

#1533 - Sunday, January 29th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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BIBLICAL AUDIOLOGY - A BASIC THEOLOGY OF LISTENING

I learned something very important in choosing this topic for a teaching series. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the Bible. I learned to make sure, when selecting a topic, that there is actually some material available somewhere dealing with that topic.

Certainly there are truckloads of books and essays on *expository preaching*. Instruction abounds to help *proclaimers* of God's Word. And, goodness knows, preachers need all the help they can get. Any preacher who isn't *honestly humble* in the assignment of preaching - and I mean *honestly* humble, not just humble because people like preachers who *say* they're humbled in preaching - any preacher who isn't honestly humble in the assignment of preaching should grow a beard, move to San Francisco, and sell real-estate. He just doesn't have any real sense of what it is he is called to do. Preachers *should* work hard - *very* hard - on studying and proclaiming God's Word.

But what about the rest of the communication process. If you just stress the importance of the *delivery* of the Word without equally emphasizing the *reception* of the Word it's like working on great *pitching* without making sure there's a *catcher* behind the plate.

Back to my opening point. Trust me, there are virtually *no* books or essays or lectures teaching a congregation how to *listen* to the Word of God preached. I found one slim booklet in the Grace Church book room in California in November of last year. That's where I told Reni I was all pumped about dealing with the topic. I even stole the title of the book for this series. But I had no idea that that little booklet would be about it.

Then I discovered a wonderful old volume, "*The Practical Works*" of *David Clarkson*, written in 1697. That's right - **1697**. And in it he devoted one complete chapter to "*The corporate hearing of God's Word.*" Other than this, the cupboard is pretty bare for study on this important subject. So lesson learned. First check out availability of material. *Then* choose the topic.

The value of that old volume by David Clarkson soon became obvious. Words that are 314 years old don't just *sound* different. They speak to different topics. They are like reminders of truths to which our generation has become senile and ignorant. Two pages in these words grabbed my mind by the scruff of the neck: "**Hearing is the provision made for the soul's eternal well-being. Its everlasting welfare depends on it. If you fail here, your souls perish without remedy. For salvation comes by faith and faith comes by hearing. It is an act of eternal consequence. According to our hearing, so shall the state of our souls be to eternity.**"

Remember, those are his introductory words to a sermon. This is what he told the people who sat in those hard pews about to hear his squeaky little voice read the Biblical text for the morning. He would preach for over an hour that morning. Then the people would come back again at night. Then they would come again on Tuesday afternoon. Then again on Friday night. No kids church. A wood burning stove in the middle of the room in the dead of winter. And each time they were to muster up great effort to be alert and thoughtful how they were hearing the Word. Everything else hinged on that. Not just his *preaching*, but their *hearing*.

So he pleads with the people. *Faith* is vital to knowing God. Without *faith* it is impossible to please God, so the Word says. So where does this faith thrive and grow and bring and keep us near to God? Clarkson makes the obvious connection. *Faith* comes by *hearing*. By *hearing*.

Here are some opening truths to lay the foundation for this whole series of teachings:

1) DEEP, CAREFUL LISTENING IS IN DECLINE IN THE CHURCH

This is not a new insight. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, *John Calvin* said, "*If the same sermon is preached to one hundred people twenty receive with a ready obedience of faith, while the rest who hear hold the truth relatively valueless.*" That's a 20% hearing rate. And that's within the church itself. And remember, faith comes by *hearing*!

Now Calvin was prone to be a little pessimistic. But if he were even *close* to being right, why are the other 80% coming to the service? What's happening in this religious mixture of sheep and goats? I think the Scriptures give us some clues:

Ezekiel 33:27-32 - "Say this to them, Thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and whoever is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence. [28] And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through. [29] Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed.

Now that's a pretty bleak opening. Those words are terrifying. And that's what makes the next verses so surprising. It's like the people just don't get what is being said:

"[30] As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.' [31] "And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. [32] And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an

instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.

Do you see those words in **verse 32? Ezekiel 33:32** - **“And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.”**

The wording is not what we're used to and it's easy to miss what the prophet is saying. To put it in our context, God is saying the people like to listen to Ezekiel the way people like to throng to hear their favorite singer sing love songs. Just like thousands upon thousands *feel* romantic when they hear someone sing about love, these people *feel* close to God when they hear someone speak about God.

But just as people who clamor around some star singing about love aren't automatically made to be loving people, just coming before Ezekiel as he spoke from the Lord wasn't making these people Godly. And *why* wasn't it? **Ezekiel 33:31** - **“And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain.”**

Look again carefully and compare the content of two verses in this text. You'll quickly discover what the problem is. **Ezekiel 33:30, 32** - **“As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord'....33:32....”** And behold, **you** are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what **you** say, but they will not do it.”

