



TAKE CARE HOW YOU LISTEN

Sermons by John Piper on Receiving the Word



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"So take care how you listen"
—Luke 8:18



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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Scripture calls us to consider carefully what sermons we listen to, and but it also calls us to consider how we listen to those sermons. Skillful listening is a non-negotiable skill for everyone who enters a church building on Sunday or plays a sermon through headphones during the week.

The life and health and growth of our souls are tied to how well we listen. We are wise to periodically evaluate our own hearing of God's word. If we listen with carelessness, we can drift away from God. On the other hand, if we listen with vigilance we "swim against the stream of sin and indifference."

"Don't be cavalier in the hearing of God's Word week after week," John Piper cautions us. "If it is not softening and saving and healing and bearing fruit, it is probably hardening and blinding and dulling." It is too easy to slip into what Scripture calls "dullness of hearing," to hear the weekly sermons without faith, and to see little or no moral fruit in our lives as a result. As Jesus makes clear, ultimately it is how we hear that reveals who we are (John 8:43, 47, 10:4, 27).

Those are a few of the points made in this e-book, which is comprised of five unedited sermon manuscripts from the preaching ministry of Pastor John Piper at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This selection covers a span of fourteen years (the earliest sermon was taken from 1984, the latest from 1998). The five selected manuscripts are published here as they existed when the sermons were preached. There is little doubt that Pastor John would prefer to rework these manuscripts stylistically and even structurally in a number of ways to make them more suitable for reading. Yet we believe these sermon manuscripts in their present state of development are sufficiently clear to benefit our readership now. Where explanation is necessary, footnotes have been added.

We pray this resource will serve your personal reflection as you heed Jesus' command to "take care how you listen."

—Tony Reinke

TAKE CARE HOW YOU LISTEN! (PART 1)¹

4 When a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable: 5 “The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. 6 Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. 8 Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great.” As He said these things, He would call out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

9 His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant. 10 And He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. 11 Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. 12 Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. 13 Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. 14 The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. 15 But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.

16 Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light. 17 For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light. 18 So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him."—Luke 8:4–18 NASB

How Do We Prepare for Preaching and How Do We Respond?

Last week² we asked the question why preaching has such a prominent place in the corporate worship services of the church. This week and next week we ask: How should the people prepare for preaching and how should we respond to preaching? To answer this question I have chosen a text that is all about hearing the word of God preached. So the first thing I want to do is show you that this is indeed the case—this text is all about hearing the word of God when it is preached.

It's a very sobering text for preachers, because it does not hold out the prospect of huge success in terms of numbers of people who are lastingly affected—one in four, perhaps (like the soils), if you take the text that way. I doubt that the proportion should be pressed to mean that we can always or only expect a 25% lasting response. But surely, Jesus is at least warning us preachers from being cocky, lest we think we can change people easily, or discouraged, if there are many hearers who do not respond with lasting change.

Is Preaching an Effective Way of Communicating?

Sometimes people will say that the day of preaching is over because it is not an effective way of changing people. The answer is: It has never been statistically very effective. Nor has any other form of communication, statistically. And the reason is not in the method of communication. The reason is Matthew 7:14, “The gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” Which is why

Jesus said, in Luke 13:24, “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” When the Word is preached and the way to life is shown, strive to enter.

That is what this text is about. It’s about hearing and yet not hearing. Seeing and yet not seeing. It’s about those who think they have heard, but have not heard. And so it is all about how to prepare for preaching and how to respond to preaching.

Let me show you this so you can see it for yourselves. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear and good hearts to bear fruit. What we are doing now—and do every Sunday in these moments—is huge and has eternal implications for what you do with what you hear.

Start in verse 5 with the beginning of the parable of the soils: Jesus tells a parable that begins, “The sower went out to sow his seed.” Then in verse 11 he interprets: “Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God.” So he is telling a parable about the preaching and hearing of the Word of God. The sower is the one who preaches the Word.

A Parable About Hearing

Then there are four responses to this preaching of the Word—four kinds of soil. What we want to notice especially is that Jesus interprets every one of them explicitly as four ways of hearing the Word. It’s all about hearing.

Verse 5 says that, first, some seed—some Word—”fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up.” Then in verse 12 he interprets, “Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and

takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved.” That’s one kind of hearing.

Verse 6 says that “Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.” Then verse 13 interprets: “Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.” That’s a second kind of hearing.

Verse 7 says that “Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out.” Verse 14 interprets: “The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity.” That’s a third kind of hearing.

Finally, verse 8 says, “Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great.” And verse 15 interprets: “But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.” That’s a fourth kind of hearing.

He Who Has Ears to Hear

Then at the end of verse 8 Jesus makes sure we got the point about hearing, and says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” That means it’s not enough to have ears on the side of your head. Everybody has those. But there is another kind of ear that only some people have. And those can hear. “He who has ears to hear let him hear.” There is a spiritual ear, or a heart-ear. There is an ear that hears, in the preaching

of the Word, more than mere words. There is a beauty and a truth and a power that these ears hear as compelling and transforming and preserving. That's the kind of hearing Jesus is calling for. That's what this text is about.

Then to stress the issue of hearing even more, Luke tells us how Jesus explained the purpose of parables in his situation. In verses 9–10, “his disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant. And He said, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’” This is a shocking word. To those whom Jesus has chosen, the mystery of his kingdom is opened and he gives them the gift of understanding. Verse 10a: “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.” Understanding the kingdom of God is a free gift of God for those whom Jesus has chosen as his disciples.

But then he says (in verse 10b) that for the others the reason for his parables is “so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand.” The issue is hearing again. “Hearing they may not understand.” That means there are two kinds of hearing: one with the physical ears of the head and one with the spiritual ears of the heart. “Hearing (with the physical ears), they do not understand (with the spiritual ears).” And this he says, is one of the reasons he uses parables—“so that” hearing, they may not understand. In other words, the parables are part of Jesus’ concealing and hardening ministry as well as part of his revealing and saving ministry.

The Word Saves Some and Hardens Some

This hard word is a quote from Isaiah 6:9–10 where God tells Isaiah his ministry to Israel will not only be saving for some but hardening for others. God says to Isaiah, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.’ Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed.” In other words, time had run out for these people and the Word of God was no longer effective to save them, but was only effective to render their hearts insensitive, and their ears dull, and their eyes dim.

This teaches us something very important about preaching. Even when preaching the Word of God does not soften and save and heal, it is not necessarily ineffective. This preaching of the Word may be doing God’s terrible work of judgment. It may be hardening people, and making their ears so dull that they will never want to hear again. There is a judgment in this world—not just in the world to come (Romans 1:24)—and oh, how we should flee from it. Which in this text means: take heed how you hear! Don’t be cavalier in the hearing of God’s Word week after week. If it is not softening and saving and healing and bearing fruit, it is probably hardening and blinding and dulling (see 2 Corinthians 2:16).

