

The Holy Art of Listening

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

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Hebrews 3:7-13

Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I sware in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Two men were talking one day, and one of them said, “My wife talks to herself a lot.”

His friend answered, “Mine does too, but she doesn’t know it. She thinks I am listening.”

No doubt we all have the ability to tune out things we are not interested in. A stewardess who was frustrated by passenger inattentiveness during her “what-to-do-in-an-emergency-talk” at the beginning of each flight, changed the wording and said, “When the masks drop down in front of you, place it over your navel and continue to breathe normally.” Not a single passenger noticed. Such comments like this easily prove my premise: one can hear something but not really listen. How often does it happen to you that you have to ask someone to repeat what they have said, not because you have difficulty hearing their words but do have difficulty in paying attention? One of the skills we are all in need of is the skill of listening.

Did you know that in order to be considered a good conversationalist you do not need the ability to talk nonstop, but rather to be quiet and listen? In fact, you don’t have to talk very much. Just be a good listener and people will think you are a great conversationalist.

The Bible repeatedly tells us to muster all of our powers of attention and listen. When it comes to God and Him speaking, you would think everyone listens. But sadly such is just not true. In fact God’s voice is often ignored. The writer of Hebrews gives stern warning that we need to pay attention when God is speaking and develop the “holy art of listening.” Your and my eternal destiny depends on this holy skill. Too many think that just coming to church and hearing a sermon is listening to God’s voice, and that somehow they have honored the Lord God by doing so. It is as if hearing a sermon is enough to ensure their salvation. But just hearing a sermon is not neces-

sarily listening to a sermon, much less listening to God. No one can improve upon how Charles Spurgeon, the famed minister of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, said it,

What a mistake to imagine that by hearing first one preacher and then another we can derive benefit to our souls. More is wanted than such hearing. A raven may fly from cage to cage, but it is not thereby changed into a dove. Go from room to room of the royal feast and the sight of the tables will never relieve your hunger. The main thing is to have a hold of the truth personally and inwardly. If you don't see to this you will die in your sins even if ten thousands voices direct you to the way of salvation. It is a pity that the bulk of hearers are hearers only. They are no more likely to go to Heaven, than the seats they sit on in the assembly of the saints.

The writer of Hebrews warns us that we need to listen and develop the “holy art of listening.” So, I want to ask you a question, are you listening? As we examine our text, two questions come to mind. Number one, does God speak to us today? And number two, does God still speak to us as He did to the men in the Old and New Testaments through audible voices, angels, prophets, visions, and dreams?

In Hebrews chapter three and verse seven we find an answer to the first question. “Wherefore as the Holy Ghost saith, today if ye will hear his voice.” The suggestion is that God does speak and is speaking to us. Look at it again and notice the tenses which the writer of Hebrews uses as he once again quotes the Book of Psalms, Psalm 95. “Today if you will hear his voice.” Evidently, God is still speaking so that we can hear Him today. Now how does He speak? We will reserve that question for just a few moments. But this verse also suggests a second thing, not only is God speaking, but you and I can refuse to listen. “If you will hear,” is a condition suggesting we have the ability to not hear the voice of God and to refuse to attend to His voice.

William Aims in Leadership magazine said this, “The receiving of the word consists of two parts. Attention of mind and intention of will. If the will does not intend to receive the mind can not attend.” Now I want to do something a little bit unusual, I don't want to embarrass anyone specifically. How many of you were thinking about something else while I was quoting William Aims? Would you raise your hand if you were? If you were literally thinking about something else would you please raise your hand. Just as I thought, about two thirds of you were not attending. Here is a lesson on listening. It is not easy to always muster the powers of attention and listen, is it? Even when the word of God is being expounded upon it is not easy to pay attention and listen. Therefore, something more is needed than just two ears if we are going to hear God speak. That is why there is a condition in verse seven. That is why the writer says, “If ye will hear.” It is not that God isn't speaking to us, it is that we are not always listening and paying attention when He does speak.

Now to the question, how does He speak to us? Let me give you several ways, in which I believe God still speaks. Predominantly and primarily, God speaks to you and me today through this book called the Bible. Oh, dear friends, let us never depart from this eternal truth. This is the inspired and infallible word of God, given to us by the Holy Spirit as He breathed upon holy men of

old. A verbal inspiration is what we subscribe to, and we would give our lives for that truth. Why? Because this is the primary way in which God still speaks to us today. This book is more than just black ink on white paper. By the conclusion of this message I hope that you will understand is that every time you read this Book, God is speaking whether you sense it or not.

