

LISTEN TO ME!—GOD

Psalms 50 & 81

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I am the father of three sons. They are now grown and living on their own. When my boys were younger, and especially during their teenage years, they all had a severe hearing problem. Physically, there was nothing wrong with them; their ears were healthy. They simply suffered from selective hearing: they heard what they wanted to hear.

As a youngster, one of my boys was particularly deaf; that is, since he wanted to hear very little of what I was saying, he heard practically nothing at all. This greatly frustrated me, for when I would I ask this son why he had not done whatever it was I asked him to do, his answer was always the same: “I didn’t hear you say that.” One day, listening to James Dobson on the car radio, a suggestion was offered that turned out to be one of the best bits of advice I have ever received. When speaking to a child who doesn’t want to listen, have them repeat back to you what you have said. That way, you know that they heard you. So, I tried this. I asked this one son to repeat what I had said. I asked him again. I asked him again. Now the problem was obvious: he had heard me, he just didn’t want to admit it. Finally, with great reluctance, the son repeated what I had said. Now I knew he had heard me, and he knew that I knew, so he was without excuse. Someone has quipped, “If you don’t want your children to hear what you’re saying, pretend you’re talking to them.”

Listening is hard work, especially if we are being told something that we do not want to hear. There’s a sarcastic statement that says, “A good listener is someone who can give you their full attention without hearing a word you say.” And then there’s this piece of advice: “Take a tip from nature—your ears aren’t made to shut, but your mouth is!”

On a more serious note, God still speaks to those who will listen. Someone has wisely observed, “If you would have God hear you when you pray, you must hear Him when He speaks.” Many times God’s children act like children: they do not listen to their father.

In Psalm 50, the LORD is presented as judge of the children of God, a judge who holds them accountable for their worship and for their lives. The psalm declares and demonstrates that when the holiness of God is not taken seriously, human life will not be taken seriously. Another way to say this is that when the first tablet of the Ten Commandments is broken,¹ the second tablet of the Ten Commandments will lose its power and authority.² If our relationship with God suffers, our relationship with our neighbor will suffer as well.

Psalm 50 reads:

The mighty God, the LORD, has spoken;
he has summoned all humanity from east to west!
From Mount Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines in glorious radiance.
Our God approaches with the noise of thunder.
Fire devours everything in his way,
and a great storm rages around him.
Heaven and earth will be his witnesses
as he judges his people:
“Bring my faithful people to me—
those who made a covenant with me by giving sacrifices.”
Then let the heavens proclaim his justice,
for God himself will be the judge.
“O my people, listen as I speak.
Here are my charges against you, O Israel:
I am God, your God!
I have no complaint about your sacrifices
or the burnt offerings you constantly bring to my altar.
But I want no more bulls from your barns;
I want no more goats from your pens.
For all the animals of the forest are mine,
and I own the cattle on a thousand hills.
Every bird of the mountains
and all the animals of the field belong to me.
If I were hungry, I would not mention it to you,
for all the world is mine and everything in it.
I don’t need the bulls you sacrifice;
I don’t need the blood of goats.
What I want instead is your true thanks to God;
I want you to fulfill your vows to the Most High.
Trust me in your times of trouble,

¹Commandments one through four deal with our relationship with God.

²Commandments five through ten deal with our relationships with one another.

and I will rescue you,
and you will give me glory.”

But God says to the wicked:
“Recite my laws no longer,
and don’t pretend that you obey me.
For you refuse my discipline
and treat my laws like trash.
When you see a thief, you help him,
and you spend your time with adulterers.
Your mouths are filled with wickedness,
and your tongues are full of lies.
You sit around and slander a brother—
your own mother’s son.
While you did all this, I remained silent,
and you thought I didn’t care.
But now I will rebuke you,
listing all my charges against you.
Repent, all of you who ignore me,
or I will tear you apart,
and no one will help you.
But giving thanks is a sacrifice that truly honors me.
If you keep to my path,
I will reveal to you the salvation of God.”
(NLT).

Instead of bringing their sacrifices out of thankfulness, the people were offering their sacrifices as a way to assert their own worthiness and self-sufficiency, as if God needed them instead of their needing God. What God wants is a thankful and trusting heart. There is more to worshipping and serving God than simply going through the right motions and saying the right words. The crucial question, then, is this: Will we live to gratify ourselves or will we live in gratitude to God?

The companion to Psalm 50 is Psalm 81. Psalm 81 begins with the praise of God and then turns quickly to preaching. The sermon is delivered as the voice of God! The intense feeling of the sermon is the yearning of God for a people who will be faithful to Him. But the people who are faithless are abandoned to the gods they have worshipped and trusted. With scorn and pain, the LORD God sees that the other gods are not real gods and cannot save. Psalm 81 reads:

Sing praises to God, our strength.
Sing to the God of Israel.
Sing! Beat the tambourine.

Play the sweet lyre and the harp.
 Sound the trumpet for a sacred feast
 when the moon is new,
 when the moon is full.
 For this is required by the laws of Israel;
 it is a law of the God of Jacob.
 He made it a decree for Israel
 when he attacked Egypt to set us free.

 I heard an unknown voice that said,
 “Now I will relieve your shoulder of its burden;
 I will free your hands from their heavy tasks.
 You cried to me in trouble, and I saved you;
 I answered out of the thundercloud.
 I tested your faith at Meribah,
 when you complained that there was no water.

 “Listen to me, O my people, while I give you stern warnings.
 O Israel, if you would only listen!
 You must never have a foreign god;
 you must not bow down before a false god.
 For it was I, the LORD your God,
 who rescued you from the land of Egypt.
 Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it with good things.

