

**EXPOSITORY LISTENING - Hearing God's Word Like Your Life Depended on it**Part ten - Teaching #1557 - Sunday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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**WHEN LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD ISN'T CHANGING YOUR LIFE**

**Matthew 13:1-4** - "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. [2] And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. [3] And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A sower went out to sow. [4] And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.'"

**Hosea 10:12** - "....break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord that he may come and rain righteousness upon you."

This sermon will have a *long introduction*, and then a *few quick points*. We studied the *unresponsive* heart in our last teaching. We saw it is very easy to allow God's Word limited entrance when its truth becomes uncomfortably demanding. There is nothing that more quickly produces spiritual deafness than only allowing God's Word access to the *religious surface* of our lives. If we ever come to think of God's Word only as related to church, worship songs, Bible studies and prayer times we will demote its relevance and authority in areas of friendships, business, education and entertainment.

And when that happens we *train ourselves* to *not* listen deeply to God's Word in those countless areas where He most wants to speak and rule. "*Hard-heartedness*" is the Biblical name for this common condition. And the very nature of this condition is very quickly we won't even know we have it. That's what hard-heartedness *means*. Only *tender-hearted* people can sense the encroaching dangers of *hard-heartedness*. This is the great paradox of how our hearts get changed by exposure to God's Word.

On top of this, Jesus said this *hard-heartedness* - this condition of *spiritual unresponsiveness* is aided and abetted by Satan himself - **Matthew 13:19b** - "....the *evil one* comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path." Satan's number one job is to make my non-listening, unresponsive heart seem totally justifiable. He instantly adds momentum to my mental calculations against the Holy Spirit. This is Satan's life work. Jesus said Satan does this as naturally as *birds eat seed*. This leaves the hard heart in desperate trouble indeed because Satan cleverly keeps us from even seeing hard-heartedness in our own lives.

This is where that brief second opening text comes in. The prophet Hosea was very familiar with speaking God's Words to hard-hearted religious people. He was addressing people who probably *thought* they were closer to God than they actually were. And, very insightfully, he knows enough from the Spirit's revelation that just more time in the temple with the law isn't going to further what God wants to do in their hearts.

This is the heart of today's teaching - the central point. In today's lingo Hosea is saying that just more Bible won't help these hard-hearted people. **Throwing more seed on top of that cement sidewalk won't produce more fruit.** More *seed* isn't the issue. The *soil* is the issue.

All of this is implied in the way Hosea addresses the people. He uses a phrase we all use. It's a great revival phrase and we use it, more often than not, just to work up some kind of emotional longing in church people. Like a modern-day evangelist Hosea tells the people it is "**time to seek the Lord!**"(12).

And of course it is. It always seems to be appropriate to seek the Lord. That's what Godly people are *supposed* to do. But when you use that phrase all the time to describe what we're *always* supposed to be doing it loses its *urgency* and *potency* for when it's *specifically* a time it is desperately necessary to be seeking the Lord. So seeking the Lord means more than just liking God a lot. "**Seeking the Lord**" as a specific meaning for a specific time and purpose.

To **seek the Lord** isn't just an instruction for spiritual business as usual for Hosea. That's why he tells the people that this *particular* time in their lives was *the* time, as opposed to just any *other* time, to seek the Lord - "**It's time - right now - to seek the Lord! These are the circumstances that require seeking the Lord in the same specific way that certain infections require Penicillin!**" So this time *isn't* the same as all the other times when we should just be praying people. This time is different. This time calls for **seeking the Lord**.

But there's still more. He then tells the people exactly what he *means* when he tells them to seek the Lord. And he *doesn't* mean they should just do what they've *been* doing, only take it up a notch. No. He means a different activity all together. It's not just their religious stuff with more heat and volume.

Then Hosea gives the people the whole picture - **Hosea 10:12** - "....break up your fallow ground, for it is the **time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.**" Seeking the Lord is defined as "**breaking up your fallow ground.**" *Fallow* ground is ground that was cultivated at one time, but has been left untouched for several years. So naturally, it's hard and crusty. A web of weeds has silently sprouted.

The important point here is fallow ground just *happens*. That's why Jesus addressed this as the very first problem in the process of hearing the Word. You don't have to do *anything* to create fallow ground. Fallow ground, by definition, is what you automatically get when you do *nothing* at all. Fallow ground is what you automatically get when you go through the religious routine of listening to sermons. Which means there's an

incredible easiness to becoming unresponsive to God's Word even while continuing to expose yourself to it.