The second way I believe God speaks to us is by His Spirit to our spirit. Now this is a less reliable method of communication. Not that the Holy Spirit is less reliable, but it is now in the subjective realm. The problem with reliability is with us, to perceive and correctly interpret the Spirit of God. Presuppositions and biases make this a less reliable means of communication. Anytime we introduce the element of our own subjectivity we must be careful and use caution. I still believe that God can speak directly to your spirit in such a way that it leaves a definite impression upon your mind and upon your emotions.

I share this word of caution because I have thought God to have spoken to me in stark reality only to find out it wasn't necessarily God speaking. Now when He speaks to us individually, you can rest assured that He never contradicts the Bible. God cannot contradict Himself. If the Holy Spirit has said in this Book one thing, He cannot say something opposite to you.

Another way in which I believe God speaks is through circumstances. He can actually direct you by the circumstances of your life. But here again you need to be careful. You always analyze the circumstances by the Word of God. I also believe God speaks to us through people and especially other believers. I hope that He is speaking through me now and that you are hearing His word. These feeble lips are to be used in some manner of communicating truth to you and to your heart. If that isn't occurring, then this is a waste of time. We would do far better to continue to sing praises or to extol His wonderful virtues than to sit and listen to somebody, as myself, who is mostly dry and not so flamboyant. If God does not speak through others, we might as well designate thirty minutes of our worship time and read our Bibles privately.

Because God can speak through others, it is an awesome responsibility, not only for the preacher, but also for anyone who dares to say "thus saith the Lord" to another brother or sister. But we must be aware that it doesn't always mean God is really speaking when we say, "thus saith the Lord."

These are the ways which God speaks. Certainly He can reveal Himself to anyone by any method He so chooses. I have only shared with you the primary ways which I know.

Now what does it mean to listen to God's voice? No matter the method He uses, how are we to discern His voice and leadership? Let's go to our text for the answer. In this text I see some very practical truths on how to hear God's voice, whether I am reading or listening to God's Scripture or I am listening to God's scripture being expounded upon. In verse seven a key element is mixed along and with your hearing. What is that key element? What is that we absolutely must have if we are going to hear God and hear Him accurately? We need a hearing that is mixed with faith. In other words, a "faith hearing." We need to mix our hearing with faith if we are going to be able to discern and understand God's voice.

The writer of Hebrews uses an illustration that explains what he is talking about. It is the children of Israel during the exodus from Egypt, and the forty year wilderness wandering under the leadership of Moses. The writer quotes Psalm 95 where a brief history of the exodus is cited. During the forty years God spoke numerous times. He spoke in ways that would we would love to see. In fact, I have said it and you have said it, I know you have, "if God would just speak to me like He did then, I would listen. I would get it."

Sometimes I think I am so thick headed that God needs to write it on the sky. How many of you have ever said that? You say to yourself, "If God would come down on a mountain and write His message with His finger I think I would understand the message." Well, friends, Israel didn't. They heard the voice of God as he descended upon Mt. Sinai. They saw God do one great miraculous thing after another. He said to that nation, "You have hardened your hearts that you are not hearing what I am saying. You are not listening." So again we ask, what does it mean to listen to God? It means to listen with faith. When God speaks we have to trust, we have to trust that what He is saying to us is the absolute best thing for us.

We have been studying for the last few weeks about what it really means to be desperately dependent upon God. You say, "Well, I would think we have got that figured out by now. You can go to something else." I respond and say, no, we haven't figured it out. I am still learning how to be desperately dependent upon God. I am learning by His grace that I need grace in order to believe and trust in Him. It is almost a circular thing. I need grace in order to believe and the more I trust Him, the more grace I receive.

When God speaks to us we must accept whatever He has said as the best thing for us. There is the idea of resting in His wisdom and ability to bring it to pass. It is when you and I can so rest in what He has said, that we can say we have mixed faith with our hearing and we are listening to God. Look at this passage and see what happened to these folks under the leadership of Moses when they would not mix faith with their hearing. We will find out what happens as a result of our not listening to God with the ears of faith.

The text says that a hardening took place. "To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation." The word "provocation" is referring to two historical events. The first is an act of rebellion against God when Israel had no meat. They were tired of their manna and complained to Moses for meat. God called such complaining an act of rebellion, or in other words, a provoking of God. In essence they were testing God or challenging God by doubting Him. The other instance of provocation was when there was no water and Moses struck the rock and water came forth. Again the scenario was the same, the people provoked God by not trusting in Him.