Notice the change of subject in those two verses. **Verse 30** reveals the way the people *talk* about the prophet. They know the lingo. They know how to mouth the idea that the prophet speaks the **“word that comes from the Lord”**(30). But when they gather - and when **God** looks at their hearts - He exposes to Ezekiel that all the people hear when they gather is **Ezekiel**, not **the Lord** - **“....you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say....”**(32).

Hearing properly depends on who you hear speak. Like God's people in Ezekiel's day, we can know well enough to call the Bible the **“Word of God.”** But that's not the same as **hearing God** when you hear the Word proclaimed. Do you hear **God** talking directly to you when you hear His Word? Or do you attend a religious service that leaves you still in charge of how you will dispatch your life after you've listened? If the second is true of you then you've never really **listened** in the Biblical sense.

2) **UNTIL WE LEARN TO LISTEN TO GOD, WE WILL LISTEN TO ALMOST ANYONE AND ANYTHING ELSE**

This is the problem in a nutshell. It is only by carefully listening to our Creator that we recognize the destructive lies from everywhere else. In other words, here's the rule - Listening deeply and obediently to God brings the only protection available against deception. Linger with this idea. Consider the average Sunday morning worship service, right here in our own church. I can tell you that it is no exaggeration to say that I could name people who have sat in this sanctuary regularly for years and they have never appeared to be listening during the sermon.

I know I can't judge their hearts. That's why I said they have never **appeared** to be listening. There are some people who are constantly whispering to others. Some are in and out of the sanctuary so frequently it would almost be impossible for it to be explained by bladder problems. Some people are constantly texting. Some just look disengaged.

And my point is this. What happens to those people who never listen carefully to God's Word preached? How much does it matter? Certainly they can make some good Christian friends just by being in the building regularly. There must be some value in that. But what about their own inner selves? What about their hearts? What about the feeding and training of their minds? Even if they have great relationships with other **friends** in the church, what happens in their relationship with **God**?

And here's what I'm saying happens. Somewhere along the way, probably after and in between all those wasted sermon times, they will encounter either **temptation** or **deception** and they will be powerless either to **resist** the temptation or **detect** the deception because those church friends can't always be with them. Their faith will crash and burn. I **know** this to be a fact because faith comes by **hearing** the Word of God, not merely by loving doing things with church friends.

Consider the Biblical example of this: **Genesis 3:1-6** - **“Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" [2] And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' " [4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [6] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one**

wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

Given a perfect environment and an absolutely clear message (from God Himself) both Eve and Adam failed to listen to God. But look carefully. It’s not that they don’t listen at all. They listen intently to the serpent. But if they had really listened to God they would have been protected from the lies of the Devil.

Even their excuses only reveal their sin more deeply: **Genesis 3:9-13** - “But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” [10] And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” [11] He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” [12] The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” [13] Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

Of course, what they’re admitting is each one was guilty by virtue of **wrong listening**. They all listened to **someone else**. Eve listened to the serpent. Adam listened to Eve. Everyone listens. If you don’t learn to listen deeply and carefully to God’s Word, you will listen to something or someone else. And that will be your undoing. You and I are **accountable** for our listening.

3) **LISTENING TO GOD IS ACTIVE, NOT PASSIVE**

Listening doesn’t happen just because you’re exposed to words. **Hearing** may happen just because sound waves vibrate fluids and membranes in your ears. But **listening** is never passive nor accidental. Communication of Biblical truth requires as much effort on the part of the receiver as the deliverer.

You just can’t miss this emphasis in the Scriptures: **Proverbs 2:1-5** - “My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, [2] making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding;[3] yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, [4] if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, [5] then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.”

Notice the way the writer stresses “...making your ear attentive to wisdom...” and “...inclining your heart to understanding”(2). Our hearts are not naturally **inclined** in the direction of listening to God. We **inherited** that from the Fall and we **slide** in a non-listening direction by being trained to only half-listen to the images and sound bites of the media all around us.

This is a huge problem. Perhaps there are people here today, and you have a **desire** to know and hear God but you’re so immersed in television and the internet all week long that you can’t turn off the habit of **half-listening** when you come to church on Sunday.

That’s what this series will be all about. Our hearts need to be “**made to be attentive to God**” and “**inclined to seek wisdom.**” Learn this and your faith will grow. It’s a spiritual law that the Holy Spirit always honors.

Listen to these words again. I mean, really **listen** - **Proverbs 2:1-5** - “My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, [2] making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; [3] yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, [4] if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, [5] then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.”

It’s not out of reach. And it’s not magic. It’s listening. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.