

Hearing Thoughtfully
March 13, 2016

I read this story this week, but I can't verify that it is true. The story says that Franklin Roosevelt, like most presidents, had to endure long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. The ambassador, not at all shocked by what Roosevelt said, leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

Hearing is important. If we do not hear carefully, we may miss life-changing truths.

Yet it is harder to hear these days because there are so many voices trying to get our attention. They come in the form of phone calls, emails, pop-up windows, catchy article titles, signs, displays, and more. There are so many that we become resistant to any new message. Consequently, we may not listen thoughtfully to what is being said even if it is God who is speaking. Thus, we may miss the very words that will have the most benefit to our lives.

Listening takes time. And time is something we are always short of. For example, in order to save time, I haven't listened very closely to the people running for president. I've heard bits and pieces of them on the Television. But I haven't given them a decent hearing yet. The primary reason is that there are too many people running. Maryland doesn't get to vote until April 26. I figured most of them to drop out of the race before then. So I'm waiting until after Easter to visit their websites and see their stances on the issues. I know I will eventually have to give careful thought to what they are saying because who we elect for president will have major consequences for our nation for years to come. It is important that we listen thoughtfully before we vote.

Even more important is how we listen to God's word when it is taught and preached. This is the most important information for us to be hearing. So it is important that we listen carefully, thoughtfully, and respond correctly. That is the point Jesus raises with one of his parables. We're going to look at a passage in the book of Luke this morning, where Jesus has some important things to say to us about listening.

Luke 8:4-8 (NIV) While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

In other words, Jesus is telling us to pay attention, listen thoughtfully, and think about what is being said. Later, when the crowds were gone, His disciples asked Him the meaning of the parable.

Luke 8:11-12 (NIV) "This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

These are non-retaining hearers. They did not retain what they heard. The spiritual truth they heard went in one ear and out the other. They did not understand much of it and did not retain any of it. They did not try to understand it. And so they forgot it as fast as they heard it.

There were people who came to hear Jesus who were not at all impressed by the miracles He did or the things He taught. The text says that the devil took the word from them. In-other-words, they were more focused on evil than good. They did not come to hear what God was saying. They were serving someone else.

Some people come to church with that attitude. There are lots of reasons people come to church. Some come for other reasons other than to listen to what God may say through a song, a prayer, a Bible lesson or a sermon. Some come to see friends. Others come because someone talked them into it. There may be some here today who have no interest in what God wants to say to you. You aren't keeping hold of what God does say.

I may be a clear communicator, and God may be speaking through me, but you just aren't taking any of it in. Instead of hearing thoughtfully, you are thinking about last night, or what you are going to do this afternoon. You keep looking at the time and thinking, "When is this guy going to be done so we can get lunch?"

The second hearer Jesus mentions, holds onto what is said but has a different problem.

Luke 8:13 (NIV) Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

These are low commitment hearers. These listeners hear the word of God joyfully at first. But they do not commit themselves fully to Jesus. When anything comes along that makes it hard to be a follower of Jesus, they give up on Him. They fall away from faith in Jesus.

The kinds of things that test our commitment include criticism of our faith by friends or family, an illness, wayward children, financial pressures, and other life difficulties. Some people hear the good news and think it means their lives on earth will be trouble free from here to heaven. Maybe you had such expectations when you became a follower of Jesus.

Such thinking will lead to disillusionment when you face difficulties in life. This kind of hearer is likely to desert Jesus when that happens.

The next time someone asks them about becoming a Christian they will say something like this. "I tried Christianity for awhile. But it let me down. So I moved on." This proves they did not fully understand the good news. You can't fully understand Jesus as the ONLY answer to sin and judgment and then leave to look for something else. When you reject the only cure, where are you going to go?

You may be facing a time of testing right now. Remember that the best things God has for us are not on this earth. Hold on to Jesus and listen thoughtfully to what He has for you today.

The Christian life is not an easy life. It is not a problem-free life. But it is still the right choice.

The third kind of hearer Jesus mentions has a different problem.

Luke 8:14 (NIV) The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.

