

*Words and Deeds: Who Is Listening?*  
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*Proverbs 3:1-6; Mark 4:21-23; Acts 18:1-17*

Our final Scripture reading today is from Acts 18:1-17. May God bless the reading of His holy and sacred Word. “After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law." Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law-- settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." So he had them ejected from the court. Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.”

Easter Sunday, 1972. Lieutenant Colonel “Gene” Hambilton is on an EB-66 aircraft over Vietnam, gathering intelligence to jam North Vietnamese radar. Hit by a surface-to-air missile, Hambilton is the only man able to eject from the plane. Here’s the problem...Hambilton has just landed in the middle of literally tens of thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers in the Easter Offensive invasion. Here’s the kicker – Hambilton was a missile expert who had worked on American nuclear weapons, and he had top secret clearance. To have him captured would have meant a huge victory not only for the Vietnamese but for the Russians, who would have gained access to untold amounts of classified American information through him.

Thus began the largest search and rescue effort of the Vietnam War. One of the most difficult parts of the rescue was that while Hambilton had a radio, the North Vietnamese could pick up his signals, and they could understand English. The big question was, who is listening? Finally, the American team realized he was an avid golfer with a near photographic memory of holes he played. They improvised a code where they navigated him safely through enemy territory, occupied villages, and mine fields by telling him how to move based on golf holes he’d played. They were able to get him far enough that a Navy SEAL team was able to rescue him, despite his losing 40 pounds in 12 days and breaking his leg along the way.

Who is listening? Often we watch what we say – or don't! – based on who we know is listening. It's funny how many people stop swearing around me when they learn I'm a preacher. Who is listening? Our willingness to talk about religion or politics is often affected by what we think the reaction of our listeners will be. There are things we will say around adults that we won't say around children for fear of being misunderstood, or things "little ears" shouldn't hear. Who is listening? If we think about it, we constantly edit ourselves based on our audience. Like the rescue of "Gene" Hamblin, we code what we say so we don't get caught.

This ties into today's Scripture passage because it involves several different audiences, several different messages, and a whole lot of surprises. It teaches us that no matter who is around us, God is our ultimate audience, and He is the One who should determine what we say. People will surprise us time and again; those we think will listen won't; those who we write off are the most eager to hear us. But God is consistent, and as Christians, it is God whom we trust and God who is ultimately the One we must please with what we do and say.

As you remember, Paul had been in Athens, attempting to convert the philosophers. He's now in Corinth, about a four day's journey. Silas and Timothy haven't reached him, so he's still on his own, trying to figure out how to make ends meet while preaching the gospel, since his team isn't with him. God sends him support in the form of Aquila and Priscilla.

Now Aquila and Priscilla aren't the most likely friends of Paul. They've been through a lot themselves. The historian Suetonius recorded that Claudius expelled Jews from Rome around 52 AD because of disturbances in Jewish circles regarding a man called "Chrestus" – probably a misunderstanding of the name "Christ." Aquila and Priscilla have been banished from their home in Italy. They've lost a lot following Jesus. It would have been easy for them not to want to get involved. But they welcome Paul into their home and make tents alongside him. They listen to the Spirit and care for Paul when he's alone.

While Paul presents Jesus at the synagogue every week, he has to make tents for his living. Finally, once Silas and Timothy arrive, Paul has support enough to preach full-time. He's excited to return to doing the ministry he loves. Yet he's frustrated when members of the synagogue turn against him. While this has happened time and again, this time he says, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility." It's finally like he's had enough.

Paul so wants his people to come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord. Listen to him in Romans 10:1: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved." In Romans 9:2-3, Paul describes his feelings as "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" because they have not turned to Jesus. He goes so far as to say that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ if it meant they would know Jesus and His salvation. But the unceasing rejection takes its toll. What more will he suffer because they won't listen?

And yet here we have an unbelievable turn of events. People are listening! For the first time in Acts, we have a synagogue ruler, Crispus, and his whole family willing to turn their lives over to Jesus. Considering the pressure that would have been on Crispus, this was extraordinary, not unlike Nicodemus, the member of the ruling class and Pharisee party, standing for Jesus at His execution and helping with His burial.

