

Your Ears

This month's meditation is based on part of Mister Potatohead's sermon that he preached on our recent mission to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Please be sure to read the article, "'Mister Potatohead Goes on a Mission,'" if the opening sentence to this meditation sounds crazy to you.

I'd like to begin with a couple lines from an old Sunday school song:

Be careful little eyes what you see.

Be careful little ears what you hear.

If the mouth is the thermometer of our heart, our eyes and ears can be considered to be the thermostats to the heart. No matter what we do to the thermometer, it will not alter the condition of the furnace; however, we can change what is happening in the furnace by adjusting the thermostat. In the same way, what we allow to enter through our eyes and ears will affect the temperature of our hearts.

As Christians, we obviously know that the first and foremost thing which we need to allow to enter into our spirit man is the Word of God. Jesus said that His words were spirit and life. (John 6:63) If we want life to flow out of our hearts, we must ensure that life is flowing in. The only way to do this is to make sure that we are constantly getting a steady diet of the Word of God. Just one example of the life-giving power in the spoken Word of God can be seen in the vision given to the prophet Ezekiel who was commanded to prophesy to a field of dead bones.

Again he said unto me, prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD. So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to

his bone. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. Then said he unto me, prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. (Ezekiel 37:4-10)

Imagine the power that the Word of God can have in our lives if it can have such dramatic effect on the totally dead, dismembered, decayed, and dried out corpses of a long-forgotten army. Unfortunately, all too many of us refuse to listen to and absorb that life-giving Word. In the same context in which Jesus made His proclamation concerning His words being spirit and life, many of His followers turned away because they found His teaching to be too difficult and too demanding. When Jesus turned to His close disciples and asked if they would also abandon Him, Peter responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68) Even when the truth becomes a “hard pill to swallow” we must determine that we will not forsake it because the Word of God is the only ingredient which can properly fuel the furnace of our faith.

No matter how much we try to adjust it, if the thermostat is faulty we won't get any results from the furnace. In the spiritual realm, we can have defective hearing which will short-circuit the effectiveness of the Word of God. There seem to be several basic hearing problems which plague the human race. The first one is that we simply can't hear from God because we don't belong to Him. Jesus addressed the religious Jews of His day plainly, “He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.” (John 8:47)

The second condition is spelled out in Hebrews 5:11 where the recipients of the letter were addressed as being “dull of hearing.”

Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.

I'm sure that all of us can relate; we've all sat through lengthy lectures and seemingly-unending phone calls until we reached the "saturation point" where words seemed to begin to flow in one ear and out the other one. We may be able to afford putting our brains in neutral on a few such occasions, but not when it comes to hearing the Word of God. Jesus warned us to be careful about not only what we hear but also about the very way we hear. "Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have." (Luke 8:18) Perhaps this is the reason that the New Testament repeats the command, "He that hath an ear let him hear," at least fifteen times. God gave us spiritual ears to hear what He is saying to the churches, but it is up to us to keep them tuned in and sensitive to His voice. In the parable of the sower, Jesus demonstrated that Word of God could be sown into unproductive fields with no lasting result or that it could fall into fertile soil and produce an abundant harvest. Interestingly enough, He concludes His remarks with one of the admonitions concerning having listening ears, implying that the ear is the key to having the productive soil for the Word of God. In other words, the ear can be the thermostat that raises the temperature of the heart! (Luke 8:8)

The third hindrance to hearing the Word of God is that sometimes we simply don't want to hear it! Let's look at the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter twenty. Verse one plainly states that God orally spoke the Decalogue in the hearing of the entire camp of Israel. However, if we continue the story as it is recorded further on in the chapter we will see that the people begged Moses to become an intermediary between them and God. They did not want to continue hearing directly from the very mouth of God. Instead, they devised a plan wherein Moses would hear the direct voice of God and then communicate His messages to them second-hand. They simply did not want the responsibility of hearing directly from God. I assume that they -- just as we often tend to be -- were more comfortable with a second-hand gospel because they knew that there might be a margin of error if it passed through a human channel, giving them an excuse for continuing in their unrighteousness. On the other hand, if they heard from the divine source directly, they would be without an excuse.

