“Who’s Listening? Are You?”

James 1:17-27

January 22, 2017

Please open your Bible with me to the seventh chapter of the Book of Acts.

Jesus often said this *“he that hath ears, let him hear.”* Actually He said this on six different occasions (Mt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mk. 4:23; 7:16; Lk. 14:35).

Where have all the listeners gone? I recently listened to an online lecture and the teacher began with this. *“What I’m going to say is divided into three levels of importance: important, very important, and absolutely important. As I come to each section, I will tell you which level of importance it is.”* That made a lot of sense to me.

So, I began to wonder if that is what Jesus meant those six times when He said *“he that hath ears, let him hear.”*

My topic today is listening and my sermon title is “Who’s Listening? Are You?” Shall we pray?

Very rarely do we think about how we listen or how well we listen. And I’m just as guilty on this as you are. Now, wouldn’t you say that Martha listens much differently than you do? Let’s say we’re all listening to Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto. Wouldn’t she hear things you might never hear?

And don’t airplane pilots need to have highly perfected listening skills? Counsellors have to be able to listen well. Pastors should listen well. Translators certainly must be able to listen well. But what about you?

So, here’s what I’ve concluded on listening. If you think something is very important to you, you will intentionally listen to what is being said. But, the rest you’ll let go in one ear and out the other.

Henry David Thoreau said this *“The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when someone asked me what I thought, and attended [listened] to my answer.”*

There’s a story that been told about the 32nd President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt who became very tired of all the typical small talk and flattery he received when meeting with guests visiting at the various White House receptions. FDR was quite certain that guests really weren’t listening to what he had to say, so at one particular event President Roosevelt decided he would make the exact same comment to each guest to see if, in fact, they were listening. As the guests arrived and shook the President’s hand he smiled politely and said in jovial tones, *“I murdered my grand-mother this morning.”*

As Roosevelt expected, the guests simply gushed and paid the President a compliment and moved along. Now, it’s easy to imagine that President Roosevelt found the interchange both amusing and ultimately a bit sad. Then, as the last of the guests were coming through, a foreign diplomat shook Roosevelt’s hand and heard the President say, *“I murdered my grandmother this morning.”* The diplomat stopped for a moment and responded, *“I’m sure she had it coming to her.”* [Found on www.snopes.com].

Acts chapter seven is really the first sermon ever given on the topic of listening.

Now, I do want to be a good listener. But, honestly, I have a long way to go. Actually, I’ve learned this about myself. It takes a lot to be a good listener. And I know why. Listening takes effort. And, by the way, listening to the LORD takes effort too. When the OT prophets heard the LORD speak, they really heart His voice. When Jesus heard His Father speak out of the sky at His baptism, I am very sure that Jesus listened with attentiveness.

Of all the people you or I should listen to, the LORD stands at the top of the list. Every so often we all should examine our listening skills when it comes to reading the studying the Bible.

And here’s what The Apostle Paul said about it from Hebrews 1:1 *“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, (2) Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;…”*

So, when Jesus says six times *“he who has an ear, let him hear,”* He was saying “listen intentionally to what I am saying.” There’s always more to hear than what you get on your first hearing.

Most people view Acts seven as “The Death of the First Christian Martyr.” And it’s true, Luke tells us how Stephen died. But Acts seven is really Stephen’s sermon on listening.

So, again, the title of today’s lesson is “Who’s Listening? Are You?”

Do you know why Stephen was arrested and brought before the High Priest of the Jews in Jerusalem?

One, Stephen was the first man chosen by the Church to serve the widows their daily allotment of food.

Two, Stephen performed miracles just like Peter and John had. Look back with me at Acts 6:8 *“And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.”*

He was food waiter. And, he was also a man full of the Spirit; a man of faith and power. And God used him to do mighty miracles among the Jews that day.

Now imagine this with me. Stephen had been selected to serve the widows. He, in essence, finds God’s purpose for his life. He’s a waiter. Then he performs miracles. Next, he opens his mouth, preaches a glorious sermon on listening, and he is stoned to death; all, apparently, in the very same day.

As you can easily see, God’s purpose for you is to carry out the duties *He’s* given you until *His* purposes are completed. It might be that God will give you a long period of service for Him or it might be that He’ll give you a very short one. Your life is in *His* hands.

