

#1543 - Sunday, March 4th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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A LISTENING LIFE - CONSTANTLY PAYING CLOSER ATTENTION TO THE THINGS WE'VE ALREADY HEARD

Hebrews 2:1-4 - "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. [2] For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, [3] how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, [4] while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

It is the essence of wisdom to learn early the difference between the things of the Spirit of God and earthly things. The rich truths of the Spirit are **modest** in nature. They usually lie silent, waiting for a whole-hearted searcher to dig them up like gold. Earthly things are far more **insistent**. They clamor. They advertise. They serenade you from morning to night. Earthly things flash their commercials before your mind. Before you get up in the morning, they have their sparkling plan of seduction all orchestrated.

What this means for pilgrims on route to a heavenly kingdom is the things we need to know the **most** come the least **naturally**. Earthly things pour through the doors of earthly **instinct, impulse, desire, and reflex**. Things spiritual are grown only through the exercising of deep, concentrated, persistent, brow-wrinkling listening and attention. That's the Google Earth overview of our text - the big picture.

It is always the great mission of the church to get people to give serious attention to spiritual matters. I said last year that, as much as I find it hard to relate to the whole concept of mission statements or vision statements, I think we could say the goal of this church is to help create a people who **know** more about God than they know about anything else, and to **care** about God more than they care about anything else. That's why this church is here.

And this text explains why this mission is never completed before Jesus comes again. However much attention is directed toward the things of God, our efforts are always in competition with other interests. Breaking the text down offers these insights:

1) CAREFUL LISTENING DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN WHAT'S IMPORTANT AND WHAT ISN'T

No one can give attention to everything. The context of this text reveals why the things of Christ should claim first place on your serious attention list - "**Therefore we must pay much closer attention.....**"(2:1). The "**therefore**" tells us **why - why** the things of Christ are **more** worth listening to than anything else.

The "**therefore**" of 2:1 points back to the whole message of chapter one. The point is made back in the very first two verses - "**Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world**"(Hebrews 1:1-2). Then it is made even more vivid in **Hebrews 1:3-4** - "**He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, [4] having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.**"

So the **reason** the things of Christ call for more devout, serious attention is there has never been a revelation like this before. There has never been a message or messenger like this before. This is our pronouncement to a world full of religions and prophets and visions and gurus. None of them compares with **this** message of Jesus Christ and His work. That's the whole point of Hebrews chapter one and that's what the "**therefore**" of this first verse of chapter two is focused on.

I hope you sense how counter-cultural this is. Politically this message is unacceptable. Our text **begins** with the premise that not all messages deserve the same hearing. One stands above all in terms of the place it deserves in our study and thought and devotion. One is far more worth listening to.

Be **open-minded enough** to give this radical truth place. Don't edit it or exclude it on the basis of the trends of our culture or social acceptability. If you give all ideas equal weight you will never grow in the things of Christ. The reason the things of Christ should count most with **you** is they count most with **God**.

2) THE PRICE OF ATTENTION MUST BE PAID BEFORE THE BENEFITS OF THE TRUTH CAN BE RECEIVED

I know this seems obvious, but it's striking to me the way the text emphasizes this point - **Hebrews 2:1** - "**Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard....**" And it was just this past week that I was startled by the meaning of words I've used my whole life. I was hit with the force of the verb "**pay**" - "**Therefore we must pay....attention....**" That really captures the right thought. You never actually just **give** attention to anything substantial. You **pay** it. That's why we talk about "**paying**" attention.

We all know about "**paying.**" You go into a store, or you go online. You see something you value. You want it. But before you actually **receive** it, you must **pay** for it. It **costs** you something to receive it. You **part** with something else - in this case money - in order to **receive** something else. And you part with the money **first**. You have to **give away** before you **get**. That's what paying is all about.

Now to the point of our text. This is what **listening** to the Word is all about. And, unlike the purchasing illustration above, you can never receive spiritual food **on credit**. You simply must pay **first**. You pay in **time devoted**. You pay in **books read**. You pay in **friends held close** and **friends with whom you must part**. You pay in **going to church** instead of watching TV. You pay in **hard fought memorization** of the Word of God. But, one way or another, you **pay** attention. You may **give** your attention to things trite, useless, and empty. But you must **pay** attention to the things of God.

This leads directly into the third point:

3) **COMPARED TO THE ATTENTION WE GIVE TO OTHER THINGS, WE MUST GIVE CLOSER ATTENTION TO THE THINGS OF CHRIST**

Hebrews 2:1 - "Therefore we must pay **much closer attention** to what we have heard..."

That word "**closer**" attention (per-is-soce) means **abundant** or **exceeding**. It means an extremely **detailed exhaustive** examination. It's referring to the difference between looking at a fly on your arm and looking at it under a microscope. And this means no one will get what the Holy Spirit wants him or her to get from God's Word just by thumbing through a few verses just before you fall into unconsciousness at night. And no one will get what the Holy Spirit wants him or her to get just by looking up once in a while from doodling or texting during the sermon.

This verse is simple and clear yet contrary to our normal way of thinking. How many Christians just moan and whine that they don't grasp spiritual things. They may even pray that God will **give** them understanding. And He **will**. But He has already told us **how** He will.