Not only that, but a great number of Corinthians believe. Of any of the cities Paul has been to so far, this is the one where you'd expect the call to follow Jesus to fall on deaf ears. Corinth was the crossroads of the Roman empire, with two huge sea ports and tons of commerce. Corinth had become synonymous with luxury and decadence. Corinth was the modern-day Las Vegas – “what happens in Corinth stays in Corinth.” Corinthian architecture was lavish and detailed because the merchants there could afford it. Even now, we hear of Corinthian leather as a luxury item. Lots of soldiers and lots of sailors came through town – no wonder that at one point, there was a temple to Aphrodite known for its thousand prostitutes.

With all those pleasures and cash flowing freely, the last place you would expect the church to take root and flourish was Corinth. Yet God opened hearts and minds and ears and they listened. They turned from their wickedness. Paul's later letters showed just how hard it was to be a faithful church in the midst of a corrupt and hedonistic society. But they heard the good news of Jesus and they believed it!

Unexpected people were listening to Paul. And then there is proof that God was listening too. God speaks to Paul in a vision. “Don't be afraid,” God says. “Keep speaking and don't be silent. I'm with you, and I have many people in the city – no one is going to harm you.” We'll circle back to this vision in a moment, but for now, know that it succeeded in its purpose – Paul says in Corinth a year and a half, developing the church there.

But there's another set of people in this passage that believe that they've got someone's ear. A new synagogue leader is placed, probably because Crispus was expelled from the synagogue for his faith in Jesus. As in many cities before, the Jewish leadership gets things riled up against Paul and has him brought into court. They assume that Gallio, like many other weak leaders before him, will acquiesce to them and let them do what they want with Paul.

But they don't know Gallio very well at all. He was a well-known Roman senator, brother of the even more famous Seneca, who wrote about Stoicism and moral philosophy. Both Seneca and Gallio were even-tempered men not afraid of pushback. You couldn't call them godly, but as God had promised, God closed the ears of Gallio to the false charges against Paul.

In fact, Gallio dismisses them entirely. He immediately understands, even before Paul has a chance to speak, that the supposed crimes of Paul have nothing to do with morality or law but everything to do with the Jewish religion. Gallio will not get involved, even when some of the Jewish people stage an attack on the new synagogue leader right outside the court. Gallio isn't listening to the angry mob; he listens to what he knows is morally right.

Now back to Paul's vision. Isn't it fascinating that God tells Paul, “Do not be afraid to keep speaking?” Paul has gone to city after city facing beatings, imprisonment, stoning, harsh treatment. Why does God tell him not to be afraid now? Perhaps it's because he realizes that people are listening to him, and what he says next time might get him killed. Perhaps he's starting to lose his nerve after so many rejections from among his own people.

Or maybe he's just like countless other faithful people in history who find themselves deeply broken after defending God for so long. He's not unlike the prophet Elijah, who has a confrontation with 400 prophets of the god Ba'al, supported by Queen Jezebel. God answers Elijah's prayers and accepts his offering in a gigantic blaze of fire from heaven, the priests of Ba'al are executed, and it looks like Elijah should be on top of the world. But then Jezebel swears to have him killed, and Elijah runs off into the desert and begs God to kill him rather than for him to have to keep on going. God restores Elijah and gives him peace and hope. But even the mightiest and boldest of God's people have times where their faith runs dry and they're running on fumes.

God says, "Don't be afraid. I have your back. You will be safe. I have my people in the city." He reassures Paul that, yes, He hears Paul. He knows what Paul has suffered and what he has yet to go through. And through it all, God will not only be listening, He will be responding to Paul's needs and caring for Paul right up through the day that He brings Paul home to His eternal Kingdom.

Let's now turn to today. If there is anything I want us to remember from today, it's this: *God is listening*. He is listening to you. He hears you. If you're in this church and you've given your life over to Jesus, if you want Him to be both your Savior and your Lord, if you've asked Him to remove your sins and your desire to commit more of them, then He has, and the Father is listening. By the blood of Jesus that has washed over you, the sins that separated you from God the Father have now been separated from you, as far as east is from west, as far as the deepest depth of the ocean, and because those sins have been overcome, God hears you and responds to you as His precious daughter and precious son.