These are distracted hearers.

These hearers add Jesus to an already busy life. A relationship to Jesus is just one more thing they add to a very full lifestyle. These hearers lack a focus on the most important thing. They have trouble choosing the right priorities.

They let other things crowd out their relationship to Jesus. Some of the things that crowd out the important are work, school, hobbies, TV, video games, internet, music, sports, reading, and more. These things fill our days, pushing out the priority of listening to Jesus.

Note what Jesus says. Both stresses and pleasures crowd Jesus out. It isn't just stresses. In fact, for most of us, it is the pleasures that crowd Jesus from our thoughts. We are busy filling our ears with all kinds of worldly things. These are not evil things, but too much of them and too many of them, crowd Jesus out. **It is possible to be so consumed with good things that you neglect the best thing.**

I know that many in our church are just getting by financially. But even at that, we have houses and hobbies that make us rich by comparison to many people in our world. We enjoy many pleasures daily, like coffee, tea, sodas, and desserts. We have access to many kinds of activities, like cable TV, to distract us from the boredom of life. And all such things can push us away from listening to God.

Are you a distracted listener? Strive to be the fourth kind of listener Jesus speaks of.

Luke 8:15 (NIV) But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

These are holy hearers.

The word holy means set apart, or in this case, different. These hearers are purposefully different from the non-retaining hearers, the low commitment hearers, and the distracted hearers. They retain the good news, unlike hearer #1, and persevere in it, unlike hearers 2 & 3, and mature in Jesus.

It amazes me how much information some people retain. Do we have any Jeopardy TV game show fans here? Some of the people on Jeopardy have retained and recall an amazing variety of information. Most of it sounds like trivia to the rest of us, which is why we did not learn it.

I did some reading about what helps us to remember information. From what I've read, it has to do with the impact of the information. If the information hits us emotionally significant or as intellectually stimulating, that fact is planted more solidly into our memory banks.

Then if we recall and use the information, we will be more likely to remember it longer. This is especially true if you then teach the information to someone else in your own words. So parents, keep asking your kids what they learned in school. And then be quiet and listen to them. It will help them remember more of what they learned when they explain it to you.

These last hearers keep reviewing the good news to keep it strong in them. They don't allow problems or pleasures to distract them from hearing thoughtfully what God wants to say to them.

Let's wrap up this passage with Jesus.

Luke 8:16-18 (NIV) "No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him."

God was not hiding what He was doing. He was lighting the way into the Kingdom of God. He was presenting the Messiah to His people. Yet many did not hear the message thoughtfully and missed out.

If you or I had been invited to the White House and had a chance to walk by and speak to the President, we would certainly remember what he said to us. We would listen. But maybe the people who always get invited to the White House get used to it. They go to lots of parties and receptions at the White House. They meet the President each time they go. For them it is not a big deal anymore. It is just another White House party. So they don't listen carefully to what the President says.

How carefully are you listening on Sunday mornings? We get to come together and speak our hearts to the one, true, living God, our creator. What a special privilege we have. But has it become old or routine to you? Do you treat it like just another Sunday at church, no big deal?

We operate under the impression that God speaks through the preaching of His word. The main thing the church pays me to do is to preach God's word on Sunday mornings. We do that believing that God speaks through the preacher to the hearts of the hearers. So you aren't really coming to hear me, but God... or are you?

We could save a lot of money by not having a paid preacher. We have the screen, the video projector, and the internet. We could watch lots of other preachers online on Sunday if all we want is religious entertainment. But we believe God speaks to His people through His preachers. So are you listening carefully, thoughtfully when you come?

How carefully are you listening when you read the Bible during the week? How carefully are you listening to God when you pray? It is vital to your growth in Christ that you listen thoughtfully. It is vital that you hear with open hearts and willing obedience.

Whenever you come into the Lord's presence, either here or at home, expect God to speak. He doesn't always. But expect that He will. Plan to listen carefully and thoughtfully. Take notes. Pray back over those notes during the next week. Obey what needs to be obeyed and expect God to work through your obedience.