In verse nine we see why God considered these two instances as being deeply disturbing, "When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years." God said in the day of provocation, that the people were tempting or testing Him to see if He would be faithful to His word. It is one thing to take God for His word and say to Him, "Lord, Your word says, 'prove me

and test me and see if I will not do what I said I will do.' We therefore claim Your provision, even as You have promised." But it is entirely another thing to challenge God to keep His word without having faith that He can do nothing but keep His word.

When a man does not believe that God will do what He promised and begins to complain about God's mistreatment of him, such is rebellion because it puts God to the test. Unbelief that results in complaint against God is the result of a hardening process in the heart. Why do I say that the result of not listening to God is the result of hardening? Look at verse twelve. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

The word "unbelief" is in the genitive case. Some translations say, "an evil, unbelieving heart." The King James Version has translated it right as far as I am concerned. "Evil heart of unbelief" shows the genitive, which means it shows possession. Genitive case shows possession and is often translated with the preposition, "of." In this verse the "of" describes the human heart as evil because it is a heart possessing unbelief. The source for evil is doubting God, and it always is. Romans fourteenth chapter and verse twenty-three, "For whatsoever is not of faith is sin." In Hebrews chapter eleven and verse six the writer says it another way, "But without faith it is impossible to please him." A lack of trust and desperate dependency upon God is evil, and all evil has at its root unbelief.

Therefore, when I do not listen with faith, my heart automatically hardens. Every time God speaks to you, but you do not trust it, or perhaps to say it more effectively, when God's Word does not go beyond your intellect and your heart does not desperately depend upon it, your heart grows hard. Listening to God requires faith, and when faith is not mixed with your hearing, hardening takes place. Holy listening is mixed with faith.

There are two kinds of hardening that occurs. The first is self-induced; the second is sin induced. Examine verses seven and eight again. Notice who is hardening who in verse eight, "To day if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." He tells them not to harden their own hearts. You have the capability of hardening your own heart and refusing to listen to God with faith. You must choose to be tender and sensitive to God's voice. When you choose not to do so, then we call this a self-induced hardening of the heart. Brothers and sisters, hear this warning. This is critical for us to understand. What God is saying to us is that every time we place ourselves under the hearing of His Word and we don't trust what He is telling us is the best for us, we harden our hearts automatically. Every time you open your Bible and you begin to read, or you put a cassette in the cassette player and just listen to the Scriptures being recited, or any time when God speaks to you through another individual, and you don't rest and rely upon it, you have hardened your heart. You are manifesting an evil heart of unbelief.

The problem with many Christians today is not a lack of zeal, nor is it a lack of knowledge. It's a lack of desperate dependency upon God for grace, in particular, the grace to believe and to trust God's Word. More and more I understand my basic need is not more understanding of Scripture, but more faith to trust the Scripture I already know. I do not deny that I want to know more of

God's Word for I do hunger for it so. The more I know about God's Word, the more I hunger for Him. But I have already learned enough information that you could take half of what I know today and get from here to heaven bravely and triumphantly. I don't need any more knowledge in order to glorify God. I don't need some mystical revelation or vision. I don't need to know or understand all mysteries of how it is all going to end. My greatest need is for me to conscientiously remember and practice a dependence upon God that drives me to God. I need a humility that keeps me thirsty, hungry, and crying out to Him. I need a grace that will keep me trusting Him for more grace.

Nothing natural about Michael Durham wants to trust God. Everything in me, which is not of God, does not want to depend upon Him. Dependency upon Him means dethronement of self. The dethronement of self is what every one of us resists. Faith is contrary to the enthroning of self. Self resists faith and that is why this is so dangerous. Every single time you read your Bible and you don't go to God and say, "Lord, if you don't give me ears to hear, I will not understand. If I don't have the grace of faith to understand I am going to be actually harder in my heart toward you O' God. Oh dear God, I need your mercy!", you will not hear what God intends for you to receive.

A sensitive heart is a product of grace. This is why it is imperative for every one who goes to a place of preaching to implore God for help while they are listening to the Word of God being explained. Every time you come here and you listen, you should pray, "Oh God, help me, help me, help my mind from wandering, help me to believe what truth is being spoken." But if you do not depend upon the Lord for such a grace of hearing, then friend, I believe what is happening is your heart is getting a little bit harder and harder each time you hear truth.

I did not say that you do not love God. I have not accused you of gross and cardinal sins. But the crime that you are guilty of is becoming more and more entrenched in self-dependence and less dependent upon God. That is the kind of hardening that takes place in the life of a believer, and it is self-induced.

