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TAKE CARE HOW YOU LISTEN!

Luke 8:16-21

By

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Luke Lesson 35

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Luke 8:16-21

Challenging his wife with a riddle, the man began, "You're the engineer of a train. There are 36 people on board. At the first stop, 10 get off and 2 get on. At the next stop, no one gets off, but 5 get on. At the third stop, 4 get off and 2 get on. Now for the question: What is the name of the engineer?"

"How should I know?" snapped the wife.

"See, you never listen! Right at the start I said, '*You* are the engineer of a train.'"

That little story shows how we often fail to listen carefully. What husband or wife has not had the experience of mumbling "Uh huh" while his partner is talking, but his mind is tuned out? One husband dropped his newspaper, looked directly into his wife's eyes, and gave her his full attention while she was speaking. "Stop it," she snapped. "You're deliberately listening just to confuse me."

Just as we often fail to listen carefully to other people, so we often fail to listen carefully to the Lord. His Word is often clear on the issue we are facing. But our minds are already made up and we don't want to hear what God says because it confronts the direction we want to go. God can speak clearly, but if we are not listening carefully, we miss His will for our lives.

In our text, Jesus warns, "Take care how you listen!" (8:18). Is Jesus addressing the crowd or just the twelve? The full exhortation of verse 18 seems better suited to the whole multitude, but there doesn't seem to be a break between Jesus' private explanation of the parable (8:10-15) and these verses, which lends weight to the view that He is speaking only to the twelve.

The flow of thought seems to go back to verse 10, where Jesus explained that the purpose of His parables was both to *reveal* truth to the spiritually responsive and to *conceal* truth from the spiritually superficial. Jesus does not want His disciples to think that His main purpose is to conceal truth. Thus He

gives the illustration of the lamp being set on the lampstand, not hidden under a container or bed, to show them that the main purpose of His teaching is to illumine the truth, not to hide it. But, at the same time, light serves two functions: it illumines, but it also exposes. Jesus' teaching not only illumines the truth, it also exposes the evil that lurks in the dark corners of the human heart (8:17). Therefore, we must take care how we listen, so that we respond obediently to Jesus' teaching, rather than shrink from it because it convicts us of sin. If we respond obediently, we will receive more light. If we shrink back, what light we think we have will be taken from us.

Luke then inserts the story about Jesus' mother and brothers (8:19-21) to underscore the importance of obeying Jesus' teaching. The key to being close to Jesus is not blood relationship or any other natural privilege, but obedience to God's Word. This means that any person, Jew or Gentile, male or female, can be closer to Jesus than His natural mother and brothers were. The way to be close to Jesus is to listen carefully to His Word with a view to obedience. As in the parable of the sower, there is both an encouragement and a warning in these verses:

Since God's truth is revealed in Jesus, we must listen carefully and obediently or His teaching ultimately will judge us.

Thus verses 16 and 17 make the point that God's truth is revealed in Jesus. Verse 18 applies it by stating that we must listen carefully or that very truth will some day judge us. Verses 19-21 illustrate the point, that obedience to God's Word is primary.

1. God's truth is revealed in Jesus' teaching (8:16-17).
 - A. The main purpose of Jesus' teaching is to illumine God's ways to us (8:16).

Many commentators understand verses 16 and 17 to be an exhortation to the disciples to function as light. They are not to hide God's Word from God's people, but to preach it clearly. The main support for this view is the connection with Matthew 5:15-16, where Jesus uses the illustration of the light on the lampstand and then applies it by telling us to let our light shine before men. But the lamp on the lampstand illustration seems to be one that Jesus

used on several occasions, and we must interpret it by its context in each case.

Some argue that the context of Luke 8 fits this interpretation, that the disciples are to take the words which Jesus presently was compelled to speak in parables and make them plain after His resurrection and ascension (Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [Eerdmans], p. 247). While this is a possible interpretation, and I am not opposed to it as a secondary thrust of Jesus' words, I think the primary meaning is slightly different.

