

Biblical Listening in a World of Words

Proverbs 2:1-6

Introduction:

They say that there are two types of people in this world (I'm not sure how accurate this is)—word people and numbers people. I'm not a numbers guy. I don't get the guy would rather decipher what X is than read a good short story. But I'm glad they exist.

As someone who takes notice to words, I've come to notice—and I'm sure you have too—that words are everywhere. Messages are everywhere. Words follow you everywhere you go. They're on the cereal box that was in front of you this morning. They're on the radio. They come in on your phone. They even linger in your thoughts when everything else is silent.

And now, you're listening to a preacher. And guess what? He's using words.

We encounter words everywhere we go. And the number of words we intake seem to be increasing as technology increases.

I've read that "we've now reached a point where the average weekday edition of the *New York Times* contains more information than Jonathan Edwards would have encountered in his entire eighteenth-century lifetime."

Billboards. Commercials. Advertisements. Words, words, words. Politicians twisting each others words. Perhaps you've had a friend or family member make a promise that didn't come true. Maybe you haven't been true to your word. Perhaps there are some of us here who are so sick and tired of words letting us down that we have a hard time listening to anything.

But not only that, we've become, voluntarily, the most distracted civilization in the history of mankind. In the smartphone, we've created a technology that we can scarcely control. We allow messages of all types to barge into our lives and demand our attention. There's a beep when you get an email. A buzz for a text. A ring for a call. A chirp for a tweet. One blogger Tim Challies thinks that when future generations look back at this time period, we will be called the people of the beep.

We are so used to being buzzed that we often feel a vibration when, in fact, there was none. Has it ever happened to you? You're not alone. Phantom Vibration Syndrom (PVS) has its own wiki-pedia page. It's also called ringxiety. We are so used to being distracted that even when we're not distracted we distract ourselves!

A Niagra Falls of information is available at any given moment of any given day. Much of it is demanding our attention. Most of it is irrelevant.

And then the Bible comes in. It says it's alive and active and piercing and cutting and working and moving. It says it's profitable. It's useful. It's fruit-making. It's heart-revealing. In the midst of an ocean of meaningless words, here stands the immovable, Rock of Gibraltar Word of God. And it demands our attention.

In this midst of this flood of information there is one particular skill that becomes increasingly vital for the Christian. Apart from this particular skill, we will all be spiritual dwarfs. Spiritual atrophy will set in.

Our faith will be flimsy; our conviction flabby. There will be no spiritual muscle, and we the church will drift until there is nothing to distinguish us from the world.

What discipline am I speaking of? Listening. And specifically, the ability to listen to wisdom in the cacophony of folly.

The Glory and Danger of Listening to Sermons

Isaiah 55:10-11 is one of my favorite passages about the Word of God. "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Here's the point. The Word of God will accomplish its purpose. There are dull preachers, but the Word is never dull. There are boring teachers, but the word of God is never boring. There are tired, dreary readers but the Bible is never tired or dreary.

The word is active like that. It's always acting. It's never doing nothing. Even when we ignore it, it's working. It's working in different ways, but it's working. To those who continually resist it, it makes them calloused. To those who receive it with hard hearts, it makes them dull of hearing. To those who refuse to obey it, it solidifies them in their rebellion. For those who receive it it's life and joy and food for the soul.

Listening to a sermon where the Word of God is expounded is at once glorious and dangerous. It's a glorious and dangerous thing to hear sermon after sermon from pastors who open up God's Word to preach. It is glorious, because God Almighty reveals himself to us in the preached Word. Heaven meets earth in an awesome moment. But it is dangerous because every time we hear the word, something happens to us. We either receive it with faith and grow in obedience to it, or our hearts are hard and we grow calloused to the Word.

One pastor said it this way: "Don't be cavalier [careless] 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." Every time the Word of God is preached, and we listen, and we actively or passively ignore it, we are being changed. And not for the better.

And so we come to our topic this morning because we need help. The most dangerous place in the world to be is in a church, Sunday after Sunday, hearing but not hearing. Listening but not listening.

Proverbs gives us what we need. Proverbs gives us direction here. Turn to Proverbs 2.

Three Conditions to Receive Wisdom from God

Proverbs is mostly written by Solomon, the wisest man in the world. And here we have the wisest man pointing his son to his words, his commandments. Solomon knew that his words were God's Words; that the commandments he gave were God's commandments. When Solomon urges his son to listen to him, he's urging him to listen to God.

He lays out three conditions that he needs to meet. Three "ifs." And these conditions all have to do with receiving wisdom, that is, biblical listening.

So he begins by saying in verse 1: "if you receive my words and treasure my commandments with you."

