives forever to make intercession for you. As you take to heart his instructions, warnings, and training, you can rely and rest upon his words of kindness, forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. They give you patience in the midst of every temptation, comfort in the midst of every affliction, and that sure hope kept for you in heaven by the Father of your Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray:

Oh, grant that in Thy holy Word
We here may live and die, dear Lord;
And when our journey endeth here,
Receive us into glory there. Amen.