

Listening to Sermon Podcasts - John Sweetman

Many people are now regularly listening to sermon podcasts. Is this a positive or negative trend? This article explores the advantages of and problems with listening to sermon podcasts and provides some helpful guidelines for using podcasts effectively to bring spiritual growth.

Many younger leaders (and some older ones) are regularly listening to podcasts of sermons. Local churches are now producing podcasts of the weekly sermons, but lots of sermons we listen to come from the USA.

I have a friend who shared with me that he was struggling spiritually. His passion for God was diminishing and he was losing interest in church. He works from home and listens to the radio a lot while he is working, so (among other things) I suggested that he try listening to preaching podcasts while he worked. To help I suggested some preachers who I thought may be helpful (including Tony Campolo, Mark Driscoll, and Erwin McManus).

He spoke to me a month later and said that his spiritual life had been transformed. He didn't agree with everything that he heard. For example, he (a political conservative) found Tony Campolo a stretch on some social/political issues. But he said that he was enjoying it immensely and was really growing spiritually. His relationship with God had come alive. He said that he now had to fight to limit himself to three podcasts a day.

In this article, I want to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of listening to sermon podcasts.

Good reasons for listening to sermon podcasts

1. *Anyone can access solid, biblical input.* Up until recently, frankly most of the media preaching was fluff at best (e.g. many TV evangelists). But now you can hear thoughtful, biblical preaching from your communicator of choice, downloaded on your own iPod. Many of the sermons are really worth listening to.
2. *You can learn from Scripture and over time develop a healthy, biblical theology.* Good teachers of Scripture can make biblical passages come alive. As you saturate yourself with God's Word (not just on Sundays), you will develop a more robust biblical worldview.
3. *Preachers can get lots of fresh ideas.* There's nothing like listening to other good preachers to inspire and inform your preaching. I learn lots from other preachers and podcasts have given me access to far more preaching than I've had before. So if you're a preacher that mainly gets to hear your own voice, listen to podcasts.
4. *For many people, listening to podcasts is more convenient and accessible than reading Christian books.* You can really only read when you have free time and some energy. But you can listen to podcasts while you're driving or exercising or going to sleep. This increases the opportunity for teaching input.
5. *Many people are more attuned to learning by listening than reading.* One younger pastor said, "I am one whose devotional life and ministry development has been revolutionised by the world of podcasts. I have reading skills that need to be developed (quite a lot) but my listening skills far exceed my reading. Therefore, podcasting has been a huge blessing to me, as I love to listen."
6. *It's all free.* You don't have to buy books or DVDs, or go to conferences. You can just download podcasts straight from the internet. It costs nothing, so there are no financial limitations on what you can access.

7. *You can listen to some of the best preachers in the world.* Now I know that the best preachers are not always those who preach to large crowds, but many of the best thinkers and communicators are now podcasting. You can sit with their congregations and listen to their messages every week.
8. *You can access a wide range of theological perspectives.* You can learn from preachers who see things differently from you, as well as those who think the same. This is healthy.
9. *It allows for cross-church influence.* In the early church, there were apostolic and prophetic roles. Some Christian leaders, like Paul, influenced Christians across churches. We have tended to neglect these broader leadership roles and have focused on the autonomy of the local church and its ministry and leadership. Podcasting may allow the functioning of apostolic and prophetic cross-church ministries as some leaders earn a wider hearing through the spiritual authority and wisdom displayed in their teaching.

Possible problems with listening to sermon podcasts

1. *People can become dissatisfied with or critical of "normal" preachers.* If you listen to the best preachers in the world all the time, then you may well find yourself bored with the preacher you hear every Sunday. Who can compete with the top communicators?
2. *You can't assess the character or culture of the preacher.* Both these issues are vitally important in preaching. What do you really know about the character of the preacher you are listening too (apart from what they say)? What do you know about their context? What is their church like? What is their community like? How does this influence their preaching?
3. *A church can be divided if people develop different core values to their church* by listening to a particular preacher. Preachers all have their own theology and consequent core values and these impact their congregation. If you just listen to one podcaster, it is likely that over time you will imbibe their core values. If these core values are different from that of your church, then there will be tension. I'm not saying that this is necessarily bad - maybe the core values of your church are wrong - but it has the potential for considerable criticism and pain.
4. *New preachers will model themselves on preachers with far greater God-given giftings.* A beginning young preacher in a local church recently spoke for well over an hour to an evening congregation and still wasn't finished. He was modelling his approach on podcasters who can easily hold congregations for over an hour of preaching. The congregation suffered.
5. *People may stop coming to church because they're getting enough biblical input already.* They will therefore not hear what God is saying through the Spirit and the local preacher to the specific community and individuals with whom they serve.
6. *There's often little opportunity for listeners to process what they are hearing.* You can't talk with a podcast preacher. You don't usually talk about their sermon in a small group. Their input avoids healthy critique.
7. *There's the problem of itchy ears* - listening to what suits and appeals to us, not what we need to hear. Paul said, "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." (2 Tim. 4:3). This is always a danger when we control the input.

Guidelines for make positive use of sermon podcasts

1. *Make listening to podcasts a discipline in your life.* Someone I spoke to today said that he listens while he's walking or mowing the lawn. My son listens while he's travelling in his car. Some can listen while they study (I have no idea how) or work or do craft. Now we all need time to relax and do nothing and time to listen to music, but there are probably some wasted moments in our lives when we could profitably listen to a sermon. Find these times and use them.
2. *Try to find someone who is listening to the same podcasts.* That way you can talk about what is being said. Learning occurs best when you talk things over.
3. *Listen to a variety of podcast preachers.* By all means have your favourite/s, but there is so much on offer that it's a pity if you just stick to what is familiar. Go on - be bold. For example, I prefer pastoral preachers, but it's good for me to listen to a prophet/preacher every now and then. I don't always agree, but it makes me think, and sometimes God speaks.
4. *Don't let podcasts woo you away from live preaching.* Some local preachers may not be as interesting or thoughtful as podcast preachers, but they are preaching God's truth in your context to your people and they need to be heard. Something happens in the live event that gets under our consumeristic guard. If you find listening to podcasts diminishing your passion to hear local preaching, beware.
5. *Find out more about the preachers you're listening to.* Ask questions like, "What is their theology?" "What sort of culture do they preach to?" "What are their priorities?" Sometimes you will find out these things by listening to their sermons, but sometimes not. You can find out more information by internet searches or talking to someone with more theological expertise.

Happy listening! May you make the most the opportunities God is providing for this generation and use technology wisely.

Let me finish with a response from an older pastor on this issue:

Thanks for bringing up this very important topic on podcasting. While reading your reflections, my mind went to the apostle Paul in Philippians 1. He didn't focus on the preacher or his motive but rejoiced that the gospel was being preached. Our young adults are listening to preaching more than ever before thanks to podcasting. It is a fantastic opportunity to expose them to good preaching. It is true that us 'ordinary' preachers have a hard time competing, but in my experience, young people who are truly growing are focusing on the word and not the preacher.

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