

Dr. Gary A. Schwarz
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Hearing Test

How many of you have ever had a hearing test? How many of you have had a hearing test in the last year? Then you know how it works, don't you? The doctor or nurse has you sit down in a chair and hands you a set of earphones, hooked up to a machine, and asks you to put them over your ears. Then they play you a several tones at different frequencies like this (play CD with tones)—and ask you to raise your hand if you can hear it. So I took a hearing test like that last week, and guess what I learned?

I've lost some of my hearing in the upper ranges. But I'm not worried about it, because those upper frequencies where I've lost some of my hearing, that's the range where women usually talk, which means I now have a perfect excuse for those times when Cheryl complains, "You weren't listening to me, were you?" Am I right, men? Your wife says something to you, but you're sure she never told you. Well, now I have a perfect excuse. All I have to say to her is, "I'm sorry, Honey. You know my hearing isn't what it used to be!" Amen?

Do you think that'll work? The answer is: Maybe yes and maybe no, depending on the circumstances! And that's understandable if we fail to listen carefully when our family and friends speak to us, because they do the same thing to us! But...and you probably know what I'm going to say next—

There's never a good excuse for failing to listen when God speaks to us, because He never mumbles or stammers. He speaks very clearly at just the right frequency and always with our best interests in mind. So if we fail to hear Him, not only are we the ones at fault, we're headed for heartache and fated to forfeit any blessings He has for us.

As Proverbs 1:25 warns us, "You ignored all my advice and would not accept my correction! I will therefore laugh at you when disaster overtakes you for the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them! But whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease without fear of harm."

Therefore, Jesus warns us in our passage this morning, "Take care how you listen, for whoever has will be given more; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken away from him." That's our topic this morning, then. Call it a spiritual hearing test, if you will, because what Jesus teaches us to do in this study is to listen, so that we're blessed and not disappointed, and the way to do that He says is to listen to obey, to listen to share, and to listen to grow. Those are the 3 main points in my message this morning, and our passage, if you'd like to turn to it with me, is Luke chapter 8, verses 16 to 21. And the way I want to approach it is to start with verse 19 and work backwards, because I think that's the easiest way for me to explain it. The first way to listen, then, is to—

1. Listen to Obey

And the place I want to begin reading is Luke 8, verse 19, where Luke says this: “Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.’ But he answered them, ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it!’” So let me mention just a few things as we get started that we ought to glean from this passage, and the first obvious thing to notice is that Joseph is missing from the story. In fact, once Jesus begins His public ministry, Joseph is never heard from again, which is an obvious indication to me that Joseph is dead, which also explains what Jesus was doing during all those years of His young adulthood that aren’t recorded in the Bible. As the oldest son in the family, He was dragging Himself out of bed every morning and going to work, in order to provide for His mother and younger siblings after Joseph was gone. And of course, the reason He chose to do that was to experience what you and I go through in providing for our own families, so that He could sympathize with our struggles and give us grace to help in time of need.

The other obvious fact is that, contrary to what the Roman Catholic Church teaches, Mary the mother of Jesus was not a perpetual virgin. They make that claim, of course, thinking that it would have compromised her purity if she had sex with Joseph after Jesus was born. But the Bible is clear. Sex within marriage is a beautiful thing that pleases God very much. For that reason, I believe that Mary and Joseph enjoyed a very healthy sex life and had many other children after Jesus was born. In fact, Matthew even gives us their names. He says there was James and Jude who wrote the books of the Bible that are named for them, and there was also Simon, Joseph, and at least two sisters. But the problem was they didn’t believe in Jesus until after the resurrection. In fact, Mark says just prior to this, when they heard the claims He was making and saw how hard He was working, His family came to take custody of him, convinced that He had lost His mind. Is it any wonder, then, that despite how much He loved them, He refused to let His mother and brothers interfere and interrupt His ministry again?

That also answers the argument raised by Jewish scholars that Jesus can’t be the Messiah because He failed to keep the commandment to honor our fathers and our mothers. “After all, it doesn’t matter how busy He was, He still could have taken a few minutes to stop what He was doing and spend a little time with His mother as she asked?” But it wasn’t dishonor toward His mother He was demonstrating here, it was obedience to His Heavenly Father who had sent Him on a mission and only given Him a short time to accomplish it. His mission was to offer Himself as the Savior of this world and disciple 12 men to take that good news to the ends of the earth. Mary should’ve known that because the angel made it clear to her from the moment he announced that she was to be the mother of Messiah—she knew that He was called to be about His Father’s business and, did you know this? Jesus said the same thing would be true of us once we began to follow Him as our Savior, it’ll bring about major changes in our earthly relationships, not that we’re to intentionally break off fellowship with them, but the simple fact is, once we align ourselves with Jesus and they decide not to, it causes tension in our relationships.

