

Listening with More Than Our Ears

Isaiah 55:10–13 • Matthew 13:1–23

Matt. 13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. **2** Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. **3** Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. **4** As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. **5** Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. **6** But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. **7** Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. **8** Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. **9** He who has ears, let him hear."

Matt. 13:10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

Matt. 13:11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. **12** Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. **13** This is why I speak to them in parables:

"Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

Matt. 13:15 For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears, understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.'

16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. **17** For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

Matt. 13:18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: **19** When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. **20** The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. **21** But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. **22** The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. **23** But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

The greatest challenge of our day is that we have too much information coming too fast. Think about your day. How often are we receiving more than one stream of information at a time? The other day, I was headed to the grocery store, I had the radio on, and I was listening to Caleb talk about his day, but I am also reading the stoplights, the billboards, the street signs. I was taking in a lot of information from lots of sources. Sure, we can filter out some things, but how do we know what to keep? Jesus says that when we “hear the Word, [we] want to hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.” With the fire-hose of information we take in everyday, how do we know what God is trying to say? How do we listen with more than our ears? We face at least three challenges.

First, we would rather talk. Celeste Headlee, in her Ted Talk, “10 Ways to have a better conversation,” says “When I’m talking, I’m in control. I don’t hear anything I’m not interested in. I’m the center of attention. I can bolster my own identity.”¹ In a world that tells us information matters, we may even feel if we aren’t adding to the world’s information we don’t matter. Stephen Covey, in his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says, “Most of don’t listen with the intent to understand. Most of us listen with the intent to reply.”² But how will we hear God if we are always talking?

Second, we have to make space to learn. In the new classic Kung-Fu movie, *Forbidden Kingdom*, a bullied teen-ager, named Jason, is transported back in time to ancient China. In order to accomplish his quest, he asks a warrior to teach him Kung Fu. That night, as they are sitting around the campfire, Jason starts getting excited about learning Kung Fu the next day. After all, he’s seen all these movies about it, played all kinds of video games about it. He asks the warrior, “Do you think you’ll teach me the No-Shadow Kick? Oh, and the Buddha Palm technique?” The warrior gives him a cup and starts pouring hot tea. Jason goes on, “There’s a guy in Virtual Fighter 2—he does the Buddha Palm technique, and he does the Iron Elbow, and he does the One-Finger Death Touch.” Jason suddenly realizes that the hot tea is overflowing the cup. “The cup’s full,” he says. “Stop! It’s full! Ow!” The warrior looks Jason full in the face and says, “Exactly. How can you fill your cup, if it’s already full? How can you learn Kung Fu, if you already know so much? No-Shadow Kick...Buddha Palm. Empty your cup.”³ We spend most of our days, thinking about what we know, that we have the answers, about what we can teach. When we truly listen to someone, we make space to let the other person tell us about their life and their experience, their thoughts and ideas...and why those matter. In the same way, most of the time, we are not really interested in what God thinks, because then we might have to change our minds or our lives, give up the things holding us back, or reach out to someone who might not like us or be like us. Jesus says, “No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light.” If we really care what God thinks, then we can make some space to learn, to ask ourselves, “What if God really knows more than I do? What if Jesus really could change my life?” But how will we really hear God if we don’t really want to be different?

¹https://www.ted.com/talks/celeste_headlee_10_ways_to_have_a_better_conversation#t-575758.

²Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1990). In fact, Covey has a whole chapter on trying to understand rather than be understood.

³“The Forbidden Kingdom.” (2008) Starring Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Michael Angarano.

Finally, listening is something we can learn. Do I mean learning how to really focus on the person in front of you, to be really present for them? Sure. Good. Do I mean trying to find the things about them that God really loves? You bet. The thing about listening, is that if we try to listen, if we try to *really* care about the other person, and really care about what's going on their lives, it gets easier and easier to hear others. And if we listen to God with our hearts as well as our ears, my experience is that it gets easier to hear God's voice. Maybe that's what Jesus means when he says, "pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given..." But the opposite is also true: if we know God is talking and we stick our fingers in our ears, or choose to think about other things, or even choose to do what we know God wouldn't want us to do... "C.S. Lewis once said, "Disobedience to conscience makes conscience blind."⁴ And the Bible is full of times when we read that God "hardens" someone's heart, but I wonder if it's God hardening their hearts, or if they just decide they don't want to listen. Jesus says of them, "...from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away." And how will we learn how to listen, if our hearts are hard?

That's why we pray. We can pray that God would take our hearts of stone that are too hard for the Word to penetrate, too hard to really care about someone, and soften them. We can pray that God might take our ears that are receiving soooo much information, and tune them to God's voice. We can pray that God would by the power of the Holy Spirit help us be drawn to focus on the people around us, because they are more important than the flood of information. We can pray...less by asking, and more by listening. Instead of telling God what we need, we can fill the space with our desire for God, so that grace can touch us, that people can move us, that God can shape us, that Jesus can call us...and we can hear with more than our ears...and become good soil for the seed of God's grace.

⁴C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Chap. 2, paragraph 4, p. 11.