The Effectiveness of Hearing

Which brings us to the last mention of hearing in this text. It comes in a surprising place. I would have expected it to come right after the parable—right after verse 15. But it comes in

verse 18: “So [or, therefore, the conclusion of the matter] take care how you listen [hear!]” That’s the point of the text. And that’s my main point this morning. Take care how you hear. Preaching is one thing—and it is crucial. But hearing is another thing—and it is just as crucial. There is nothing in this text about the effectiveness of preaching. It is all about the effectiveness of hearing. The point is not, “Take heed how you preach.” But: “Take heed how you hear.”

Now notice the reason given in the rest of verse 18 for why you should be so vigilant over how you hear. It says, “For [or, because] whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.” Now what does that refer to?

Whoever Has...

Well, there are two parts, the positive (“whoever has, to him more shall be given”) and the negative (“whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him”).

Take the positive first: “Whoever has, to him more shall be given.” This refers first back to verse 8, at the end of the parable of the soils. Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Why? Because “whoever has, to him more shall be given.” If you have spiritual ears, then you will be given understanding. It also refers to the fourth soil described in verse 15: “The seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.” Whoever has, to him more will be given. What they have already is “an honest and good heart.” And the more that will be given is fruit. They “bear fruit with perseverance.”

So take heed how you hear! Hear with spiritual ears, not just the ears on your head. And hear with an honest and good heart, not a deceptive and evil heart.

But now look at the negative half of verse 18: “Whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.” What does that refer to? It refers to the other three soils and the failure to hear with a good heart and with true spiritual ears. In each of the first three soils (verses 12–14) there is a hearing of the Word of God. But in each case what they think they have, is taken away from them.

Verse 12, the first soil: they think they have the Word, but the devil snatches it away.

Verse 13, the second soil: they think they have the Word and true spiritual faith and joy, but they have no root to sustain them in time of trial. Their faith is a superficial enthusiasm that is real only for fair-weather days. And so when the trial comes, what they think they have is taken away.

Finally, in verse 14, the third soil: they think they have the Word of God, but when the worries and riches and pleasures of life come, what they think they have is taken away, and they fail to bear fruit.

So the point of verse 18 is to interpret what was happening in the four soils. Three times it comes true: “Whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.” And one time—the fourth soil—the opposite comes true: “Whoever has, to him more shall be given.” If you hear with an honest and good heart (v. 15) then more will be given to you.

Next week³ I will try to answer the question why the sayings about the lamp and the lampstand (verses 16–17) are

sandwiched between the interpretation of the parable of the soils and its practical conclusion in verse 18.

Take Heed How You Hear

But for now the main point is clear and very urgent: “Take heed how you hear!” To the one who has more will be given. Do you have ears to hear? Do you have a new heart?

I’m going to talk very practically next week on how you prepare yourself to hear like this. But this morning I simply want the weight of it to land on us. Hearing is huge. I believe with all my heart that I am called to preach the Word of God. And many of you are called to teach it in various settings. But this text is about another great calling—the calling to hear the Word of God. And it is no small thing. The stakes are very high. There is a hearing that barely gets started and the Word is gone before you get out the door. There is a hearing that lasts until there is a hard time in life, and then one turns from God to other messages. There is a hearing that flourishes until the riches and pleasures of this life choke it off. And there is a hearing that defeats the devil, endures trial, scorns riches and bears fruit unto eternal life.

That is the hearing we want. Let’s ask God for it. Psalm 40:6 says that God opens the ear to hear: “Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; my ears You have opened.” So let us pray. Just like we prayed back during prayer week, “Open my eyes, that I may behold Wonderful things from Your law” (Psalm 119:18), so let us now pray, “Open my ears, that I may hear the Word of God, with an honest and good heart and be saved (Luke 8:12) and bear fruit.

TAKE CARE HOW YOU LISTEN! (PART 2)⁴

⁴ When a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable: ⁵ “The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. ⁶ Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. ⁸ Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great.” As He said these things, He would call out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

9 His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant. 10 And He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. 11 Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. 12 Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. 13 Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. 14 The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. 15 But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.

16 Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light. 17 For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light. 18 So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him."—Luke 8:4–18 NASB

The Parable of the Four Soils Is About Hearing

Today's message is the conclusion and practical application of last week's message⁵ on the parable of the four soils in Luke 8:4–18. My point last week was that this parable and its interpretation by Jesus is about hearing not preaching. Let's review from the text why I say that.

At the end of the parable, in verse 8, Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." That's the first mention of "hearing." It warns that there are some people who have ears but not "ears to hear." So there is a great urgency in the voice of Jesus: O take heed that you get ears that hear, and not just ears.

Then in verse 9, the disciples ask Jesus what the parable of the four soils means. He answers shockingly with a quotation from Isaiah 6:9–10 by telling them why he speaks in parables. He says, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'" This is the second reference to hearing: Jesus uses parables, among other reasons, because they will keep certain people in the dark.

I said last week that this was a form of judgment. Time had run out for some in Jesus day. God had handed them over to the darkness of their minds (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). Hearing, they would not hear. These are people with no ears to hear. So the urgency increases. Are we among the number who will hear the parables and say, "This makes no sense to me at all"? Or are we among the number to whom the mysteries of the kingdom are given? It is an issue of hearing.

Then we noticed that, in verse 11, Jesus says that the sown

seed in the parable is “the Word of God.” This is preaching, but preaching is not the issue. The issue is hearing. We see this in each soil. Each soil is described in verses 12–15 as a different kind of hearing. Hearing is mentioned in each verse. Verse 12: A hearing where Satan takes away the Word. Verse 13: A hearing where trial destroys the rootless Word. Verse 14: A hearing where worries, riches and pleasures choke the Word. And finally, verse 15: A hearing with a good and honest heart where the Word bears fruit in perseverance. The issue is hearing: how do you hear the preaching of the Word of God?

Then we skipped verses 16–17 and saw the final reference to hearing in our text, verse 18: “So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.” If you have ears to hear, and if you have a good and honest heart, then you will be given understanding and you will be given a life of fruitfulness. But if you do not have ears to hear and do not have good soil, then even what you think you have will be taken away: the seed is taken away by the devil in verse 12; it is taken away by trials in verse 13; it is taken away by worries and riches and pleasures in verse 14.

So take heed how you hear! It is a huge issue. Salvation hangs on it (see the last word in verse 12). Hearing is a high calling. It does not come naturally. It is a gift. But it can be sought. Otherwise Jesus would not have said in verse 18, “Take heed how you hear.”

Now let’s go back to verses 16–17 which we left out last week. The reason I include these verses with the parable of the soils is that the conclusion to the parable comes in verse

18 after these two verses. So Luke includes them with the parable of the soils. In fact, he makes the conclusion to the parable (verse 18) a direct inference from these two verses. Let's read them:

Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light. 17 For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light.

With these words Jesus does at least two things.

Fruit and Light

First, He declares that the “fruit” of verse 15 is the “light” of verse 16. And this light is meant to help people see their way to “come into” the kingdom of God. He changes images from fruit (verse 15) to light (verse 16). But that is not surprising because we know from other New Testament teachings (Colossians 1:10; Luke 3:8–9) that bearing fruit means doing good deeds of faith for the glory of God. And we know that, in Matthew 5:16, Jesus called these good deeds “light” which helps people enter the kingdom: “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” In other words the fruit that grows in the good soil of verse 15 is the good deeds of faith in the Word of God that was preached. And those good deeds are here (as in Matthew 5:16) called light which helps people enter the kingdom—helps people recognize the glory and truth of God and trust in him.

