

The Gospel and Emotional Health

Listening

Proverbs 7-8; James 1; Mark 4; Psa 40 and 139

July 9, 2023

^{Proverbs} Now therefore, my sons, listen to me, And pay attention to the words of my mouth. ²⁵ Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, Do not stray into her paths. ²⁶ For many are the victims she has cast down, And numerous are all her slain. ²⁷ Her house is the way to Sheol, Descending to the chambers of death. ^{8.1} Does not wisdom call, And understanding lift up her voice? ² On top of the heights beside the way, Where the paths meet, she takes her stand; ³ Beside the gates, at the opening to the city, At the entrance of the doors, she cries out: ⁴ "To you, O men, I call, And my voice is to the sons of men. ⁵ "O naive ones, understand prudence; And, O fools, understand wisdom. ⁶ "Listen, for I will speak noble things; And the opening of my lips will reveal right things... ¹⁰ "Take my instruction and not silver, And knowledge rather than choicest gold. ¹¹ "For wisdom is better than jewels; And all desirable things cannot compare with her... ^{15.31} He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof Will dwell among the wise.

^{James} In the exercise of His will He gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. ¹⁹ You know this, my beloved brothers and sisters. Now everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; ²⁰ for a man's anger does not bring about the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore, ridding yourselves of all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

^{Mark} He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. ² And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, ³ "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow. . . ⁹ And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." ¹⁰ As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. ¹¹ And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, ¹² so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN." ¹³ And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ "The sower sows the word. . .

^{Psalms} ⁴⁰ I waited patiently for the LORD; And He inclined to me and heard my cry.

^{Psalms} ¹³⁹ My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; ¹⁶ Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them. ¹⁷ How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with You.

We plan to finish this series looking at two components of emotional health and maturity NOT covered in the book by Pete Scazzero called *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. The core chapters of that book dealt with *Looking Below Surface Behaviors; Confronting the Power of the Past; Embracing Brokenness and Vulnerability; Learning the Freedom of Limits; Facing Grief and Loss* and *Making Jesus Christ Your Model for Loving*. If those topics interest you please visit our website and listen to those sermons.

Today and next week, two issues NOT covered in the book, namely *Listening* and *Speaking*. Emotionally/Spiritually mature individuals understand the tremendous power of words. So, they value words

and use words (whether receiving them or giving them i.e., by listening or by speaking) they use words with the care that words deserve.

We begin our look on the receiving end, i.e., on the subject of listening. I'm sure you've heard that quip: we have TWO EARS and ONE MOUTH so we should probably use our ears more and our mouths less.

On one hand listening (like thinking) is one of the easiest of all activities but on the other hand, listening well or thinking well are among the hardest tasks. Hearing and listening are NOT the same (husbands: just ask your wife!... And LISTEN to her answer). To really listen to another person "is the rarest and purest form of generosity" according to Simone Weil.

In the view of the Bible, listening is more than important. The very creed of the Jewish Church is called "*The Listen*" (The Shema: "*Listen, O Israel, the LORD is One*" Dt 6.4) Christianity is actually VERY focused on this activity of listening well. AND those who believe the central message of Christianity (the gospel), they see the significance of listening and eventually they become skilled listeners. Let's dive in and look at:

1) How Important IS This Activity/Practice?

2) What Resources Are Available to Help Us

3) How the Resources Change Listening (or How to Listen Like Your Life Depended On It)

If you've ever been dismissed or truly ignored by another person, you know how terrible that makes you feel. It feels like deep rejection and maybe worse than rejection because the listener is acting as if your words, the expression of your mind is worthless.

So, from our experience (if we're open to see it) we know that not being valued, not being heard or included is a big deal. So, we all know that listening is important and the Bible not only insists on this but doubles-down. Listening is more important than we know!

The writers of the Proverbs...instruct young people to do almost anything in order to GET wisdom. Please see listening to, paying attention to good instruction as being the most important pursuit in your life. To hear and process and absorb wisdom is like receiving treasure and anyone careless in acquiring treasure is a fool. Proverbs CH 4: "*The beginning of wisdom is: GET wisdom; and with all your acquiring, GET understanding.*" (v.7)

The wisest person is the one who knows he's not wise and therefore he/she seeks wisdom and does that by LISTENING, paying attention, attempting again and again to acquire and understand wisdom.

