

## HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THE SERMON

***“All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, . . . Ezra opened the book.”***

Friends, we in the Lutheran Church have been accused of performing “Lutheran gymnastics,” constantly standing up and sitting down during the worship service. We stand up for the confession of sins, we sit down for the first two readings, we stand again for the gospel reading and then sit down again for the hymn. In some churches, not ours, they stand up again for the reading of the sermon text and sit down for the sermon. Then we stand up after the sermon and sit down for the offering. We stand for the prayers and sit for the third hymn. We stand for the closing prayer and benediction and sit for the announcements until we are told by the ushers to stand and leave.

Instead of complaining about our Lutheran gymnastics, be glad we let you sit down once in a while. It says in our Old Testament reading that the people gathered at daybreak to hear Ezra read the Law of the Lord. The Law of the Lord refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis through Deuteronomy. When Ezra began reading they stood up and remained standing, as far as we can tell, until Ezra stopped reading at noon. That’s five or six hours of standing! Aren’t you glad we practice Lutheran gymnastics?

These believers in our Old Testament reading will be our example today, not that we should stand during the whole service, but how they listened to the Word of God. Today we will learn how we can get the most out of the sermon. First, listen with total humility. Second, let the joy of the Lord give you strength.

### *I. With humility.*

***“All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.”***

When it came time to read the Law of God, the people gathered as “one man.” That’s what we have here. We are one. We are one in faith, one in baptism, one in Christ. This is the joy of being a member of a congregation.

We are also told that men, women, even children gathered that day. Parents, we understand how difficult it sometimes is to get children to sit still in church. You feel you are a nuisance. Don’t feel that way. First, if a child acts up, let’s not all turn around and look. Second, keep bringing children to church. They will learn to sit still sooner or later. Let them know how important church is. Let them witness baptisms. Let them witness communion. Explain communion to them and let them dream of the day they get confirmed. On the drive home or at dinner, ask questions. “What part of the sermon you remember most? What did it say about you? About Jesus?” Help them get the most out of the sermon because it is all about God’s Word.

Our liturgies are Bible passages set to music. So are our hymns. We don’t sing, “Take me out to the ballgame.” No, music appropriate for church is based on the Word. The readings and sermon are central. Then we respond to that Word with song, prayer and the confession of faith. We do not come here to be entertained. That’s why we call it a worship “service” and not a worship “theater.” We come to listen and serve with song and prayer, not to sit back and watch.

But there is one key element to the service: humility. Look at how the people reacted to the Word. ***“Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.”*** The people bowed down during the reading. Bowing shows you are humble. I had a Japanese visitor in church many years ago. As she came through the line to shake hands, I bowed. She bowed lower, and I bowed lower than her. In Japan, you always bow lower than your superior and I tried to show her that the pastor is the servant.

Do you bow when God’s Word is spoken? No, you don’t have to bow and hit your heads on the pew before you. I don’t mean that. But do you bow in the sense that you submit to God’s Word? One of the most dangerous words a person can say after hearing the Word is, “but.” “I know that is what it says, but. . .” This is not humility; this is rebellion! It says we don’t want to submit to God’s Word. “I know I am suppose to love my neighbor, but. . .” “I know I am suppose to forgive, but. . .”

Don’t add “buts” to God’s Word. Be humble before it. It says in Habakkuk, ***“... the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”*** This isn’t some guy offering his opinion. The Bible isn’t a letter to the editor. This is the Lord of the universe. When God speaks, we should accept what he says and take any thoughts, desires, opinions we have and stuff them down the garbage disposal and flip the switch. But we sinful human beings are too arrogant. The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does NOT want to submit to the Lord.

So the Lord humbles us. He will crush us. Take a fine, crystal wine glass and drop two or three 40 pound bags of softener salt on them. The glass will be pulverized. God will crush you. Maybe this is why so many people are afraid of God and his Word. Maybe this is why you and I are so often afraid, because God will crush us. Yes, we did lie, we did lust, we did dishonor

marriage, we did covet, we are lazy, we are stubborn, we did murder, not with a gun, but with hate! As it says in Romans 3, ***“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that EVERY MOUTH MAY BE SILENCED and the whole world held accountable to God.”*** Stop adding “but” to God’s Word. Stop offering excuses. Be silent and humble before the Lord.

## *II. The joy of the Lord is our strength.*

Why does God crush us like that? Just like you punch and crunch your pillow to fluff it up, God is humbling us to save us. ***“Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.””*** The people wept because they were ashamed they hadn’t listened to the Word for a very long time, showing how far they have fallen away from the Lord. It exposed their sins. It crushed them. But Nehemiah and Ezra comforted them. They told them this is a day of rejoicing, not mourning, a day of eating the best of food instead of fasting. This is a day God turns sadness into joy.

What can turn sadness into gladness? The Joy of the Lord, and what is that joy? Let me quote you from Romans five. ***“For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through him? Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have no received reconciliation.”*** While we were his enemies, he made everything right through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. We owe God nothing now. We don’t owe him death or hell or even a holy life. Instead, God gives salvation to us as a gift through faith alone. This is what makes God happy, to save us. Now that joy is our strength.

Let me show you how that joy affected the Apostle Paul. Sitting in prison, he wasn’t sure if he would die or not. Yet he confessed that he didn’t know what would be better, to go on living or to die and be with Christ in heaven. The joy of Christ and heaven gave him strength to be happy with both. Later in the same letter he confessed he was happy whether he had plenty or nothing. Want to be happy if you are rich or poor? Let Christ be your Savior and this will give you the strength to endure even the toughest times. In 1 Timothy Paul knew he was going to die, but he looked upon it as a gift and how he will receive the crown of righteousness. The joy of the Lord gave him strength to face death because of Christ.

That is the strength Jesus gives to you and me and every believer! There is nothing that will overcome us, not even death or the grave. We can endure anything and everything through Christ.

Friends, you come to church. Make the most of it. Get the most you can out of the sermon and readings and the whole service. How? Humble yourself before God and his Word. Then let the joy of the Lord, let Jesus and his death and resurrection, be your strength. Amen.