

“Are You Listening?”

Jesus Christ was the greatest teacher in all the world. His messages were simple but profound, and appealed to the lowliest of men, yet plumbed the greatest depths of truths known to the minds of men. He confounded the most elite scholars of His day with His answers to their questions, and His questions that they could not answer. We don't know how many people heard the Son of God speak while He was on this earth, but I can promise you this: no one was ever the same after they heard Him preach. We read in the gospels how some went away angry, some speechless, some walked away with hope because of something Jesus said. Even today, it is impossible to hear the words of Jesus and not have a response that will affect eternity. That makes *how* we listen and whether or not we listen to Jesus and to the word of God incredibly and, in fact, eternally important.

John 12:48 “...the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.”

Whether I receive His word and obey it or I reject it doesn't change the fact that one day, I will answer to God in relation to what He said. So, what Jesus said is not only important; the hearer has a grave responsibility. Our Lord illustrated that in one of His great parables, the parable of the sower, recorded in **Luke 8**. A parable is an example or illustration, much like a speaker uses today when trying to get an important or difficult point across. In this parable, Jesus was talking about what we do with His word when we hear it. He tells us it's like a farmer that goes out into his field and plants seed. That seed falls on all types of soil, some fertile and some infertile. The savior says that that's the way it is with us when we hear the truth: some listen to God and allow His word to take root in their hearts and produce the fruit that God intended; others have a heart that is hard and stony, so the seed just lays there until the birds come and carry it away; or their heart, like some soil, is so shallow or so overgrown with weeds and thorns until whatever grows is not going to do very well. It will eventually die. That leads us to ask the question: what kind of soil is your heart?

Luke 8:18 “Take heed therefore how ye hear...”

From time to time, my wife will accuse me of not listening very well. To be honest, often I accuse her of the same thing. We've had a lot of arguments where she tries to remind me of something she says she once told me, and I don't remember that. To which she'll reply, “That's because you don't listen to me!” Sound familiar? Sometimes, we misunderstand one another. We think we're listening, but we're really not, or we're listening just enough to get it wrong. But if men today would listen—truly listen—to the word of God!

That's really the source of many of our problems in religion today: we're not listening to what God is saying. It's very difficult to find people these days who will stop long enough to even let someone speak with them about the Bible, and there are even fewer who really listen when it's spoken. But listening is a skill that we must acquire if the word of God is going to do us any good. That's what Jesus said when He warned us in the application of His great parable of the sower when He said to *take heed how we hear*.

First of all, some people hear the word of God **indifferently**. That was certainly the case with Pontius Pilate of old. Here was a powerful man who held the Lord's fate in his hands. Here he was, face to face with the Son of God, and had to admit that he could find no fault in Jesus. The Jews had trumped up false charges against Christ, but Pilate could see through all of that. The problem was—and consequently, is a problem with a great many people today—Pilate didn't really care. He was the

governor of that part of the Roman Empire, and he cared little about the Jews' religion or about what they did with their religion, as long as they remained in submission and bondage to Caesar. Jesus was no threat to him, and the idea that Jesus was a King that threatened the rule of Rome? To Pilate, that was laughable! He just wanted the whole thing to go away. The whole matter was a bother, a nuisance to him, to even have to make such a judgment. Here is a part of the Lord's defense to Pilate:

John 18:37 "...and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice."

But Pilate was unimpressed. You recall that with a shrug of the shoulders, Pilate flippantly said, *What is truth?* Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who have that very attitude toward the whole concept of truth, and more specifically, the Bible. Now, that's not to say that they despise the Lord, or that they view themselves as enemies of Christ. They're not necessarily antagonistic toward God or Christianity. They're just really indifferent to what the savior says. They don't believe that anyone has the right to lay claim on the truth. In fact, many people today don't believe that there is such a thing as *absolute truth*. They're indifferent about the word of God.

Pilate finally gave in to the demands of the Jewish leaders, as we know, and he handed Jesus over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified. As he did, he washed his hands in a basin of water, saying that he was washing his hands of any guilt in the death of Christ. But the blood of Jesus stained the hands of Pilate that day, and he went to the judgment laden with the guilt of his cowardice and his deadly indifference. His hands are bathed in the blood of the Son of God.

You, like Pilate, may dismiss the truth. You may dismiss the word of God. Like him, you may think it's a nuisance, a bother. There are many people who want to look at the Bible as merely a classic work of literature or an inspirational message. When they're down and out, they want to open it and find some little platitude or passage that will make them feel better or lift them up, but they're really not interested in listening to what God has to say. They're certainly not interested in conforming their lives to what the Bible says.