If you have to choose between MONEY and WISDOM – ALWAYS go with the wisdom. It's not simply a matter of collecting facts and information but a quest to integrate the data into a way of knowing and deciding and discerning how to live... It starts with hearing but really listening, internalizing and integration of information and it's exceedingly valuable.

The Book of James is sort of the Proverbs of the NT and James agrees but even raises the bar. Listening to God (or NOT listening) is decisive to becoming right with God. God has chosen THIS as the means of a person becoming spiritually alive. Words are powerful and God's words are ALL-powerful.

The words of God are like a life-imparting seed that give birth to the dead. Because God has chosen the Word as the way He made the worlds and as the way He conveys spiritual life – we should respect the unit of speech we call the word. (Jacques Ellul said, “Anyone wishing to save humanity today must first of all save the word.”) Words are more important than we realize.

“Therefore”, says James, “ridding yourselves of all filthiness and all remaining wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls”.

But James only echoes the teaching of Jesus Christ who gave listening a new level of significance. Jesus starts by giving the meaning of the parable: (Mark CH 4, v. 3)

“And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, ‘Listen to this!..’”
LISTEN TO THIS!

Jesus cleverly answers the riddle before telling the riddle itself. “I’m about to tell you about the all-important value that ONE spiritual practice has above all others – LISTEN TO THIS!” And then He tells a parable about the all-important practice of listening. He gives the punchline before the joke, the answer before the quiz!

The parable is about a whacky farmer who throws seed everywhere. When the seed falls into hardpacked soil or pebbles or a thorn-patch, the seed doesn’t grow. It doesn’t get the reception it deserves and requires for growth. When it flies onto good soil – it grows like crazy and yields a huge crop.

If you LISTEN to Me, says Jesus... not only hearing Me but LISTENING, you will receive life and become a truly fulfilled and fruitful person. If you don’t listen to Me, don’t receive My word, YOU WILL NOT COME TO LIFE – to fulfillment and spiritual productivity.

It ALL comes down to LISTENING. Your eternal destiny comes down to how you listen, how you receive or don’t receive the news that Jesus Christ told and that He became by His life, death and resurrection: LISTENING is the most important of all spiritual activities and practices. “Listen to this?”

When the disciples come to Jesus and ask for clarification of the meaning, Jesus says, “If you don’t get THIS parable, you won’t get ANY of My parables. And BY that He means – “This story is about listening and without listening, without tuning IN, paying attention and BEING RECEPTIVE to My stories, you won’t understand, won’t receive LIFE! In My Kingdom, believers RECEIVE and listeners LIVE!”

See? Christian spirituality is essentially a receptive spirituality. Life is transferred by a word, a message, NEWS and that NEWS is received by listening. Jesus is the Planter/Scatterer/Sower of the Seed and He is also the Seed itself. He spreads the Word and He IS the Word. So, what you do with Jesus Christ, the Word of God made Man – if you hear Him, listen to Him; if you receive Him, you have LIFE. The way you listen or don’t determines where you’ll be in 10,000 years. Listening, I think you can see, isn’t pretty important – it’s ALL IMPORTANT!

And therefore, I don't want to be a bad listener.

But... truth is... I've had to face it again and again: I am a bad listener. I don't listen and internalize the things people say to me. The Promises of God that are ALL embodied in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ – I don't receive those Promises with undivided attention.

But there are resources in the Good News that come to my assistance. First, just as the disciples are sort of confounded by the parable but THEN they GO TO JESUS for help, so I'm getting used to running for Jesus for real, tangible help in listening.

The ones who come to Jesus hear the words: "To YOU has been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God – YOU CAME TO ME! You came receptive to the One who IS the Word of God in physical form (Rev 19.13).

The spoken Word brought you to the Living Word.

