

HAVE YOU HEARD?

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We will rightly celebrate (or at least acknowledge) the beginning of a new year tonight. Tomorrow represents your chance to begin again, to make a fresh start, to improve your life. Tomorrow signifies the boundless grace of God and His power to renew us through our faith in Jesus Christ.

But our celebration will only be shallow and fleeting if it is not set in contrast to an honest evaluation of the year just past. And an honest evaluation is impossible if it is not set alongside the example of Jesus—the humility of His birth, the submission of His daily life, the sacrificial love of His death, and the triumph of His resurrection.

Reflection

For me, frankly, that comparison prompts grief for the multitude of opportunities missed, when I was just too busy doing what I wanted to be doing to listen and obey. Too little humility, too little submission, too little love have been shown in my life. As much as I wanted to please Him, I have not been very good at listening. I intend to improve that.

Here's what Jesus said:

Matthew 7:24 “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. ²⁵ Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. ²⁶ But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. ²⁷ When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.”

This was underscored by God the Father's own words, when Jesus stood transfigured before His disciples: *Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him.”* (Mark 9:7)

Most Important

Jesus reminded us that it was so from the beginning: *“The most important commandment is this: Listen, O Israel!”* (Mark 12:29)

Jesus said, *“Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!”* (Matthew 11:15)

He warned, *“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.”* (Matthew 13:19)

Then He added, *“Pay close attention to what you hear. [Luke 8:18 quotes, “...to how you hear.”] The closer you listen, the more understanding you will be given—and you will receive even more. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them.”* (Mark 4:24-25)

John 10:27 “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

The Gospel Record

The gospels are largely a record of people who heard, and some who did not. Mary heard. So did Joseph.

So did the shepherds, who spread the news around.

So did the magi, who undertook a long and arduous journey because of it.

So did Simeon, who was blessed to hold the Christ child in his arms. So did Anna.

So did Andrew and Peter and James and John, who left their fishing nets to go with Jesus.

So did Matthew, who left his lucrative business to follow the Lord. So did Phillip.

So did Mary and Martha. So did their brother, Lazarus! So did Zaccheus.

So did Jairus and the woman with a bleeding problem.

So did the blind men and the demonized and the lepers. So did the woman caught in the act of adultery.

And finally, so did Saul of Tarsus (who became Paul the apostle).

They were all busy doing what people did in those days to survive and provide and advance, but when they heard, they dropped everything else to listen and to follow.

Family Likeness

So important is this that Jesus said, *“My mother and my brothers are all those who hear God’s word and obey it.”* (Luke 8:21) It is, therefore, a family trait.

One woman praised Jesus by saying, *“God bless your mother—the womb from which you came, and the breasts that nursed you!”*

Jesus replied, “But even more blessed are all who hear the word of God and put it into practice.” (Luke 11:27-28)

How Do You Hear?

To emphasize this value, Jesus once told a story:

Luke 16:19 Jesus said, “There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury. ²⁰ At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. ²¹ As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man’s table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores.

²² “Finally, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and his soul went to the place of the dead. There, in torment, he saw Abraham in the far distance with Lazarus at his side.

²⁴ “The rich man shouted, ‘Father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in anguish in these flames.’

²⁵ “But Abraham said to him, ‘Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here being comforted, and you are in anguish.

²⁶ And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over to us from there.’

²⁷ “Then the rich man said, ‘Please, Father Abraham, at least send him to my father’s home. ²⁸ For I have five brothers, and I want him to warn them so they don’t end up in this place of torment.’

²⁹ “But Abraham said, ‘Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote.’

³⁰ “The rich man replied, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will repent of their sins and turn to God.’

³¹ *“But Abraham said, ‘If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they won’t listen even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”*

You see, it’s not about the text, or the translation, or the mouthpiece, but about one’s willingness or unwillingness to listen.

John 8:47 “Anyone who belongs to God listens gladly to the words of God.”

For Your Ears Only

Jesus reserves the deep truths about God and the life He gives us for those who demonstrate their willingness to listen and obey. To the rest He speaks in stories and illustrations, but to those willing to listen He speaks the unvarnished truth:

Luke 6:27 “But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you.

²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also. If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also. ³⁰ Give to anyone who asks; and when things are taken away from you, don’t try to get them back. ³¹ Do to others as you would like them to do to you.

³² “If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! ³³ And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! ³⁴ And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return.

³⁵ “Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. ³⁶ You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.

³⁷ “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.”

What would the message of Jesus be without these words and their corresponding deeds? These are practical spiritual truths that distinguish the message of Jesus from all other would-be prophets...and they are reserved for those who are “willing to listen.”

Source of Eternal Life

John 5:24 “I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.” This potent promise belongs solely to those who listen and believe. It is a promise for this life and for the life to come:

John 5:25 “And I assure you that the time is coming, indeed it’s here now, when the dead will hear my voice—the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live.”

Learning to listen is not just about today’s ventures. Those who learn to listen to His voice in this life, will hear Him even after they are dead!

John 12:47 *“If anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.”*

The right time to listen is now. Some who had ears, heard. Some never heard. Some heard only much later, like me. Perhaps, like you.

Develop a Listening Habit

My intention to improve my listening habit is cast in this seven-point form (perhaps you could make a similar plan):

- *I will rise a little earlier to give adequate time each day to listen to His voice.*
Before the voices of the world around me (the news, the telephone, the Internet) inundate me with information and opinions, I want to hear Him. While my mind is fresh and still uncluttered, I want to meet with Him.
- *I will listen in quiet worship and thanksgiving.*
Before I generate words or songs of praise, I just want to take in His majesty and beauty. This is time to contemplate who God is—His character, His greatness. Time to sit and let awe develop.
- *I will listen by reading the Bible.*
I cannot hear Him clearly in the moment-to-moment rush of life if I do not first give attention to what He has already said. I want to see Him on every page. I will spend at least 30 minutes just listening as I read.
- *I will listen in contemplating the day before me and any scheduled appointments or tasks.*
As I preview my schedule for the day, I will ask for His wisdom and listen for any counsel He may give me. He knows what’s coming before it arrives and He knows how to prepare me.
- *I will listen as I pray for grace for His people and for my responsibilities.*
There are various lists that guide my praying for people and for duties, but I believe it is most important that I listen as I pray, rather than performing a merely mechanical task. So, I will pray with my ears open to His advice and direction for how to pray most effectively.
- *I will listen in the midst of unexpected circumstances and encounters during the day.*
Interruptions are just appointments I was unaware of—some are from satan to distract and disturb me, but God uses them all to strengthen and to bless me. I want to listen before reacting, so I can discern how to respond appropriately, bringing honor to God.
- *I will listen in reflection at the end of the day.*
It is appropriate to look back over one’s day to review how well you listened and what you were able to hear, to reflect on how you responded and what God accomplished in and through you. The little opportunities occur hundreds of times more often than the big ones, so *“do not despise the day of small things.”* Your faith grows by your responses to the little things, more than the big ones. Pay attention. Admit your shortcomings and purpose, with God’s help, to do better tomorrow. Don’t forget to give yourself credit for the times you got it right, too.

Matthew 10:27 *What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear!*

God, grant ears-that-hear to those who need You and have not yet heard Your voice. Begin with me. And give me the courage to follow what I hear and to report it faithfully to others.