A word here to the unbeliever. You already have an "evil heart of unbelief." This is the reason for your lost state and being under the judgment of God. If you will not hear this word and believe with your heart, then you will harden your heart all the more. It is almost impossible to understand that your heart could be any harder than it is today. But it can. The very message that I give you will be an indictment against you if you do not repent and turn to Christ. Oh sinner, "why will you die?" Believe and put your reliance in Christ!

The second type of hardening is a sin induced hardening. Look at verse thirteen. Sin induced hardening is the next warning from our text. It reads, "But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Now here is a different kind of hardening, than verse eight where you harden your heart. Here sin is hardening your heart.

The word “deceitfulness” means “trickery” or “strategy.” Sin’s deceitfulness or sin’s trick is this, to convince you and me that we know better than our Lord what is good and pleasurable for us. A reading of First Timothy chapter two and verse fourteen will unlock the meaning of the words “deceitfulness of sin,” and we will be able to understand sin’s trickery. “And Adam was not deceived,” in other words, Adam knew what he was doing when he disobeyed God. Paul continues and now turns attention to Eve, “but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” When Satan lied to Eve, he deceived her. What was Satan’s deceit in the temptation in the garden? Satan says to Eve, “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” Eve responded and said “But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.” Interesting answer considering God did not tell the first couple they couldn’t touch the forbidden tree.

Next Satan says to Eve, “And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” Listen to the trick of sin. Satan states that God really didn’t mean what He said. Satan’s reasoning is, “God doesn’t want you to experience what He experiences. He wants to be selfish and have that all unto Himself. If you eat of the fruit you will be like Him. Eve, you can really decide for yourself what is good and not good. You know as well as God what will bring you pleasure and not bring you pleasure.” The trap was laid and, well, we know the rest of the story. The deceitfulness of sin is the appeal to your heart and mind that God really doesn’t know what is best for you and He really can’t be trusted. The strategy of sin is trust your own judgment. It says, “You know better than God what is good and pleasurable for you.” That is it, right there. That is how every sin comes packaged and at the very heart of the issue is the battle of faith. Will you trust God to know what is better for you or will you trust yourself?

You have God’s Word and God has said, “do not touch the prohibited thing.” Along comes sin’s temptation to disobey God. What is the trick and deception of the temptation? It is that you ought to trust your own judgment and feelings concerning what is good and pleasurable. You need not trust what God has said. You can determine this for yourself. This is the essence and heart of all temptation. Isn’t it true that if you choose to sin you think that the sin would somehow not be as bad for you as God has warned? Don’t you convince yourself you would enjoy this? There is a pleasure in sin, although short-lived.

I got a phone call this week from someone who when tempted decided they knew better than God what was pleasurable for them, and so they threw their life away for a few fleeting moments of pleasure. Now they are full of weeping and are broken hearted. The pleasure has long gone, and now in its place have come the consequences. This individual said to me, “Oh, if there is anybody that is in the same place I was and contemplating the same thing, I wish I could just talk to them and warn them that the pain outweighs the pleasure.”

Christian, if you are not listening to God’s word with faith, you have hardened your heart. But if that were not the worst of it, sin comes along and tricks you into thinking that you know better than God does about what is good and not good for you. Every time you succumb to sin’s de-

ceitfulness, your heart gets a little harder. The process continues over and over until one day you are in the same place as Israel was. God speaks to you, but you no longer are able to hear Him.

It is like taking a piece of wet clay and placing it in the sun. When the clay is exposed to the sun, it begins to harden. If you take an umbrella or shelter it from the sun's rays, it stays soft. It stays moist. Faith is the umbrella, the protection that guards your heart from the deceitfulness and hardening process of sin. Faith in God's word is your only hope to combat a hard heart. Faith keeps your heart supple and tender.

How do you know if hardening of the heart is happening? What are the signs of hardening of the heart? I believe it occurs in our lives, and we are not aware of the illness of our souls and the progression of the spiritual disease. How do you know if it has happened to you? Let me give you just two suggestions. The first is, trusting God for the past and not for the present. We have all been guilty of this. When I look back at my past, I can see where God has worked. God had delivered Israel from Pharaoh and He delivered them from the Red Sea. Again and again He delivered them from destruction. But when they were hungry and tired of bread from heaven, what was the response? They could not trust God for it. God had delivered them in the past, but they could not trust God for the present.

How many times has God delivered you and me in the past? We are the recipients of grace and mercy. We have seen the hand of omnipotence deliver time and again. Yet, when a crisis comes encroaching upon our hearts what is our first reaction? Is it not to fix it, solve it, and change the circumstances ourselves? This is an expression of doubting God, and it is a sign of a hardened heart.

