Learning to Listen

by Harry Osborne

One of the first lessons we must teach children is how to listen. In most cases, they have no problem learning to talk, but learning to listen is not so easy. We must teach them to cease other activities and concentrate on the things being said by those in authority. It is only after one has heard that he can properly react to the message. Yet, learning to listen to parents, teachers and other figures of authority is not the ultimate point of preparing our children to hear. The ultimate aim of such training is preparing them to listen with true respect and reverence to the instruction of God. As we begin any gospel meeting, it would be good for all of us to examine ourselves even closer about our readiness to hear God's will proclaimed.

The account of Cornelius' conversion contains an example of preparation to hear God's word. After relating the things that led up to his sending for Peter, Cornelius said, "So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all things commanded you by God" (Acts 10:33). The passage states three essential qualities that must be a part of every prepared hearer. ***First,*** they were all present. One cannot hear all said if one is not present when the speaking begins. Absence or tardiness make proper hearing impossible. ***Second,*** they assembled with the recognition that they were in the presence of God as they heard. One cannot properly hear if his focus is on other humans present in the assembly. We must always remember that we come into the presence of God as we listen to His word and let that recognition move us to hear with humble reverence and solemn determination, understanding the eternal implications of the occasion. ***Third,*** they were ready to hear all things commanded by God. One is not properly prepared to hear if he only wants to hear selected parts of the truth rather than the whole counsel of God (cf. Acts 20:20-27). Neither is one properly prepared to hear if he or she comes to be entertained by jokes, stories or other crowd gathering techniques of human origin. Our purpose in coming to each service should be to hear the whole truth with its reproofs, rebukes and exhortations solidly based upon the Scripture.

Jesus taught that the hearer of spiritual truth must learn to listen properly. He said, "Therefore take heed how you hear" (Lk. 8:18). If we are to listen as Jesus wants us to listen, we must "take heed" regarding **how** we hear. Where can we go for instruction on **how** to hear God's word?

One place we can go for such instruction is to James 1:19-27. The previous verse in the context focuses our minds on the proper source for all spiritual nourishment by reminding, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures" (Jas. 1:18). The inspired writer then teaches us several divinely-guided principles about becoming acceptable hearers of that word of truth.

The Priority of Listening

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (Jas. 1:19-20). God clearly says that listening comes first to one who is aiming at the righteousness of God. Of course, those who place a priority on their own desires and pursuits will not place the proper value on listening to God's word. Instead, they will be given to speech that pursues their selfish ends through self-justification, gossip, slander or other base means. The result of such actions will not be of benefit to the cause of God, but will end in wrath and its consequent detrimental effects to the cause.

When one truly seeks the righteousness of God as his goal, he properly values the need to listen to God's word and humbly seeks its instruction. His life will evidence the attitude of the psalmist: "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates both day and night" (Psa. 1:2). Solomon even noted the priority of hearing by urging, "be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools" (Eccl. 5:1). Did this denigrate all sacrifice? No, it affirmed the necessity of hearing God's will first to properly instruct about acceptable sacrifice before offering according to one's own thoughts and being found a fool as a result. All proper obedience is prompted from the instruction found in God's word. Hence, we see the priority of hearing.

It must also be noted that there is a vast difference between being "swift to hear" and desiring that the time given to hearing be swift. Our age is filled with too many of the latter and too few of the former. How can anyone hope to spend eternity in reverent praise to God and yet complain if the teaching of God's word goes longer than thirty or forty minutes? If we place the proper value on hearing God's word, we will desire the opportunity to study and grow from its teaching as much as possible. If we think it too taxing on us that we be here at each opportunity to learn, we need to reassess our priorities.

Purity & Meekness in Listening

"Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21). We cannot receive the word of God as we ought if filthiness and wickedness abide in our lives. The message of Christ reproves such evil and cannot coexist with it.

Just as filthiness and wickedness are inconsistent with God's truth, "meekness" is an essential quality for all who desire God's word to have a lasting impact upon their lives. The word translated "meekness" in our Bible refers to the strength of character which is brought under the controlling harness of God's will. It is the willingness to let God direct our path.

Active Listening

James does not stop at that point. He goes on to instruct, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (Jas. 1:22). God wants us to be the kind of hearers who put His instruction into action. He does not want His truth to merely change our intellect. Proper hearing of God's word should change our lives! Notice how useless non-active hearing is to God:

"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was" (Jas. 1:23-24).

Why would we look in a mirror if we did not intend to correct that which is amiss? It would make looking in the mirror a waste of time. So it is with those who read the Bible or listen to it being proclaimed, but never intend to change whatever violates the will of God. The word of God is designed to scrutinize our heart and prick us to change our ways (Heb. 4:12-13). It was never meant to satisfy mere intellectual curiosity.

James goes on to show the way we should react to God's message. "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does" (Jas. 1:25). God demands that His message be remembered in our day to day activities, not forgotten upon closing our Bible or leaving the assembly where it has been proclaimed.

James shows how we must "continue in" God's word. "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (Jas. 1:26-27). According to the Bible, proper hearing demands the cessation of actions not approved by God and doing those things approved by God within His word. We must be seeking to let God direct our actions to please Him as instructed within His word. It is just that simple.

Conclusion

If we claim to hear God, we will not reject any instruction found within His will for us today. We may not put evil into our lives and still be true hearers of God. Let us learn to listen and take heed how we hear His word of truth.