

“Hearing and Doing”

Introduction: One of the things about being a parent whose children have grown up is that you get to watch other parents raise their children. And, as you see them go through various challenges and struggles you don’t have to get so stressed about it because they’re not your kids! One of my favorite phrases to hear is when a parent says, “Are you listening to me?!” Of course, you don’t have to be a parent to ask this. From camp counselors to babysitters, coaches to conductors, siblings to friends, many find it necessary to use this phrase.

Let me ask you: What would prompt you to ask this? How do you know someone isn’t listening to you? Most often it’s because someone is not doing what you’ve asked them to do. Listening, I think we would all agree, is incomplete unless and until you respond to what you hear. No less an authority on life than Jesus concludes his great body of teaching, known as the Sermon on the Mount, with the comment that we will be blessed by his words only if we hear them, *and put them into practice* (Ma. 7:24-27). In another place he says, “My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (Lk. 8:21). And in still another, in response to someone in the crowd who says, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth,” Jesus replies, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Lk. 11:28). Hearing, and doing, is how Jesus describes throughout his ministry what it means to listen, and how important it is to our relationship with God to listen, and to listen well, to listen with the intent to put what we hear from God into practice. It’s why, after reading from the word of God each Sunday we conclude with the words: “May God bless the hearing, and the doing of his word.”

So, how are you at listening? In particular, how are you at listening to God? How are you at hearing his word, and then beginning to do it? Where do you struggle with this? How do you respond when it becomes clear that you have not listened very well? As we move ahead in the books of Samuel, we see this morning how Saul struggled both with listening well, and with acknowledging his failure to listen. In fact, he listened so poorly that it broke his relationship with God beyond, it seems, healing.

I. A Hard Word: Destroy the Amalekites

A. To be sure, the word of God that Samuel the prophet brought to Saul to hear was a hard one: “Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys” (v. 3). To our modern ears, this sounds alarmingly like ethnic cleansing, or the “holy wars” that various terrorist groups seem bent on visiting upon the West. But as hard as this word is to hear, we need to consider the context in which it is given. As the preceding verse reveals, God has determined to bring judgment upon the Amalekites, “for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt.” The conflict between Israel and Amalek began when Israel was on her way out of Egypt and headed to the Promised Land. The Israelites were alone and defenseless in the wilderness, and the Amalekites attacked them (Ex. 17). And it wasn’t just a one-time event. Throughout Israel’s history, the Amalekites constantly provoked and pillaged Israel. They were a violent and ruthless people, whose religious practices were highly immoral, including child sacrifice (Lv. 18).

B. Finally, God said, “Enough...totally destroy them!” How do we understand this? This is a God, we need to remember, who is a holy and loving creator, a God who, in the big picture, is committed to renewing his creation, which has been broken and destroyed by sin.

To do so, he offers scads of grace. But, eventually, he is not above bringing judgment upon those who continue to oppose his good purposes, be they “outsiders” like the Amalekites, or the Israelites themselves (e.g., Saul!). So, God’s command to destroy the Amalekites was an act of ethical clarity, not ethnic cleansing; it was a war of justice. God was using his people as his instrument of judgment. It was an act of divine punishment through human agency, limited to a particular time in the history of God’s people. It’s also a hard picture of what happens when a people live in an ongoing state of unrepentance: The entire community is affected. [For more on this, see handout from Christopher Wright, “What About the Canaanites?”]

II. Disobedience, Excuses, Half-Hearted Repentance

A. Did Saul listen to this word from God? Well, sort of! His “doing” what he heard was only partial at best. But his disobedience was not because he thought God’s word was difficult. It was because he was thinking about himself, as well as allowing other voices to control him. He attacked but did not totally destroy. Instead, Saul ended up sparing the Amalekite king, Agag, as well as the best of their animals. God was not pleased: “Saul has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions” (v. 11). Saul had heard, but he had not put what he heard into practice.

B. When Samuel arrived to check things out, it’s as if Saul had been waiting for him to come, in order to begin the cover-up: “I have carried out the Lord’s instructions” (v. 13). In response, in one of the funnier lines in the Bible, if it wasn’t indicative of Saul’s disobedience and denial, Samuel says, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle?” Saul, if you’ve really destroyed everything, then why does it sound like we’re standing in a zoo?!

