

WHEN CHURCH-GOING TURNS USELESS - Hearing God's Word Like Your Life Depended on it

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Listen to these old words from Richard Baxter in Volume One of his massive "Christian Directory" - *"Come not to hear God's word with a careless heart, as you were to hear a matter that little concerned you, but come with a sense of the unspeakable weight, necessity, and consequence of the holy Word which you are to hear; and when you understand how much you are concerned in it, and truly love it, as the Word of life, it will greatly help your understanding of every particular truth. That which a man loveth not, and perceiveth no necessity of, he will hear with so little regard and heed, that it will make no considerable impression on his mind."*

I was particularly interested in the middle section of that great quote - *"....when you understand how much you are concerned in it, and truly love it, as the Word of life, it will greatly help your understanding of every particular truth."* In other words, the difference in the way people listen to God's Word preached has more to do with their *hearts* than their *ears*.

Baxter is saying when someone doesn't *understand* what the Word preached *means*, it may be because the preacher is just unprepared, or mentally dense, or, heaven forbid, both. But far more likely, the understanding problem has different roots. Far more likely the hearer is hearing, but not hearing with all his or her heart - *"....when you understand how much you are concerned in it, and truly love it, as the Word of life...."*

Baxter is saying something profound. He's saying there are two *different* understandings involved in listening to God's Word. The one kind he mentions - understanding of the *meaning of the text* - comes *second in sequence*. The *first* understanding Baxter describes is what he calls *understanding "how much you are concerned" in the text*. He's saying understanding the *meaning* of God's Word comes, first of all, from *hungering to have it dominate your being*. So the understanding of the mind comes about *through more than just mental activity*. It comes from a heart-felt *awareness of the importance of the teaching moment*.

This is a rather precise explanation of another important text - 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 [raise it to Whom?]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."*

The point here is you can't snatch up truth listening to God's Word the way you snatch up content from a novel or a movie. The priority God places on *devout listening* is high. He refuses to yield the treasures of His truth to *half-listeners*. You can sit through a class you're really not interested in, jot down some notes, and if you're mentally sharp enough, still get a good mark on the exam just to say you got the required credit. But you can never grow spiritually on the truth of God's Word like that. God only responds to *passionate, hungry-hearted listeners*.

And the question I want to ask myself is *what keeps me from being that passionate listener?* I mean, sometimes I do that. But many times I hear God's Word like I hear the background music on a long elevator ride. I *hear* it without really *listening*. What keeps us from listening?

1) **WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT PROMOTES AND FACILITATES HALF-LISTENING**

You've seen it, I'm sure. Everywhere you turn you pass people who walk through the mall with two little cables or jakcs coming out of their ears. They're looking at you. They're looking into store windows. They select merchandise. And they take out their credit card and sign. And all the while they're listening to something totally different in their heads. A song. A story. A book. Fiction. Non-fiction. Perhaps even the Bible.

The point is, we are immersed in a multi-billion dollar industry whose sole mission is to feed the habit of listening to *one* thing while doing something *else*. The same slice of time is now *divided* between at least *two* activities, one of which is *listening* - actually *half-listening*.

Increasingly we are trained *not* to give all our attention to just one thing. We have convinced ourselves we don't have time for that. We focus all our mental energy on just one thing less and less frequently.

Please understand, my point here is not to castigate technology. But my plea is that we all remember this habit of half-listening is not easily turned off when we come before the Lord. God is too big to be heeded as merely *one* of the items of your attention. The process of actually *growing in faith* through *listening to God's Word* demands

full-time attention. You can't be doing anything else while listening to God's Word. Listening to God is a **demanding** business.

Here's how God describes the human heart encountering His Word - **Isaiah 66:2** - "...this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and **trembles at my word.**"

This isn't **half-listening**. Trembling isn't **casual**. This is someone who, upon exposure to God's Word, is so **filled up** with awe and fear and joy and dread and hunger and desire that God's Word plus nothing else shakes up his whole being. And our God says He notices - fixes His attention upon - that kind of listening.

2) SOMETIMES WE ARE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING MORE DRAMATIC THAN THE MERE TEXT OF GOD'S WORD

There's an interesting account in the teaching of Jesus that seems to pin point this very issue:

Luke 16:19-31 - "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. [20] And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, [21] who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. [22] The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, [23] and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. [24] And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' [25] "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. [26] And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' [27] 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*** [This is a parable about *listening*] **Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'** "

Jesus pulls back the curtain on the after-life. Some consider it a parable, but I doubt it. We have no other parables in Scripture where Jesus gives **names** to His characters, nor where He lists other actual names from Biblical history. But that's not important to our point right now.

