



Sunday School Lesson for July 17, 2005.
Released on June 13, 2005.

"Learning to Listen"

Printed Text: **Matthew 13:9-17.**
Devotional Reading: **Mark 4:10-20.**
Background Scripture: **Matthew 13:1-23.**

Time: A.D. 28
Place: Sea of Galilee

Matthew 13:9-17

9 Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?

11 He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

12 For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.

13 Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

14 And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:

15 For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

17 For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

Today's Aim

Facts: to teach the nature of true listening.

Principle: to show that truly listening to God involves a willing heart.

Application: to encourage students to listen to God with their hearts as well as their ears.

Introduction

"Once Upon a Time ... "

Everyone loves a good story. Children learn at an early age to perk up their ears at the magic words, "Once upon a time ... " Stories can carry us to other times, other places, other worlds. Stories can be fun, but they can also carry important lessons.

Jesus told stories called "parables." His stories were interesting and easy to visualize, but they were far more than mere entertainment. Jesus had great spiritual truths to teach, and sometimes His vivid stories were the only way to express them. This was especially true when His listeners were stubborn and hardheaded.

Parables were Jesus' way of transporting His audience to another world-the kingdom of God. It is a world of hidden treasure and pearls of great price. It is a land of sprouting mustard seeds and of grain harvests in astonishing abundance. In this kingdom, beggars go to feasts and rich men go to Hades. It is a world where lost sheep and lost coins are found, where a prodigal son is welcomed home.

K. R. Snodgrass proposes that "parables are best defined as stories with two levels of meaning.... In effect, parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Parables express moral or spiritual truths. The parables of Jesus are deceptively simple, but they are packed with an enormous amount of spiritual truth.

A parable may be a brief comparison ("the kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed") or a lengthy story ("a certain man had two sons"), but the parable somehow manages to bring a spiritual truth down to earth. Therefore, when parables are told people need to learn to listen. They must learn to hear with their hearts, not just their ears, to understand the spiritual truths of God's kingdom.

Lesson Background

Great crowds gathered on the shore beside the Sea of Galilee. Some of the people were eager disciples, some were hostile enemies, and some were curiosity seekers. In order to allow everyone to hear, Jesus got into a boat and spoke from a short way

out into the sea (Matthew 13:1, 2). But the real problem was not just allowing people to hear; it was getting them to listen.

Oday ouyay ememberray enwhay ouyay okespay inay Igpay Atinlay osay atthay ouryay ildrenchay ouldway otnay owknay atwhay ouyay ereway ayingsay? You did this with your spouse in order to communicate a message that he or she would understand but that the children would miss.

Do you know that parables were something like that? Jesus taught His followers in parables so that they could gain spiritual understanding while others listening in could not. Without spiritual insight, people were incapable of grasping the truths being taught. In 1 Corinthians 2:1 through 3:4, Paul wrote of three different types of people: spiritual, carnal, and natural (unsaved). Each group responds differently to the presentation of spiritual truth.

When a person preaches or teaches the Word of God, his listeners hear him through preconceived ideas that determine what they understand from the message. Unsaved people cannot grasp spiritual truth. They hear the message one way. Carnal, or spiritually immature, people cannot grasp much spiritual truth; so they hear in a different way. Spiritually mature people hear in another way. They are able to grasp truth the others cannot.

The Importance of Listening (Matthew 13:9-13)

1. What type of people among those listening to Jesus could not comprehend what He was saying (Matthew 13:9)?

In New Testament days, there were ungodly people who apparently had a curious interest in spiritual matters but were not interested in embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ. From them spiritual truth was withheld. They could neither grasp it nor apply it to their lives in meaningful ways. When Jesus taught His disciples the "mysteries of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:11), He used a method of teaching that kept ungodly listeners from comprehending what He was saying. When He said, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (v. 9), He was referring to the godly, who could understand.

Jesus had just finished telling the parable of the sower (vs. 3-8). As we find out later in the chapter, even the disciples could not initially understand the meaning of this parable (vs. 18-23). But when it was explained to them, they would have the capability of comprehending the message Jesus conveyed. They were puzzled, however, as to why Jesus was teaching in parables.

