

Listening

Hearing, Understanding, and Doing

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A Turkish proverb teaches that if speaking is silver, then listening is gold.

This echoes the sentiment in James 1:19 in which the Apostle advises, "Therefore my beloved brethren, let every man to be swift to hear, slow to speak?"

Listening is one half of the communication process. There must be not only someone speaking, but someone must be listening for communication to actually take place. And in most respects, though we tend not to think this way, the more important part of the communication process is listening because someone can speak for hours on end, like I am wont (known) to do, but if no one is listening, what good is it? Even if someone hears it, what good is it if they are not actually listening?

Unfortunately, we often neglect to train this vital communication skill thinking that anybody can listen, but that is not really true. We often hear, but we do not listen. Things are going on in the world so much, the television is on, the radio is on, people are talking, cars are going by, and there is every chance of hearing it all, but we tune it out.

We have to learn to tune it out, or we will get distracted. It becomes a habit to tune things out. And so, in cases where we need to, we end up not really listening.

Psychologist Carl Rogers asserts, "Man's inability to communicate is a result of his failure to listen effectively, skillfully, and with understanding to another person."

Now, you know that listening with focused attention is a dying skill or an art. It was not very long ago when I gave a sermon entitled, "Words versus Images." I said that people just 150 years ago were able to listen to political speeches that went on for hours. Remember, I mentioned the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Those debates took place over a seven hour period where each man had three hours to give his side. And then, each one also had a half hour for rebuttal.

But today, in contrast to that, we become bored with the presentation after just a few minutes. We have been taught mostly through television, a bit through radio, and other media, to take things in bite sized chunks. Psychologists say that the average adult attention span in a college classroom is roughly 15 to 20 minutes.

There are people who spend most of their time, supposedly, in class listening to lectures. And even they, can on average only listen for about 15 to 20 minutes before their attention wanders.

It might be person speaking; the professor might be a little dull. But even so, most people will only listen for about that long.

Now, this is in contrast to earlier in the 20th century when it was about three times that long—45 to 60 minutes, which was about the time that they were beginning to figure out class time lengths.

You know most class times (well, in the schools I went to) last about 50 minutes to an hour. That is also why they were 50 minutes to an hour because those earlier psychologists figured out that that was about the time length that people could listen.

Think about church sermons—not in the church of God, but in other churches. They went from about an hour to about 45 minutes; then down to about 30 minutes. Some sermons in some of the churches out there are only about 20 minutes long. It has all been scaled back to the average attention span of the normal adult listener.

Now, internet researchers—we are coming into the 21st century here—are finding that web users have the attention span of a gnat! An average web user has the attention span of about 7 seconds.

This is what David Grabbe has to worry about. When he makes a website page, he has to make sure that the person who is viewing it will accept it and want look at it in 7 seconds. And so, it has to be an almost immediate recognition of something interesting. Otherwise, you will lose him—This is not fun; this is not pretty; this does not appeal to me; this does not attract my attention; there is too much stuff going on; this is distracting to me or whatever the complaint is.

You have got to grab them in 7 seconds or so, before they go off to something else. They will click that mouse, and if they have a nice high speed connection, those pages will come up just one second after another. And that is how most people surf on the internet.

I do not know if you have ever surfed, but it is not slow; not if you are on the wave. You are moving fairly fast.

Now this has gone into other things like politics.

The sound bite has replaced reasoned explanation. So now, people are supposed to vote based on snippets of information. It was about two months ago when I heard—and this just blew Rush Limbaugh away because this just never happens—John Kerry had an interview with CBS and it went on for about a half hour. When he was finished the producer came up to him and said, "Mr. Kerry? Can you do something else? We did not get anything out of your speech that we can use on television." And so he said, "Well?.OK." And so he got back up in front of the camera, and impromptu, tried to come up with sound bites that they could use on the evening news. They would not use any of his statements, or answers, because they just went on too long to fit their idea of a good sound bite.

And so now, here we are going to elect the president of the United States, the most powerful position in the world, on the basis of two or three second sound clips of his platform of ideas.

