

EXPOSITORY LISTENING - Hearing God's Word Like Your Life Depended on it

Part three - Teaching #1537 - Sunday, February 12th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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BY GOD'S UNIVERSAL, PREVENIENT, RESISTIBLE GRACE, COME TO THE WORD SO YOU CAN THRIVE IN THE WORD

This will be a *one issue* teaching rather than a list of multiple consecutive points. There is one tough question I want to examine. But to get there we need to set the stage with a review from last Sunday. We considered three factors contributing to the habit of *half-listening* to the Word of God proclaimed and taught:

First, we live in a world that promotes and facilitates half-listening. We can split the same time space of our day with more than one activity in a way that no other generation on planet earth has ever been able. But there's also a huge price for that. It is incredibly hard (impossible?) to turn off the half-listening habit when we make our approach to God through hearing His Word taught.

Second, half-listening is easily justified because faith should, to our minds, come from means more dramatic and impacting than the mere hearing of human words proclaiming the written text of the Bible. The text we considered was the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke chapter 16. We paid special attention to the rich man's request at the end of that account and Abraham's response:

Luke 16:27-31 - "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— [28] for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' [29] But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' [30] And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' [31] He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.' "

The implication of the rich man in torment is his brothers *would* respond if someone came back from the dead to warn them of their future judgment. And Abraham's response is they *wouldn't* respond in faith even if someone came back from the dead. How did Abraham know that? Because they didn't respond in faith to the writings of Moses and the Prophets - the Old Testament Scriptures. The point is, one's response to God's Word reveals how one would respond to *anything* God revealed. This is the measuring stick of a heart for God.

Then we considered a *third* factor contributing to the habit of half-listening to God's proclaimed Word. **Sometimes we only half-listen because we don't like what we hear.** And the text we considered here was **2 Timothy 4:1-3 - "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions...."**

Demand determines **supply**. This is the way marketing works. And when the pew (or theater seat) drives the message, God's Word takes a back seat. The problem with this is without the absolute, radar-like truth revealing revelation of God's Word I will always *mis-diagnose* what my deepest needs are. I will be calling for the doctor to treat my ingrown toenail while my liver is full of tumors. Only God's Word - His *unfettered* Word - *reveals* my true situation.

This world will never once tell me I need the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It will tell me of my financial needs, my psychological needs. I can usually *feel* most of my physical ailments. But my sinful heart rarely turns honestly inward. Only God's Word *brings saving, restoring grace, freedom to follow and honor Jesus, and fruit that's eternally abundant*.

That's where we finished last week. That's where we are. And it raises an important question. How shall we respond to this situation? If all of these factors are arrayed against truly *listening* to God's Word proclaimed, how can we continue with any hope? And it's right at this point that we are forced to think through one of the paradoxes of listening, and deliverance, and restoration.

Consider how we *might* answer the question, **"How shall we begin to properly hear God's Word given all the challenges we're just studied?"** There are several approaches. We might tell the inquirer to repent and turn to Jesus Christ. And that's true. But

where will he or she **discover** Jesus? And what must he or she **believe** about Jesus? Where will these necessary truths be discovered? And what exactly is the nature of true repentance anyway? How will we learn this?

To all of those questions the Christian wants to say, "Well, listen to the Bible, God's Word. That's where faith comes from. You know, 'Faith comes by **hearing**, and hearing by the **Word of God.**' So go to the Word!"

But look where this has taken us. We've just discovered people don't **listen** to the Word very well. There are so many biases and so much resistance to God's Word. How can coming to the Word be the solution to not wanting to hear the Word? That's the tough question.

The issue we need to resolve is how is **desire** for God's Word created? And if the answer comes back, "**God** creates that desire. Either He creates it or we perish," then I want to know **how** does He create this desire? Is it really true that He just unconditionally selects certain people to whom He deals grace and leaves others eternally damned? Is it really true that the difference between God and Satan is Satan wants to send **everybody** to hell, whereas God only wants to send **some**?

Or, as I believe, has God done something so incredibly powerful in Christ Jesus on the cross that it's a game changer for everyone on the planet? If Adam's sin has actually effected **everyone** with spiritual death, but Christ's death only effects **some** with spiritual life, is Christ's work of grace that much smaller and weaker than Adam's work of sin and death?

And now here's the work part of this teaching. Paul didn't think so: **Romans 5:15-20** - "**But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.**[So whatever number this "many" is, it is the same for the effects of the trespass as for God's grace through Christ] **[16] And the free gift is not like** [Notice this is the second time Paul says the effects of the grace are not the *same* as the effects of the sin] **the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.**

[17] If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace [So now we see something new in Paul's argument. The full fruit and effects of this grace must be "received." Death through Adam's sin doesn't have to be "received." It just *happens* to everybody.] **and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. [18] Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men,** [take note] **so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men** [This "all" *must* be the same be just as universal as the "all" effected by Adam's sin. Which requires some explaining of the qualification Paul made in verse 17 about saving grace only effecting those who "receive" it]. **[19] For as by the one man's disobedience the many** [Now we're back from "all" to "many"] **were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many** [same term as with Adam's sin in this verse] **will be made righteous. [20] Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more...."**

You could study this passage for a year. But there's one issue that isn't just an issue of intellectual rummaging. It relates to our study of how shall we confidently approach God's Word to receive life and grace and growth. Paul says with absolute clarity and certainty that the extensiveness of the effects of Adam's sin is matched by the extensiveness of something in Christ's atoning work. True, there is something that must be "**received**"(17). But there is also something that reaches everyone just as Adam's sin touched and effected everyone.