2. What question did the disciples ask Jesus, and why (v. 10)?

The disciples have been with Jesus long enough to recognize the change in Jesus' teaching. Using only *parables* (Matthew 13:34) has not been Jesus' custom to this point. Therefore they ask Jesus *why* He chooses to speak to the crowd in that way. All told, the parables of Jesus make up about one-third of His recorded teachings.

An example from 2 Samuel 11:1-12:14 shows the power of a parable. After David committed adultery with Bathsheba, he was slow to come to repentance. Even after their baby had been born, David still had not repented. Therefore the Lord sent Nathan to tell David a parable about a poor man whose pet lamb had been taken by a greedy rich man. When David became incensed against the rich man of the story, Nathan replied, "Thou art the man!"

David then immediately recognized his sinful behavior. When a parable is told to someone with listening ears, that person can identify himself or herself in relation to the story.

3. At what point in His ministry did Jesus begin to use parables more extensively?

Jesus had offered Himself to Israel as her Messiah, but she had rejected Him. The epitome of the rejection can be seen in the statement in Matthew 12:24. The religious leaders had concluded, "This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils." In saying this they attributed His power and authority to Satan. It appears that it was after this rejection that Jesus began teaching in parables much more extensively.

4. What were the first two reasons Jesus gave for using parables (vs. 11, 12a)?

In response to their question about teaching in parables, Jesus gave three reasons. The first is given in verse 11. Jesus wanted to pass on to His followers the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. These truths were not meant for unbelievers. The word "mysteries" refers to truth that had not previously been revealed to anyone. There are truths in the New Testament that were never given in the Old. The Apostle Paul referred to this, for example, in I Corinthians 4:1.

Those who believed in the Lord were enjoying the privilege of learning more about Him, His Father, and the eternal plan coming from Them. Those who rejected the Lord were being denied any further comprehension because of their refusal to believe. This still occurs today. Those who receive the Saviour are given insight into the Word of God, while those who reject Him cannot understand it. Likewise, those endeavoring to grow in their knowledge of the Lord learn more and more of His will and ways than Christians who are content to remain spiritual infants.

This should become a challenge to every believer. Spiritual growth does not come from perfunctory Christian activities. While it is good to attend church regularly, it is possible to listen passively and leave the services without having received a message in the heart. For example, how many times do we sing thought-provoking words in hymns and gospel songs without even thinking of those words while we sing? How often do the soloist and preacher present meaningful messages and we remain unmoved in our hearts?

It is widely known that many believers do not engage in daily devotions, let alone in-depth Bible study on their own. God has filled His Word with wisdom beyond our imagination, but as Proverbs 2 teaches, we must search diligently for that wisdom. When we do, we are promised wisdom and insight far beyond what is granted to those who have little interest in God's Word. God graciously adds to what we already

have when we search diligently for more.

5. Jesus told parables so that those who were truly seeking the truth could understand it. Of course, that often meant they had to ask further questions to achieve such learning. How can we identify the true seekers of truth today, and how can we lead them to find it?

True seekers of truth go out of their way to find it. Proverbs 2:1-5 describes the intense search for wisdom that God honors. Such seekers are not going to shrink from the demands of discipleship. Churches can offer classes for such seekers or visits in their homes in order to communicate to them the truths of the gospel.

6. Why would Jesus want people not to understand what He was saying to His disciples (vs. 12b, 13)?

The second reason Jesus gave for teaching in parables was His desire to hide spiritual insight from those who were rejecting Him. We saw this fact as part of His first reason, but He especially emphasized it in these verses. Verse 11 includes the phrase "to them it is not given," indicating that those outside the circle of believers were not being given the same spiritual instruction as the believers. While they could hear what Jesus was saying, they could not understand it.

Note the statement "whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath" (v. 12b).

It has already been established that rejection of the truth stops any learning of further truth. Jesus now seemed to be saying that it also causes a person to forget the truth that brought him to the point of decision. We see the reality of this in people we know who once were under conviction of their need for salvation but turned away from it. They then apparently forgot what they heard. This is probably best illustrated in the example of the first person described in the parable of the sower. He received the truth but did not understand it and so rejected it. As a result the truth was snatched away from his heart by the enemy (13:18,19).

First Corinthians 2:14 explains it this way: "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Is it possible that someone in your Sunday school class has never received Jesus as personal Saviour and so is without the ability to discern spiritual truth? When we accept Him, God sends His Holy Spirit to dwell in us and enable us to understand things we have never been able to grasp before (1 Cor. 2:9-12,14).