For example, I'll never forget my mother's reaction when I told her I was going to a Baptist church and I planned to marry the pastor's daughter. Believe me. She was not a happy camper! Nor did she get any happier when I told her that I wanted to be a pastor too! So you can imagine her reaction when I told her that God had called us to take her grandkids and move to the other side of the world as missionaries? She let me know in no uncertain terms, and I quote her, "I'm so mad, I could spit!" That's why Jesus told us to count the cost before we become His disciples, because not everybody will be happy that we have.

But here's the good news! Jesus said the moment we begin to follow Him, we become part of a huge, never-ending family that'll spend forever in His presence. Isn't that His basic message to us this morning? When told that His mother and His brothers want to see Him, He says, "My mother and brothers are these who hear the Word of God and do it!" So the question I want to ask you before we move on is: How well are you listening to and obeying the Word of God? "Why is that so important?" you say. Because that's the undeniable proof that we really are children of God! Last week you'll remember we studied the parable of the four soils, each one representing a different response to God's Word, and we learned that you can be a hard-hearted person with no interest in Jesus, so the devil is able to snatch the seed away from you. You can be a shallow-hearted person who receives the Word of God with joy but because you have no depth, you fall away the moment temptation comes. Or you could be someone with a conflicted heart who'd like to believe in Jesus, but you have so many other interests in life they choke out the Word of God so it withers, which tells me that the faith of these first 3 persons is only superficial because they bear no fruit, which is the only real evidence that you're born again and growing in His Spirit. Consequently, the only safe person to be is the noble-hearted person who faithfully applies God's Word to his life and produces a harvest, which happens to be the same lesson Jesus teaches us in our passage this morning.

But, then, that shouldn't surprise us. Did you know that both Matthew and Mark put this incident later in their gospels, whereas Luke puts it right here following the parable of the 4 soils, in order to give double emphasis to the importance of carefully listening to and obeying the Word of God, because that's the only way to tell if you really are a disciple of Jesus. The test isn't whether or not we say the right prayer, go to the right church, or make the right resolution. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, then are you truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." The fact is Jesus didn't call us to make new converts, enlist more members or increase our attendance as a church. He called us to make disciples. So that's what we want to be about both as a church and individual believers—to grow as disciples by learning and obeying the Word of God and teaching others to do the same. So that's what we spent most of our time doing last weekend at our elder retreat.

People sometimes wonder what we do at our retreats. So let me take a moment to tell you what we did. We arrived at the Settle getaway in Olympia at 10 o'clock Friday morning, spent a good deal of time in prayer, and then spent most of that day and the next day as well talking about our purpose as a church, and our conclusion was that there's just one great commission Jesus has given our church, and that's to make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything He has commanded us and lo," He said, "I am with you always even to the end of the age."

So what we did, first of all, was ask ourselves: How do we do that? And we agreed that there are 4 basic steps in making disciples—outreach in which we share our lives and faith with unbelievers until we can bring them to the point of conversion. But that's only the beginning because unless we follow them up and help them get established in the faith, chances are they'll get discouraged and fall away. So we also have a responsibility to teach them the basics of the faith like how to pray and how to feed themselves from the Bible. The third stage is spiritual growth, which is learning to think and act like Jesus. That's something that takes an entire lifetime to learn.

Finally, there's the need for training which isn't something we wait to do until we've finished growing; it's part of the growth process, which includes everything from how to lead a person to Christ, which completes discipleship circle, to following up a new Christian or serving in a specific ministry. Then, having identified the process, we began to evaluate the things we do as a church, and you know what we found? We found that most of what we do falls into the first and third categories of outreach and growth, but we do very little in the areas of follow-up and training. So that's where we want to invest more of our time and energy in days to come. We not only want to reach people for Christ and give them opportunities to grow, we also want to provide the follow-up they need and to train them, so they're ready and able to serve.

So let me ask you. Where are you currently at on the pathway of discipleship? Have you made a commitment both to hear and do the Word of God? That's what it means to be a disciple. We listen to obey. And notice there's also a second way or reason to listen—

2. Listen to Share

Now let's reverse engines and back up to verse 16, where Jesus makes this statement: "No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light, for there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open!" And the first thing I had to ask myself when studying these verses was: Why did Jesus choose to say that here immediately following the parable of the 4 soils? It seemed out of place to me. But then I remembered what He said to His disciples in last week's study in verse 10: "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that seeing, they may not see, and hearing, they may not understand," which in itself is a little hard to understand! After all, wasn't Jesus interested in winning as many people as He could? So why only teach the truth to His disciples, but hide it from everyone else? I think the answer has to do with timing. For one thing, the Holy Spirit hadn't been poured out on the world as yet, and the Bible says without the Spirit's help, it's impossible to fully understand the things of God. And the other reason is He wanted to give Himself as much time for ministry as He could.

