

**Listen Up! “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).**

The Bible begins with an account of creation. According to Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth by his powerful word (Genesis 1:3-31). After the man and the woman, by a combination of deception, doubt and disobedience, had fallen into sin, they hid from God. ‘But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”’ (Genesis 3:9). From that point on, the call of God is very significant in the Bible. The word of God, the call of God and the response of men and women is at the heart of the Biblical message, not least through the ministry of the prophets.

The first person to be called a ‘prophet’ in the Old Testament was Abraham (Genesis 20:7) but the standard for the role of prophet was set by Moses, the man who stood before the people because he had been made to stand before God. While prophets used symbols and what might be termed ‘prophetic drama’ (cf. Jeremiah 19), the great emphasis was on the spoken word, ‘Thus saith the Lord’. A substantial part of the Old Testament is given over to the books of the prophets. In our modern division of the Old Testament, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are joined by the scroll of the twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) but in the Hebrew Bible these ‘Latter Prophets’ were preceded by the books of the ‘Former Prophets’, namely, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

When we turn to the Gospels, we find great emphasis given to the words of the Lord Jesus. At the core of Matthew’s Gospel is a section on the teaching ministry of Jesus – this includes five great blocks of teaching; the Commissioning of the Twelve (Matthew 8-10), Parables of the Kingdom (Matthew 11-13), the Life of the Kingdom Community (Matthew 14-18), the Little Apocalypse (Matthew 19-25) and, most famous of all, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 3-7). The other Gospels also give great attention to what Jesus said and, while it is appropriate to be pastorally sensitive to people with various impairments and disabilities, one of the identifying features of the Christ was that the deaf heard (Matthew 11:5, Luke 7:22).

Since the ministry of the church began, preaching has been the primary way of proclaiming the gospel message. The book we commonly call the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ is by no means limited to what the Apostles did. Rather, there is a significant emphasis on what the Apostles said. Speeches form a significant part of Acts and those of Peter, Paul and Stephen make up a quarter of the book. In fact, there is sense in which the historical narrative is there to provide a context for the speeches, which often follow the basic structure that gives an explanation of what is going on (*apologia*) and a proclamation of the basic apostolic message (*kerygma*). Preaching on the day of Pentecost, Peter pressed home the point, ‘God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2:36). From the account of the sermon, Luke dramatically switches to narrative. ‘When the people heard this,’ Luke reports, ‘they were cut to the heart’ (Acts 2:37). While it is clear that faithful gospel preaching in the power of the Spirit gave impressive results, it is important to notice that the people responded to the gospel message that they had heard.

With the Bible's emphasis on the spoken word, preaching, teaching and prophesying, it is not surprising that it also gives attention to hearing. God made the ears (Proverbs 20:12) and he opens our ears (Job 33:16, 36:10; Isaiah 50:5). However, 'hearing' goes beyond just sensing something audible. It has the implication of paying attention (Ezekiel 40:4) and understanding (Matthew 15:10, Mark 7:14). When the Lord Jesus wanted to give something special emphasis or show that there was a meaning beyond the immediate or the obvious he would say, 'he who has ears, let him hear' (Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Mark 7:16; Luke 8:8), something which is echoed in the letters given to the ancient churches in Revelation (Revelation 2:28; 3:6, 13, 22).

The imperative, 'listen to me!' or similar, is repeated in numerous places throughout the Bible as is the exhortation to pay attention. While listening to the word of the Lord is commended, judgment comes upon those who will not listen to the voice of the Lord (1 Samuel 12:15; Malachi 2:2). The Lord Jesus gave the disciples particular instructions as to what to do if the people of a town refused to hear, namely, to shake the dust of their feet (Matthew 10:14; Mark 6:11).