David Brainerd was born April 20, 1718 in Haddam, CT. His dad, a CT legislator, died when Brainerd was just nine. His mom died when he was fourteen. At twenty-one, Brainerd was converted and he soon felt God calling him to preach. Two months after his conversion to Christ, he decided to prepare at Yale College here in Old Saybrook and, though he was at the top of his class, in the year 1742, in his second year at Yale, he was kicked out of school.

Brainerd then spent his life reaching Indians for Christ. He once wrote *“My heart sunk. It seemed to me that I’d never have any success among the Indians. My soul was weary of life. I longed for death.”*

God gave young minister Brainerd just five years of ministry because he died in 1747 of a disease called tuberculosis.

I imagine that this man Stephen from Acts chapter seven might have been one of those who greeted Brainerd on the day he died, October 9, 1747.

One day of ministry in his service for the King; one sermon; one message on listening; and God’s purposes for Stephen were completed.

So, here’s Stephen called in before the High Priest?

First, he was accused of speaking blasphemously against both Moses and God. Look with me at Acts 6:11 *“Then they suborned [bribed] men, which said, we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.”*

Then, they accused him of saying blasphemous things against the Temple; verse thirteen. Acts 6:13 *“And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:…”*

Then, they accused him of saying that Jesus intended to destroy the Temple and change the teachings of Moses; verse fourteen. Acts 6:14 *“For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.”*

So, in light of these false accusations, Stephen is taken into the High Priest’s chambers and given an opportunity to answer the charges against him. Acts seven in his response.

And what does Stephen do? He takes the High Priest and those around him through the entire Old Testament in a few minutes. It’s really quite a review in just a few minutes’ times.

He begins in Genesis, starting with Abraham; vv. 1-8.

Then he moves on to Joseph; vv. 9-10

Then to the Jews in Egypt; vv.11-19;

Next, to Moses; vv. 20-35;

Then he brings up Jesus in the OT. He takes them to a very well-known passage from Exodus chapter eighteen, which is a prediction of the coming of Chris.

Here it is. Acts 7:37 *“This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet [Jesus] shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me [Moses]; him [Jesus] shall ye hear [listen to].*

*(38) This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: …”*

Can you see here how pointed Stephen is? “You, you Jews, do not listen to God.” Here’s where Stephen is really taking his message to the Jews that day. He does it by connecting the Jewish leaders right there in front of him with the Jews of Moses’ day who wouldn’t listen to the LORD.

Look a little further with me to verse thirty-nine. Acts 7:39 *“****To whom our fathers would not obey****, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt, (40) Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot [know] not what is become of him.*

*(41) And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.”*

Here’s what we can about listening.

First, listening includes obeying. If you listen to the LORD, you obey Him.

Those of you who are parents will easily remember those days when you used the word “listen” in exactly the same way Stephen does. Dad walks in the room and Mom says to their daughter “Ruthie, you better listen right now.”

What did Mom mean? She meant “You’d better do what I said or else.” “You’d better obey.”

All the way back in the Torah you will find this exact same word. It’s the Old English word “hearken.”

Deuteronomy 11:13 *“And it shall come to pass, if ye shall* ***hearken*** *diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul,*

*(14) That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil.”*

To “hearken” means to “listen, to obey, and to comply.”

Think about what the LORD is saying. Did He mean to simply listen to His command to love Him and serve Him will all their heart? Do you really think the LORD would give them rain in due season and the early and the later rains so that they could gather their corn and wine and oil if they merely *heard* what the LORD said? I don’t think so.

Rather, listening includes obeying.

Second, to refuse to listen to the LORD is to resist Him.

Here’s Stephen again at verse fifty-one. Acts 7:51 *“Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. (52) Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?*

*And they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: (53) who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.”*

Can you the direct simplicity of Stephen’s words here? “You who are stiff-necked; who are you? You are those who hear what the Bible says; but you refuse to do it. In other words, you are stubborn when it comes to listening to the LORD. And why are you so stubborn? Isn’t it because you think you have a better way to live than to surrender to Him? Isn’t it because you think you know better than the LORD?”

Stephen describes such people as uncircumcised in heart and ears. Now think with me about what the Jews had accused Stephen of; that he’d spoken blasphemously against Moses and God. But, in truth, who was it that was living blasphemously against both Moses and the LORD? It was those very same people that Stephen was speaking to that day.

Folks, practically speaking, are we any different today? When you are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart, you refuse to do what the LORD says you are to do; you also accuse other people of doing exactly the same thing you are doing. In both cases, both then and now; anyone who rejects the LORD’s word is resisting Him.

