

Listening to The Lord

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Prayer series #5

John 8:42-47 (v.47)

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Friends in Christ,

This past week was one of rushing and too much noise. I've been pretty excited about Patsy and the Roffs coming home so I've been running around to get stuff ready. I had some amazing help too. Absolutely wonderful! But I still had plenty to do. Then our brother Alec Hamstra passed away and I suddenly had to prepare for and conduct a funeral. That was an honour and privilege. Then it was getting this sermon ready. And I helped with the wedding rehearsal on Friday night. And yesterday, last-minute preparations and picking up the gang from the airport. It was one of those weeks. These things happen. We can't foresee everything that comes into our lives. And we will always have days or weeks when there are just more things to do than usual. Whether those are welcome or unwelcome additions to our schedules, those things will threaten to rob us of our prayer time, our time with God.

I've told you before that after the first Prayer Summit I attended in Los Angeles about 7 years ago, I told the Lord that I was done trying to be a faithful pray-er in my own steam. I wanted to be but kept falling asleep. So I told him, "Lord, if you want me to pray at 5:00 every morning, you have to wake me up. And keep me up." And that's exactly what he did! So, by God's grace and power, I can say that I am pretty faithful at taking time to pray every morning. I can lay in bed for an hour and pray without falling asleep! But if I get up first, it seldom goes well. The mind starts spinning, the "to do" list keeps calling and, before I know it, it's night time. And I still haven't spent quiet time with my Lord.

If we want to hear from God and listen to him, we need to spend time with him. If we seek his guidance in prayer, that's good. But we need to learn to hear from him as well. Part of prayer is listening. There are obviously things that hinder our ability to hear from God. And, on the flipside, there are things that help us listen. And I want to focus on just two things this morning. But that doesn't mean it'll be a short sermon 😊

Hindrances & Helps to Listening

1. Neglecting the Word is a hindrance to hearing from God. And by contrast, listening to God is helped by **attending to God's Word**. God's primary means of speaking to us is through the pages of his book, the Bible. The hard-hitting last verse of our reading says,

Jn 8:47a He who belongs to God hears what God says.

And similarly we hear this refrain in the Bible:

Mt 13:9 He who has ears, let him hear.

It's recorded six times in the first three NT gospels. And it's found 8 times in book of Revelation. And each time it is Jesus speaking the words.

If you look in your Bible, you can see that our reading for today comes in the context of Jesus being questioned by the Pharisees and other Jews as he talks about who he is and God's plan for him and the world. If you look at chapter 8:12, Jesus talks about being the light and if we follow him we'll never walk in the darkness. At vv. 26 – 28, he tells them that he is sent by the Father and that he speaks what the Father tells him. In other words, he's getting his direction from the Father. He then accuses them of getting their direction from the devil. And, understandably, they don't like that. They insist at v.41,

Jn 8:41 *We are not illegitimate children... The only Father we have is God himself.*
But Jesus insists that if God is your Father, you'll be listening to him and doing his will.

Every day when we drive down the roads, we see these speed limit signs. One person will see those signs and think, "Why do we have to listen to that dumb sign. It's cramping my style and holding me back. I don't have time to go that slow." Another person will look at the same sign and think, "Oh, it's a 30km/h sign. I must be in a playground or school zone. I want to be careful so that I don't injure any children. I will slow down." The one person sees the sign and resists. The other sees it and takes it to heart.

Similarly, Jesus wants us to take God's Word to heart. Not just read it but know it and believe it to be good for us. The Lord Jesus is calling his people to be disciples who listen to him so that we can better understand his ways for us and do God's will because we trust that it will be good for us. So from our standpoint, if we belong to God, we want to be hearing from him and we can hear his thoughts—his heart and teaching—by taking time regularly to read the Bible.