A commercial at the most lasts only one minute. And even that, to hold the interest, they must change the picture constantly. Just go home tonight, and flip on the television—and it does not have to be a commercial, it could be any show, or movie—just get out a stop watch, and start it for only about 15-30 seconds, and count how many movements there are on the screen. It may be a pan, a fade, a shift in perspective, some sort of action on the screen—just count all the times that something happens to change the perspective on things just a little bit. You will find that if you do this, that in 15 seconds of a normal program you will find at least ten of these! They are constantly moving things to keep you interested.

If you do a commercial it is worse. There is probably one every second. And in one of those "movie trailers," They say that there is one every half second. They use this as a means to get our attention to keep us riveted so we will go out and spend our money on a movie ticket. But, they have found that most people's attention will not be captured if they do something more slowly or reasoned. They have got to get you caught.

It is no wonder that when kids get to school, they are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, or other related things. Their brain has actually been programmed to want movement all the time, so that they cannot focus on anything that is longer than a half second.

This is why people have lost the art and the skill of listening. It makes it difficult for someone like me who tries to keep your attention for an hour and fifteen minutes

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because a lot of people are trained at about 15 minutes to lose the train of thought. And then to try and carry that attention another 50 minutes or so. That is tough!

Think about this!

We are coming to the crisis at the close, and it is the work of the church of God to make a witness to the world. Sure, we do this with our example, but another thing that we do is preach the Word of God. We get it out there in one form or another. We have it on the hyper internet for those who want to slow down. But, we also speak it.

Now, the people at the close of this age, if this continues on the way it appears to be going are not going to have the attention span to listen to God's Word for any length of time; to really grasp what God is trying to teach them. It makes the job of the church of God twice as hard as it would be if the people had been taught from early on to listen.

Listening, as I have just shown you, is an important spiritual skill. It is as important as a physical skill is. And in this spiritual area of our lives it is far more vital. Just as skillful listening enhances human relationships, it will also enhance our relationship with God.

And that is what I want to get into today.

The late Episcopal theologian, William Stringfellow, had a book entitled, "Friend's Journal." And he wrote in it,

"Listening is a rare happening among human beings. You cannot listen to the word another is speaking if you are preoccupied with your appearance, or with impressing the other, or trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking, or are debating about whether what is being said is true, or relevant, or agreeable. Such matters have their place, but only after listening to the word as the word is being uttered. Listening [now get this] is a primitive act of love in which a person gives himself to another's word, making himself accessible and vulnerable to that word."

In this light thinking of it as an act of love, we can see that listening has a spiritual aspect to it, even in the physical sense. I am not talking at this point necessarily about listening to what God has to say. But, just listening to somebody else is showing them love. It is showing outgoing concern for what they have to say. It has a spiritual aspect to it. It is giving of one's self. It is giving of one's time and attention to receive what the other person is saying. It may not be important, and it may not have anything to do with

anything.

And, in a way it does not matter what the other person is saying, but just the act of stopping what you are doing and giving your full attention to the other person's words, as well as the feelings, and the expressions, and whatever else is in this communication process that the other person is trying to get across—all of that is showing them love.

Now, listening is important, just on a physical plane, in terms of our relationships with our spouse. You have to listen to your wife, or your husband or your marriage is going to go down the tubes!

Your children—kids—at some point more than being taught, they need to be listened to.

Friends—you cannot keep a friendship long if you do not communicate, and I know I am guilty of this. I tend to get so involved in what I am doing, that I do not keep up with other people who I may have spent a great deal of time with in the past and I know that those relationships have petered down to almost nothing.

You need to be able to talk with your employer, or employee, to keep the work relationship going. And it could go on, and on. It is important that we listen in those relationships. But, it is exponentially more important to listen in our relationship with God.

If you would turn in your Bibles to Matthew 17 (which of course comes right after Matthew 16); and if you remember what happens in Matthew 16? where Jesus asked the disciples "Who do men say that I am?" And, Peter answered rightly and said, "You are the Son of the Living God—the Christ!" It is not but a few verses later that Jesus tells Peter and the rest that He is going to have to go to Jerusalem and die, and Peter says, "Far be it from You, Lord." And guess what Jesus does? He says, "Get behind me Satan!"

Peter had recognized who He was, but he had not recognized what He had come to do. He had missed something. And so, a bit later, Jesus does the section on "Take up your cross, and follow Me."