That's the first thing Jesus does in these verses: he declares that the fruit of the hearing of the good soil is a life of good deeds that shines in the world so that people who are "coming in" may see and know the way to enter.

The Hiddenness of the Gospel

The second thing Jesus does in verses 16–17 is to make plain that the hiddenness of the gospel, mentioned back in verse 10, is not meant to hinder the disciples from bold, public demonstration and proclamation of the Word of God. Remember he said in verse 10: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'" That looks like a limitation on the openness and universality of the offer of the Word of God. But it's not. And that is what verses 16–17 make plain.

When your lamp is lit by the Word of God, and your life becomes a light of faith and joy and good deeds, don't hide it! Verse 16: "No one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light." It may be that there is a hiddenness about it in my earthly life for a season, Jesus says, but (as he makes plain now in verse 17) things are to change: "Nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light." In my justice, I may have wise and sovereign purposes for concealing the mystery for a season from some, but that is not your business. You take what I give you and make it known far and wide. As Jesus says in Matthew 10:27, "What I

tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops.”

So in the end, the point of the parable of the soils is not only that your own salvation and fruitfulness hang on how you hear the Word of God, but also the success of how the Word of God spreads in the world depends on how you hear. That is why verse 18 now concludes (drawing the inference directly from verses 16–17) “So take care how you listen.”

Listening—hearing—is a high calling in the Christian church because your salvation hangs on it (verse 12), and your fruitfulness hangs on it (verse 15), and the spread of the light in the world hangs on it (verses 16-17), and in the end the glory of God hangs on it (Matthew 5:16). So (verse 18), “Take heed how you hear.”

Now how shall we do that in preparing for hearing the Word of God preached at Bethlehem?

How Do You Prepare to Hear the Word of God on Sunday?

I have ten exhortations, most of them very short, but worthy of much more reflection than I can give them here. You can take them and go over them. I hope you jot them down and talk about them as a family or perhaps in your small groups tonight. The question I am trying to answer is, How do you prepare to hear the Word of God in worship on Sunday morning? Specifically, I mean what can you do Saturday evening and Sunday morning and on the way to church and when you come into this room? That is the time frame I have in mind.

1. Pray that God would give you the good and honest heart described in verse 15.

There are many things we can do with our wills—and must do. But our wills are governed by our hearts and what our hearts love. So we must have a new heart if we are to do what we ought to do, and do it with joy the way God commands us to (Psalm 100:2). And the Bible teaches that this new heart is a work of God. Ezekiel 36:26, “I will give you a new heart.” Jeremiah 24:7, “I will give them a heart to know Me.” So we should ask God for it: “O Lord, give me a heart for you. Give me a good and honest heart. Give me a soft and receptive heart. Give me a humble and meek heart. Give me a fruitful heart. Give me a heart for you.”

Set aside some time before you go to bed Saturday night, and then again when you get up Sunday morning to pray like this.

2. Meditate on the Word of God. Read portions of your Bible with a view to stirring up hunger for God.

How many of you have heard of the word “appetizer”? Most everybody. But how about the word “appetize”? No? Because it’s not in the dictionary. Well I hereby create the word! An appetizer is that which appetizes. To appetize is to awaken appetite. And that is what an appetizer is for. So if the sermon is the meal, the appetizer is the portion of the Word that you meditate on Saturday night and Sunday morning. This is crucial. You need to cultivate spiritual taste before you come if you want to enjoy and benefit most from the meal of the Spirit. If your palate is worldly, you will have no taste for spiritual things, and will not hear as you ought. So “appetize”

your heart by meditating on the Word of God Saturday night and Sunday morning. Plan it in. This is the way you “Take heed how you hear!”

3. Purify your mind by turning away from worldly entertainment.

James 1:21 says, “Put aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.” How do you receive the implanted word? By putting aside all filthiness and wickedness. This is what makes the word “unreceivable.” It astonishes me how many Christians watch the same banal, empty, silly, trivial, titillating, suggestive, immodest TV shows that most unbelievers watch—and then wonder why their spiritual lives are weak and their worship experience is shallow with no intensity. If you really want to hear the Word of God the way he means to be heard in truth and joy and power, turn off the television on Saturday night and read something true and great and beautiful and pure and honorable and excellent and worthy of praise (see Philippians 4:8). Then watch your heart unshrive and begin to hunger for the word of God.

4. Trust in the truth that you already have.

In our text, the second soil failed to hear the way it should because it had no root. What is the root that we need in hearing the word of God? Jeremiah 17:7–8 says, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream.” The root that nourishes fruitful hearing is the root

of faith. Hearing begets faith and faith begets better hearing. Trusting in the truth you already have is the best way to prepare yourself to receive more. So when you pray and meditate and turn off the TV, consciously fix your heart on the promises of God and trust him Saturday night and Sunday morning.

5. Get a good night's rest on Saturday night.

I am aware that some of you work all night on Saturday, get off at 7 a.m. and shower and grab a bite to eat and come straight to church. Bless you. God has special graces for you and you must seek his special help. Trust him. He will help you. But I am talking to the rest of us who make our own choices about when to go to bed. My counsel is: decide when you must get up to have time to eat, get dressed, pray and meditate on the Word, prepare the family, and travel to church; and then compute backward eight hours (or whatever you know you need) and be sure that you are in bed 15 minutes before that. Read your Bible in bed and fall asleep with the Word of God on your lips and in your mind.

It takes more discipline to go to bed on time than to get up on time. There are not as many pressures to go to bed. And sleep is so boring compared to playing or going out or watching TV. I especially exhort parents to teach teenagers that Saturday is not the night to think of staying out late with friends. If there is a special late night, make it Friday, not Saturday. It is a terrible thing to teach children that worship is so optional that it doesn't matter if you are exhausted when you come. What happens here is more important than a college entrance SAT, and we do work hard to get our kids to sleep well before an important test.

Without sufficient sleep, we are not alert; our minds are dull, our emotions are flat and unenergetic, our proneness to depression is higher, and our fuses are short. “Take heed how you hear” means get a good night’s rest before you hear the Word of God.

6. Forebear one another without grumbling and criticism.

Psalm 106:25 says, “They grumbled in their tents; they did not listen to the voice of the Lord.” Saturday night’s and Sunday morning’s grumbling and controversy and quarreling can ruin a worship service for a family. My suggestion is this: When there is something you are angry about or some conflict that you genuinely think needs to be talked about, forebear, and put it off till later on Sunday after worship. Don’t dive in Saturday night or Sunday morning.

And when you come to worship, don’t come as hypocrites pretending there are no problems. We’ve all got problems. Come saying: “Lord, show me the log in my eye. Humble me and cleanse me and show me so much of yourself that I know how to deal with this in a more Christlike way than I feel now. You may be surprised how many of your crises get changed in the light of God’s Word and worship.”

