

By Russ Gressett

"Listen"

I am finding more and more that this one word is vitally important in every aspect of our lives. So much can be said about a person who takes time to privately listen to the right voices. Can we say about ourselves that we are truly people who take time to listen?

Proverbs 1

32 For the waywardness of the naive will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them. 33 But he who listens to me shall live securely and will be at ease from the dread of evil.

Proverbs 23

19 Listen my son and be wise ...

Psalms 84

11 "But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. 12 So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels (or you might say "their own thinking"). 13 "Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! 14 I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries."

Ephesians 1

3 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation--having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise ...

The verb "listen" appears some 1,160 times just in the Old Testament alone. But what does it mean to listen? Private listening (when we are by our self) is intentional. It's not an occasion when we just happen to hear something. We set ourselves to listen. It's a decision. But there is definitely a battle because man has a wonderful ability to start thinking and to start being creative on his own, and it can get us in trouble when it is not coupled with relationship and intimacy and with choosing to listen to specific voices. Notice how in a couple of the verses above when we see the word listen it is followed by "to me". It alludes to this choice we have in listening.

Listening is not the same as thinking. What we could call listening is actually our opening the door of our soul to thoughts and subsequently entertaining them. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to take every thought captive that assails itself against the knowledge of God ... meaning, at the door, when the thought knocks, we respond with "No, you cannot come in and be entertained". So listening is like the decision we make to entertain thoughts. And, based on Paul's exhortation, it is clear that not all thoughts originate from God, and also clear that we can take them captive.

Typically, we will listen to something (hear something) and then think about it. Right? Well, Paul also instructed the Philippians to think on certain things, which tells us plainly that we can choose what to think or not think about. Ever heard someone make the statement, "I

just can't stop thinking about that!"? I've probably said it myself a few dozen times. Well, it's not true. We have the God given ability to think or not think about whatever we choose. And, we can think on some pretty incredible stuff ... stuff that can prosper us exceedingly or do great damage to us and others. We are wonderfully made with abilities that are spectacular. Remember in the Old Testament when God decided to confuse the language? Look at His comments ...

Genesis 11

*1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. 3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." 5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. 6 The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, **then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.** 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." 8 So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.*

Look at the potential we have just in our own thinking! It is so significant that God said, "If we don't confuse the language, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them". A pretty strong statement, wouldn't you agree? Just our own thinking can take us a long, long way and in fact bring us much success and/or much failure. Just look around. Observe history.

I said above that "thinking" is not the same as "listening". Listening to God is deciding to entertain His thinking (wisdom) ... not our own thinking or the enemy's thinking. He said that His thoughts are higher than our thoughts ... not that we couldn't entertain them. Our flesh stays very busy in the "thoughts" arena as well because desires produce thoughts and there is no question but that our flesh is full up with desires. So, opportunities to listen come at us from numerous directions.

We were talking about "freedom" in a previous newsletter and spent some time in Galatians 5 where the works of the flesh are enumerated. It is interesting to meditate and get a picture of the impact that correct decisions in listening can have on "the works of the flesh". This is real important because most of our problems are "flesh" problems, not "devil" problems.

Galatians 5

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

You can go through on your own and meditate about each of those listed and how it can be impacted with correct listening. It makes for an interesting and strengthening study. One of those listed that is very pertinent to those of us who operate in the business arenas is selfish ambition.

I have sat in churches all my life and cannot recall hearing a single message on selfish ambition per se. It's a killer though, plain and simple. In fact, I would offer this up to you ... the "thinking our thoughts vs. listening to His thoughts" test is a good barometer of selfish ambition's operation in our lives. It's especially true of successful businessmen. Most all of them are driven. They think a lot. Well, selfish ambition thinks a lot too. Now, there is nothing wrong with thinking, don't get me wrong, we have to do it. It's one of the operations that God designed us with, but again, listening first opens to us a door to God's thinking. If we listen to the right voice and then think, we accomplish what Paul exhorted in Philippians 4 when he said, "Think on these things ..."

As a Christian businessman, one of the issues that God has always been faithful to deal strongly with me about (not always successfully mind you) is motive. The why question ... why am I deciding what I am deciding, doing what I am doing etc... Selfish ambition is one of the leading motives that drive people in the business arenas of the world, and is a point of entry for other issues that can become stumbling blocks as well. Whereas selfish ambition has the characteristic of thinking a lot and actually being a voice itself ... motives that are pure and peaceable have the characteristic of listening first to the right voices a lot. There is a big difference.

Selfish ambition has an extremely loud voice and has the tendency to dominate our motives. Selfish ambition is good at disguising. It wants something on a very intense level. And, it's a tricky rascal that does not like to be told, "That's not God's will". Being still and quiet ... listening ... entering in is the best offense against selfish ambition. When we listen we will hear ... and when we hear we must obey. If we hear instructions from God that go against our selfish ambitions ... then there is a battle to be won. Win it! The victory has already been suffered us to have.

A lot of times selfish ambition can be simple and even "spiritual". Paul wanted to go and preach in certain places but the Holy Spirit said "no", and Paul heard Him ... because he was listening. Listening most always brings about instructions that are contrary to what our flesh wants to do ... and many times to what our ambitions want to do.

Proverbs 8

32 "Now therefore, listen to me, my children, for blessed are those who keep my ways. 33 Hear instruction and be wise, And do not disdain it. 34 Blessed is the man who listens to me (wisdom), watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. 35 For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord

In meditating the truths about listening, I connected something that I had not connected before. I have made the statement on numerous occasions to people that as I look back over my life and see the times when God spoke something significant and life changing to me, it always came at a time when I was fellowshiping with Him in His Word. It didn't necessarily have anything to with the passage I had been meditating or studying, but it

came while fellowshiping with Him in His Word. Why? It's because I was in a posture of listening. I had checked my stuff at the door and was positioned to hear His stuff. No agendas in play, just a time of fellowship ... and bam ... I get a hold of His thinking because I am listening. Simple. So, if we are guilty of being in a position where we can say "I am having a hard time hearing God", always start in the Word. He is speaking to us on every page.

Listening is a free will choice we must exercise. Something we specifically decide to do on a daily basis. Sometimes we find ourselves caught up in the day-to-day stuff that just living throws our way and negativity has crept in, disgruntlement, dread, cloudiness, weariness, uncertainty etc... What are we listening to? We have to be careful and attentive in our listening. Someone else is not going to do that for us. It is our responsibility ... not the Pastor's ... not the Elder's.

Look at what Jesus Himself said ...

Luke 8:18

So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him."

Today, let's all make a decision to set ourselves to be first class listeners.

Prayer

Father, we ask for Your ability (grace) to overtake our listening. You said that Your sheep know Your voice. Sensitize us to the need to stop and listen. The need to stop, get quiet, and to take captive all the voices and thoughts that are not originating from Your heart. Draw us daily to your Word. May it be sweet to our taste and inviting always ... never dry. Amen.