Before We Get to the Conditions, Remember this is Personal

Let's make a few observations about the kind of listening that gets wisdom. **First, you must do it.** If *you* receive my words. Your parents can't receive them for you. Husbands, your wife can't receive them for you. Wives, your husbands can't receive them for you. Not even your pastors can receive them for you. We are each called to receive. On the day of judgment you will not be held accountable for how the people around you received the word. You will be held accountable to you.

First Condition: Attentively Receive Wisdom.

Notice that the word is active. Receiving is an action. We tend to think of listening as passive. It's something that doesn't require too much involvement. We listen to the radio while we work on the car; we listen to our favorite songs while we run. We typically think of listening as passive. But here, we are urged to receive them. Listening is active in the same way catching a pitch is active. If a catcher is passive, he's going to be a terrible catcher (by the way I hope this is on tape because this is the first and most likely the last baseball analogy I've ever used in preaching). The catching watches. His eyes are open wide. He's prepared. He knows what's coming. And when it comes, he catches it. Listening is active. God's Word, a force stronger and more potent than a 100 mile per hour fast ball, is flying from this pulpit Sunday after Sunday. Receive these words. This is an action. This is proactive, not reactive. Listening is hard work, not something passive.

And notice its parallel. Hebrew parallelism is a common way of making a point: you essentially say the same thing in two different ways. That's what he's doing here: "**If you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you.**" Part of receiving is treasuring. That means we value what wisdom is telling us. This is massively important, especially for well-taught, theologically-minded churches like ours. We are not to receive the Word of God like movie critics. We are not to receive the Word of God like the peanut gallery. As tempting as it is, we are not to receive the Word of God like Simon Cowell from American Idol. Instead, we pay attention to the Word of God like a treasure hunter pays attention to a treasure map. We lean in. We get excited. Our expectations are high. The map has never been wrong--it always leads us to our treasure.

And you'd expect at this point for Solomon to finish his "if-then" statement with a "then." But he doesn't, and the intensity of what he's saying heightens. There's more to it than simply receiving and treasuring. There's "**making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding.**" The way the grammar is set up indicates that this sentence is modifying *how* we ought to receive and treasure. Don't you love how practical proverbs is? How should we receive God's Word? How should we treasure it?

Make your ear attentive. One commentator says it could be translated "bending your ear toward wisdom." Intensity is heightened. And what's interesting here is the ear/heart parallel. Make your ear attentive, and incline your heart. Isn't that fascinating? Both are involved in biblical listening. We need ears to hear and we need hearts to hear. Your heart can hear.

I think a lot of people will miss heaven by 18 inches- the distance between the head and the heart.

But the pipeline between our ears and our heart need not be clogged up. What we hear ought to affect our hearts--not just our emotions, that's not what is meant here by the word "heart." In Hebrew culture, the word "heart" stood for the whole inner person: mind, emotions, and volition. And so he urges us to be "making our ear attentive to wisdom." This phrase connotes **rapt attention, absorbed, even captivated.**

Now, if you're honest, that's a pretty weighty charge, is it not? We read over it like it's some light and fluffy powder-puff command: "**incline your heart to understanding**"-- ah, that's one of those easy commands in Scripture. Wait a second. Have you ever tried to incline your heart? Actually, the same verb is used when Balaam struck his donkey to "turn her back" to go on the path. Donkeys are stubborn. Hearts are stubborn. This is not easy feat. Inclining your heart to understanding is like training your cat to sit. It's not easy. Cats are bent toward stubborn independence-- and so are our hearts.

And that's why, at this point, the text shifts. Solomon, in his instruction, knows that what he's asking of his son is impossible. Receive my words--that's possible; be a good listener. Treasure up my commandments--okay, that's possible too, I'll memorize them perhaps. Make your ear attentive--okay, this is still in the realm of possible. But "incline your heart"? The command is to have your whole inner being, your mind, emotion, and volition inclined toward understanding. Now who is able to do that on their own?

And so he turns to prayer. In verse 3 he says, "**yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding.**" For real listening--listening that doesn't stop between the ears; listening that doesn't simply fill up the skull-- rather listening that is receiving and treasuring--for this kind of listening to happen, God must grant divine assistance. In fact, this is just as much part of listening as listening. We could put it this way: want to listen well? Pray well.

Second Condition: Aggressively Call Out for Wisdom

I wonder how much prayer happens before we encounter God's Word Sunday morning. Sure there's a pastoral prayer that we (hopefully) pray alone with. Sure some of the songs are prayerful and voice some of our petitions. But I wonder how much "calling out" there is. I wonder how much desperation there is. I wonder how much asking and begging and pleading with God for divine assistance. I wonder how many Sunday mornings are so hurried, so busy, even tension-filled that we've forgotten to pray. And thus, another Sunday goes by and we don't hear.