So, who here is a listener? Who here is a good listener? Are you? How do you know you are listening to the LORD? You can tell how well you listen by how well you obey.

And how did those who heard Stephen respond?

Here’s how; verse fifty-four. Acts 7:54 *“When they heard these things, they were* ***cut to the heart****, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.”*

Charles Spurgeon describes their responses this way. *“He [Stephen] takes the sharp knife of the Word and rips up the sins of the people, laying open the inward parts of their hearts, and the secrets of their souls … He could not have delivered that searching address with greater fearlessness had he been assured that they would thank him for the operation; the fact that his death was certain had no other effect upon him than to make him yet more zealous.”* [C. H. Spurgeon].

Can you see how powerful God’s word is? Can you see what it is? Can you see what it can do? The Bible, when it is taught and preached in truth should have this effect. It’s designed by the Holy Spirit to “cut to the heart.”

Do you remember how the Jews responded when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost? Acts 2:37 *“Now when they heard this,* ***they were pricked in their heart****, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?”*

And how had the Sadducees responded when the Chief Priests brought Peter and John before them? Acts 5:33 *“When they heard that,* ***they were cut to the heart****, and took counsel to slay them.”*

Can you see what really reaches the heart? It’s the sword of the Spirit. Here’s how the Bible describes itself. Hebrews 4:12 *“For the word of God is quick living], and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”*

The Bible you hold in your hand is a living, powerful, sharp, piercing sword that God must use to bring you to Himself.

Folks, it’s way too easy to call yourself a listener to the Word of God when, in reality, you are anything but a listener. My Mom use to say to my brothers and sisters and to me “is what I’m saying going in one ear and out the other.” That’s what happens when you really don’t want to listen to the LORD.

But when His word “cuts you to the heart,” and when it “pricks you in your heart,” then and only then, have you really listened to what the LORD is saying.

And how did these Jews respond to the preaching of this man Stephen? Acts 7:54 *“When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and* ***they gnashed on him with their teeth****.”*

This is another way of saying “they very deeply affected by what Stephen was saying and it made them very angry.” And, as you are about to see, it made them so angry, they decided to stone him, verse fifty-five.

Acts 7:55 *“But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, (56) And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.*

*(57) Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, (58) And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. (59) And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*

Now, some of us think that Stephen being stoned was merely having stones thrown at him. But here’s what it really looked like that day.

The second-century Jewish writing *Mishnah*, describes the practice of stoning: *“When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned … When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, “Confess, for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and everyone who confesses has a share in the age to come …*

*Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped … The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient.*

*If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.”* (Cited in Acts by F.F. Bruce)

So, yes, Acts seven is the account of the first Christian martyr. But it’s really a sermon about listening. Who’s listening? Are you?

Have you become so accustomed to hearing the Bible taught and preached and done nothing about it that you’ve become spiritually tone deaf? Or, can you remember when you heard the voice of the LORD and it cut you to the heart?

Folks, the LORD doesn’t speak just be say He’s spoken. Rather, He speaks so that you and I will listen; and listen so as to obey.

Here’s a final word from the Apostle James on this subject. James 1:22 *“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. (23)* *For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:*

*(24)* *For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. (25)**But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”*

Who’s listening? The one who’s listening today is the one who is a “doer” of the Word. When the LORD speaks, you listen and do what He tells you to do.

Let me close with five reasons you must obey the LORD.

One, because God is your Father and you and His son. If you’ve repented and trusted in Christ, then you’ve entered the road of a listener. You’ve obeyed some of what the LORD has said. You are now saved by the work of Christ on Calvary.

Two, because God’s word is The Truth. God only requires you to abide in the Truth. So, the only obedience you should know is obeying the truth. I Peter 1:22 *“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently:…”*

Three, because you love Him. John 14:15 *“If ye love me, keep my commandments.”*

Fourth and finally, because your daily goal should be to please Him. Here is the verse that I continually pray both for myself and for you that are here today. Colossians 1:10 *“That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;…”*

So, are you a listener? If not, why not?

If you are here today and ready to listen to what the LORD says, here’s a prayer to begin with. “LORD, I surrender myself completely to you right now. Thank you for sending Your Son to be my Savior and LORD and giving me Your life. By your Holy Spirit, I intend to LISTEN and apply these words to my life. Thy will be done; In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

Shall we pray?

Please find with me hymn number # 321 “When I Survey”