7. Come in a spirit of meek teachability.

Not gullibility. You have your Bible and you have your head. But James says, “In meekness receive the implanted word” (1:21). If we come with a chip on our shoulder that there is nothing we can learn or no benefit we can get, we will prove ourselves infallible on both counts. But if we humble ourselves before the Word of God, we will hear and grow and bear fruit.

8. Be still as you enter the room and focus your mind's attention and heart's affection on God.

I would like to recommend that as we enter the room here we “come on the lookout for God and leave on the lookout for people.” That is, come quietly and go hard after God in prayer and meditation. Then leave with a view to taking risks as you extend your welcome and love to other people. We will not be an unfriendly church if we are aggressive in our pursuit of God during the prelude and aggressive in our pursuit of visitors during the postlude.

Are you with me in this? This is different than the way many churches conceive of the pre-service atmosphere. For many, the louder the better, because it connotes life and friendliness. That is legitimate in some contexts, but something huge is lost, a sense of the greatness and holiness and wonder of God. There are almost no times in our lives when we together get blood-earnest about God and our meeting him in his greatness. Let Sunday morning be one of those times. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Where do we do that? Let's do it just before the service in this room. Let the Commons be abuzz with greetings. But let this room reverberate with the electric power of silent passion for God's glory. There is a world of difference between the silence of apathy and the silence of passion! Pray, meditate on the text to be preached, ponder the words to the songs. Go hard after God.

9. When the worship service begins, think earnestly about what is sung and prayed and preached.

Paul says to the Corinthians, “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking

be mature” (1 Corinthians 14:20). And he says to Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Timothy 2:7). Anything worth hearing is worth thinking about. If a message does not require the engagement of your mind, it is probably not going to take you anywhere beyond where you are now. But that would probably not be biblical preaching. If you would take heed how you hear, think about what you hear.

10. Desire the truth of God’s Word more than you desire riches or food.

As you sit quietly and pray and meditate on the text and the songs, remind yourself of what Psalm 19:10–11 says about the words of God: “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” So because the Word of God is greater than all riches and sweeter than all honey, take heed how you hear. Desire it more than you desire all these things.

As Proverbs 2:3–5 says, “If you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.”

May God make us a people who hear the Word of God and bear fruit a hundredfold so that the lamp of our lives will be on a lampstand giving light to all who enter the kingdom of God. Take heed how you hear! Amen.

SATAN TAKES THE WORD AWAY⁶

1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; 6 and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and in-

creasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” 9 And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

10 And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. 11 And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; 12 so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.” 13 And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them. 16 And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; 17 and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”—Mark 4:1–20 RSV

On the Sunday before Christmas my aim is to preach from 1 John 3 under the title, “The Son of God Appeared to Destroy the Works of the Devil.”⁷ In the three Sundays of Advent leading up to that message I want to talk about three typical works to the devil. If we have a sober awareness of some of Satan’s most common works, we will appreciate Christmas all the more, because Christmas is a celebration of the truth that the Son of God came into the world to destroy the works of the devil.

The work of the devil that we will expose today is his opposition to the Word of God when that Word is preached. Satan takes away the Word of God from people’s minds and hearts so that they cannot believe and be saved.

I will mention three ways that Satan takes the Word away and then three ways that we can counter attack.

Three Things at Stake in the Loss of the Word

But first we need to get clear what is at stake in the loss of the Word. Why does it matter if Satan takes the Word away from our hearts? It matters in three increasingly crucial ways.

1. Fruit-bearing

If the word does not abide and take root in our heart, we cannot bear any fruit for God. Verse 20: “But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” The fruit Jesus has in mind here is probably what Paul called the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, etc. Only the abiding Word of God taking root in the heart of the believer can give rise to these spiritual traits.

Jesus prayed in John 17:17, “Father, sanctify them in the truth. Thy word is truth.” The Word of God is the means used by the Holy Spirit to sanctify his people—to make them fruitful, or loving. So our holiness, our Christ-likeness, our moral newness is torpedoed if Satan takes the Word away from our hearts and minds.

2. Discipleship

A persistently fruitless hearer of the Word cannot be a disciple of Jesus. Jesus said in Luke 6:43, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its fruit.” Fruit does not make a tree good. Fruit does not give life. Fruit is a sign of life and reality. Good and bad trees are known by their fruit. Bad fruit or no fruit means bad tree or no inner reality. Therefore fruitfulness is essential to being a true disciple of Jesus. And since the abiding Word is the key to fruitfulness, discipleship is at stake if Satan takes the Word away.

Which is what Jesus said in John 8:31, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.” If the Word is taken away from our hearts, we cannot be followers of Jesus.

3. Salvation

Which leads us to the final and most fearful consequence of having the Word taken from our hearts. Jesus says in John 15, “Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away ... If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” Ultimately what is at stake if Satan takes away

the Word of God is our salvation. Without the Word of God abiding and taking root in our heart we cannot bear fruit, be disciples, or inherit eternal life.

So it matters more than words can express that we not be among those who hear the Word and lose it to the work of Satan.

Three Strategies of Satan to Take the Word Away

How does he try to take it from those who hear?

When Jesus interprets the parable of the soils in Mark 4:14–20, he only refers to Satan once. He says in verse 14 that the sower is sowing the Word, and then in verse 15 he says, “These are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them.”

But there are two other kinds of soil where the Word bears no fruit. There is the rocky ground in verse 16 and the thorny ground in verse 18. Jesus doesn’t mention Satan in connection with these. But we know from other teachings in the New Testament that Satan is very much at work in these soils to nullify the Word of God and make the hearers fruitless. So there are really three strategies (at least!) by which Satan takes away the Word. Let’s look at each briefly.

1. Immediately—with Inattention, Ill-Will, or Ignorance

In verse 15 it says that he does it immediately. He does it before there is any sympathetic response at all. “Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them.” I can think of at least three ways this happens. It happens through people’s inattention, ill-will, or ignorance.

Satan works overtime to keep people from giving serious attention to the Word of God. He may keep you up late Saturday night so that you can't stay awake during the sermon or Sunday School. He may put a dozen different distractions around you in the service to take your mind away from the message. He may send thoughts into your mind about tomorrow's meeting with your supervisor. If he can only distract you so that the sounds coming out of the preacher's mouth go in one ear and out the other, he will have successfully taken away the Word of God and made it ineffectual for you. Inattention is his game.

He also uses ill-will. He causes feelings of aversion to block the Word. These feelings might be against the preacher or against his language or simply against the truths of the gospel. People may hear and understand exactly what is being said, but despise it. Paul said the gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing. Satan works to maintain their worldly sense of values so that the value of the death of Christ is as nothing. Satan gives people such a high estimation of themselves that the evangelical message of brokenness before the cross for our sin is disgusting and threatening. So the Word of God gains no foothold. Satan takes it away.