Matthew 17:1-4 Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is

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good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Now, I wish that they would put a dash there, because I think it would have given you the sense more, that Peter was just going to go on—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But, notice what was said next:

Matthew 17:5 While he [Peter] was still speaking [God interrupted him], behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

What did He say to them? *"Look, Peter! Shut up! This is God, My Son, who has been made radiant before you to teach you a lesson. Now **listen** to Him!"*

See? What Peter had done in this jabbering was say, *"Oh! Jesus is about on par with Moses and Elijah. So, let us make three little tabernacles here, one for each, and they could share them like a little trinity!"*

And God said, (knock, knock) *"Hey, Pete! Look! This One is My Son! I do not care what Moses and Elijah said. Hear Him! He is the top of the pyramid."*

Now of course He cared about what Moses and Elijah said, because what they said came from this very One standing with them. *"Listen up!"*

This was a direct command from God and it was not just to Peter. It was to us as well. We are instructed directly from God the Father to listen to His Son. I think that God set up this entire scenario here in chapter 17 just to impress this point on Peter especially, but also James, and John, and later on to rest of the disciples, because God wanted them to understand just what kind of Person they were dealing with in Jesus.

Sure, he (Peter) recognized that this was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, but he did not understand it. He did not really feel it. He was still stuck in what he had been taught before. And God needed to shake him, and wake him up, and say, *"Look! This is no ordinary man! This is Someone who has the highest credentials. He is worthy of our utmost attention. He is the One who has the words of life. Do not let this opportunity pass. Do not let yourself get distracted by other things. Do not think that what you have to say is more important. Do not think that what you think has any bearing on anything!"*

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Because, this is the Son of the Living God. He has been sent here specifically with a message, and it must be heeded if you want eternal life."

We are not talking crackers now. This is the whole thing. It all depends upon hearing Him—listening to Him.

So, shake off the lethargy, and listen—truly listen, because He is our life, He is our hope, He is our Savior, and our King, and our God. Who else in the universe should demand our attention?

Jesus Himself as Yahweh had problems with this in the past. Let us go back to Ezekiel. In this particular place, it is kind of condensed into one little vignette that Ezekiel had to learn and go through. Ezekiel 33, beginning in verse 30. In a way, I believe just about every minister has gone through something like this that Ezekiel had to go through. But, with Jesus, I think, it was probably the pinnacle of this. And certainly as Yahweh, God had the hardest time getting Israel to listen to Him. But, I want you to see how a carnal person reacts to the Word of God. It is right here:

Ezekiel 33:30 As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses?

Oh, he was just a famous guy. I mean, he was on the cover of all the tabloids there in Babylon, and everybody was gossiping about him. He had front page news all the time. "What was Ezekiel doing this week? Was he lying on his side? Which side? What was he laying siege to now? Was he burning his hair again?"

They were really interested in what he was doing.

Ezekiel 33:30-33 ?and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, 'Please come and hear what the word is that comes from the LOORD. So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, *but* their hearts pursue their *own* gain. Indeed you *are* to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them. And when this comes to pass—surely it will come—then they will know that a prophet has been among them."

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Now, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that before conversion, just like these Israelites, that we really ever listened to God or to His Word with real spiritual ears. We were just like these Israelites.

If we had an interest in religion it was like this, "Well, I wonder what the preacher is going to say today? I just cannot wait! He is always so entertaining. I could just listen to him for hours!"

Well, fine. Giving sermons is part entertainment in that you have to keep people's attention. But, that certainly is not the reason why we do it.

These Israelites were very eager to hear what Ezekiel had to say each week, or whenever he spoke, because I think they probably knew that they were dealing with a real prophet of God. They could recognize the truth, they could recognize that he was speaking the words of God, and so they were eager to hear them. But, that is about as far as it went.

It was just so much entertainment to them, or possibly it was intellectually stimulating. Maybe there was a bit of plain old curiosity, "What is the old coot going to come up with next?"

But, did it produce anything in them? Did it bring forth any real fruit?

Before our conversion, we may have said that we understood, that we believed. We could say a lot of things. I could say that I am going to be the next Winston Cup Champion. I would be lying because there is not any Winston Cup anymore. But, I could say as much as I want and it does not make it true!

Really, before conversion when we heard God's Word, did it really change us? Just hearing something with the ear makes no difference. Everybody does that. But, did it change us? Did it change our ways? Did we stop living carnal lives? Did we actually do what God said?