C. So, just like Adam in the Garden, “It was the woman, she made me do it” (Ge. 3:12), Saul then begins to make excuses. It was the soldiers, they spared the best of the sheep and cattle. Later, he would add: “I was afraid of the men and so I gave into them” (lit. “I obeyed their voice” v. 24). This was followed by Saul’s explanation to Samuel that the men kept these animals alive in order to make a sacrifice to your God! Somehow, even God seems to get some of the blame. Notice also, with the pronoun *your*, that God is no longer Saul’s God, but Samuel’s. Add to that the fact that after the battle, Saul had also set up a monument in his own honor (v. 12), and we have the sad story of a man who had forgotten his humble roots, forgotten how God had showered his grace upon him, forgotten how it was God who had made him king, and had forgotten God himself. Instead, Saul had become so enamored with the power he now had that he was all about making a name for himself. It’s why he spared Agag. Refusing to kill this Amalekite king was not an act of mercy. Rather, in that day, to have an enemy king in your prison was an enormous status boost. From time to time the conquering king would parade the vanquished king through the streets, in chains, as a sign to the world: “I am the king of kings.”

D. To sum it up, Saul’s problem was his refusal to trust that life is best lived in God’s care, and under God’s leadership. Saul was to be a king, but not like the kings of the other nations. He was not the king of kings; he was to be led by *The* King of kings. If we’re honest, it’s the very essence of our own sin, refusing to trust that God’s voice is the one that will lead us to life. Instead, we listen to our own voice, and the voices of those who don’t fill us with sound doctrine but with what our “itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3) want to hear! But if we are to be a people, and a community, that reveals a picture of the beauty of God’s kingdom, not only for our own sake but also for the sake of drawing others to the kingdom and love of God, then we need to listen well. And when we don’t, we need to repent.

D. On the surface, it seems like Saul has. But, when confronted by Samuel, that he had rejected the word of the Lord, like everything else in his life, Saul's repentance was half-hearted. Saul's life really never changes. He's still, in the end, making excuses and concerned about what others will think of him, more concerned about *my people* than *your* [Samuel's] *God* (v. 30). In this vein we see a marked contrast to the next king, David, whose life, as well, was far from perfect but who, when confronted with his sin by the prophet Nathan, did not deny it, or try to make excuses, or worry about what others would think; David confessed. His sacrifice was a broken and contrite heart (Ps 51:17) while the heart of Saul remained proud and conceited.

III. Consequences and Challenges

A. The sad consequence of Saul's disobedience, of his failure to listen to God in order to put what he heard from God into practice, of his rejection of the authority structure that had made his kingship possible in the first place, was a loss of his kingdom and his role as God's representative in the world. Samuel, who represented God, never saw Saul again. And God, we read, regretted that he had made Saul king. What can we learn from this tragic episode?

1. We learn the importance of listening to God with the intent of putting into practice what we hear from God. Importantly, we seek to obey what we hear, not out of duty, but out of love, out of a recognition that God intends the very best for us through his word. His authority structure is for our good. As Jesus would say: "Whoever has my commands, and keeps them, is the one who loves me" (Jn. 14:21).

2. We learn that when we fail to listen, when we don't do what we've heard, that God stands ready to forgive and restore, but not if we step into the dance of denial and excuse making. Thoughts like, "well, it seemed reasonable to me," or "everyone else is doing it," or "others are worse than me," or "look what I did right not what I did wrong," or "at least my motives were good," or "I go to church..." just don't cut it with God. As we hear virtually every Sunday, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 2:8-9).

3. We learn the importance of healthy, Christ-centered community in this listening process. Saul listened only to himself, and the voices with which he surrounded himself were not helpful! When we struggle with listening well we need to remember how Jesus put it: "My mother and brother are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Lk. 8:21). When we come to faith, we no longer live alone but join a family that seeks to listen well together, intentionally being with those who know and seek to love Jesus, and who commit regularly (not just on a Sunday morning!) to remind one another of the word of God when they notice another forgetting or getting off course. In the letter to the Hebrews, the author highlights the importance of our community in this way:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess [hearing] . . . and let us consider how we may spur on another on toward love and good deeds [doing], not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb. 10:23f

Like both the Amalekites, as well as Saul, learned, there will come a day of reckoning. So may we take full advantage now, today, of both the gift that is God's word, and the community

into which God has called us, that when that day comes, we may say, “Lord, by your grace, I have listened well.”