

## "LEARNING TO LISTEN"

Centuries ago, one of the early church fathers, Clement of Alexandria, is reported to have said:

"People are like old shoes. All worn out except the tongue....."

His words serve to remind us that the art of listening is an unknown art for many people. Most of us prefer to talk, and find it difficult to listen while someone else is talking. The more experience I have in the ministry, the more convinced I am that one of the real problems of modern life is how to secure a measure of peace and quietness. I think that someone needs to invent a new gadget, a gadget that would be able to produce five minutes of silence whenever a coin was deposited into it.

For our scripture lesson this morning I read the Parable of the Sower. It concerns our human understanding of, and our response to the promptings of the spirit of God. Some of us find it difficult to hear the voice of God. We are like tiny sparrows sitting on a telephone wire. The sparrow is simply not aware of the messages that go through the wire. While this comparison cannot be pushed too far, it does underscore the truth that often we fail to hear and understand much of the truth, and many of the revelations of the spirit of God that constantly surround us.

We need to organize our lives so that we can recognize his guidance. We need to be more sensitive to his voice, and for this end, I would suggest three ways that will improve our listening so that we may hear The "still, small voice of calm".

### LISTEN SELECTIVELY

We need to listen selectively. The radio and the television help to pin point our listening problem. These instruments, capable of great benefit, and often conferring it, infiltrate into every nook and cranny of our homes bombarding us with high powered advertising that confuses our thinking and secularizes our actions. We get advice and persuasion for everything from cigarettes to dandruff remover. The day in which we live, with all of its noise and confusion, seems to conspire against us for that measure of quietness and solitude so essential for sensible and effective living. In a crowded bus, a passenger was heard to protest, "Please lady, that's my nose your blowing." And a brochure from a Swiss hotel reads:

"This place is known as the preferred resort of those wanting solitude. People searching for solitude, are, in fact, flocking here from all corners of the earth"

And so it is! With so much to hear, and so many discordant noises in the air, we need to screen carefully all the appeals that come our way and demand our attention. Here in the city the pace of living is very rapid. Tensions often increase, and as they do a sort of mass suggestibility seems to take hold of us. Some of us will believe anything and everything we read without any critical examination. Moral standards are often lowered in order to keep up with the crowd and get ahead. It is important for us to screen, and sift, and weigh and examine what we hear from all who would get our attention. We need to be selective in our listening, and selective listening involves deliberate choice.

A person prepares himself to hear well when he reads the words of those who possess unusual spiritual insight - the Psalms, the Gospels, the letters of Paul, and the inspired creations of the poets and prophets of every age.

A person prepares himself to hear well when he brings to his reading the attitude of quietness that he experiences in the highest moments of his life. You get from your reading what you bring to it.

A person prepares himself to hear well when he practices the presence of God daily through meditation and prayer, and when he practices public worship and fellowship with people who follow the teachings of Jesus.

As we learn to listen selectively, life takes on new meaning and much of the trivial and superficial is drowned out.

LISTEN ATTENTIVELY

We need to listen attentively. The effort of attention is essential to our living. The ideas that we listen to day by day often help to determine our choices. Harry Emerson Fosdick reminds us: "If you have a thing in mind, it is not long before you have it in hand."

We need to listen attentively to the highest and best we know. Peace of mind results from living with the genuine. It's never found through cheap and superficial living. Our minds must be sensitive to the finest inspirations that come along. George Buttrick once remarked:

"There was a man who visited Rome and afterwards could recall nothing of the visit save that he had found a new gambling device. He did not understand the "Grandeur that was Rome". There were people at Niagara Falls who hurried from that marvellous torrent to a cheap and crowded carnival: they did not understand that thunder majesty. There are people to whom the Fifth Symphony is only a combination of sounds: they do not understand Beethoven's spirit rapture. And so there were people who listened to Jesus and had no comprehension of his message. He spoke one tongue, and they another. He lived in one world, and they in another. He was always below the surface, and they were always on the surface."

We need to listen with attention to that which inspires and uplifts. When we do, we begin to hear the words of truth. We begin to hear the inspirations to great achievement. We begin to hear the overtones of the spirit, even in the midst of adverse circumstance.

Joan of Arc, the peasant girl from Lorraine, became the heroine of France by following what she called "voices" which came to her from God. In Bernard Shaw's play, Saint Joan, one of the officers asks: "What do you mean voices?" And she replies, "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God." Later in the play, the weakling King Charles says, "Oh your voices.....your voices..... Why don't they come to me. I am king, not you! And Joan answers:

"They do come to you, but you don't hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings, you cross yourself, and have done with it. But if you prayed with your heart, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

The voices come to us when we open our ears to them. God seeks us. He speaks to us. But we're too busy....or too skeptical....or too proud... or too sinful to hear him. As we learn to listen attentively, we are claimed by His love, and we achieve the power to rise above all the circumstances of life.

LISTEN USEFULLY.

We need to listen usefully. We find that we are able to do this when we constructively employ the inspirations we receive. We can apply what we hear right where we are. It's important to keep this in mind, for often we get the idea that if we were in someone else's shoes, we could do this much better. Jesus of Nazareth, the most influential person who ever lived, never traveled beyond the confines of a small area. The great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant was never over forty miles away from home, and yet he influenced the thinking of men the world over.

John Crowe, a minister in Denver, Colorado, tells of a conversation that he had with a back-woods native of Louisiana. He met the man while on a fishing trip in that state. The native lived in a broken down hut by the side of a small stream. Crowe tells us that he felt sorry for the man because he lived so far away from the centers of civilization and culture, and that he was quite surprised when the native said to him:

"You know...this small stream is a wonderful thing. It can take you anywhere. From my stream you go into the creek, and from the creek into the river, then into a bigger river, and from that river into the ocean...."

This bit of back-woods philosophy points out the truth that you and I can start where we are, and in the matters of spiritual achievement and growth can go wherever we wish to go. As we learn to listen - ~~selectively, attentively, and usefully~~, we begin to find power for great and effective living.

A young medical student living in London was returning one evening from a visit to a patient. He passed a tent, and saw a sign stating that the American evangelist, Dwight L. Moody was conducting religious services. Out of curiosity, the young doctor dropped in to hear him. As the service got under way, one good brother began a very lengthy prayer. The young doctor grew tired of what he heard and picked up his hat and started to tip-toe out. As he neared the back of the tent, he heard Mr. Moody call out:

"Let us all sing a hymn while our brother is finishing his prayer....."

This rather daring word on the part of the evangelist, checked the exit of the young doctor, and he decided to stay and sing, and listen to what the preacher had to say. That night the young doctor heard some words that changed his life. The young man was Wilfred Grenfell, and because of the inspiration that he received that night, ~~the~~ direction of his life was changed, and his great mission of service to Labrador was begun.

Some words that you hear may swing the course of life into a new and great direction. Some words that you hear may bring you comfort and understanding. Learn to listen - selectively, attentively, and usefully - so that you may hear the voice of God, and in quietness and peace, find guidance for your way. Let us pray:

"O let me hear Thee speaking, in accents clear and still.  
Above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will.  
O speak to reassure us, to hasten or control.  
O speak and make us listen, Thou guardian of our souls."