The second sign of a hardened heart is refusing to believe God's Word about forgiveness. I hate to admit it, but this one has tricked me many times. The Bible says that when a Christian disobeys, the Holy Spirit will convince of sin. The child of God will begin to feel the guilt of his or her sin. Misery and sorrow will overwhelm the soul. But instead of running to our Heavenly Father quickly and confessing the sin and receiving His cleansing, we often run away. God offers us restoration in fellowship, if we would only humble ourselves before Him, but our reaction is to run and hide from Him. We do exactly what Adam and Eve did. We hide.

The deceitfulness of sin has said to you, "You can't go to your Father, He is angry and He will not forgive you. You will have to make it up with trying to earn the restoring of His favor. He is going to make you hurt for what you have done." All lies, it is all falsehoods, there is no truth whatsoever in sin's voice. The pain you feel is the consequence of sin, not necessarily God making you to hurt. Now He has promised to discipline us, but you don't need to be afraid of Him. You need to be afraid of the trickery of sin. For at that moment when you do not repent and confess your sin and you run from your Father, you believe the lie of sin. Sin, at the first, lied to you that you could not trust God to judge for you what is good and pleasurable, and now it lies to you again by saying you can't trust God to forgive you if you come back to Him.

Sin will play on our natural sense of moral justice. To sincerely turn from our sin and confess it to God goes against our sense of justice. We are opposed to it because it appears too easy, too good. We, at that moment, forget that such grace did not come so easily but came at a very high and dear cost to God. Therefore, we are opposed to the very thing we are dependent upon, grace. We want to do something ourselves. We want to earn it. We want to achieve it. We want to perform in such a way that God will say to us, "You blew it, but I feel much better about you. I now will be restored to you." Friends, that is the deceitfulness of sin that hardens your heart.

The immediate response to our sin should be to run to our Father and confess our sin. This is the word of God Himself in First John chapter one and verse nine, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Waiting, running and walking under condemnation is a hardened heart that refuses to believe God's Word. He will forgive, if you only repent. I could go on and on with other examples of a hardened heart, but I want to give one final illustration of this danger.

There is a danger of being under the Word, and not actively depending upon the Lord for the grace of faith to embrace it and apply it to our lives. When I was a boy growing up in Springfield, Missouri, we lived one block from a major thoroughfare called Grant Avenue. It was constant traffic twenty-four hours a day. Sirens blasted from police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks as they sped up and down the street all hours of the day. It was not a quiet place. No wonder, for Springfield at that time exceeded one hundred thousand in population.

We lived in the heart of the city. But as a kid, I never remembered it to be much of a big deal, that is, all that noise. However, when I go back to visit, I find the constant noise very annoying.

I remember just a few years ago when they reopened the races just down the road here. In the beginning, Friday and Saturday nights were very noisy and extremely bothersome. They were so loud, but now we don't even pay attention to the noise. What changed? The noise level? No. What changed was my hearing. The more we heard the sounds of the roaring racers, the more familiar we became with them. The more familiar we become with them, the less our brains pay attention to them. The same thing happens to the hearing of God's word and His voice. We hear it and we hear it and we hear it, but less and less are we really listening. Our ears become dull of hearing. The reason you are where you are today, spiritually bankrupt, is you have become dull of hearing and hard of heart.

The remedy for this malady is for you to be humble. Go to your merciful, loving, gentle, wonderful Heavenly Father and say, "Father, I need grace, I need mercy." Dear sinner friend, that too is what you need. You don't need to walk this aisle, you don't need to talk to a preacher, and you don't need to pray a prayer. You just need to cry out and become dependent upon God to be merciful and gracious to you. You need to believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ, that when He died on the cross He took the penalty of your sins. Trust and rest in that fact, turning from your sin, and giving Him nothing but your wickedness that in exchange He might give you His righteousness. God will deliver you of a hard heart.

Dear child of God, there is a preventive measure that we must take to prevent the hardening of our hearts and keep ourselves sharp in the holy art of listening. Once again the text says in verse thirteen, "But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." We need to be practicing this passage and "exhort one another." Exhorting each other is an anti-hardening remedy. Every one of us can get a little harder in our hearts, a little harder in self-assurance rather than in God-assurance. Thus, we need to be constantly advising one another, and making ourselves accountable to other Christians. We need the encouragement of others provoking us to be desperately dependent upon God. We also need to be encouraging others to do the same. May the Lord melt our hard hearts and give us "ears to hear!" Amen.