We are told to raise our voice. Imagine one little boy complaining about how his father is always yelling at him. And then another little boy saying, "The only time I've ever heard my father raise his voice was in his prayers!" Wouldn't it be great if all the fathers in this room were accused of raising their voices--for understanding? How amazing would it be when kids walk in on their parents praying hard for Sunday morning?

Consider this story D.A. Carson, an internationally known scholar, preacher, and Christian leader. He wrote a little book about his unknown father, "Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor." I bet every pastor in America has heard of D.A. Carson through his writings and his preaching, but no one had heard of his father. But he was faithful. D.A. Carson writes about his brother Jim:

"Jim recalls barging into Dad's study unannounced, finding him on his knees praying, and quietly backing out. [Jim is then quoted saying] 'But that image has always remained with me, especially during my later rebellious teen years. While walking away from God, I could not get away from the image of my father on his knees, praying for me. It is one of the things that eventually brought me back.'"

This is exactly the prayer that the psalmist prays in **Psalm 119:36 "Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain."** Prayer is not just a food-blessing mechanism. Prayer opens eyes, prayer inclines hearts, prayer changes us. Let me ask you: when was the last time you prayed something like this *"Lord, I'm about to go to church. At church, there is a God-appointed pastor who is qualified and gifted to preach your authoritative, life-giving, Christ-exalting, mission-driving, God-exalting Word. And I'm about to hear it. Lord, do not let me waste this. Incline my heart to hear it."*

Sometimes we walk away from the sermon saying we didn't get anything of it. Sometimes we blame the preacher. Sometimes we blame our circumstances. Sometimes we don't blame anything, we just go on with our day. And the reality is that whenever we say that, nine times out of ten the problem ain't with the sermon. Perhaps that pipeline between our ears and our hearts hasn't been washed and cleansed by prayer. Perhaps we're listening in our own strength.

So receive the word, treasure the word, be captivated by it, incline your heart toward it. Overwhelmed by all this? Good--cry out to God for divine assistance, raise your voice for understanding.

But that's not all either. The picture of biblical listening is only partially complete. It starts with receiving, moves toward praying, and ends with seeking.

Let me give you an illustration, and I'm borrowing from a guy who wrote a book on Proverbs named Dan Phillips. Bread. How do you get it? Work or pray?

Work? Well, Jesus told us to pray for bread in Matthew 6. "Give us this day our daily bread." See? So it's not work, it's prayer.

Or supposed you're hyper-spiritual. You say, "Pray." If we work, we're actually not depending on God. Jesus told us to pray, and so we rely solely on him to meet our needs. We don't work. And to that we'd all say with Paul, you don't work you don't eat, buddy. No work-y, no bread-y.

So which is it? You know the answer; it's obvious. We get it when we're talking about something tangible as bread. But sometimes we get a little mystical when it comes to other things, things like wisdom.

How do you get wisdom? One says, "Pray. James 1:5-7 says we can ask God for wisdom and he'll give it to us. We just need to ask in faith. He will always deliver." Another says, "Study! Keep reading in James and it talks about being doers of the Word, not just hearers. We need to study! We need to work harder in the books if we want to get wisdom."

Now whether we're going after bread or wisdom, there's a principle that runs throughout Scripture: God works through means. Should we pray for bread? Yes, because ultimately, it comes from God. Should we work for bread? Yes, because God has ordained work to be a means of his provision.

But sometimes with wisdom we're a little more mystical. It's easy to see the connection between working and eating. If no money is made, no bread is bought. Hungry bellies prove the point that prayer for bread must be accompanied by work for bread. But with wisdom, there are no hungry bellies to remind us to we need to be fed. We like the idea that we need to pray for wisdom and that God will answer that prayer. But we also need to remember that we need to work for wisdom. If you've been the type who's prayed and prayed and prayed for wisdom, but has refused to crack open your Bible, listen to what God says about biblical listening: "if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures."

Do you want wisdom? Pray. But that's not all; indeed, that falls short. Do you want wisdom? Seek it. Search for it.

Third Condition: Actively Seek Wisdom

Seek it like silver. Imagine if for one week we all tried to fill our minds the same way we try to fill our bank accounts? That's what Solomon is getting at. He's a father telling his son, "Listen, all that drive you have to get riches--put toward getting wisdom." We can update it to make it more applicable to us.

