

67 - Listening Carefully to God

John 11:54-12:7

If you'll recall, Mary is the one who listened carefully. While her sister Martha was busy serving the guests, she sat at Jesus' feet and pondered His every word. The Gospel of Luke describes that exchange. Let's hear it again:

"Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up [to Him] and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but [only] one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her'" (Lk 10:38-42).

Unlike her sister, Mary stopped to listen. Unlike the twelve disciples, she let Him say whatever He wanted to say. She didn't try to argue with Him or correct His theology like Peter did (Mt 16:21-23). And in the passage we're reading today, we discover that she didn't ignore the sad predictions He made about His death. Other than Simeon, the old man who prophesied over Jesus when He was a baby (Lk 2:21-35), Mary appears to be the only disciple who understood that it was God's will that Jesus die violently for our sins. And it's not because Jesus didn't try to teach people that truth. Over and over again He told His disciples and the multitudes that the Father had sent Him to die for them, but no one listened, probably because they didn't like what He was saying.

Yet this one woman, who only weeks earlier had undoubtedly helped to prepare her brother's body for burial (Jn 11:1-2), came over to where Jesus was seated at a dinner table and began to prepare Him for burial as well. How did she know that He was going to die a few days later? She knew because He had said so, and she had listened carefully to every word He spoke. You and I must do the same. We must listen carefully to every word God speaks, even when we don't like what we hear. It can be a matter of life and death.

A dinner in Bethany (Jn 11:54-12:7)

• DBS (Mon-Sat)

The Father's love

Mary's actions were an expression of her deep devotion to Christ, but they were also an expression of the Father's love for His Son. With that oil, Mary was prophesying. Not only was she announcing that Jesus was going to die, but through her the heavenly Father was telling His Son how much He cherished Him. Jesus' body would soon be savaged as He endured the process of the crucifixion. Violent men, who had no respect for Him, would treat Him shamefully, but in that wonderful moment as Mary began to pour oil on His head and feet, the Father was honoring Him and assuring Him that He would see that His body was buried properly.

Seven hundred and fifty years earlier, through the prophet Isaiah, God the Father had described, in detail, the death that Jesus was about to die (Isa 52:13-53:12). But in that same prophecy He had also said He would honor His Son's dead body. He promised that He would be buried "with a rich man in His death" (Isa 53:9; Mt 27:57-60). Mary knowingly or unknowingly, was allowing the Father to remind Jesus of that promise. She was allowing the Father to assure His Son of His love, and to thank Him for the sacrifice He was about to make. And who can doubt that the sweet fragrance of that oil still lingered on Jesus a few days later, as He hung on the cross, a sweet reminder of God's love for Him in His darkest hour.

Jesus, understanding perfectly what that moment meant, replied to Judas' protest that the oil had been wasted, with these words, "Leave her [alone] so that she may keep it for the day of My burial" (literal). If we take those words literally, it appears that Mary may not have emptied the entire container of oil. After all, that alabaster vial held an entire pound of perfume (v3), so some of it may have been left over. In that case Jesus' statement to Judas would have meant, "Let her alone, so that she may keep [the rest of it] until the day of My burial." Indeed, a group of women, which may or may not have included Mary of Bethany, went out to Jesus' tomb on the morning of His resurrection to put "spices and perfumes" on His body (Mk 16:1-3; Lk 23:55-24:1).

Responding to God

Nothing, absolutely nothing, reveals our attitude toward God more quickly than the way we respond when He says something we don't like. Do we argue? Do we whine? Do we try to negotiate a compromise? Do we bargain with Him, hoping to change His mind? Or do we say "Yes, Sir. May it be done to me according to Your word" (Lk 1:38). Obedience really isn't obedience until I do something I don't want to do, only because He asked me to do it. A surrendered heart trusts Him and tries to determine exactly what He wants, so it can obey. But a proud heart wants to control the situation. It wants God's help, but not His leadership.



LIFE LESSONS WITH DR. STEVE SCHELL

Teaching the Bible
practically & understandably
and seeing lives changed by
the truth of the Gospel

Today we'll look at three important sources of God's word to us. Through each of these He speaks to us, and we must listen carefully, even when He says something we didn't want to hear: His prophetic word; His written Word, and His incarnate Word.