Satan also uses ignorance. The work of Satan can be so thorough that his servants can actually lose the capacity to grasp what is being said well enough even to get angry about it. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, "Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of

the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.” When the glory of God is described, Satan blinds the eyes of his people so that they wonder what in the world is going on when spiritual people are deeply affected by this glory. Thus Satan takes away the Word of God.

2. Eventually—with Shallow Soil and Persecution

But Satan’s battle against the Word is not just directed against that first hearing of the Word. Even after a person has heard the Word and received it with joy, Satan does his best to take it away and bring the person to fruitlessness and ruin. Verses 16–17 describe this attack. “And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.”

The reason I feel confident in saying that this too is the work of Satan, even though Jesus doesn’t mention him here, is that persecution is mentioned and this is a key strategy of Satan elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, when Paul heard that the Thessalonian Christians were being persecuted, he chalked it up to the devil and said, “For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent that I might know your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor would be in vain.” It’s clear that Paul saw persecution as a work of Satan that could destroy the gospel labor he had expended. In other words, the Word could be taken away.

Just because Satan is not able to keep everyone from responding joyfully to the Word of God, doesn't mean he gives up on those people. He brings many of them to ruin by keeping their soil shallow and battering them with hard times so that they fall for the lie that the Word of God is not worth the trouble it brings. And so Satan takes away the Word of God even after it has gained a little toehold.

3. Eventually—with Prosperity

If persecution doesn't look like it will work, Satan will try prosperity. This is his third strategy for taking away the Word and making people fruitless. Verses 18–19 describe this strategy: “And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the deceit of riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

Ephesians 2:2–3 teaches that when people follow Satan they are not dragged along against their desires, but are giving in to their ungodly desires. Satan takes away the Word by making us feel that if we hold fast to the Word, we will have to give up something better. He is the great deceiver. And in America he majors not on soil two but on soil three. He doesn't snatch the Word as much by the threat of persecution as by the deceptive promise that things will go better if you don't get fanatical about the Word of God. And so thousands of people who had made a start with the Word of God give in to his lies and have the Word choked out of their lives.

Summary of Satan's Three Strategies

In summary, Satan has three strategies to take away the Word of God.

First, he often acts immediately as soon as the Word is heard to make people inattentive, or cause them to feel ill-will, or to simply be so ignorant of spiritual reality they can't grasp what's being said.

Second, he comes in after the Word has been received with joy and attacks it with hard times. He convinces some that holding fast to the Word is not worth the trouble.

Third, he comes in where the Word has begun to take root and strangles it with the lie that too many good things are being sacrificed.

Three Ways to Combat Satan's First Strategy

It should be obvious from these strategies of Satan that we must be prepared to give some serious counter thrusts. James 4:7 says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." First Peter 5:8 says, "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith."

We only have time to deal with Satan's first strategy. But if you successfully counter his attack here, you will probably defeat him later, too. So let me suggest three ways to resist Satan's efforts to defeat the Word of God as you hear it.

1. Prepare the Soil of Your Heart

Verse 20 says that good soil is the key to a fruitful hearing of the Word. I have said it several times before and no doubt will again: devote some time Saturday night and Sunday morning to prepare your heart for hearing the Word of God. The more you take time to humble yourself and purify your heart in prayer and tune the receiver of your mind into the

wavelength of Christ, the more powerfully you will hear the Word and the more deeply you will worship.

Don't play into the hands of Satan by staying up so late Saturday night that you can't stay awake in worship or in Sunday School. He constantly lies to you telling you that what you're doing at 10:00 Saturday night is more important than being rested to give your best ear to God's Word on Sunday morning.

Don't play into the hands of Satan by letting the newspaper set the agenda of your Sunday morning meditation. Read a Psalm and pray that God meet you in worship as he never has before.

I believe that if we as a church formed the habit of conscientiously preparing our hearts for hearing God's Word, the Lord might speak with such power that amazing changes would come into our lives for God's glory and for our joy. So let's resolve to take time for meditation and prayer and solitude and quiet walks in the snow, so that the soil of our heart is plowed deep for the Word of God.

2. Listen with All Your Might to the Word of God

And remember, the Word is in the hymns and in the anthem and in the prayers and often in the organ, not just in the sermon.

Focusing attention on the Word of God is hard work for us sinners. Add to that Satan's opposition to your attention! If we come with no resolve to work at listening and fight against Satan, we will be fair game for the birds along the path. They will pluck up the seed and we will leave week after week with no power to bear fruit.

Focus on the content of the worship folder during the prelude. Focus on the words of the call to worship and the prayers and the hymns. Focus on God during the organ praise and the moment for meditation. Pray to God whenever there is a non-directed moment. Go hard after God. Don't coast in worship. Again and again Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Strive to have those ears and not to be among those who hearing do not hear and seeing do not see.

3. In the Act of Hearing, Welcome the Word of God

Verse 20 says, "But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." All the attention in the world will be of no avail if the message heard from God is rejected.

So set your mind to be open to the Word of God, even if it is new or demanding. This doesn't mean listening uncritically. Jesus didn't want mindless acquiescence. Neither do I. The admonition is this: when the word of Scripture stands forth plainly, welcome it. Have a receptive attitude, not a resistant one. Love the Word of God. Be like a miser in search of gold and silver. Snatch up the Word of God as precious pearls.

Be like rich black Minnesota farmland, deeply plowed, free of thorns, free of rocks, moist from the rains of the Spirit, and then receive the power-packed seed of the Word of God. And this church will overflow with fruit—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. May the Lord destroy the work of the devil and make us a fruitful people by his Word.

THE DANGER OF DRIFTING FROM THE WORD⁸

¹ For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. ² For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, ³ how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴ God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.
—Hebrews 2:1–4 NASB

In the Beginning Was the Word

In chapter 1 of Hebrews there are no commands for the church. We are not told to do anything. The whole chapter is a declaration and celebration of God's final word to the world—Jesus Christ the Son of God. The chapter begins, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in his Son." This is the point of chapter 1: something utterly stupendous happened in the coming of the Son of God.

This is Hebrews' way of saying what John said in his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). In other words, God the Son took on human form as God's final, decisive Word to the world. Not final in that God has not spoken since then, but final and decisive in that, since Jesus came, all that God has to say is rooted in Jesus, and points toward Jesus, and is proven by conformity to Jesus. All the fullness of God is in Jesus (Colossians 2:9). All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Jesus (Colossians 2:3). Beyond what the Old Testament told us, whatever we need to know about God and how he relates to our lives we learn from what we hear and see in God's final, decisive Word, Jesus Christ.

That's what Hebrews 1 is all about: this final word of God, Jesus Christ. In summary, chapter 1 says that the Son of God is the heir of all things (v. 2), he made the world (v. 2), he is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's nature (v. 3), he upholds all things by the word of his power (v. 3), he made purification for sins (v. 3), he sat down at

the right hand of God's majesty (v. 3), and he is greater than any angel (v. 4) because angels worship him (v. 6). He is the mighty God (v. 8).

That's the message of chapter 1: God has spoken by his Son and this Son is Creator and Sustainer and Owner and Ruler and Redeemer of the world. There are no commands for us here, only declaration and celebration of the greatness of Jesus, the final Word of God.