Rather than go through endless references in both the Old and New Testaments noting people who listened or who would not listen to the word of God and their reasons for responding as they did, we move now to a fuller discussion of just a few passages from both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Let's begin with Samuel. Eugene Peterson, who translated the Bible in a lively paraphrase called *The Message*, entitles the passage of the call of Samuel in the temple (1 Samuel 3), 'Speak, God, I'm ready to listen'. Many of us will have known the outline of the story since our childhood. The chapter begins with the observation that in those days, the time of the Judges, 'the word of the LORD was rare' (1 Samuel 3:1). At night, the boy Samuel heard God's voice clearly and, concluding that Eli, the old priest was calling him, Samuel ran to him but Eli had not called. This happened a second time. The narrator offers the observation, 'Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him' (1 Samuel 3:7). However, when Samuel presented himself before Eli a third time, Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore, Eli told Samuel, 'Go and lie down and if he calls you, say, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening"' (1 Samuel 3:7). Times of spiritual famine were not unknown in the Old Testament (cf. Amos 8:11-12). It seems that Samuel did not yet know that it was the Lord who was speaking to him but his openness to serving God would soon enable him to know the Lord. It was because Samuel listened that he was able to speak. Again, it is the important combination of God speaking and his servant being ready to listen.

After the return of the exiles from Babylon to Judah, Ezra read the Law before the assembly. It was effectively a public proclamation of the scriptures attended by all the people, men, women and children old enough to understand, assembling as one man (Nehemiah 8:1-2). The attendance of the women marks a particularly solemn occasion. While we cannot be completely certain what the expression 'the Book of the Law of Moses' means an obvious interpretation is that it is the five books of the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy) commonly called 'The Pentateuch'. The public reading began on the first day of the seventh month which was the New Year's Day of

the civil calendar. The people seem to have stood for about five or six hours, listening attentively to the Book (more accurately 'scroll') of the Law (Nehemiah 8:3). In the ancient world, it was common to read aloud but not only did Ezra the scribe read the Law but it is clear that he and the Levites expounded the scripture passage, 'making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read' (Nehemiah 8:8). This powerful exposition of the word of God to an attentive people brought about a profound reaction (Nehemiah 8:9) though the people were commanded not to weep, despite being overwhelmed.

In the New Testament, the account of the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8) gives a special insight into the nature of Jesus. The bright cloud that appeared was reminiscent of the way that God appeared at different times in the Old Testament, not least to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:5-7, 29-35). The voice that spoke from within the cloud was undoubtedly the voice of God saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' (Matthew 17:5). To the endorsements given at Jesus' baptism, the command is given to the disciples, 'Listen to him!' not least because this is the only way that they will understand the mission of Jesus as Saviour and Messiah. The glory of the Son of Man will not be revealed again in the same way until he has been raised from the dead (Matthew 17:9). In short, if they have not taken Jesus' words seriously before, they must surely do so now for the transfiguration cements and confirms in a powerful way Jesus' identity and mission. Throughout the rest of his ministry, Jesus will lead Peter and the others to a clearer comprehension, and all that is required is that they stop talking long enough to listen to him.

At Philippi (Acts 16:14-15), the Apostles met Lydia, a woman from Thyatira who sold expensive purple cloth. Luke comments that 'the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message'. The interesting thing is that Lydia was also in the right place at the right time. She was learning faith in the company of believers and, in that company, God spoke to her. It shows that listening to the word of God is a spiritual activity and will often take place in a spiritual context. James Wilson gives an account of people who find it difficult to listen. He observes that when you tell someone about your difficulties (be it a story of car troubles, or a medical issue or a personal problem), the person whose turn it is to listen suddenly interrupts to tell the story of his or her car troubles, medical issues or personal problems. In a sermon, Dr Wilson continues, 'are you listening right now, or are you evaluating? Are you trying to hear a word from the Lord right now, or are you grading the preacher?' (Wilson 2009). Lydia was listening and, when she was listening, God spoke to her. Paul spoke to her through her ears, but the Lord spoke to her through her heart. While it is true that Lydia's life was changed because her heart was open and she listened to the message that is not the whole story. It was not only Lydia who listened, but also the Apostle Paul. For Paul had seen the vision of the man of Macedonia and had heard the call, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us' (Acts 16:9), a timely reminder that the preacher cannot speak the word of the Lord without first hearing the word of the Lord.