Examine the Word. Look at the things that teach and point to Christ like you would look for your lost contact lens in the drain of the sink. Pull through everything. Go slowly. Pick everything apart down to the details. Handle every piece of truth gingerly and deliberately. The text answers our question - "**How closely do I have to examine the things of God?**" And here's the answer - "**Much more closely!**"

When your mind can only handle so many ideas, when your schedule will allow only so many appointments, when your stamina wanes and can't possibly handle all you're called upon to deal with, remember God always has **first claim** on your attention. Listen to Him "**much more closely**" than to anything else.

4) **THE TEXT TELLS US HOW TO INCREASE OUR LISTENING CAPACITY TO SPIRITUAL THINGS**

Hebrews 2:1 - "Therefore we must pay much closer attention **to what we have heard...**"

We can zoom in on this verse by looking at its **opposite**. The opposite of paying much closer attention to what we have heard is described as "**neglecting our salvation**" in **verse 3** - "...how shall we escape if we **neglect such a great salvation?** It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard..."

I don't have to **deny** salvation to lose its benefits. I can **neglect** salvation the same way I can neglect my health. I simply don't **consider** it. I don't have to **hate** good health. I simply don't **mentally rehearse and apply the details of what good health is and how it's sustained.**

So the writer urges that much closer attention be paid to "**...what we have heard...**" Let me be very specific. He means a conscious **breaking down into details** the things we already know **generally**. That's what the "**much closer attention**" is. He is calling the Christians not to rest on **general concepts or slogans**.

Here is a rule. **General concepts** will rarely capture the mind with great devotion to Christ. A general concept is "**Jesus died for my sins.**" And that's true. But it's far too shallow to sustain robust faith. Did Jesus die for your sins? Or did He die to surrender to the will of the Father? Or did He die to bear God's wrath? If so did He die for me or for Father God. Or did His death accomplish both? And how does His death effect sins I don't forsake? And what is the relationship between His death and resurrection? What if He died for my sins but stayed dead? And if God's grace comes through Jesus' shed blood, how did Moses and Abraham get to heaven?

There are answers to all those questions. And they're **precious** and **beautiful** answers. Turn the microscope closer and closer. Let your heart begin to salivate after glorious truths. Jersey Shore will take your mind into barrenness and fog that won't ever be able to sustain genuine faith in God.

5) **THERE ARE GREAT AND ETERNAL DANGERS IN NOT PAYING CLOSER AND CLOSER ATTENTION TO THE WORD**

Hebrews 2:1 - "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, **lest we drift away from it.**"

Note those powerful last six words - "**...lest we drift away from it.**" No one would lose spiritual life if he saw its loss coming. No one craves a lost eternity. But that's not how decline happens in the walk with God. Spiritual decline happens the way gray hair happens. It

happens while you're *not* considering it.

How we need to hear texts like these. They paint a picture of *contrasts*. The Biblical writers seemed less worried about *disturbing* listeners than we are today. Hence, both the duty of *paying closer attention* and the danger of *drifting away* are both held forth as valuable for our souls. There is great benefit in both *encouragement* and *warning*. We need them both in a fallen world.

Again, to *drift* isn't to *deny*. At least not at first. To drift is simply to forget the things we have heard by not *holding them under the microscope of meditation*. And neglect like this never seems to matter a great deal in the early stages. Drifting isn't the same as *falling* or *crashing*. But it can be just as fatal in the end.

I had a great friend in Bible College days. Let's call him Gene. He was one of the most naturally (supernaturally?) gifted Christians I have met. Ideas and wonderful music flowed out of him like I've seen in few others. He was instantly grabbed up by churches who craved the kind of talent he possessed.

Two years ago, at our general conference in Edmonton I met another close buddy and asked how our mutual friend was doing. His response was, "O, you won't believe it. I just bumped into Gene. He told me he was now an atheist."

Now I know Gene quite well. We served for years together on the same pastoral staff. And I know that he would like to tell you he encountered issues he couldn't answer. Or he would say he somehow outgrew his early faith. But that's all fluff. Atheists are *made*, not *born*. And what happened is, somewhere, very gradually, he stopped considering the *details* of truths that *were* big enough to sustain him had he made the effort. He *drifted* and is too proud to admit it.

And the writer of Hebrews wrote prophetically about this kind of drifting. It can happen to anyone who is lazy or distracted enough to allow it. The Bible is honest enough to warn of the *judgment* that comes on those who simply neglect - **Hebrews 2:2-3** - "**For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, [3] how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard....**"

6) FOR THOSE WHO DESIRE TO SHUN DEADLY SPIRITUAL DRIFT

One last thought very quickly. It's striking the way the writer of this very warning also urged a remedy. He saw a spiritual key, a practice that would, not only keep people from *drifting*, but actually produce the opposite positive effect. It would actually *revive* and *encourage* vital faith in careful listeners:

Hebrews 10:23-25 - "**Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering [drifting?], for he who promised is faithful. [24] And let us consider [paying closer attention?] how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**"

Listening well always involves listening *corporately*. None of listens honestly all alone. Don't forsake the body of Christ. You will die without this.