Secondly, Jesus Christ, who He IS and WHAT He's done TELLS me that God has not dismissed or ignored ME! God listens to me! On the Cross, Jesus Christ, the WORD, was speaking on my behalf and God, the Father was listening. The central most important Person there IS hears me, knows me, takes daily interest in me. "I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined His ear to me and heard my cry.

I am known by God. Think of that. In fact, His knowledge of me is NOT a passing acquaintance or a kind of distant contact (like a Facebook friend I've never really MET) but deeply intimate, exhaustive knowledge.

I don't know Oprah Winfrey or Taylor Swift or Lionel Messi. It would be cool if I did. It'd be astounding if when some great, famous person received an award if he/she said, "I'd especially like to thank T.J. Campo who's my good friend I think of every day!" And then YOU said, "*Hey, I just heard a speech by Elon Musk, and he thanked T.J. Campo for being his best friend!*"

That would be thrilling... right? Or if Messi came out at his upcoming press-conference and publicly said, "The reason I decided to come to Miami is to be close to my true inspiration _____" (YOUR name!)

Well, the Bible says that God, who listened to the pleading of Jesus Christ who was dying with MY sins on His record, that due to God LISTENING to Jesus, and proving that He listened and approved of Jesus by raising Him from death, that NOW God sees me as the Apple of His Eye. He thinks of me...in fact, if I could somehow count His thoughts of me on a given day, those thoughts would be too many to count – like the number of grains of sand on a beach.

He knows intimate, mysterious, unknow things about me – my beginnings and my end, my tears and my laughter. He pays attention to me. He's infinitely more important than ANY famous, important, powerful person you could name – and yet He knows you, thinks of you... And if you've received His Word, Jesus Christ, God has forgiven you and has adopted you, empowers you and has a destiny in mind for you that's inexpressibly magnificent.

And IF that really sinks in, we can't help making a kind of spiritual calculus from it – if THE most important Person there IS has humbled Himself to listen to me, to think about me and be intimately acquainted with me on every level AND still loves me and likes me – if HE lowered Himself billions of light years can't I lower myself a few inches to listen to a person who's made in this God's image.

To listen to a person, to NOT dismiss or ignore or simply "hear" (without really LISTENING) but instead to really give my attention to another person is love. God loves me... and knowing that and receiving that truth makes it possible for me to love others.

The people around you want to be heard. YOU want to be heard. To be in Christ means that when Jesus speaks to the Father, the Father hears Him on your behalf. Believers IN Jesus Christ are given the privilege of praying the Father IN the Name of Jesus Christ. God hears ME because Jesus the Worthy is so perfect and infinitely interesting and enthralling that the Father is fixated on Him (Heb 1.1-3).

I am IN Christ and as such, the Father is fixated on me – a Great Priest represents me by taking my weak, smokey prayers and purifies them so that they're like incense before God's throne. God inclines His ear to me, thinks endlessly of me because of Jesus Christ.

And believing that enables me to look others in the eye and be genuinely interested in them, willing to "waste time" on them... because I realize that to waste time LISTENING to people made in God's image is NOT a waste of time at all – it's a safe investment. It's what God did for US in Jesus Christ.

So, remember as C.S. Lewis said, *"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a night-mare."* (The Weight of Glory)

This makes it possible to listen to people like my life depended on it... like their life depended on it. I can be curious with people, want to know them, listen to them. My wife asks people about their tattoos which, we're learning, are THERE because people want to be noticed... People want to tell their stories to others who will actually LISTEN. And it can be really FUN!

God listens to us in Jesus Christ so that WE can listen to others... So, develop the skill by God's grace.

I'll close with these words from Anne Long:

As our eyes are opened to the Father's gift of his Son, so he creates in us a desire to respond to him, listen to him, become like him, be with him in his ongoing work. For Jesus, risen and glorified, goes on listening to the world for which he died. At his Father's side he continues as great High Priest, making ceaseless prayers for us, constantly bringing to his Father the needs of the world. And God, in his amazing humility, delights to draw us into his ongoing work of redemption. (Listening; 1990; p. 177)