We may have thought we did, but before God opened our mind, did we keep the Sabbath or the holy days? Did we tithe? Did we stop coveting? Lying? Stealing? Hating? Taking God's name in vain? Swearing?

Did we worship a trinity? Or did we worship God the Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ? Did our minds change from the impact of God's Word?

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Biblical listening is far more than just hearing. It is understanding and responding in obedience. It is not just hearing.

Listen to that: It is understanding and responding in obedience.

True listening produces changed behavior. (We are going to see this in a lot of places.) And the changed behavior results in spiritual growth. The behavior, several steps down the line, proves that God's Word fell on more than deaf ears. The behavior is the proof that what God said, which we heard, actually implanted itself in us.

Now, do not we expect this from our children?

I could think of a thousand times when either I or Beth (my wife) have told all four of my children, "Pick up the toys, off the floor! This place is a mess! Pick up the toys! Put them back in the toy box!"

And they can say, "OK, Daddy. OK, Mommy." And if they did not pick up the toys, did they really listen? NO! They heard, but they did not respond. They really did not understand and respond in obedience. This happens everyday in our house. That is why I can say, "a thousand times." It is probably two, three, four, or ten thousand times we have said that.

They have got action figures all over, or it could be marbles, and other things that can kill you when you come in and step on them; or just all kinds of stuff all over our den. I mean it looks like a cyclone hit it. Really, I am not kidding. It usually looks terrible because the kids just play, and throw things around—boys, we are talking three boys here—and the two little ones are very bad at it. And then, we can say that dinner is going to be in so many minutes, and we want this place picked up! "Wah! Jerod did it!"

But, we do not see that they really listened until all the toys are picked up, and the place is clean. There is a difference between hearing and listening. You can hear, it is just a physical process. But, listening is much deeper.

I am going to take a minute or so to discuss the Hebrew and Greek words here that we are dealing with in the Bible.

They are very similar to the English word in the sense that they treat this concept of hearing the same way. That is, the word, itself, is a very simple word. It is the everyday word that is used for the actual process of hearing with the ears. But, we all know that we use hearing, most of the time, in a sense of not just actually hearing it, but

understanding it.

And then, of course, in all three languages—Hebrew, Greek, and English—we know that that concept moves further than just hearing, or understanding. It goes all the way to obedience.

So, all the words we are dealing with here have this same very simple basic meaning, but a very complex, and far reaching extended meaning.

Now, the Hebrew word for hear, or listen, is "*shama*." It occurs over a thousand times in the Old Testament. Like I said, it is the everyday word for "hear." It simply means "to hear." But, it also means by extension, listening, paying attention, obeying, understanding, and even, in a technical sense, for hearing a case in a courtroom. So, it can also mean examining, or judging. So, it has a very broad range of meanings.

It is often translated as "to heed," or "to understand;" or they even (when they feel it warrants) translate it directly as "obey," because that is what is meant (according to context).

Now the Greek word is "*akouo*." It is very similar to "*shama*." Like I said, it is the usual word for hearing, but it also implies "listening attentively, or respectfully." And, it is often extended to cover "hearing effectually, or effectively;" hearing, then, and performing what is spoken. As in, if someone gives a command, you hear it and do it.

It can also mean "to obey," and "to understand." It is variously translated like that.

Let us go back to an example in Luke 10—a very well known example of Mary and Martha with Jesus. This verb is found right here in the context. We will read the whole passage.

Luke 10:38-42 Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard [this is the word] His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

It is kind of an interesting word. It is not exactly "*akouo*," that we find in other places, but "*ekouen*." Now this is a word that has the root, "*akouo*," with the prefix "*ek*" added. "*EK*" means "out of." And so, what this word means is, "to hear out." Do not we use that expression? "Hear me out!" It means, "listen to all that I have to say." (Maybe you will have to endure it, but listen to everything I have to say.)

This is the exact same idea that we are supposed to get from this—that Mary was interested in everything that He had to say. She wanted to hear Him completely. She did not want to miss a word.

And so, her hearing was not only attentive, it was very respectful, and it was complete. She was just totally absorbed with what He had to say.

Now, notice Jesus is clear to impress upon Martha that Mary was doing a better thing than she [Martha] was doing even with all her bustling service that she was going about doing. Mary, He said, had chosen the better part.