As bleak as this all sounds, Hosea's message is the situation isn't totally hopeless. This soil **can** germinate seed and produce fruit. But not as it presently sits. **It's been left alone too long.** Seed isn't the answer - yet. Something else has to happen first. And it's precisely what has to happen first that defines, in Hosea's mind, what **seeking the Lord** is all about.

Whichever of our opening texts you choose - whether it's Jesus' **wayside soil** or Hosea's **fallow ground** - something has to **cut into that hard, non-responsive heart.** And what **that** means is there is always a massive **cost** to breaking up fallow ground in your heart. While always ultimately life-giving and joy-producing, there is a huge initial **hurt** when huge clods of my very comfortable, settled heart are suddenly stabbed with the sharp edge of God's Word.

Understand this. **It's this huge initial pain of repentance that causes people to allow their hearts to become hard and unresponsive in the first place.** It's always easier - though only in the short-term - to function unrepentantly when God's Word presses for obedience.

Remember Jesus' parable. This is what makes it so easy for Satan to swoop down quickly and snatch up the seed of God's Word from that hard heart. Satan always focuses our attention on the initial pain of repentance rather than the long term bondage of our unresponsiveness. Above all, he keeps us from seeing the ultimate freedom and joy of obeying God's Word. We simply must think this whole process through because this is how the whole Christian life works!

Now we come to some points of practical application. How is this kind of hard-heartedness overcome? Or, even more to the point, how can it be avoided? And there's an immediate problem. There is a reason Jesus cautioned so quickly - first in line in His parable - about the unresponsive heart to His Word. The problem is, just as the person with the hard heart is the very last one to see his or her own spiritual problem, the **solution** to this condition doesn't seem exciting enough to engage our wills and minds.

What I mean is, because the solutions and preventions to hard-heartedness seem so **ordinary** the problem doesn't appear to be all that **serious.** We're not casting out demons here. Prophecy catches our attention. Miracles are certainly more exciting. But it very hard to keep constantly urgent about the **ordinary maintenance** of a responsive heart. Remember, we're talking about **"breaking up fallow ground."** Ploughing. Rocket-launches are exciting. Ploughing is just hard work.

Very quickly, here's how to plough up the heart for new life and keep it soft and fertile to the fruit-producing seed of God's Word:

#### 1) **WHEN YOU READ THE BIBLE EVERY DAY, STUDY IT INTENT ON A TRANSFORMED WORLD VIEW**

The most important goal in the daily reading of Scripture is to have the message of the text change two things about you. The reason you read is not merely to glean information. True enough, read carefully and slowly. Speed isn't the issue here. Read each individual book in proper context. Read with the big picture of the purpose of the author in mind. If you don't know that, get good commentaries and a good Bible dictionary. That Bible is too precious and too important to read randomly or carelessly.

But given all of that, read the Scriptures to change two things about yourself: the things you **love** and the things you **hate.** Everything else about your life - the things you **do** and the things you **think about** and the **ambitions to which you aspire,** are all fueled and driven by what you **love** and what you **hate.**

So read the Word with the goal of forming healthy **fascinations.** And read the Word with the goal of forming **healthy fears.** Learn from what **happens** to people who don't honor God in the Old Testament. Learn from the distinction God makes in responding to **humble** people as opposed to **proud** people. Take note of the things God had to constantly **warn** His people about. Repeated warnings help identify the most common problems.

These are just a few examples of a process described by the Psalmist as **"unfolding"** God's Word - **Psalm 119:130** - **"The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple."**

**"Unfolding"** is a great word. It describes a slower, more diligent process than just skimming or even reading. Remember, on any given day of the week you will spend your entire day in a world that presses you to **not** take God seriously. Unfold God's Word regularly in a way that causes you to **cherish** things this world ignores and **hate** things this world blindly embraces.

#### 2) **I MUST PRAY EVERY DAY THAT GOD WILL GROW MY SOUL'S INCLINATION TO HIMSELF AND HIS WAYS**

I work to remind myself of this the longer I walk with Jesus. I pray about this more and more. The tendency is to think we have all of the will-power we need to keep our hearts passionately stretching after God. **We don't.**

Here's the question I ask myself: **What makes me think I will still love Jesus at the end of this year like I do at the beginning?** The Bible says the love of **many** will grow cold. Notice, it's not that they didn't **have** love for Jesus at one time. And it's not that their love for Him wasn't **genuine.** Somehow, it wasn't **sustained** in their hearts. How do I know I won't be one of those?