The woman in the video complained about not hearing from God. But it's obviously because she's so busy. And I get that. But many of us have all kinds of time to be on phones or other electronic devices. So why not add a Bible App to your phone. Since I've gotten a smart phone, I think I read the Bible more than ever. I always have it with me. I can easily read it when I'm waiting somewhere. A lot of the elderly folks can't believe I have the whole Bible in my little phone. And then I tell them that have several different versions as well! The point is that the Bible has never been so accessible for us. I get that we can have a lot on the go, but at some point we have to decide what we want most. Can we crack 10 or 15 minutes out of our day to read three chapters? If so, you'll read the whole Bible in one year. Read it during your lunch break. Read a chapter before you go to school or to work. Read one at supper time, and one more before you go to bed. Even if you read just one section a day, that's great. Romans 12 says that we are transformed by the renewing of our mind as we get the Word into us. We are going to be better able to listen to God because we are getting his Word into our heads and hearts.

Consequently, we'll also be in a better position to detect lies that come our way. Most sin in our lives is a result of choosing to believe a lie instead of living by the truth of God's Word. Often through sheer neglect of the Word, we plug our ears to what God has already told us. That was the very first sin of Adam and Eve. God told them not to eat fruit from a certain tree. He added, "for the moment that you do, you will die." So, you

see, listening to God is about choosing life God's way instead of death, about walking in step with God instead of following our sinful desires, about saying yes to God and no to temptations to sin.

In fact, when it comes to listening to God, the better we know the Bible, the better we'll be able to determine in our daily lives when God is speaking to us or when it's just our own desires. We'll also be able to discern that something is not from God when it contradicts what the Bible says. God will not speak to our heart and say something that he speaks against in the Bible.

Romans 1 talks about how we humans have a natural tendency to suppress God's truth. We plug our ears to it and do our own thing because we do not want to obey God. And if that's our usual disposition, that's a sign, says Jesus, that we don't belong to him. In the second half of John 8:47, Jesus says,

Jn 8:47b The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.

In other words, even though you might physically hear the Word of God, you don't really hear in the sense of wanting it to guide your life. Instead, you are bent on doing your own will. If you love God, you want to do his will and that's a sign that you belong to him.

But don't think that Jesus is saying that every time you disobey or every time you are misguided because you don't know God's will clearly, it's because you don't belong to God. We all sin. But do we acknowledge that and do we actually want to do God's will even though we often fail to do it? If we want to do God's will but we are mistaken about it at times, God is still with us. We still belong to him.

I told you a couple weeks ago about a time when I was certain I'd get a call to a particular church because I felt that God and I were really in tune with one another. It turned out that I was wrong. Nonetheless, God was honoured in my life because I was trying to follow him. He was guiding me even though I wasn't sure about it at the time

Granted, listening to God is not always crystal clear. It requires prayer. It requires Bible reading and it requires listening to the nudging of the Holy Spirit in your heart. Most decisions we make are not about things clearly spelled out in the Bible. Should I take this job or that one? Should I go to college, university or into the workforce? Should I move to this place or that one? God will help with those decisions if we invite him to help us by praying about our needs. And you'll learn to sense his leading. For me, it is always associated with peace. If I have peace with something, that's a good signal that I'm listening to God's leading. Otherwise I keep searching or wrestling and keep praying and trying to listen.

So the greatest help in listening to God is reading and studying his Word while praying for his clear leading or direction in your life. He loves us so much and wants to be in fellowship with us. The greatest sign of that love and his move toward fellowship with us is how he came to us in the person of Jesus. Now think about it. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life for us. He not only died for our sins; he desires to lead us, guide us and give us the fullest life possible. A life that is filled with the joy of knowing his love, the

peace of walking in step with him, and the security of being in his loving embrace through whatever ups and downs we face.

2. The second hindrance for listening to God is one we already alluded to: **busyness**. And the second help that overcomes this is **resting in God**.

Busyness is extolled as a virtue in our society. When we ask one another, “How are you doing?” we consider it good when someone responds, “Oh, I’m so busy.” Yet busyness is probably the greatest hindrance in our lives to hearing from God or listening to him.