The Discrepancies in Listening (Matthew 13:14-17)

7. Who did Jesus quote, and what was the context of that quote (v. 14)?

These words are quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10. Long ago, the prophet *Isaiah* wrote about the kind of people Jesus is encountering in this narrative (see Isaiah 6:9). The quotation comes at the climax of the well-known vision of Isaiah in which he saw the Lord high and lifted up in His temple. Although Isaiah knew of his own unworthiness, he answered the Lord's call and said, "Here am I; send me."

God told Isaiah to preach to His people, even though they would not accept the message. "Hear ye indeed," Isaiah is to tell them, "but understand not." Even though they would refuse to listen, Isaiah was told to continue calling them to repentance until their cities finally lay wasted and desolate.

Jesus sees in Isaiah's words the parallel to His own situation. Thus the passage has both an immediate application in Isaiah's day and an ultimate fulfillment in Jesus' day. To be honest, should we admit that the words describe many people in our own day as well? Isaiah's words are so important that the apostle Paul repeats them in Acts 28:26,27. Compare also Jesus' words in John 12:37-41.

8. What does it mean that "the people's heart is waxed gross (v. 15)?

The prophecy of Isaiah continues with a very unflattering picture of the people to whom he was to preach, hundreds of years before Christ. There was a reason that *their ears* did not hear and *their eyes* did not see: it was because their hearts had *waxed gross*. This means that their hearts had become dull and insensitive. Just as King David had been slow to repent following his sin with Bathsheba, Isaiah's original audience stubbornly refused to face up to their sinfulness and were slow to listen to God.

Like the people in Isaiah's time, many of the people in Jesus' day willfully close their eyes *lest at any time they should see*. They do not want to hear or *understand*. By their refusal to listen, they also signify that they do not want to *be converted* and that they do not want God to *heal them*. Perhaps they think they don't need any spiritual healing. Does any of this sound familiar?

The problem is on the part of the people, not on the part of God. God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). If only the people would listen and turn to Jesus, God would gladly forgive them. But even miraculous signs in abundance do not convince many (see John 12:37).

9. How were the disciples blessed in an unusually wonderful way (vs. 16,17)?

The disciples were a great contrast to those who rejected Jesus, and as a result they were unusually blessed. They had believed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah sent from God; therefore, they were able to comprehend further spiritual truths.

Using the same terminology, Jesus said their eyes could see and their ears could hear. That is completely the opposite of those who had no spiritual comprehension at all. This contrast still applies between believers and nonbelievers.

Perhaps the greatest privilege of all was the fact that these disciples lived in the actual days of Messiah's appearance and ministry. This is brought out by Jesus' saying that many prophets and righteous men from the past had a great desire to see the fulfillment of the things they spoke.

In earlier times God had spoken in veiled prophecies about the messianic age, but He did not fully reveal His ultimate plan to humanity. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, God now reveals what "in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men" (see Ephesians 3:5).

Even the prophets "inquired and searched diligently" into the salvation that they foretold for coming generations (see 1 Peter 1:10-12). The *prophets* searched to learn what events would take place concerning the future sufferings and final glory of the coming Messiah. But God revealed to them that it was not for their own age that certain prophecies were given (e.g., Daniel 12:8,9).

The ancient prophets were not alone in their yearning to know God's plan. Even the angels longed to look into such things. But neither Old Testament prophets nor angels were told fully the secrets about Jesus and the coming kingdom of God.

In a somewhat similar way to the first-century disciples, we are privileged *to hear* the gospel of Christ. We should count it a blessing to know the saving truth and we should live up to the responsibility that this blessing carries with it. God has placed in our hands the task of spreading the gospel to the whole world. If we are faithful to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19,20, then people of every tribe and nation can share the blessing-if they have ears to hear.

Conclusion

Our lesson this week has shown us that we truly listen to God when we listen with our hearts and not just our ears. We are then truly blessed by Him.

Prayer

Father of Heaven and earth, help us to have open hearts to receive Your truth. Help us cast off anything that would interfere with this communication. Forgive us when our eyes have been turned away and our ears have been tuned out. Teach us to listen and obey. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

"Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 13:16).

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Our lesson next week shows us how to forgive others in the same manner in which we have been forgiven our sins by our loving God. Study Matthew 18:21-35.

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