God is listening. He wants you to come with him with every joy, every fear, every worry, every regret, every hope, every passion, every concern. There is no part of you hidden from Him, so talk to Him – He is listening. When you are afraid that you're no good, that your faith isn't strong enough, that you've sinned yet again, He is listening. When you're worried that you'll lose friends and be called horrible things for standing up for Jesus and His truth...He is listening. When everything's going crazy good, He hears your thanksgiving. When everything is circling down the bottom of the drain, He hears your cry for help. God is listening. He loves you. He hears you. And while we often miss it in the noise of our lives, He is responding. He is working out all things so that His children might know His love for always and forever.

It's beautiful to know that God hears and responds to us. So also know this: *God is always our audience*. If God is always listening, always desiring to hear from us, always aware of all that we go through, then He is also the audience for all we say and do. There is nothing we think or say or do that gets past Him. If we think that way, it will affect how we share our faith, how we raise our kids, how we treat our spouse, how we relate to our co-workers – everything.

Like I mentioned before, we edit ourselves based on our audience. Some things you don't talk about around the kids; some things you don't talk about in front of the parents. That's fine; that's good; that's being social, you know? Being appropriate. But if we think about God being our primary audience, that really is going to change things, and ultimately for the better.

We want to live out our faith at work, right? But it's hard. Even at a church, at the pregnancy center, it's hard. Because you're supposed to work at work. Praying is the work of God's people. But our culture doesn't call that work. Even working for a Christian organization, you can't pray all day. That's not what they pay you for! A secular environment, people angry, frustrated, rules about how much you can be you – much harder.

But if you know that God is your audience, the atmosphere changes. The way you deal with things is different. The jerk that you're talking to on the phone? I want to speak to him in a way that if God was in the room with me – and He always is – He would be pleased. The child that I teach, the person I counsel, the co-worker that does the books with me...all of those conversations have a different feel when I think that God is my first audience. I'm going to be more graceful about failure; I'm going to be less egotistical about success. I'm going to watch what I say because I might be saying it to you, but it's ultimately to God, because God made you and you belong to God (whether you acknowledge Him or not).

It's also liberating because when we are convicted to share the gospel, when we are moved to do something outside of our comfort zone for Jesus, the fear we have about rejection or being socially awkward changes. Because we're not doing it for us. We're doing it with God as our primary audience. The fear we have changes when we realize that it is God who matters, pleasing Him, and if we upset some people along the way, not because we haven't been kind and loving but because we've spoken truth, that's OK.

One of the greatest chapters in the Bible is Genesis 15, when God makes His covenant with Abram. In verse 1, God tells Abram, "Fear not, Abram. I am your shield." And then the next phrase has a double meaning in Hebrew. One way to read it is, "Your reward will be very great." God promises Abram descendants more numerous than the stars. But the other way to read it is, "I am your very great reward." The promise that God makes to Abram, the reward beyond all others, even better than descendants too numerous to count, is Himself. Abram's chief reward for believing God and trusting God is God Himself. That's why it's so important we remember that God is our primary audience. He is so good, so wonderful, so perfect, that the reward above all other rewards we can receive is Him – His peace, presence, and faithfulness.

Even when we worship on Sunday mornings, it's why it's OK when we don't know all the songs or they aren't in the style we like best. It's OK if my sermon doesn't speak to your immediate need. It's OK if we don't have a building or Starbucks coffee or whatever. Because as much as we get out of worship, we aren't the target audience. We do it for God, to honor God, to draw closer to God, out of the love we have for God because He first loved us. If we remember that God is the One who's always listening, we will speak with grace and love and truth in every circumstance, and we will not be afraid. Because no matter if we lose a friend or find ourselves in a hairy situation, God has our back; He will never leave or forsake us.

God is listening. He loves us, and through His Son Jesus He has instigated a search and rescue mission far grander than the one we heard about this morning. He knows our voices and is listening for us all the time. He will never lose us. Trust in Him, speak to Him, remember that He is always there in every moment and every conversation. And you can be sure that God has found you and in His perfect timing bring you into His Kingdom with all His saints.