 “But no, my people wouldn’t listen.
 Israel did not want me around.
 So I let them follow their blind and stubborn way,
 living according to their own desires.
 But oh, that my people would listen to me!
 Oh, that Israel would follow me, walking in my paths!
 How quickly I would then subdue their enemies!
 How soon my hands would be upon their foes!
 Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him;
 their desolation would last forever.
 But I would feed you with the best of foods.
 I would satisfy you with wild honey from the rock.”
 (NLT).

The children of God have a hearing problem; they do not listen to God. Verse 8 —
 “Listen to me, O my people . . . O Israel, if you would only listen!” Verse 11 — “But no,
 my people wouldn’t listen.” Verse 13 — “But oh, that my people would listen to me!”

Do we, the children of God in the twenty-first century, listen to God? Do we? Do we
 really listen to God? In some ways, our modern ears are no better at hearing than were
 Israel’s ancient ears. Children, whether of earthly parents or of the heavenly parent, tend
 to hear what they want to hear and then do what they want to do.

In Matt 9:37-38, Jesus uttered these words:

“The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send out more workers for his fields” (NLT).

Do we hear what Jesus is saying? He is saying that the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. There is no problem with the harvest; the problem lies with the workers. The world is not the problem; the church is the problem. The problem is not with the lost; the problem is with the saved.

“Why are our young people leaving the church?” I have heard that question for as long as I can remember. I have heard that question for so many years that I find it shamefully embarrassing. The question is *not* “Why are our young people leaving the church?” but rather the question *is* “Why don’t we know why the young people are leaving the church?” How many years will we continue to ask this question, a question that reveals just how much we have lost touch with the younger generations? Why don’t we know why some of our churches are growing old and dying? Why don’t we know why we are not baptizing folks like we used to? Why don’t we know why people within our own fellowship are leaving the Churches of Christ? Why don’t we know?

We do know . . . we just don’t want to hear it. A recent study asked members of Churches of Christ, who had left one church for another, why they left. Selecting from thirty-two possible reasons, the top two reasons were these:³

* 77% said they were drawn to a church with a more *heartfelt/expressive* style of *worship*.

* 73% said the *worship* service at their previous church was *uninspiring*.

The primary factor for losing our own people and keeping the unchurched out is that we do not want to hear the fact that *we live in a time when what folks seek is worship that offers an experience and an encounter*. Now what’s wrong with that?

We do know why . . . we just don’t want to hear it. Because if we listened, we would have to change. The fact that we don’t change only shows that we don’t listen.

Worship is not the only issue. I mention it because it seems to be the primary issue. The truth is the church must constantly change—not its message, but its methods. Our worship is not like that of the first-century-church. Yes, we sing, pray, preach, take the

³Chris Altmann, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age* (Chalice, 2004), 130.

Lord's Supper, and give of our money. But we also sit on padded pews in heated and air-conditioned buildings, with indoor plumbing, artificial lighting, and enjoy expensive audio and visual systems. We have hymnals with four-part harmony and pew Bibles. We use TV, radio, and the internet to spread the gospel. Outwardly speaking, we are nothing like the first-century church. That's ok. After all, we live in the twenty-first century. Why then do we continue to think and act like we lived in the nineteenth century or even the first half of the twentieth century? The world as it is today is not the world I grew up in. Why should I act like it is?

We don't have to change. We can choose to grow old and die. And all the while we can blame it on the world, telling ourselves folks just aren't interested in the truth. The excuses are endless. But Jesus said the problem is not with the lost; the problem is with the saved. Are we listening?

And do you know where the burden for change lies? It lies with folks my age and older. In case you're wondering—48. We are supposed to be spiritually mature; therefore, more is rightfully to be expected of us. I have been a Christian for 35 years. Anyone here today younger than 35 has lived on this earth less time than I have lived in Christ. Now comes the tough question: Can you tell that I've been a Christian 35 years? Do I look like someone who has allowed the power of Christ's spirit to shape my life for three-and-a-half decades? To those younger than 35 I ask you, Do I look like the type of Christian you want to be? We who are older both in years and in the faith must pave the way for those who will follow. This will not be easy and will not be comfortable. But we follow a Savior who chose a path that was not easy and that was not comfortable. God becoming flesh and blood, now that's a change beyond comprehension.

Physically, I will grow old and die. That's the way of the earth. Spiritually, I want to grow mature and live. That's the way of the resurrected Christ.

To those who are younger, I want to say this: Honor and respect those older in the faith. Love us and be kind to us. But challenge us, push us, prod us, help us to never, never, never stop growing in Christ. And to those my age and older, I want to say this: Encourage and respect those younger in the faith. Love them and be gentle with them. But let them know by our example that we expect, yes expect, them to grow in spirituality and maturity.

I pray that we have come to worship today to listen to God. We are going to sing the Hebrew Shema:

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength (Deut 6:4-5, NLT).

This is called the “Shema” because the first word in the Hebrew is Shema, which means “listen!” If we are having problems with our heart, we probably need to get our ears checked.⁴ “Let the one who has ears to hear, let them hear.”⁵

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⁴In the preaching of the sermon, I referred to one of the church members who is a heart surgeon. Although I am not a medical doctor, I ventured to say that most of the patients he sees have heart problems because of hearing problems. They have not listened when told, “Stop smoking. . . . Loose weight. . . . Eat right. . . . Exercise. . . .” and so on. Such heart problems are directly linked to a failure to hear—a problem with the ears. The surgeon smilingly nodded his approval and affirmed my point after the sermon.

⁵The appeal of the risen Christ to each of the seven churches of the Book of Revelation (Rev 2-3).