You see, the more open Jesus was in His teaching, the more the opposition grew, because people, especially the religious rulers, didn't like it when He called them liars and hypocrites. So, when talking to the crowd, He hid the truth in parables to make His ministry last as long as possible. You see, if His only reason for coming into this world was to die for our sins, He could have done that as soon as He was baptized but He didn't do that because His master plan for reaching the world was to disciple 12 men who would disciple others who would

then disciple others until the gospel was taken to the whole world. That's been the secret of the church's growth from the very beginning. It's never been about mass evangelism: gathering a huge crowd, sharing the gospel with them, and getting them to say a prayer of repentance. I think there's a place for that. But if that's all you do, expect very little life change. I know they tried that in Romania right after the wall came down. They held great crusades in all the stadiums of Romania with thousands making commitments to Christ. But how many went on to join a local church? Less than 5% because no one made an effort to follow them up or get them into small groups which is the best way to get started in the Christian faith. So that's how Jesus spent every waking moment, teaching the truth to 12 close friends who were to then take it with them wherever they went making disciples of everyone just as Jesus had with them.

Of course Jesus knew that people don't change overnight and that He'd need at least 3 years to train them. So He held back some of the truth from the crowd to give Himself enough time to do that. But that's not necessary today because the work of salvation is finished. Jesus died on a cross to pay for our sins, He rose from the dead to give us new life, and He poured out His Spirit on us, so we can now understand what we never could before and then share it with anyone who has ears to hear. "For no one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so those who come in can see the light for there's nothing hidden that will not be disclosed and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open!" A typical lamp in that day was a little clay pitcher full of oil with a wick floating in it and a handle, so you could carry it from room to room or put it on a lampstand. Its purpose was to bring light to a space that would otherwise be dark. Then to emphasize that point, Jesus describes two ridiculous situations: lighting a lamp and covering it with a jar, which would do what? The lack of oxygen would immediately put out the flame. So why light it at all, if what you plan to do is to put it out? And the second illustration is just as ridiculous. Imagine lighting a lamp and putting it under a bed! People in that culture slept on mattress pads that they put on the floor, not four-poster beds that stood a foot off the ground. In other words, He's saying: "No one lights a lamp just to smother it with a blanket, do they?" And the obvious answer is: No. The reason you light a lamp is to see in the dark.

That's something I appreciate much more today than I did 10 years ago. 10 years ago, I had perfect vision and could read the smallest font on a bottle of medicine. But today I need reading glasses with a power of 1.75 unless I'm in a room with bright lights and suddenly I can read what I couldn't see in a dimly lit room. So it is with the truth. Today we live in a culture where we're told that there is no absolute right or wrong, and what's true for you may not be true for me! But what happens when we expose that foolish-ness to the light of God's Word? It chases the darkness away and brings new insight to our minds. But not everyone appreciates that because the truth not only brings light in our darkness, it also exposes the secret sins that bring us shame. Hence the warning in verse 17: "Nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed and nothing is concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open." And that can be embarrassing! For example, do you remember that last time you tried on clothes in the public dressing room with all the bright lights exposing every wrinkle, every blemish, and every extra ounce of fat on your body. It's embarrassing just to think about it, isn't it? Because light not only illuminates the darkness, it also exposes things for what they are, and the point is: So does the truth!

For example, I was talking to our daughter the other day about her clients at CareNet where she meets people facing some of the most serious circumstances in life. So I asked her, “How many are usually open to counseling?” “1%,” she said. “1%! You gotta be joking!” So she decided to be more gracious and added, “Well, definitely no more than 5%!” Why? Why are people in trouble so slow to step into the light? Think about it. If you were being wheeled into the OR, you’d want the lights as bright as possible so the surgeon can see what he’s doing, but we don’t want those lights in the dressing room because that wouldn’t be flattering!

Consequently, don’t be surprised if the next time you speak the truth in love to someone in trouble, they resent it because the truth is not only illuminating, it can also be painful and embarrassing until the problem gets resolved. We listen to obey. We listen to share. And one more way we need to listen. We—

3. Listen to Reproduce

Let me read the key verse of this chapter one more time—Luke 8:18, where Jesus says this: “Therefore, consider carefully how you listen, for whoever has will be given more; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.” The principle is: “Use it or lose it,” which is something most of us have heard when it comes to physical fitness, but the same thing is true when it comes to farming, economics, car engines, academics, and the study of the Word of God. Jesus explained, “The seed that fell on good soil are those who, having heard the word with good and noble hearts, keep it and patiently produce a harvest—some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred-fold.” And the converse is also true. If we do not listen carefully to the Word of God and obey the light we’ve been given, we can lose everything we’ve gained up till now and more.

Conclusion

I want to finish, then, by giving you a spiritual hearing test and asking you: Where are you in the process of becoming a disciple? Is that something you’re thinking about this morning? Or maybe you’ve made that commitment but you need a little encouragement to keep going and growing. Or maybe you want to serve but you need a little training to make you a more effective servant of Jesus Christ. Most of you’ve probably noticed the little booklet in your bulletin today called “Your Spiritual Journey: A Personal Guide.” And what I want to do before we finish is give you a few minutes to evaluate yourself in light of it and fill out the back with me. And then, because we love you and want to do everything we can to help you grow—if you want us to pray for you or encourage you in some other way—leave it on the seat next to you, so the ushers can pick it up and give it to us when the service is over. But before we do any of that, let me pray—