Now, I looked into this a bit because I was interested in Jesus' reply to her.

If I can paraphrase what He had to say, it was, "*Martha! Look as all you have done here today. You have made us five courses, you have made us beds in the other room, you have made it possible for us to have a bath. You have done all these things, but only one thing was needed. We just needed to have the hospitality of your home. Mary chose the better course to sit down and listen to what I had to say.*"

Implied in this is, "*I only have a short while. You will not get this opportunity again. It would have been better had you put a few figs on the table, and we could have had a little service, and I could have told you the things that you need to know.*"

That is what He meant by saying, "Mary has chosen that good part which will not be taken from her." See, she was going to come away from this experience with spiritual truth—something that she could use, then, later on. But, Martha was only going to remember all the work she had to do to make sure that crowd of 12 guys had their bellies full. He was telling Martha, rebuking her just a little bit, that, "*You have not prioritized properly in this instance. Yes, it is good to serve. Yes, it is good to be able to give people what hospitality they need. But you, like Peter, did not recognize Who was among you. Mary did.*"

Mary would come away better for the experience than Martha, because she had chosen that good part. He was saying, "Martha, you should have followed Mary's example."

And so, He is not saying in any way that Mary was lazy. In fact, He was only saying that Mary had her priorities straight. That is not to say that we are not supposed to serve. This is choosing between two good things. And Mary had chosen the better of the two.

Jesus shows us here in John 5 just how important hearing, or listening is. He uses the word "hear," in this instance, and it is the simple form of the word, "*akouo*."

John 5:24 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

Now, the word, *akouo*, here implies "receives, or understands." It could even be "obeys." Just put those back in there:

"Most assuredly I say to you, he who *receives*, or *understands*, or *obeys* my word has passed from death into life."

What He is saying is that He is putting the proper perspective on how important it is to listen. It starts the ball rolling that will lead all the way to this particular end, this good end of eternal life.

Now, we know that many people have heard God's Word, or His doctrines for two-thousand years. Millions of people have been exposed to it. The Bible has been in print since Gutenberg (1450)—the first thing printed on a printing press was the Bible. It is been distributed all over the world, millions of copies every year.

But, does it really hit people the way that it should? What is the difference? Why does it strike us differently than it would strike Joe Blow down the street?

Obviously, the church of God knows God's calling has a great deal to do with that, and the giving of the Holy Spirit. But, part of it is the fact that they do not really listen to it. It does not make—the words do not make—any impression upon them whatsoever.

There is really no magic in the words. The words must work in the mind that is prepared for them. And then, as they work they produce understanding. And even then, those words make little difference in a person's life until they are acted out and change behavior.

Once they are put into practice and the miracles begin to happen, people's lives begin to change. Now, it has gone from words—symbols on a page, data on a computer, little vibrations on the ear—to actual principles which bring behavioral change that begins to make a difference in the way a person lives.

Let us see this in Acts 9. This is probably the prime New Testament example in which we can see this happen in a man. Acts 9, if you know your Bible chapters, is the conversion of the Apostle Paul, called Saul at the time. Notice where he starts:

Acts 9:1-2 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now, notice what he was going to do! He was going to go get official permission to persecute Christians in Damascus. Notice his attitude. It was here, "breathing out threats and murder?," on top of the persecution. He was willing, not only to haul them into prison, but to have them executed. Just a vile attitude.

Acts 9:3-6 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord *said* to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Acts 9:10-11 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus [one of the ones he was going to persecute] named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord *said* to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for *one* called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.

Acts 9:17-20 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul [notice Ananias' attitude—he knew the God was working with this man, even though the last he had heard was that he was breathing out threats and slaughter against the brethren], the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately

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there fell from his eyes *something* like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

A total change—a 180° —from "breathing out threats and slaughter" to preaching that this One was the Son of God.

Acts 9:21-22 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

What a turn around! It took only days for this to happen. You get the impression from just reading through it that he was struck on the road, he went to Damascus, a couple days pass, Ananias came, said this to him, put his hands on him, he received the Holy Spirit after his baptism, and suddenly marched out the door, went into the synagogue and said, "I have some news for you, guys."