The First Command in Hebrews—Listen!

But in chapter 2 the first thing is a command or a duty—something we must do. And the connection with chapter 1 is very important. Chapter 2 begins, “For this reason... “ (or: some versions have, “therefore”). In other words chapter 2 begins by telling us that chapter 1 is the reason for this duty. Because God has spoken by his Son in these last days, and because he is the Creator and Sustainer and Owner and Ruler and Redeemer of the world—above all angels—therefore (“for this reason...”) “we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.”

So the first command in this book—the first duty mentioned—is that we give heed to the Word of God in his Son. We could boil down the two chapters so far to this: “In these last days God has spoken to us by a Son... for this reason we must pay closer attention to this word that he has spoken.” In other words, God has spoken by his Son, so listen, listen very carefully.

Now here is a command that we need desperately to hear in our day. What do you listen to? Whom do you listen to?

God has spoken through his Son, do you listen to him? How does your listening to him compare to your listening to other things? When we want to listen to someone, we make provisions for listening. If we want to listen to a musical group, we make sure that we have a tape player in the car and that we have the tapes. If we want to listen to the news, we make sure there is a radio in the kitchen or that we have a TV and that we have it turned on at the right time. If we want to listen to a missionary who is in a critical situation overseas, we make arrangements to have email and pick up our mail often during the day. If we want to listen to John Grisham tell his latest tale, we buy a paperback in the airport and have it with us on the airplane.

On and on it goes. We all want to listen to something. And we make plans for our listening and we buy things and go places and make sure we are not distracted. So how does all this compare to our listening to God's Word to us in his Son? Are you listening to that? Are you making provisions for that? Are your kitchen and your car and your den and your reading devoted to that?

It Is Exceedingly Necessary

What Hebrews is saying here is that in the Christian life we must go on listening to God's Word in Jesus. And we must do this with very close attention. We cannot treat this casually. We cannot act as if we already know all we need to know, or that we have nothing to gain from listening to Jesus. There is an urgency here in Hebrews 2:1. Literally it says, "It is exceedingly necessary that we give heed to what we have heard."

It is not just an option that you can do if you are especially spiritual or have a crisis in front of you or if you are at camp or if you need to prepare some lesson. This is a word to all Christians: it is “exceedingly necessary to give heed” to Jesus as the Word of God.

This is not an isolated command in the book of Hebrews. This concern to get the readers to wake up and listen closely to God is repeated. For example, Hebrews 3:1 says, “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus.” Consider Jesus! That’s the point of Hebrews 2:1. Listen to him. Consider him. Focus on him. Stay close to him and keep him in your thoughts. Learn more and more from him every day—what he is like and what he says and the way he sees the world.

Then again in Hebrews 12:1–2 the author says, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.” There it is again: “Fix your eyes on Jesus.” Consider Jesus! Listen to Jesus!

One of the great burdens of this book is that we the readers will see how serious it is to listen to Jesus, the Word of God, and consider Jesus, and fix our eyes on Jesus. This is the first commandment in the book. It is not a difficult command: Listen! Consider! Look! These are not hard things to do—unless we don’t want to do them. The first command of this book is not “labor for Jesus,” but “listen to Jesus.” He is not commanding us to work for him, but to watch him. All our spiritual life-changes come from that (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Pay Attention, so You Don't Neglect Such a Great Salvation

And the whole first chapter is intended to make this a light burden and an easy yoke. The one we are to pay close attention to is the Creator and Sustainer and Owner and Ruler and Redeemer of the world. And what he has to say to us is a “very great salvation.” Do you see that in verse 3: “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” So if we choose not to listen to Jesus every day and consider him and fix our eyes on him, then we are scorning his importance described in chapter 1 and we are neglecting a “great salvation.” Now why would anybody want to do that? The only reason would be if we regard something else as more important to listen to and consider and fix our eyes on. But what distinguishes a Christian from a non-Christian is that a Christian has been born again with a new nature that regards Christ as supremely valuable. And so we find the argument of chapter 1 powerfully compelling. God has spoken in these last days by a Son... For this reason we must listen and we want to listen all the more closely to what he says.

The Christian life is first and foremost a life of contemplation—listening to Jesus, considering Jesus, fixing the eyes of the heart on Jesus. Everything else in the Christian life grows out of this. Without this the Christian life is simply unlivable.

This is why the next phrase in verse 1 is a warning: “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” The first reason for paying close attention to what we have heard in God’s word through his Son is that the Son is infinitely greater than an-

gels: Creator, Sustainer, Owner, Ruler, Redeemer. Therefore how could you not want to be vigilant in listening and considering and fixing your eyes on him?

Pay Attention, so You Don't Drift into Destruction

Now comes a second reason for paying close attention to what we have heard of God's Word through his Son: if we don't do this, we will drift into destruction. Consider this word "drifting." It means float by. It's what a piece of bark or a leaf or a dead fish does in the river—it floats by the boat that is being rowed up stream. It takes no life and no motion to float by. One need only do nothing, and you will float by.

Hebrews says that if we do not vigilantly pay closer attention to the Word of God, we will float by—we will drift away from God's Word. We all know people that this has happened to. Some are in this room. Some are reading this sermon. There is no urgency. No vigilance. No focused listening or considering or fixing the eyes on Jesus. And the result has not been a standing still, but a drifting away.

That is the point here: there is no standing still. The life of this world is not a lake. It is a river. And it is flowing downward to destruction. If you do not listen earnestly to Jesus and consider him daily and fix your eyes on him hourly, then you will not stand still, you will go backward. You will float by.

Drifting is a deadly thing in the Christian life. And the remedy to it, according to Hebrews 2:1, is, "Pay close attention to what you have heard." That is, consider what God is saying in his Son Jesus. Fix your eyes on what God is saying and doing in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This is not a hard

stroke to learn so that we can swim against the stream of sin and indifference. The only thing that keeps us from swimming like this is our sinful desire to float with other interests. But let us not complain that God has given us a hard job. Listen, consider, fix the eyes—this is not what you would call a hard job description. It is not a job description. It is a solemn invitation to be satisfied in Jesus so that we do not get lured downstream by deceitful desires.

Our “Job” Is to Be Satisfied with the Love of God

One of the most powerful words to me in Kenya as I was teaching was the simple prayer in Psalm 90:14, “O satisfy us in the morning with your lovingkindness, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.” That is our “job” as Christians: being satisfied in the morning with the love of God spoken to us in the Son of God, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days—and so be free from the deceitfulness of downriver desires.

O the danger of drifting away from the word of God’s promise in Jesus Christ!

Verses 2 and 3a tell us why this is so dangerous.

For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

Failing to pay close attention to God’s Word and the drifting away that results is described in verse 3 as “neglecting a great salvation.” And this is said to be extremely dangerous.

How dangerous? So dangerous that if we go on in the way of neglecting this great salvation—not listening to Jesus day

by day, and not considering Jesus, and not fixing our eyes on Jesus—the result will be that we will not escape. That is, we will not escape the judgment of God (Hebrews 12:25; 1 Thessalonians 5:3). We will be lost. We will not inherit eternal life. We will perish in hell.