While theologians split hairs over these points, I know this much for certain, ***the inclination toward God, comes from God: Psalm 119:36*** - ***"Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!"***

Now, David was not an overtly wicked **person**. But he did recognize his own wicked **inclinations**. That's something deeper and different. He recognized his natural bent toward the **material** rather than the **spiritual**. Yet he was still a man after God's own heart, **because** he asked God for the kind of **inclinations** that would be honoring to Him. He kept a tether on his heart by constantly bringing it to God. He didn't trust himself with his own heart.

Please understand me. I know the importance of exercising the **will** in Christian discipleship. We just talked about this in the first point. I know we don't live our lives driven by mere **emotion** or **feeling**. I understand the place of **discipline** in the things of the soul.

But I also know this. It takes an **extremely** disciplined person to keep **pursuing** God unless that person actually **desires** God. The Christian life is more than mere mechanics. True, God isn't **loved** unless He's **obeyed**. But it's also true in the reverse. God won't be **obeyed** for long, unless He's **loved** from the heart.

The very **first** thing I need, every day, is the **inclination of my heart toward God - the moving of my love in His direction**. Nothing else will happen without this. Where does that inclination toward God come from? It comes from God. We play a role too. We feed and nourish the life God puts in our hearts. But God gives the desire to those who pray for it.

So here's the question: ***What are you doing in your prayer life, not only to have your present needs met, but to sustain your future love for God?*** Pray every day for God to supernaturally incline your heart toward Himself.

### 3) **CONFESS YOUR SIN WITH DEEP THOUGHTFULNESS AND CONTRITION EVERY DAY**

The big thing here is to never become **casual** with inward sin. Hearts become **hard** toward God's Word as they become **tolerant** toward inward sin.

**James 1:21** - ***"Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."***

The reception of the seed of the Word with **saving impact** follows the breaking up of the fallow ground of unchallenged inward sin. James says the truly **meek** person - remember - "Blessed are the meek?" - the truly **meek** person demonstrates that meekness first of all by agreeing with whatever God's Word says about cherished sin. Give special attention to those inward sins no one else knows about. The confession and repentance that brings the most freedom in Christ is the confession of sins for which there was no **external pressure** to forsake.

### 4) **REDUCE YOUR MEDIA INTAKE**

I have to hurry. **Timothy Turner** in his recent book, ***"Preaching to Programmed People: Effective Communication in a Media-Saturated Society"*** says, ***"....TV watching and preaching are diametrically opposed to one another - one is visual, the other is rational; one involves the eyes, the other involved the ears; one creates passive watchers, the other requires active hearers....TV fosters idleness and passivity by providing information that requires no response, whereas preaching seeks to engage some kind of change."***

The key point here is there is more at stake than just the **content** of the program watched. Christians rightly caution the sludgy moral content of the contemporary media. But **Turner** is saying this is only **part** of the problem. His point is media consumption, by its very nature, effects watchers simply as a result of their watching - regardless of the moral nature of the program.

The whole television/video media trains us to be **lazy listeners** simply by feeding us content for which, as a rule, we are unaccountable. The **network sweep weeks** only want to find out if you're **watching**. They don't give a flip about what you **do** with what you're watching. Television **creates** passive listeners. How you listen in church is deeply effected by the extent to which you devote time to the entertainment industry. It will automatically harden your heart in **boredom** toward God's Word.

### 5) **BE CONSISTENT IN YOUR CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND WORSHIP GOD WITH ALL YOUR MIND AND HEART**

**Hebrews 3:12-13** - ***"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. [13] But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."***

The writer's concern is that these Christians might end up **"hardened"** - that's hard-heartedness - fallow ground - by sin in a way they didn't see happening because the whole process was extremely **"deceitful"** - hard to diagnose.

And the way they'll be deceived in **particular** is also explained in the text. He's concerned these Christians might not fully appreciate the

difficulty of trying to keep their hearts soft and sensitive *in isolation from the rest of the church*. So he plants the instruction right in the warning - ***“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”***

Don't get sketchy in your gathering together with the corporate assembly of believers. Don't miss out on chunks of sermons when studying a book of the Bible. That's like reading every other chapter in a novel or going for coffee in the middle of Handel's Messiah. Consistent corporate listening and worship breaks up fallow hearts. Sketchy worship leads to indifference and self-deception. But you won't see it happening. That's what self-deception *means*.

So let these words form your morning prayer each day this week: **“Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.”**(Hosea 10:12).