You may put the word of God off to another time. Maybe you feel like you have more pressing issues. Friend, you're making a tragic mistake, because the word of God is going to determine where you spend eternity. It amazes me today, that people want to have a Christianity without the very thing that reveals Christianity; that is, the Bible. As I said a moment ago, they may use the Bible to justify themselves or to pick them up or make them feel good wherever they find it to be agreeable. But they don't see the word of God as it is: an eternal message, God's blueprint for their lives.

You may be indifferent about the stock market, politics or anything else, but you're making an eternal mistake if you brush the word of God aside. Jesus is saying in the parable of the sower, *take heed how you hear*. Don't be like that seed that fell on a rock and the devil came, like the birds of the air, and took it away so it could never produce faith unto salvation. Don't be like that seed that falls onto shallow and stony soil so that it cannot grow and thrive and be fruitful, but rather is choked out. Don't be like that seed that's covered up and surrounded by and choked with the cares of life. Jesus says, *take heed how you hear*. It's a precious opportunity to hear the word of God preached, and one that many have not had the privilege of having. Many have neglected the opportunity, many have underestimated and despised the opportunity. But, friend, it is a precious opportunity that God has given you to hear the word of God, and it will affect where you will spend eternity, so *take heed how you hear*.

Secondly, there are those who hear the word of God with a **prejudiced, biased heart**. That is, they don't really look to the word of God for the answers; they look to it to justify the answers they've already arrived at. In other words, some people filter what they hear with the traditions and prejudices of their own religion. It's very difficult to get people to honestly listen to the Bible. I mean, to lay aside the preconceived ideas that people have about the Bible and just take it for what it says. That is a tendency and a great temptation to every single one of us, I suppose, but we have to guard against it lest we allow our prejudices to blind us to the truth.

Now, the Jews of Christ's day did exactly that. The religion revealed in the Old Testament had undergone some radical changes by the time that Jesus came into the world. Hundreds of years had allowed the traditions of the Jews to creep in and take the place of what God's law actually said. The result is that the religion of the Pharisees, by the time that Jesus came upon the scene, was not the religion of Moses, but was the religion of the Jewish elders. It was based on their traditions that had evolved, rather than a desire to actually do what God had commanded.

Many times when people say that we should follow God's word and they demand a strict adherence to the word of God, they are charged with or labeled a "Pharisee." People say, *don't be like the Pharisees*. Friend, Christ's complaint with the Pharisees was NOT that they contended that men should obey the word of God; His complaint was with their hypocrisy, because they claimed to go by the word of God when in reality, they only cared about the traditions that had come about after the word of God had been penned. They were actually disobeying the word of God as a result of following after their human traditions. The law of God had become so polluted by their traditions that their religion was unacceptable to the Lord. Thus, Jesus said this about them:

Mark 7:7-9 "Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition."

You see, they twisted and perverted the scriptures to make them fit, and allow for their own traditions and practices. They ignored the word of God when they were confronted with what it said in its purity and originality. They criticized the Lord and His disciples, not because they disobeyed the law of Moses, because they didn't. They criticized them because they actually went by the law instead of conforming to the traditions of the Pharisees. In fact, they so resented the Lord for His interpretation of the law that they plotted to kill Him. That's the reason that they finally crucified Him: what He said didn't agree with their prejudiced understanding of the scriptures.

The Old Testament prophets clearly said that a Messiah would come and deliver them, and a King would rise up in the tradition of David and rule over them. But, of course, they had become so worldly and carnally minded that they thought this King would be nothing more than an earthly ruler who would come riding in on his white horse and break the back of the Romans and make the Jews a great nation on the earth. But that wasn't the mission of Christ at all. When He came claiming to be their King, teaching principles like meekness, humility, turning the other cheek when smitten, loving your enemies and doing good to those who do evil to you...well, they saw Him as nothing more than a blasphemer, worthy of death. How dare a homeless, penniless pacifist reject from Nazareth come claiming to be the Son of God and the great King over God's people! So, they killed Him. They killed Him. You remember what Jesus prayed in His dying hour? **"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"** (Luke

23:34). And they really didn't. They were ignorant of their own scriptures and their view was so clouded by the concept that they had of their coming King, that they didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah when He came. If you go back and look at the prophecies of the Old Testament, and you lay them alongside the life and deeds and sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ, there's no doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. It's one of the most wonderful properties of the Bible that affirms our faith, that it IS the word of God: how that we can look at those things written hundreds of years before and see them so perfectly fulfilled in the life of Jesus the Christ. Yet, the people who lived in Jesus' own day, who had the oracles of God committed to them and had the law—they missed Him. They completely missed Him because they read the word of God through the filter of their own biases, prejudices and traditions.