I think that Jesus is clarifying verse 10 so that the twelve do not mistake His point. Jesus' teaching is the light that is put on the lampstand. His words are not given for the primary purpose of concealing God's truth, but for revealing it. But, the same light that reveals truth also exposes sin. Because of this two-fold function of the light of God's truth, no one can respond neutrally to Jesus' teaching. Either we respond obediently and draw closer to God or we ignore it and deceive ourselves. What we think we have will one day be taken from us.

Let's consider how what Jesus is saying in verse 16 applies to us. The lamp was a small clay pitcher with a spout, filled with oil and a wick. Obviously, a person didn't light such a lamp for the purpose of putting it under a container or under a bed. He lit it so that he could set it on a stand and light up his house. In other words, the lamp had a very practical function. Without it, a person would bang his shins against low-lying furniture. He would trip over the kids toys that had been left on the floor. He couldn't see to cook or read or do anything. The lamp was lit to be used, not to be hidden.

In the same way, God has given us the Bible, including the teachings of Jesus, to shed light on how we should live so that we don't grope around in the darkness, whacking our shins on the obstacles that the Word warns us about. Many people, especially young people, want to know the will of God for their lives. Whom shall I marry? What should I do with my life? Etc. God's Word reveals principles on each of these crucial questions so that you don't whack your shins on the wrong ways of the world. Clearly, God's will is that you should marry only a spiritually minded, God-centered Christian, because the Word commands us not to be une-

qually yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-18). His will is that we should spend our lives serving the Lord Jesus Christ, whatever we do to earn a living, because we are to seek first His kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33). We are to be morally pure, because His will is our sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3). These and many other vital principles for right living are revealed to us in God's Word of truth.

Several years ago when our children were young, Marla's parents were building a new home in Ensenada, Mexico. We went down to visit them and were taking a walk along their dirt street. I looked over at Daniel, who was a toddler, and grabbed him just before he stepped into a huge open hole that workers had dug for a utility pole and left uncovered. Unlike the United States, where there are warnings and barricades, this hole was right along the street but with no protection.

Marla's parents were renting a duplex next door to their new home, and we were staying in the second unit. Later that night, we had put the children to bed and Marla and I had just settled into bed when we heard the front door slam. I knew that I had closed it, so it startled me. I jumped up and discovered that Christa was not in bed—she was sleepwalking and had gone out the door! I immediately thought of that open hole and panicked! We had a few frightening moments before we found her safely next door, saying something nonsensical to Marla's parents, who could not figure out what was going on.

Without God's Word, people are wandering in this dark, dangerous world without illumination from God. They're falling into the open holes of drug use, sexual immorality, anger, bitterness, self-centeredness, greed, and a host of other sins. God's Word is the light that tells them how to walk so that they don't destroy themselves with sin. As believers, we must live in the light of God's Word ourselves. Then, by our example and our words, we must help others see God's ways.

You may wonder, why wouldn't everyone want God's light to illumine their lives so that they can see how to avoid the holes and dangers of the dark? Jesus explained, "Men loved the darkness rather than the light for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:19-20). This shows us ...

- B. A secondary purpose of Jesus' teaching is to expose all that is hidden in the human heart (8:17).

There also is debate about the meaning of this verse. Some think it refers to God's truth that will be made obvious through the apostles' teaching. But the warning in the next verse to hear carefully fits better with the view that God's light exposes the sinfulness of human hearts. But therein lies the danger: we all are inclined to hide from the light rather than to allow it to expose the foulness of our hearts.

Years ago, a wealthy Chinese businessman visited England and was fascinated by a powerful microscope and the wonders it uncovered. So he bought one and took it back to China. He thoroughly enjoyed using it until one day when he looked at some rice that he was planning to eat for dinner. To his shock, he saw tiny living creatures crawling in it. He didn't know what to do, since rice was a staple of his diet. Finally, in frustration, he smashed his microscope to bits. It had revealed something distasteful to him, so he destroyed the source of the discovery!