Drifting Is Infinitely Dangerous

Drifting is infinitely dangerous. O that I could waken you all to be joyfully vigilant in living the Christian life of looking to Jesus, and considering Jesus, and listening to Jesus. His yoke is easy and his burden is light—as easy as listening and as light as looking. But if we neglect this great salvation, and drift into the love of other things, then we will not escape. We will perish. The mark of the true child of God is that that he does not drift for long. If you are drifting this morning, one of the signs of hope that you are born again is that you feel pricked for this—a rising desire in your heart to turn your eyes on Jesus and consider him and listen to him in the days and months and years to come. And one of the signs that you may not be born again is that you hear what I am saying and feel no desire to guard against drifting.

The argument given in verse 2 for why we will not escape if we drift and neglect our great salvation is that “the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense.” In other words, in the Old Testament God did not yet speak directly through his Son on the earth. He spoke through intermediary messengers. Hebrews says angels were involved in the revelation of God’s Word. Nevertheless, the firmness of

this mediated Word was so great that every neglect and rejection of it was punishable with a just recompense.

Now something much greater has come: God has spoken to us not through angels, but unmediated through a Son. God himself stood forth from heaven in Jesus and spoke a great salvation with his lips and his life and his death. Now, this writer says, if we neglect this great Word, we are much more guilty than the Old Testament people who disobeyed the Word of God given through angels, and therefore we will not escape.

So, as always in the Bible, God graciously is giving us in this book positive and negative incentives to embrace our great salvation and listen to the great Savior. Negatively, he says that we will perish if we drift away from the Word of God and neglect our great salvation. Positively he says that this Word is such that how could anyone not want to listen and linger and live in this Word—the Creator of all things, the Upholder of all things, the Heir of all things, the Ruler of all things from the right hand of Majesty, and the Purifier of all our sins, if we will trust him? How could we not want to pay attention to this Word and consider him and fix our eyes on him!

BY THIS TIME YOU OUGHT TO BE TEACHERS⁹

¹¹ Concerning him [Melchizedek, as a type of Christ] we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.—Hebrews 5:11–14 NASB

Something Is Wrong—The Disease Called Dullness of Hearing

The writer of Hebrews hasn't come right out and said it until now. But he has implied it. There is something wrong with the Christians he is writing to.

In 2:1 he said, pay close attention to the message you've heard lest you drift away.

In 3:1 he said, consider Jesus.

In 3:8 he said, don't harden your hearts like Israel did in the wilderness.

In 3:12 he said, take care, lest you have an evil heart of unbelief.

In 4:1 he said, fear, lest you fail to enter God's rest.

In 4:11 he said, be diligent to enter God's rest lest you fall by disobedience.

In 4:14 he said, hold fast to your confession.

In all of these urgent admonitions you begin to get the impression: this writer is really concerned about some situation in the churches of his day. But until now he has only given the cure, not the diagnosis. Now he tells us what's wrong.

He comes to the end of last week's¹⁰ text in 5:9–10 and says that Christ has been perfected through suffering and that he has been designated a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. And he takes a breath—you can almost hear him sigh—and says, in 5:11, “Concerning him [or concerning this—what I've just been talking about briefly] we have much

to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” And there is our first explicit diagnosis. Here’s the disease he is working on in this letter: dullness of hearing.

This is what’s behind all those exhortations: Pay close attention! Consider! Don’t harden your heart! Fear! Be diligent! Hold fast! These are all doctor’s prescriptions for the disease of dullness of hearing.

The most urgent question this morning is: Do you have this disease, and if so, how can you get well?

But first we need to make sure we know what he’s talking about. What is the disease of dullness of hearing? Let’s let this writer explain his own terms for us; let’s take the two words one at a time and look at the one other place in Hebrews where each is used.

“Dullness”

Take first the word “dull”—or slow or sluggish. It’s used one other time in the New Testament, namely, in Hebrews 6:12. Let’s read 6:11–12 and you’ll see what the opposite of dullness is,

We desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish [there’s the word for “dull” in our text], but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

The opposite of dullness is diligence or earnestness, to turn the message of hope into the assurance of hope; it’s the imitation of people who hear the promises of God and then respond with faith and patience. So dull hearing doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with your physical ears. It means

there is something wrong with your heart. The heart is not eager and diligent to embrace the promises and turn them into faith and patience. Instead, the Word comes into the ears and goes down to the heart and hits something hard or tough—or starting to get hard. That’s dullness of hearing. The promises come to the ear, but there is no passion for them, no lover’s embrace, no cherishing or treasuring; and so no faith and no patience and—if things don’t change—no inheritance of eternal life. Which is why he wrote this book. And why I preach this sermon. It is an incredibly dangerous disease, this dullness of hearing.

“Hearing”

The other word we can track down is the word “hearing.” It’s used one other time in Hebrews, just like “dullness” is, namely, in 4:2.

For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard [literally: “the word of hearing”—same word as in 5:11, “dull of hearing”]—the word of hearing—did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.

So here is the same problem again: a word of good news—a word of God’s promise, and a hearing, but no faith. This is “dullness of hearing.” The word goes in the ears, and comes to the heart, and meets dullness and slowness and hardness. The opposite of dullness of hearing is hearing with faith which produces obedience.

You can see this three verses earlier in Hebrews 3:18–19, “And to whom did He [God] swear that they should not enter

His rest, but to those who were disobedient [note the word!]? And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.” Notice the switch from “disobedient” to “unbelief.” I think this means that the root of all disobedience is unbelief—lack of trust in the promises of God.

So you can see what dullness of hearing is and why it is so important. It is a kind of hearing with the ears that is unresponsive in the heart. It doesn’t embrace the Word of God with faith. And therefore, it doesn’t produce the fruit of patience and obedience. So, whichever way you go—looking at the word “dullness” in 6:12, or looking at the word “hearing” in the context of 4:2 the answer is the same.

“Dullness of hearing” is hearing without faith and without the moral fruit of faith. It’s hearing the Bible or the preaching of the Bible the way you hear the freeway noise on I-94, or the way you hear Muzak in the dentist’s office or the way you hear recorded warnings at the airport that this is a smoke-free facility. You do but you don’t. You have grown dull to the sound. It does not awaken or produce anything.

A word of Jesus from Luke 8:18 is very important here. When he had finished telling the parable of the four soils where the seed is the Word he says, “Therefore take care how you hear; 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.” In other words, if you have the grace to hear (with faith and fruit), you will get more grace; but if you do not, even what you think you have will be taken away—namely, the Word.

Now I plead with you even now at this point in the message to be diligent and earnest in how you hear. Lazy, drift-

ing, passive—dull—listening is incredibly dangerous, even now, at this very minute.