And he was telling them there, the ones he had come to tell to round up all the Christians, "*No! I have changed my mind! This One is Jesus, the very Son of God, the Christ.*"

And then when they non-believers argued with him, he proved it to them from the scriptures that this One who he formally persecuted was his Lord and Master, and theirs too!

Now, how did this take place?

It looks like maybe it was about a week or two in this whole scenario. But, why did he go from black to white so quickly when all those years he had been chief among the persecutors. He was the one that the men who killed Stephen gave their cloaks to. Meaning, he was the one responsible. How did this all happen? What did Christ have to do to make this change in the man—to make him one of the chief Apostles to write His Word, to raise up churches, to spread the Gospel all over the Mediterranean region?

What did he have to do?

He began by forcing Paul to listen to Him!

You have probably read of the name of Dick Cavett in Reader's Digest, or some other humor places, he said, "It takes a rare person to want to hear what he does not want to hear."

Paul was that way. He did not want to hear the truth. He was fine with Pharisaism, until God knocked him on the head, and said, "*Listen, Paul! You have got to hear what you do not want to hear.*"

God had to strike Paul blind to get his attention. He had to put him on a three day fast (verse 9) to get his attitude straight. And then, He made him think through, while he was blind, what he had been doing and what he knew of Jesus' claims, versus what the Old Testament said. I am sure that Saul was not just sitting there, saying, "*Woe is me! I am blind!*" *through those three days.*

He was a man of very serious intent. He was a man of great intellectual power. And not eating and being blind—pretty much helpless like a baby—he had a chance to sit there for three days and think.

I am sure that most of the Old Testament flooded through his mind at one point or another, and he began thinking about this Christ, and the things that he knew about these Christians, and compared them to what the Old Testament said of this One.

And by the time that Ananias came, he was ready. He had to be knocked down, blinded, and put on a starvation diet, before he would really listen to God's Word.

But, it worked! God's methods usually do. So, what did all of this result in?

Baptism, receipt of the Holy Spirit, and an immediate change in character—then, he was off to do God's Work; and he did not stop from that point on. He was the chief worker for God. That is what his name means: Paul—worker!

He put all his energy into God's Work from that point on. Once God knocked him on the head and made him sit down and listen to the Gospel, he was changed.

Now, this happens to all of us when He finally turns His attention to us.

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Let us go back to Matthew 13. These are those mini-parables that He gave. But, the first one is the most important one. It is the parable of the sower and the seed. It sets the stage for hearing the other parables. We are going to read down through verse 23 because I want you to see the entire context here, and what Jesus is doing to open up their minds.

Matthew 13:3 Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying:
"Behold, a sower went out to sow.

We are not going to read the parable today, as you all know the parable very well. The seed put on different soils produced differently. He ends that parable with:

Matthew 13:9 He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

It is a very insistent command. "*You whose minds have been opened to hear my words, **listen!** There is something important here!*"

Matthew 13:10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

Now we go through an entire section that is all about hearing:

Matthew 13:11-16 He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with *their* eyes and hear with *their* ears, Lest they should understand with *their* hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.' But blessed *are* your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear;

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The miracle has begun to take place! You have been set apart to see, and to hear!

Matthew 13:17 For assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous *men* desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*.

Notice that this goes straight on in. The explanation of the parable of the sower and the seed, comes directly after this explanation of why they have the difference between the multitudes and themselves in terms of hearing.

So, this is a further explanation.

Matthew 13:18 Therefore hear the parable of the sower:

This is going to enlighten us in terms of the differences of those who hear.

Matthew 13:19-23 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand *it*, then the wicked *one* comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands *it*, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

Now Jesus takes a lot of time, and takes great pains to explain this point to His disciples because hearing only gets the ball rolling. You have to have the right "soil," like He uses in the parable to come to fruition.

So, it is important that we understand what "soil" we are, and strive to be the fourth soil in the example—the good ground—the rich, fertile soil. And so He tells us how to avoid being the other soils. He shows us by the example in this parable what we should not be like.

The question is: What is done with the seed when it hits the soil?

In the first case the person does nothing with it. It just sits there. He makes no attempt to understand it. We have seen this with people of the world. You could hand them a magazine with the truth on it—we even named the magazine, in the old days, "The Plain Truth," right there on the cover. They could read it from cover to cover, and say, "Whoever did the graphics in this thing was really good."