That was rather foolish, but how many people do the same thing with the Bible or with sermons from the Bible that expose their sin. They don't feel comfortable with what they see, so they get rid of the source rather than deal with the sin! The Puritan pastor, Thomas Watson, said concerning the Scriptures, "Take every word as spoken to yourselves. When the word thunders against sin, think thus: 'God means my sins;' when it presses any duty, 'God intends me in this.' Many put off Scripture from themselves, as if it only concerned those who lived in the time when it was written; but if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourselves: a medicine will do no good, unless it be applied" (cited by Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* [Navpress], p. 53). That is what Jesus exhorts us to do in verse 18:

2. Therefore, we must listen carefully or that teaching will judge us some day (8:18).

Jesus says, "Therefore, take care how you listen, for whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him."

- A. If we listen carefully, we will be given more light (8:18a).

Note the emphasis on hearing or listening in the context: 8:8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 21. Listening carefully to God's Word involves several elements:

First, *listening carefully means taking the time to read the Word and meditate on its meaning.* Even among those who attend church regularly, so many are simply ignorant of what the Bible says because they do not take the time consistently to read it and think about what it means. In our busy schedules, we often rush through devotions (if we have them at all) without taking the time to chew on what the text means and how it applies to our lives.

A few years ago there was a man in his eighties named Carl Sharsmith who had spent over 50 summers as a guide in Yosemite National Park. This man delighted in the spectacular beauty of that place, and he was always discovering some new facet of it to revel in. But often he got hit with a question that a lady asked him one afternoon: "I've only got an hour to spend at Yosemite," she declared. "What should I do? Where should I go?" The old naturalist ranger finally found a voice to reply. "Ah, lady, only an hour." He repeated it slowly. "I suppose that if I had only an hour to spend at Yosemite, I'd just walk over there by the river and sit down and cry."

Just as there is enough in Yosemite to spend a lifetime of summers exploring, so there is enough in the Bible to spend your lifetime digging out and meditating on. If we do not understand it, we must ask God to open our minds to its meaning. We must go back and spend more time observing what it says and does not say. We must read the context over and over to get the flow of thought. Take the time often to spend with the Lord in His Word.

Second, *listening carefully means always looking for Christ in the Word.* Jesus chastised the Jews by saying, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 6:39). With the two men on the Emmaus Road, "beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, [Jesus] explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Whether we're in the Old Testament or in the New, we ought to draw closer to the Lord Jesus if we are listening carefully to what God has revealed.

Spurgeon tells the story of a young preacher who preached a very fine sermon—what Spurgeon calls “a highfaluting, spread-eagle sermon.” When he was done, the young man asked an old Welsh preacher who had heard him what he thought of it. The old man replied that he did not think much of it. “Why not?” asked the young man. “Because there was no Jesus Christ in it.” “Well,” said the young preacher, “my text did not seem to run that way.” The old preacher said, “Never mind, but your sermon should have run that way.” He went on, “This is the way to preach. From every little village in England—it does not matter where it is—there is sure to be a road to London. Now, from every text in the Bible there is a road to Jesus Christ, and the way to preach is just to say, ‘How can I get from this text to Jesus Christ?’ and then go preaching all the way along it.”

The young preacher said, “Well, but suppose I find a text that has not got a road to Jesus Christ.” “I have preached for 40 years,” said the old man, “and I have never found such a Scripture, but if I ever do find one, I will go over hedge and ditch but what I will get to him, for I will never finish without bringing in my Master.” (Sermon, “How to Read the Bible.”)

For sake of time I mention only a third way to listen to God’s Word carefully: *Listening carefully means always seeking to apply the Word to my own heart and life.* The two questions that Paul asked the Lord on the Damascus Road are good ones to ask when you read the Word or listen to it being preached: “Who are You, Lord?” and, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:8, 10). Those two questions are linked: If He is the risen Lord and Savior, who gave Himself for my sins, then it has a great deal of bearing on how I must live.