His prophetic word

The Holy Spirit speaks directly to humans in many different ways. Yes, there are dramatic moments when He speaks so loudly no one could miss it. But normally, recognizing His voice is a skill each of us must develop by trial and error. The more we try to listen and obey, the more we learn to discern which voice is His, and which is not. Each time we step out and obey what we've heard, we grow in faith, and our capacity to hear increases. The reverse is also true. The less we listen or obey, the less faith and the less capacity we have to hear. Stepping into the realm of the prophetic is like a muscle that must be strengthened through exercise.

The real problem with God's prophetic word comes when He says something we don't like; either He corrects us, or He asks us to do something frightening or humbling. That's when our character comes to play. Are we honest, or will we twist God's word to mean something else? Are we humble; will we do the selfless thing He asks? Are we courageous; will we step out to do something uncertain or unsafe? Are we submitted; will we allow Him to correct us when we wander off the path? Listen to Proverbs: "My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father [corrects] the son in whom he delights" (Pr 3:11-12).

A real word from God is not always affirming or comforting. It always flows from love, but love may require our heavenly Father to confront something that is wrong or destructive. Or, His love for someone else may ask us to put ourselves at risk for them. And when such words come, and they will, it will be our character that decides how we will respond.

His written Word

The Bible contains many things that are hard to understand. We may find ourselves struggling to discover what God is saying to us in a biblical event that took place long ago and in a very different culture than the one we live in today. That's when we have to study a passage in order to hear the truth it contains. But the greatest struggle most of us have with the Bible is the bluntness with which it confronts our sin, and the high standards of behavior it sets for us. We live in an ever-changing culture where something may be wrong today but right tomorrow. But the Bible doesn't change, so sooner or later it calls us to live in ways that put us on a different path than our culture. It forces us to make painful choices, either to please God or please people. And again, it will be our character that decides how carefully we are willing to listen to God's written Word. Psalm 1 makes a wonderful promise to those who choose rightly:

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law does he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season; and its leaf will not wither, and whatsoever he does will prosper" (Ps 1:1-3) (my translation).

Refusing to follow the wisdom of the world; refusing to join others when they abandon the standards of God; and refusing to mock when we don't understand the ways of God are choices each of us must make before we can "delight" ourselves in the Bible. But to the person who follows God's written Word rather than our changing culture, God promises that they will remain full of life; they will endure when everything around them is dying, and God will prosper every area of their life. Those wonderful blessings belong only to those who listen carefully.

His incarnate Word

Jesus is God's Word in human flesh. John tells us that, in the opening verses of his gospel, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

When we see Jesus, we see the heart of the Father. When we listen to Him speak we are hearing truth spoken purely. And what we hear "God's-Word-in-human-flesh" say to us includes some of the most difficult things of all. No one tells us how desperately lost we are, more than Jesus. No one warns us of the eternal dangers we face if we refuse to repent and believe, more than Jesus. And no one calls us to leave the pleasures and safety of this world, more completely than Jesus. Listen: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Lk 9:23).



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And once again, it will be our character that determines if we will listen to that voice. Will we let Him tell us that we are sinners, or will we walk away offended? Will we believe that it was our sins that sent Him to the cross, or will we argue that we're not that bad. Will we actually take up our cross daily and follow Him? If God's prophetic word tells us truth that's hard to hear; if God's written Word calls us to choose between pleasing Him or the world; God's incarnate Word looks us straight in the eye and says, "Come, follow Me!"

Mary of Bethany

Mary of Bethany sat at His feet and listened. She let Him say what He wanted to say, and she believed it. That's why she knew He was going to die. And that's why God could prophesy through her to comfort His Son when no one else understood. Here's what Jesus said about her:

"Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her" (Mk 14:9).

He's challenging us to become like Mary, and we will be, if we listen carefully.

Questions

- 1) Has God ever warned you about something to protect you? Tell us what happened.
- 2) Has God ever told you something you didn't like, and you struggled before you were willing to receive it. If you're comfortable telling us about it, please share that with us. What was it that caused you to listen to God?