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was. And the LORD said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. (verses 18-22; also see Deuteronomy 5:22-27 and 18:16)

The fourth complication is that we often can't recognize God's voice when He speaks to us. The lad Samuel had this difficulty when God first spoke to him. In the third chapter of I Samuel we find the story of how the Lord called him three times before he finally recognized that it was God Himself rather than his mentor Eli calling him. However, if we read the rest of the story, we will see that Samuel developed an exceptionally clear ability to recognize the voice of the Lord. He became known as a "seer" because he could hear the whisperings of God concerning even the most secret of divine mysteries. In fact, the people of the region actually developed a fear of him, always cognizant that he might "read their mail" and expose the "skeletons in their closets" or reveal the "dust that they had swept under the carpet."

Several years ago, I tuned in a nature show on public television to find that the subject that day was elephant seals. Honestly, these animals must be the most unattractive creatures on the planet. Pardon my bluntness, but they are downright ugly. I learned that these animals have no part to play in human economy except that their droppings can be used for fertilizer. What an insult -- not only were they ugly, but their only contribution to society is that they go to the bathroom. I was really puzzled as to why the television network had spent thousands of dollars to send a crew to the Falkland Islands to shoot the footage; why they were airing the show; and, most of all, why I was wasting my time to view it.

Suddenly, I saw something -- these animals were excellent teachers on the subject of learning to hear God's voice. The cow elephant seals all give birth at the same time, and no mother will nurse another seal's calf. Thus, it is necessary for each cow and calf to establish a way of identifying one another. This is done through honks and grunts which the mother and baby practice hour after hour. When they are separated in the vast chaotic herd of thousands of these ugly beasts, the mother's voice, though mingled with hundreds of other honks and grunts, beckons the calf back home. The baby only learns to distinguish that voice after hours and hours of constant drill; in the same way, we only know God's voice after much prayer. If we will give ourselves as much to prayer as we give to natural interests, we will never mistake a deceiving voice for the inner witness of God.

As in the case with the people of Samuel's day who were afraid that he might reveal their transgressions and shortcomings, the fourth reason why we cannot hear the voice of God is because we are simply afraid. This has been a common problem since "day one." It was fear that drove Adam and Eve into hiding and away from their daily time of fellowship and conversation with God. (Genesis 3:8-10)

The fifth problem we have in not being able to hear the Lord is that we often do not give diligence to what we hear. In Exodus 15:26 the Lord, speaking concerning our health and healing, said that we must diligently hearken to His voice and give ear to His commandments in order to partake of His divine provision. While Deuteronomy chapter fifteen speaks of release from financial and physical bondage, verse five limits these provisions to only those who will carefully hearken unto the voice of the Lord and observe all His commandments. The twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy contains an oft-quoted roster of blessings, but we must realize that the opening two verses limit these benefits only to those who hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord and that verse fifteen turns all the blessings into curses for those who will not hearken unto His voice and observe all His commandments and statutes. For just a minute, let's think on totally natural terms. Suppose you ask someone for directions to a specific place. Imagine that the instructions are a bit complicated with several turns, some to the left and some to the right. If you listen with only a casual ear, you will likely make the first turn with no difficulty and possibly take the second turn correctly; however, by the time you are

at the third crossroad, you will be confused as to which way to turn. You'll probably be totally lost before reaching the fourth road. Unfortunately, we are all too satisfied turning a nonchalant ear to God and, therefore, missing the precise plan He wants to lay out for our lives. Think of the detail that God gave Moses when He laid out the plans for the Old Testament Tabernacle; it took seven full chapters of Exodus (25-31) to spell out the pattern for the structure and the priestly order. But, more importantly, notice the preciseness with which Moses followed each detail when he implemented the blueprint (chapters 36-40). The reward for this attention to detail was an invasion of the presence of the Lord so overwhelming that Moses was not even able to enter the Tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34-35)

We must learn that God is not in the habit of giving suggestions, but direct commands which He expects to be followed explicitly. However, we will never be able to follow them in minute detail unless we learn to listen with diligence. I remember being in a service when a prophetic word came forth in which the Spirit reiterated three times that the Lord is God and that His people should kneel before Him in worship. As soon as the prophecy had ended, the moderator of the meeting took the podium, "We've all heard the Holy Spirit's admonition, so let's stand up and praise the Lord." Fortunately I was in a position of leadership within the body so that it was not out of order for me to step up and correct the moderator by reminding the people that the Holy Spirit had directed us to kneel -- not stand -- and to worship -- not praise. No matter how sincere he may have been, he was wrong and would have led the people astray because he did not hearken diligently to the voice of the Lord in the prophetic message.