Now Jesus' point is the same point the writer to the Hebrews is trying to make: the one who has grace to hear will receive more grace, and the one who does not (in other words, is dull or hard in his hearing) even what he thinks he has will be taken away. Hebrews 5:11 says that there is so much more that the writer wants to give his readers: "Concerning him we have much to say... but you have become dull of hearing." If they had more grace to hear, they would receive more that the writer has to give. But they are becoming hard and dull, and in danger of throwing away the little they have.

What Is the Remedy?

That's the disease. Now what about the remedy? How do you get well? Somebody might object that I am using the term "disease" when the text uses the terms "babe" and "mature." A person who is dull of hearing is compared to a babe (in verse 13b) that has to drink milk. There is nothing diseased about a baby's dependence on milk. So why do I use the image of disease? My answer to this objection is that if a person is still a baby when he is old enough to be a teenager, he has a disease. And the disease in this text is called "dullness of hearing."

So my question remains: what's the remedy? Why are some Christians stuck at the baby stage of development with the disease of "dullness of hearing" and what is the cure?

Now keep in mind what dullness of hearing is. It's not a physical problem. Deaf people can be the sharpest hearers and blind people can be the sharpest see-ers. It's not physical.

Dullness of hearing, you remember from 6:12 and 3:18, is the failure to make use of the Word heard to nurture faith and bear the fruit of obedience. Dull hearing is passive and lazy and does not reach out and grasp the promises of God and embrace them. Passivity produces perpetual babies, who may discover that they are doll-Christians and not living Christians at all. That's the disease.

Become Mature with Milk

The key verse to describe the remedy is verse 14: "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Now ask yourself this question: If solid food is only palatable—digestible—for the mature, with what food do you become mature so that you can then eat the solid food? The answer is: milk. You become mature with milk.

The problem with these Christians is not that milk is weak or that babes can't eat steak. The problem is that babes are not exercising with the milk they have. You see the key word there in verse 14: you become mature by "practice" or exercise or habitual responses to the milk. The problem is that the milk of the Word is not producing muscle of faith. And the muscle of faith is not producing acts of righteousness. This is how you grow from a baby Christian to a mature Christian: from the milk of the Word to the muscle of faith to acts of righteousness.

But as soon as I wrote that down, I noticed that it's not quite right. It's true, I think, but it's not exactly what this text says. Verse 14 does not say that the milk of the Word

should produce new muscle; it says, in effect, that milk should produce a new mind—the mind that can discern between good and evil. “Because of practice [the mature] have their senses [internal, moral—spiritual senses] trained to discern good and evil.”

Now this is amazing. Don’t miss it. It could save you years of wasted living. What verse 14 is saying is that if you want to become mature and understand the more solid teachings of the Word, then the rich, nutritional, precious milk of God’s gospel promises must transform your moral senses—your spiritual mind—so that you can discern between good and evil. Or let me put it another way. Getting ready to feast on all God’s Word is not first an intellectual challenge; it is first a moral challenge. If you want to eat the solid food of the Word, you must exercise your spiritual senses so as to develop a mind that discerns between good and evil.

The startling truth is that, if you stumble over Melchizedek, it may be because you watch questionable TV programs. If you stumble over the doctrine of election, it may be because you still use some shady business practices. If you stumble over the God-centered work of Christ in the cross, it may be because you love money and spend too much and give too little. The pathway to maturity and to solid biblical food is not first becoming an intelligent person, but becoming an obedient person. What you do with alcohol and sex and money and leisure and food and computer have more to do with your capacity for solid food than where you go to school or what books you read.

The Way You Drink the Milk

What this means is that if you want to grow up and feast on the fullness of God's revelation, you don't do it by jumping from milk to meat. You do it by the way you drink the milk. The milk has to make you a certain kind of discerning person before you can digest the meat. This is so important because in our highly technological society we are prone to think that education—especially intellectual development—is the key to maturity. This text makes clear that it isn't. There are many Ph.D.'s who choke in their spiritual immaturity on the things of God. And there are many less-educated saints who are deeply mature and can feed with pleasure and profit on the deepest things of God's Word.

So the key to maturity (and the remedy for dullness of hearing) is not jumping from milk to meat. The key is the way you drink the milk—what you do with the milk of the Word. So let me close with three steps in how to grow with milk to maturity.

First you drink in the milk. That is, you listen to the milk of the Word—the message of God's promises in the gospel. You read them yourself in the Bible and you sit under the preaching and teaching of God's Word. And you give heed. You are earnest and diligent to apply your heart and mind to what is being said. You are not passive and cavalier and indifferent—babes long for milk, and are incredibly focused when they are thirsty.

Savor and swallow and digest and be satisfied. This is crucial. If this doesn't happen, the next stage of discernment will not happen. Here is the miraculous spiritual event of loving what once you hated. You love the taste of the milk: "Taste

and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). And when the promises of God and the God of the promises are tasted, the milk satisfies. And when it satisfies, it transforms your values and priorities, which leads to Step 3.

With a heart satisfied with God now, discern good and evil. There are hundreds of decisions that you must make day in and day out which are not spelled out explicitly in the Bible. What to watch on TV, political positions to take, investment strategies, vocation, insurance, retirement, business tactics, where to live, what to drive, whether to own a gun, how to discipline your children, what to wear, where to volunteer, how much to give, etc., etc.

It doesn't take discernment to know what's wrong if you have a list from God. Knowing when to murder and when to steal and when to commit adultery take no discernment if you believe God gave the Ten Commandments. So verse 14 is talking about decisions that are not laid down specifically in a list.

And it says that there is such a thing as discernment between good and evil. How does this discernment come? It comes from habitually (by regular practice) nourishing and shaping your spiritual senses (the word in verse 14 doesn't mean physical senses) by the Word of God until that word becomes a “word of righteousness”—a discerning power, a word producing righteousness in the mature. Discernment is what you do naturally when the milk of God's promises is so savored and so satisfying that it gives you the mind of Christ.

This is the remedy for “dullness of hearing.” Drink with delight until the desires of your heart are so transformed as to become the discernment of good and evil. Then you will be mature and ready for meat.

NOTES

- 1 This sermon was originally preached on February 15, 1998. Listen to or download the audio online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/take-care-how-you-listen-part-1>
- 2 A reference to “The Place of Preaching in Worship” (2 Timothy 3:16–4:5), a sermon preached on February 8, 1998. Read the manuscript or listen to the audio online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-place-of-preaching-in-worship>
- 3 See the next sermon in this collection.
- 4 This sermon was originally preached on February 22, 1998. Listen to or download the audio online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/take-care-how-you-listen-part-2>
- 5 See the previous sermon in this collection.
- 6 This sermon was originally preached on December 2, 1984. Listen to or download the audio online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/satan-takes-the-word-away>

- 7 Which he did: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-son-of-god-appeared-to-destroy-the-works-of-the-devil>
- 8 This sermon was originally preached on April 28, 1996. Listen to or download the audio online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-danger-of-drifting-from-the-word>
- 9 This sermon was originally preached on September 29, 1996. Listen to or download the audio online: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/by-this-time-you-ought-to-be-teachers/>
- 10 A reference to this sermon: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/he-is-the-source-of-eternal-salvation-for-all-who-obey-him>