It does not affect them at all. They just let it go. And so, what happens is that anything that might have started in their heart—their mind—to bring them to a calling, just gets snuffed out. Nothing is done with it.

In the second case, the person receives it with joy. "This is the best thing that ever happened to me! This is better than sliced bread." He just loves the truth. "I can use this, and it will be so wonderful. Now, I really understand."

But really, when you get down to it, the word has no effect on him other than to make him happy. He may be around smiling all the time, "I have the truth! Is that not wonderful?" But he does not really think it through. All he understands is the most basic of concepts.

He may understand a little bit about what God is doing, but he is either intellectually unable, or he is just lazy and does not take it any further than that basic meaning.

So, when hard times come, as Jesus says here, he cannot endure—he has no depth. All he understand is the very periphery of the truth, and if something makes him question, he falls away; or if some sort of persecution comes, something he only has a small amount of real knowledge of, it does not hold him up against it. He cannot contend against his persecutors. There is nothing there.

Now, in the third situation the person receives it, and may even make some use of it. Jesus does not imply at all that this person is simple-minded. What He says about this person, though, is that he is too busy—he is distracted—he is juggling a lot of balls in the air—and the truth is only one of them. "Oops! I have to go do this thing?" and the truth ball falls to the floor because he is got something else that suddenly has become more important to him. It could be his job, his wife, his family, or even only mowing the grass. Maybe his yard has become a god to him—he wants to have the best yard on the block, and win the 'yard of the month' award, or something.

It could be something as innocuous as his hobby, like stamp collecting, or model trains,

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etc. But, this person has not learned to prioritize the truth properly. It is supposed to be first, because it is God's Word.

And so, the person allows the truth of God, the Word of God, all he has learned to be crowded out with stuff—busyness, and activities. They could be fine things, but he has not learned to put them in their proper place.

And then in the last example, (notice the progression), "He receives the seed," that is he hears the Word, and understands it—that is what Jesus' definition of receiving the seed is.

He hears the Word, and understand it—but, does it stop there? NO!

"And indeed bears fruit!" See? Receiving the seed is not just hearing, or just hearing and understanding, but also bearing fruit! That is the one who has good soil. That is the one who bears fruit. It does not matter if he bears 30, or 60, or 100 because God knows what we are able to bear. He will be able to judge that in terms of gold, silver, precious stones, etc., as in I Corinthians 3. We will have our reward for that.

But, He wants to see the bearing of fruit come from the inculcation of the Word of truth into our mind, understanding coming from that, and then wisely putting it into practice. He wants to see the whole progression in each one of us.

Now, we did not need to wait for the New Testament for this to be said. It is also back here in the Old Testament. If you would, please go back to Deuteronomy 1. He tells us what listening is! In this Moses is recounting their rebellion in the wilderness when God says, "*OK. Thirty-eight more years for you guys, because you would not listen to Me!*"

Just notice how Moses puts this:

Deuteronomy 1:42 And the LORD said to me, 'Tell them, "Do not go up nor fight, for I *am* not among you; lest you be defeated before your enemies.'"

He made it very clear, "Look. This is not the right time, this is not the right place to go into the Promised Land. I am not with you. If you go in, you will be defeated, many of you will die. This is wrong, do not do it."

Clear! Clear as glass! Moses said:

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Deuteronomy 1:43-45 So I spoke to you; yet you would not listen, but rebelled against the command of the LORD, and presumptuously went up into the mountain. And the Amorites who dwelt in that mountain came out against you and chased you as bees do, and drove you back from Seir to Hormah. Then you returned and wept before the LORD, but the LORD would not listen to your voice nor give ear to you.

Now, what happened here as far as hearing goes? What is the principle that we can take out of it? In a negative sense the principle is "Not hearing equals rebellion!" And what is rebellion?

It is not just an intellectual thing. They actually went and did what He said not to do. It went that far. They did not just disagree, they actually marched out there and tried to take the Promised Land for themselves, and this is what happened.

And notice God's reaction. *"OK. If you are not going to listen to Me, I am not going to listen to you. You are going to get what you deserve. You are going to get treated the way that you treated Me."*

And that is what God did. He did not listen to them. They died in the wilderness.

All their prayers for leniency from Him fell on deaf ears. "I said it, but you did not do it, therefore, you died." Not listening equals rebellion.