Religion today is filled with traditions that you cannot read anything about in the Bible. People today take those traditions for granted until they actually reject what the Bible does say, OR they twist and mutilate it to make it fit their doctrine. There are many examples we could discuss. Let's notice just a couple.

Instrumental music in worship, for example, was never used in the early church and was never spoken of by Christ and His apostles. We read where they were told to sing (**Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16**). But Jesus and the apostles never used instrumental music and the early church never used it. Not only is the New Testament silent about it, but church history also shows us that that is the case. That should come as no surprise, but take out your Bible and check. Look at your church history. Instrumental music actually began in the Catholic church 600 years after the apostles lived and the church was established. It's a tradition of man; not a commandment of God. People look at you like you've lost your mind if you suggest that it's an unscriptural innovation.

Also, you have infant baptism and sprinkling. Those are church traditions; not an apostolic practice. Many of the things that constitute religious service and practice today, many of the formalities and rituals that you see in so-called "Christian worship" today—if you'll just research them, you'll find that they are nothing more than human traditions, and were simply not taught by the apostles nor practiced in the first century church.

What sayeth the scriptures? That's the question. And are we willing to listen to the scriptures? Are we willing to lay aside all that we have taken for granted and to take the word of God for what it says? Or do we read it through the glasses of tradition and prejudice? You might be surprised to learn that what you have believed for a long, long time is merely rooted in human tradition, and is therefore wrong. It is steeped in tradition and not revelation. *Take heed how you hear.*

Thirdly, some hear **without conviction**. That is, they hear what the Bible says, but it doesn't *move* them to obedience. There may be any number of reasons why, but the point is, the word is not mingled with *faith*. There are many people, multitudes of people, who hear the word of God in this way: they acknowledge that the Bible is true; they will even acknowledge to you what the Bible says about one thing or another, but it doesn't move them to do anything about it.

The book of **Acts** tells us about a man who heard the word without any conviction, and it's a very sad case. Paul was given the privilege of preaching to some very notable men, and one of them was the Roman Procurator, Felix. Now, Felix was an unscrupulous ruler, and in addition to having three wives, he considered himself capable of committing any crime and avoiding punishment because of his influence with the courts. He was a wicked and hardened man. Paul, on one occasion, had to stand before him

after he was arrested for disturbing the peace. The Jews had come up with a list of charges and they wanted to have Paul put to death. Paul went before Felix at least three times, and the third time Felix called for him, he gave Paul the opportunity to make his case for the gospel. What a tremendous opportunity that was for Paul!

Acts 24:24-25 “...he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.”

You know, Paul’s sermon is a sermon that I wish I had a recording of. I wish that such things could have been preserved for the ages, audibly, in that time. It must’ve been something to hear, something to read. It must’ve been a powerful sermon, because the Bible says that it had Felix *shaking*. I’ve seen people react that way when they’ve heard the word of God, to some degree. I’ve preached on the judgment of sinners, I’ve seen and heard others preach and warn of the judgment to come, and I’ve seen people outside of Christ moved to tears. And you would’ve thought that they would’ve bolted down the aisle at the first invitation. But, no. and Felix didn’t either. He sent Paul away, saying he would send for him when it was more convenient.

You know, the Bible never says another word about the life of Felix and whether he ever became a Christian. Felix rather used procrastination to stay in control of his own destiny. In other words, he will determine when and to what extent these matters are considered in the future. He hides behind a busy schedule. And how many people have fooled themselves into thinking that by not deciding, they have kept their options open? And in a more convenient time, they’ll give some consideration to the claims of Christ, and give those matters the serious attention they deserve.

Let me remind you of something: indecision IS a decision. Indecision is a choice to remain where you are. Perhaps, outside of God’s saving grace. With your only prospect the judgment and condemnation of God (**John 3:18,36**).

We never read another word about Felix after that. It’s pretty safe to assume that one day, he died, and was lost, because it’s never convenient to become a Christian. You have to lay aside the many hindrances and decide that you’re going to yield to the Lord. The word of God must be able to lodge in your heart to produce faith. Are you listening, in order to obey what you hear? Hearing isn’t enough.

Hebrews 11:6 “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”

Rather, the kind of hearer that I want to be and that you should want to be is found in **Acts 2**. When the people on the Day of Pentecost, who had been guilty of calling for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ heard the gospel preached in all of its power by Peter, and they cried out to Peter, once they were convicted that Jesus was the Christ. They listened to Peter, they were convinced that he was preaching the truth, and that Jesus was the promised One.

Acts 2:37-38 “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”

What does the Bible say in **verse 41**?

Acts 2:41 “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”

These people changed directions. They gave up their preconceived ideas and humbled themselves and submitted to the word of God. They gladly received the word of God and obeyed the gospel.

Friend, as the word of God is preached to you, are you listening?