To read the Word without applying it doesn’t do us any good. The Word was not given to fill our heads with interesting facts, but to change our hearts into conformity to Jesus Christ. I have met Christians who can tell you the tense of Greek verbs in the New Testament and who will argue the subtle nuance of some theological point, but they are angry and insensitive toward their families. The whole point of Scripture is summed up in the two great commandments, to teach us how to love God and to love one another. If we aren’t learning to do that, we’re missing the point. If we lis-

ten carefully to God's Word, He will give us more light so that we can grow more. But, ...

- B. If we listen superficially, what we think we have will be taken away from us (8:18b).

Jesus' warning in this verse applied to the Pharisees, who thought they knew the Scriptures, but missed the Messiah of whom the Scriptures prophesied. God judged them by taking away their temple and their land in the great destruction under Titus in A.D. 70. His warning also applied to Judas, who superficially listened to Jesus' teaching, but did not apply it to his own heart. The Pharisees and Judas were not irreligious pagans. They seemed to be zealous for the things of God. Judas was one of the twelve. Yet both the Pharisees and Judas were deceived. They thought they knew God, but they didn't know Him at all because they didn't apply His Word to their hearts. In the end, they lost everything.

Because there is this element of self-deception, we must be very careful here. It's easy for spiritual pride to slip in, where our knowledge of the Bible fools us into thinking that we are spiritually mature because we know so much. We must constantly confront ourselves with the standards of Scripture applied to our thoughts, attitudes, and behavior, especially as seen in our relationships at home. Is my thought life pure? Do I deal with my grumbling, unbelieving, unthankful spirit? Does my family see the fruit of the Spirit in my dealings with them? If I put on a good front at church, saying, "Lord, Lord," but I don't practice His Word in private and at home, I will be shocked some day to hear Him say, "Depart from Me, I never knew you, who practice lawlessness."

- 3. Careful listening means obedient listening (8:19-21).

Luke drives home the point with this incident of Jesus' family coming to visit Him. He uses the story to show that the key to a relationship with Jesus is not birth or other natural privileges, but obedience to God's Word. Those who obey Him are truly Jesus' family. Jesus was not repudiating family ties or obligations, but He was setting priorities. Allegiance to God's Word must be first, even more important than family. Jesus is most intimate with those who hear and obey His Word. As He told His disciples, "He who has My commandments and

keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:21). If you want Jesus to disclose Himself to you, you must hear His word with a view to obedience. He calls such ones His mother and His brothers! The wonderful privilege of being close to Jesus is open to anyone who walks in obedience to Him!

Conclusion

Sometimes people complain that reading God's Word or listening to it being preached is boring. I admit that some portions of the Word are difficult and that some preachers are not very exciting. But often our problem is with our own attitude, not with the Word or with the preacher.

Shortly before he died, Rowland Hill, an 18th century British preacher who was used greatly by God, was visiting on old friend who said, "Mr. Hill, it is now 65 years since I first heard you preach; but I remember your text, and a part of your sermon." "Well," asked the preacher, "what part of the sermon do you recollect?" His friend answered, "You said that some people, when they went to hear a sermon, were very squeamish about the delivery of the preacher. Then you said, 'Supposing you went to hear the will of one of your relatives read, and you were expecting a legacy from him; you would hardly think of criticizing the manner in which the lawyer read the will; but you would be all attention to hear whether anything was left to you, and if so, how much; and that is the way to hear the Gospel'" (Told by C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* [Zondervan], condensed and edited by David Fuller, pp. 374-375).

Whether you're listening to a sermon or reading God's Word, take care how you listen! The Bible is *God's* revealed truth. If you listen with a view to obedience, you will be blessed. There are riches there for you—if you will listen carefully as God speaks.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we keep Bible reading from becoming dull and routine? How can we stay fresh in the Word each day?
2. How can we avoid the self-deception of the one who thinks he has spiritual knowledge but really has none at all (Luke 8:18b)?
3. The sermon mentioned several elements of careful listening. List other elements you can think of.
4. Why is it important to take obedience to the thought level?

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