The effects of Adam's sin don't reach more people than the effects of Christ's grace. Pick whatever verse you want from that Romans text and they both reach either "**many**"(15,19) or "**all**"(18). But they're **always** - repeat, **always** - the same. Just as **everyone** is effected by Adam's sin, so **everyone** is effected (I didn't say "**saved**") by Christ's work.

The apostle John states the same truth - **John 1:6-9** - "**There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. [7] He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.**[Something that must be "received" in Paul's words] **[8] He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.[9] The true light,**[that's Jesus, in contrast with John] **which enlightens everyone,**[there's no room for misunderstanding this. How many people is "everyone?"] **was coming into the world."**

Remember John's words, and link them up with Paul's because they're both saying the same thing. John uses different terms. But his meaning is clear when he says there's a sense in which Christ's work "**enlightens everyone**"(1:9). But there's a problem. If Christ's saving grace reaches "**all**"(Romans 5:18) in exactly the same way as the death from Adam's sin, then everyone would automatically be saved. And we know everyone is **not** saved. Besides which, Paul says the saving effects of Christ's atoning grace must be "**received**"(17).

So I conclude there must be some **other** way in which the effects of Christ's redeeming work reach "**all**" without actually **saving**

them all. There must be, if we are going to honor all of Paul's words in this text, some way that God's grace through Christ reaches everyone who is reached by Adam's sin - that makes it **possible** for them to **respond** to saving grace in a way they never could have if Christ hadn't died. This is what theologians call "**prevenient**" grace. Which simply means it **precedes** salvation. This grace precedes anything that a person does. In fact, this is the grace that **enables** anyone to do **anything** to respond to God whatsoever. God is always the cause. And you'll notice that word - "**prevenient**" - in the title of this message.

So there is a grace - a divine grace Paul says comes from Christ's work, that is **universal** grace. Meaning, it reaches **everyone**. And it is **prevenient** grace. Meaning it isn't the same as salvation, but comes **before** saving grace. And it is also **resistible** grace. Paul clearly says it must be "**received**"(5:17) to lead to regeneration.

So this grace isn't **coercive** in nature. It **draws** but doesn't **force** - **John 6:44** - "**No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.**" I deeply believe that verse. And John also tells us **how** the Father draws and **how many** the Father draws - **John 12:32** - "**And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw** [exactly the same word] **all people** [not just all the *elect*] **to myself.**"

This drawing grace is **resistible** grace that extends to everyone, enabling a willing response or inexcusable rejection to the revelation God extends.

OK. That's the hard work. We're actually almost done. And I know this has been a huge mental weight to drop on people on Sunday morning. But we need to deal, not with itching ears, but important truth. How does faith come by hearing for people who don't find it easy to listen to God's Word? How can there be **hope** for us in this? **How can coming to the Word be the solution to not wanting to hear the Word?** And it's that wonderful, grace-filled hope that I want to consider just before we close.

Here's the text: **Mark 4:21-25** - "**And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? [22] For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. [23] If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."** [24] And he said to them, "**Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. [25] For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.**"

Here is **hope** - and **warning** - for all. And notice it's a **wide open principle** - "**If anyone....**"(23). Don't mess with that "**anyone.**" All our work in Romans and John's gospel have been simply to prove that God's grace has opened up the **possibility** of response to this invitation to absolutely **everyone**. That's the good news. There is hope that if **anyone** will merely **start** to honestly listen to God's Word God will pour on more of His grace to **grow** them in God's Word. That's the deal. You don't have to have enough devotion and maturity and zeal to take you all the way to home plate. And God **has** given everyone enough grace to **start**.

That's because of the beautiful promise in **verse 25** - "**For to the one who has, more will be given....**" Because of God's universal, prevenient grace in Christ, you **can** make a start. And you are honestly **blameable** for resisting this grace and **not** starting with what you have. Because of God's gracious, in-breathed power in His Word, it begins to **seed itself** as it gets honestly and humbly sown into your heart.

You don't have to take my word for that fact. It's not a little pastoral pep-talk. Look finally at **Mark 4:8-9** - "**And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.**" [9] **And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."** This is the Word **seeding itself - multiplying itself** - in the heart. You never sow as much seed as you harvest. You just start with the seed you have. Just start. Listen with all you presently have. Listen repentantly. Use the understanding and the time you have **cooperating** with the grace and opportunities God has given you. Soon you'll be filling up your life with the full riches of the power of the Word of God's grace.