You may have seen the acronym for busy: B-U-S-Y—Being Under Satan’s Yoke. In other words, being too busy to talk to and listen to God is a certain recipe for spiritual misdirection or simply following your own plans. The amazing thing is that Jesus has guaranteed us an ear in God’s throne room. Because of Jesus, we have God on our side. And God has promised to lead us and guide us. To direct our lives and help us find the greatest purpose and joy in life. And he’s ready to deliver! But too often we are too busy to listen.

Honestly, that opening video is, I think, a fairly good representation of our lives. I know I’ve had days that seem like the life portrayed in that clip. We are on the go for a large chunk of the day. And when we get home we surround ourselves with distractions and noise: TV, internet, music and our phones—either talking or texting. Even though we are pretty busy, we can still waste a lot of time. And I don’t want to take away from our need to relax. Nor does God. In fact, he’s offering us something much better. He wants us to learn to rest in him.

Now, can I be honest? I love you all. And I might be wrong about this, but I think a lot of us are not resting God’s way throughout the week because we don’t know how to rest God’s way on Sunday. We had a hymn in the old blue Psalter Hymnal that talked about Sunday as a day of rest. It said, “Day of all the days the best, emblem of eternal rest.” Sadly, I know a lot of people grew up with rules about what we could or couldn’t do on Sundays. Understandably, there has been a reaction against that. And rightly so. God did not intend for this to be a day of rules.

It’s a day of rest. It’s his gift to us. It’s about living into God’s promises to care for us. All week long we are doers. That’s what our culture makes us believe. We have to study, go to school, go to work, go to meetings, get food ready, take care of the family and more. We must bring in the sales. Run a tight ship. Get the grades. Push for the stars. Produce, produce, produce. Earlier generations could keep Sunday separate more easily. But a generation ago, Sunday started to become just another day in our society where stores open and all kinds of sporting activities take place. Now people must work on Sundays more than before. And if you want to be in a sport, you often are called to play on Sunday. We can lament that and long for the good old days, but that’s not the point. This is the age and place where we live. God’s people have to figure out how to live into the rest he is offering us. And I really believe you and I need it more today than ever.

It's harder today than at some other times to get into the rest mode. But it's all the more important for us as well. When our whole society expects people to run hard seven days a week, we need to see the spiritual battle behind the scenes. Satan is trying to rob us of the rest God intends for us to enjoy. The rest that will give us strength for the week ahead by strengthening our connection to the Lord of life. It's not just about Sunday. If you can't take Sunday off, find another day to rest up, both physically and spiritually. Use your day off to set yourself up well for the week ahead. Include worship with God's people. And if you can't do that, do something alone. Spend time listening to Christian music that stirs your soul and draws you into God's presence. Sit with God by meditating on some Bible verses. Sit quietly for a time. Be still. Be open-hearted. Like the young boy Samuel, say "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." You see, dear friends, by resting, we are making ourselves more receptive to hearing from God. We are getting into the mode where we can better hear from him because we've quieted the distractions in our life.

Recommitting ourselves to spiritual rest is important for listening to God. I've noticed that it's harder for people to sense God's nearness in hard times when they have seldom taken the time to listen to him before. It's like thinking you can instantly connect with a person when you've never spent much time with him or her before. Listening to God takes time and intentionality. But if we don't structure that time into our schedules, it won't happen. And consequently, we won't feel God's clear leading in our life. We won't hear his voice in those times when we really want it because we don't know what his voice sounds like.

When we were at the most intense time of our journey with Rachel and Tory, the people we are closest to would call and I would almost immediately break down crying because I knew their voice. I knew them. I knew how much they loved me and Patsy and our family. They didn't have to say much because I knew their voice from years of connecting and experiencing their love. There was a deep connection.

That's what Jesus wants for us all—a steady connection to him so we will know his voice and have his peace, guidance, and joy each day.

Friends, if your heart is set on loving Jesus, that's so great! Stick with him. Read his Word so you get to know him better. And learn how to rest in him more fully every day so that he's your daily companion and best friend whose voice you know and love. Keep walking with him and listening for his leading every day. He will never lead you astray! The devil is a liar. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.