This is in a bit of a different situation, but it gives us another equation, pretty much the opposite of the one we just saw:

Deuteronomy 4:1-2 Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

Deuteronomy 4:5-6 Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to *them* in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe *them*; for this *is* your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation *is* a wise and understanding people.'

Did you notice what Moses equated listening to? Moses equates listening and learning with obedience to God's Law. And it results in reward (the land) and life. This is your life. And you will have life, "that you may live," He says.

And then He adds in verse 2, that they are to take it whole. Now, when we listen to God, we do not have the choice of taking some of it, and rejecting other parts of it.

God says, "Do not add to it, do not take away from it." When you listen to God you have to take it raw, as it were. You have to take it in the form that He gives it to you, which is this word here in this book (the Bible). You do not have the choice of accepting some, and rejection others. You have to take it whole. It is all, or nothing.

So, once we hear, He says, you should be very careful to observe all that He tells us to do. He says specifically that He taught us (referencing verse 5) so that we should act, or behave, according to His Law.

See! He taught us, we listened, and it should result in behavior change according to His Law. Hearing is only the first step. There is learning, understanding, and observing—behaving, doing. All of those are necessary parts of the process.

Before I close, let us go to Isaiah 51. This has an end-time setting applying both to Israel in their state of captivity right there at the end; He is giving them help to bring them through this, but it also applies to the church of God. We can get a great deal out of this. It provides three pointers in regards to where we should focus our attention right now. I will give you each point as we go through it.

Isaiah 51:1c Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, [Would not that be us?] You who seek the LOORD [Would not that be us? OK, He is talking to us so we had better listen, because He said listen!]: Look to the rock *from which* you were hewn, And to the hole of the pit *from which* you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, And to Sarah *who* bore you; For I called him alone, And blessed him and increased him." For the LOORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, And her desert like the garden of the LOORD; Joy and gladness will be found in it, Thanksgiving and the voice of melody.

Now, this is the first area where we can pay attention. We need to pay attention here as the end approaches.

The first point here is, Concentrate on the faith once delivered to the Saints—Jude 3. Concentrate on the faith once delivered to the Saints. Do not be distracted and confused by peripheral issues and unimportant ideas. This is the crunch time. The trunk of the tree is the part you hold on to, not the twigs. Twigs will snap. The tree will stay in place.

You could also say, if you want an example, remember and follow the faith of Abraham, the father of the faithful. He is the one that it all began with. So, go back to that, the faith of Abraham.

Isaiah 51:4-6 Listen to Me, My people; And give ear to Me, O My nation: For law will proceed from Me, And I will make My justice rest As a light of the peoples. My righteousness *is* near, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait upon Me, And on My arm they will trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, And look on the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish away like smoke, The earth will grow old like a garment, And those who dwell in it will die in like manner; But My salvation will be forever, And My righteousness will not be abolished.

The second point: Keep the commandments! Follow God's Law! If you remember throughout the book of Revelation, He keeps saying that they are the ones who are protected. The ones that He was watching over are the ones who have the testimony of Jesus Christ and keep His commandments. So, the second point is, keep the commandments, follow God's Law, for in living His way of life is salvation and eternal life. One other little scripture for this is Matthew 5:19. "He who keeps these things will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

The third point:

Isaiah 51:7-8 Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, You people in whose heart *is* My law: Do not fear the reproach of men, Nor be afraid of their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, And the worm will eat them like wool; But My righteousness will be forever, And My salvation from generation to generation."

The third point: Do not let what other people think or do distract you or frighten you. We have God on our side, and besides, these others will get what is coming to them. So, we

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have no reason to fear—Hebrews 13:6, "Who cares what man can do to me?" I have God on my side!

So, I want to close, here, in Psalm 81:13, Asaph writes here:

Psalm 81:13 Oh, that My people would listen to Me [he is writing as if God is speaking], Oh, that My people would listen to Me That Israel would walk in My ways!

It is God's fervent desire that we really listen to Him—that we hear Him, by which He means that we would live His way of life. If you see the parallelism here in the psalm, He compares listening to Him with walking in His ways.

He wants the very best for us. We need to remember that. He wants to give us everything that He has, everything that He enjoys. And we can have it if we just listen up.