The central issue is the reality of incredible blessedness after this life and unimaginable horror as well. And the final point of the parable is nailing down the key issue: ***how do we help people find blessedness and avoid punishment?***

And right at this point **two different opinions emerge**. The rich man's whole case is people will respond to truth if it comes in a way that is more dramatic than the proclaimed Old Testament Scriptures:

Luke 16:25-30 - "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. [26] And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' [27] And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to **send him** [The "him" is Lazarus, sent back from the grave] **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.***' "**

Don't miss the rich man's point. He says he **knows** his brothers have the words of Moses and the prophets. But that's not enough. Their indifference isn't really their fault. If the message were **dramatic** enough, if it were more **compelling** than mere revealed truth from the Word, his brothers **would** respond. Of course they're not going to be reached just by another text or sermon. But ramp it up a bit and they'll respond. He seems certain they would.

And notice the response from Abraham in Jesus' account. It's surprisingly brief and full of chilling impact - **Luke 16:31** - "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.'** "

There's a lot in that brief response. Don't miss the main point. This is not just Abraham saying, "No way. They didn't hear the Word so God's not going to give them another chance!" There's far more here than that. And it's all about **listening**. And it's about the **results** of **not listening**.

Those brothers lived life **not listening** - or perhaps **half-listening** - to the Old Testament, the only Scriptures they had. But when you develop the habit of **non-listening** you can't be reached by some other dramatic form of revelation. The point of that last verse **isn't** that God was **unwilling** to send Lazarus back from the grave. Look carefully at that verse again: **Luke 16:31** - "**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.'**"

"Even if I send Lazarus back, it wouldn't do any good." But **why** not? Because hearts become hard and cold when God's revealed Word is ignored. Once they become unyielding to God's Word they won't become soft and responsive to anything else. So church can be a place of accelerated growth or accelerated damnation. Buckle up when you come into this sanctuary.

Listening to Moses and the Prophets - the Scriptures - is how we are opened up to receive from God. Faith comes from **hearing**. But if such listening is shunned the capacity to receive from God dries up. No other form of revelation can reach the non-listening heart. Be very careful what you do with your ears and your mind when you sit in church on Sunday.

3) **SOMETIMES WE DON'T LISTEN BECAUSE WE DON'T LIKE WHAT WE HEAR**

The more relativistic the culture, the more common this attitude. We extend the exercising of our rights to our own self-destruction. Our concept of **fairness** can smother the Lordship of Jesus. Paul described this kind of heart as it would manifest itself particularly in the last days:

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 [Sound teaching takes time. Its effects build more gradually. People won't have the patience for this], but having itching ears [That's the clue that Paul is writing about a listening problem] they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions...."**

Here is the epitome of the end-time tragedy. People will live, increasingly, in societies where those in charge, with some exceptions, work to keep their power by pleasing the people. Even in communist regimes and dictatorships leaders at least try to promote the lie that they are giving the people what is best for them. And more and more of the world's population is coming under the influence of some form of the West's influence. People bask in the glory of their "rights." Our Creator's rights aren't even on the table.

These consumers know what they like because they are trained in the art of pursuing self-fulfillment. And they are offered every option for satisfying every desire for amusement and comfort.

And then these people go to church. But if the church they go to is worth a dime it tells them they have a **Creator**. And the Creator has **ultimate** rights. And the church, if it is worth a dime, tells these people they have a **Redeemer**, and hence, they have been bought with a price and are no longer their own.

And even if the people know they're supposed to **agree** with these Bible truths they have been trained 24/7 in lifestyles that pull them in the opposite direction. It's very easy for these people to **resent** the truth they hear when it's actually **expected** that they lay down their own lives to follow Jesus on a tight, narrow road when everyone else is flowing along just fine, thank you very much, on a broad freeway with ease and fun and excitement and self-rule and self-fulfillment.

And Paul tells the young preacher Timothy that lots and lots and lots of church people aren't going to take it anymore. They'll stop listening. And long before they quit going to church they'll easily find a whole slew of teachers and preachers who will love the feel of a successful ministry so much they will give the people exactly what they want. Just like McDonald's and Amazon and the movies give them what they want. But they'll stop **listening** to God's Word.

So there's three reasons people stop listening. **First**, they are trained to half-listen while they split attention with something else. **Second**, they excuse not listening to the Word because they think only something more dramatic will do - like someone coming back from the dead. And **third**, they stop listening because they don't like what they

hear.

And the plea of the Spirit of God is ***don't do it***. You grow ***in*** listening ***by*** listening. That's the way faith comes and there still is no other. Faith always comes from ***hearing***. He who has ears, let him hear.