Despite the many of examples throughout the Bible of people listening to the word of the Lord, there are many examples of people not listening. While it is relatively easy for the person who does not listen to blame the speaker, the listener, perhaps more accurately 'the non-listener', must also take responsibility. One of the main reasons for being a 'non-listener' is sin – for the 'non-listener' is, consciously or subconsciously, aware that the word of God challenges sin, which is

both unbelief and disobedience. The prophet Isaiah warned an obstinate nation, ‘These are a rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD’s instruction’ (Isaiah 30:9). The Apostle Peter lights on this when he reminds the believers that if they are going to ‘crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it (they) may grow up in (their) salvation’ (1 Peter 2:2), they should first rid themselves of ‘all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind’ (1 Peter 2:1). Conviction of sin demands true repentance and this inevitably brings about an increased desire to hear more of God’s truth, thereby promoting spiritual growth.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds the early Christians of the danger of drifting and exhorts them by saying, ‘we must pay closer attention to what we have heard’ (Hebrews 2:1). In this, the reader is reminded of the twin issues of authority and accountability. Until we have a clear conception of God’s right to rule over our lives, then we can have no sense of accountability to his word. The text of scripture can never speak to us if we rest in a self-centred authority that judges all of life from a personal perspective rather than from the perspective of the word of God. While the preacher has responsibility to speak faithfully, the congregation also has a commitment and responsibility to listen carefully, taking our personal and moral accountability before God seriously.

In a great passage on both preaching and hearing, speaking and listening, Paul reminds us that preaching the good news is necessary for people to hear and be saved (Romans 10:14). While there are times to focus on preaching or speaking, there are also times to focus on hearing or listening for ‘faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ’ (Romans 10:17). Methodist minister and New Testament Professor at Durham, the late C. K. Barrett, said, ‘Christ must be heard either in his own person, or in the person of his preachers, through whom his own word is spoken; otherwise faith in him is impossible.’

R. L. Thomas (1992:351) reminds us that Jay Adams once observed:

Too many laymen speak about the preaching event as if it were a one-way street, as if the responsibility for what transpires when the Bible is proclaimed rests solely on the shoulders of the preacher. But that’s not so! Effective communication demands competence from all parties.

Thomas then outlines three vital principles that will aid the listener to gain the most from Biblical preaching. Firstly, there needs to be a sense of anticipation. The listener must be personally ready to hear the word of God. People who are tired or hungry are not receptive listeners. How we use Saturday evening will impact on how receptive we are on Sunday morning. Most of all, the listener needs to be prayerfully prepared to attend a spiritual event through which God will speak. It is important to pray both for the preacher and for the ability to listen and understand what God communicates (Psalm 119:17-18). This is the responsibility of the whole Christian community. Secondly, there needs to be a commitment to attention, diligent preparation of the soil making it ready to receive the good seed. If God has called, equipped and gifted godly preachers to preach his word faithfully then the listeners need to fulfil their responsibility in gathering to hear what God says through his duly appointed servants. Thirdly, there needs to be a commitment to applying the word of truth, developing the right attitude, including confession and opening one’s heart to hearing the truth, and not simply talking about

wanting to hear the preached word but being committed by our actions to coming under its sound that we may listen and understand it.

In practical terms what congregations must appreciate is that we have to learn to listen to the word of God all over again. What does it say to the preacher (and indeed to the whole church community) when the congregation sit at the back of the church? What does it say about us as a Christian community when people are casual or indifferent, even in their posture and demeanour, during the reading of the Holy Scriptures and the preaching of the word of God? What sort of environment do we create for the proclamation of the word of God? And what message do we send to the preacher and to the wider community when we suggest, if only partly in fun, that the sermon is something to be endured and that the quicker that it is over the better.

For many Christians, Sunday's sermon is their main, if not only, regular Christian teaching. To encourage the preacher it would be good to sit as near to the front as is comfortable, to concentrate totally on the preacher and what is being said, to give visual encouragement to the preacher, offering eye contact and perhaps indulging in mild head nodding. Pentecostal friends feel able to go further by giving verbal encouragement to the preacher but anything other than bland indifference would be good. It's important to listen with an open mind and an open heart.

Whatever an individual churchgoer might feel about the sermon, it is probably true to say that the sermon has meant a lot to the preacher, who has put considerable time and effort into preparation. That being the case, the listener could at least afford the preacher the courtesy of putting some time and effort into listening. When listening to a Biblical or expository sermon, it is always helpful to have a Bible in your hand. It may also be useful to have a notebook – not necessarily to take extensive notes but at least to write down the outline of the sermon and the main points. Like everything else, active listening improves with practice. So, pay attention, show that you are listening, and most of all respond appropriately to the preacher and most of all to the word of God – in short, 'Listen up!'

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