Fathers, model to your sons that hearing God's Word is more valuable than the football game on. Mothers, tell your daughters to pursue wisdom with more passion than the academic scholarships they might be able to reach. All of us need to be exhorted here: the diligence and fervency and consistency with which we get our income should pale in comparison to the diligence and fervency and consistency with which we listen. This is how we pursue wisdom.

This shows that biblical listening extends beyond the Sunday morning sermon. In fact, biblical listening must not stop at the end of the sermon, no matter how long Jordan goes. The Bereans were commended for their good listening because their listening didn't stop at the end of the sermon. Their listening transitioned to studying. Their receiving of the Word turned into rigorous study of the Word. And that is the way it should be. That's why they were called noble.

Is there anything as valuable? Is there anything so urgent? Is there anything so needful?

Church gatherings where the word is preached are like goldrushes to the Christian who is listening biblically. It's a treasure hunt. God's Word is being preached--the Word that effectively created stars and galaxies--and we sit to hear it. There will be gold in the listening. Search for it like hidden treasure. And the better you listen, the more treasure you'll find. "Rake and you'll only find leaves; dig and you might find diamonds."

The result of listening like this--receiving, being captivated by, inclining the heart toward, praying and asking, seeking, searching, studying--is infinitely worth it.

Listen: **"then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."**

This is the great goal of humanity: to know God. Not know about him, but to know him.

Conclusion and Exhortation

I want to end with challenge and a consolation. First, the challenge.

Hebrews 5:11-14. It says, "About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing." Listening problems are spiritual problems, and here we learn that Christians can become dull of hearing. And listen to what he says: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God." Some people in the congregation had given in to the subtle, yet ever present temptation to think that they had spiritually arrived and no longer needed to hear God's Word. They were dull of hearing. And what was the result? What was the consequence?

There were people who should have become teachers but hadn't. Here's my challenge: some of you have been listening to God's Word preached for some time now. Some have been since childhood, others for a number of years now. God has shaped you, transformed you, and blessed you through the preaching of his word. Can I ask this question, simply because the writer of Hebrews brings it up? I wonder if there are here who should be teachers? I wonder if there are any here who, over the years, have become dull of hearing? My dad used to always say, "My mind is like a steel trap; nothing gets in, nothing gets out."

Perhaps you haven't really been listening biblically. You've heard a bunch of sermons, but, looking at Proverbs 2, it's apparent that your listening has been incomplete. You receive the Word but you don't treasure it. You make your ear attentive but don't bother to incline your heart. You pray for blessings on the food, but never blessings on the sermon. You're not crying out for wisdom or raising your voice for insight. And when it comes to seeking and searching and studying for wisdom, you haven't been all that passionate. And thus, you don't have the wisdom you wish you had.

There's hope for you. Here's the consolation: Help is a person and his name is Jesus. Are you a Christian who needs correction? Are you a humbled Christian who needs help? Come again to Jesus, for healing, for help, for direction, for forgiveness. He is an ever-present Savior--one that can make the blind see and the ADD listen. He's there, he knows, he cares, he understands. Believe it or not, we are told that Jesus experienced our weakness so we can have sympathy with us. Jesus was tempted to tune out good teaching! He'll help you.

Or perhaps you've never really heard. Perhaps you've sat under numerous sermons and have never allowed God's Word to penetrate the surface of your heart. Hebrews 3:7 says "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart!"

The bad news is that you are blind, deaf, and unable to save yourself. The good news is that today, you've heard from God's freeing, life-giving Word, it has come to you. And that news is that Jesus died for sinners, he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and he offers freedom from sin and forgiveness of sin for everyone who turns from their sin to trust him for salvation. Today, you can commit to believe his words--you can commit to listening to him.

There was once a young man who stumble into a small country church during a blizzard on a Sunday. The church was in service and the regular preacher was not preaching that morning; he had been delayed in the snow. A man from the church, an old man, got up into the pulpit. He wasn't trained or polished or appealing. But he preached. It was a simple sermon, with very little to it. He read verse: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." The young man in the pew was bearing with it, until the preacher pointed his finger at him and said "Young man, you look very miserable and you

always will be miserable—miserable in life, and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved." Then, lifting up his hands, the preacher shouted, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin' to do but to look and live."

The young man's name was Charles Spurgeon. He says at that moment "I saw at once the way of salvation . . . I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" What a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to HIM . . .

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply
Redeeming love has been my theme
And shall be till I die

Spurgeon was urged to look to Christ! In this age, we cannot see Christ with our eyes but we see him with our ears. I want to urge the same: look to Christ! Listen to him! He has granted us a message of good news and salvation-- let's look to him and rest in him.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart!