

Introduction

"I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." That a communication joke, but it's often true. Someone says something and the person who hears doesn't understand what he means.

Sometimes the problem is with the speaker. Consider these bulletin and newsletter bloopers as examples: (1) **"Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our community and church"**; (2) During a pastor's illness – **"God is good – Pastor Hargraves is better"**; (3) **"Please welcome Pastor Dan who loves hurting people"**; (4) **"Please place your donations in the envelope along with the deceased person you want remembered"**; and (5) **"Reverend Merriweather spoke briefly, much to the delight of the audience."** The problem was with the speakers. They said what they didn't mean.

But sometimes the problem is with the hearers. Remember what Archie Bunker used to say to his wife Edith in the sitcom, *All in the Family*: **"The problem Edith is that I speak in English and you listen in ding-bat."** The problem really was with Edith. Archie said what he meant but she didn't understand it.

That's sometimes the way it is with God and us. He speaks and says what He means but we don't understand it. Or as Jesus would say it, we have ears that don't hear. We need to check our hearing to make sure our ears hear, and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

God Speaks

Let's begin with the lamp metaphor that Jesus uses in verse 21. Imagine buying a lamp for your bedroom. You bring it home, plug it in, turn it on, and then place it under the bed to hide the light. No sane person would do that, Jesus says and he's right. You'd place it on the lamp stand instead to shine the light not hide it.

The lamp in this parable is a point of reference. It stands for the

most important principles and truths about our universe and life in it. Placing it on the lamp stand is also a point of reference. It stands for God revealing those principles and truths to us. There's a reason He does. It's because He loves us and wants us to thrive now in this life and forever in the life to come. So, He speaks to us and reveals the principles and truths we need to know and live by in order to thrive.

God speaks to us in eight ways that I've explained before. Because of time constraints, I'm going to focus on the most extensive of those ways – through His written word, the Bible. That's what the Bible, in its essential nature, is. It's God speaking to us and giving us the best information about the most important matters in human life.

I once met with a husband and wife who were having serious marital problems, despite reading two Dr. Phil books and consulting a marriage counselor. I asked them if they knew anything the Bible says about marriage, to which they replied that they didn't. I then claimed that the Bible gives us not all but the best information about marriage. Ephesians 5:28, for instance, says husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. That is a profound insight, I told this husband, richer in psychological and relational meaning than any he'd ever hear outside the Bible. I also told him that he needed to understand it and to live it out in order to be the husband he should be.

The moral of the story is this. God speaks to us, most extensively through His written word the Bible. And in it, He reveals the most meaningful and life-impacting principles and truths we'll ever hear.

Check Our Hearing

Yes, God speaks but do we hear when He does? That's what verse 23 is about, **"If any man has ears to hear, let him hear."**

It's a fact that some of Jesus' deepest teachings are about hearing. There's a reason for that. Let's go back to something I said at the beginning of this message. Sometimes the problem is with the speaker. But that's never the case when God speaks because what He says is

always infallible. He always says what needs to be said and always says it in the best possible way. If we don't hear what He says, therefore, the problem isn't with Him, the speaker, but with us, the hearers.

I had an instructive experience several years ago. Just before I came to church one Sunday morning, I turned on one of America's most popular television preachers who speaks to millions. He said something as he preached that was just the opposite of what I was going to say that very morning. He derived what he said from the Bible and so did I. What that means is clear. At least one of us didn't hear what God says.

My larger point is this. The problem wasn't with the speaker, God. It was with the hearers, one of us, instead. That reveals what the issue is when God speaks. According to verse 23, it's what kind of ears we have. We need to check our hearing. Do we have ears that do hear or ears that don't? Let's examine both of those.

Ears that Don't Hear

We begin with ears that don't hear. Not to hear God when He speaks means not to understand what He says.

The biggest reason that people don't understand what He says is because they don't want to. The problem is they don't want to be converted from their chosen ways. They want to run their own lives (be and do what they want to be and do) without God butting in. So, they position themselves in such a way that they don't hear what He says. Their perceptual mechanisms actually manage His message. They manage it so that it fits in with their own purposes, desires, and lives. They do that in one or both of two ways.

One is to select and omit. They take in the things God says that they do want to hear but keep out the things they don't want to hear. They embrace what they like and ignore or reject what they dislike.

When I counsel Christians who want to divorce their spouses, I always emphasize this point. The decision they make in that regard needs to be based on what God says about divorce in the Bible. I then

offer to teach them what He says. But almost all reject my offer and I know why. It's because they don't want to hear it. They want a divorce and ignore anything that gets in the way of that, including God's word.

There's a second way that people manage what God says. They reshape it. They do take it in but mould it to their chosen ways. They interpret it to fit their own purposes, desires, and lives.

A Christian mother was irate with a little league baseball coach for calling her son "**lazy**" and not playing him as she thought he should. She had given him a piece of her mind but was still agitated and upset about it. I urged her to forgive the coach and move on and explained why. It's the way of Jesus. But she disputed that. She admitted He repeatedly commands us to forgive wrongdoers. She claimed though that it was for harming us not others, especially our children. "**It's one thing if you hurt me,**" she said, "**It's another if you hurt my son.**"

What she did is clear. She didn't ignore or reject the texts about forgiveness. She just interpreted them to fit her chosen way.

That then is what it means to have ears that don't hear. God speaks through His word the Bible but we either select and omit or reshape what He says. The result is that we don't understand it.

Ears that Hear

But we can hear if we want to and verse 23 calls us to do just that. Have ears that hear. We answer that call by doing three things.

First, we listen when God speaks. In the context of His written word, the Bible, to listen obviously means to read. We listen to what He spoke by reading what He wrote.

Doing that is probably a larger issue than many of us realize. Studies show that approximately 31% of professing Christians don't read the Bible at all and that 37% read it 20 minutes or less a week. The majority of Christians spend very little time reading the Bible.

But if we don't read it, then we don't even know that God spoke. And if we don't know *that* He spoke, we certainly don't know *what* He

spoke, which is the case with many Christians. They don't know what He says about some of the most important matters in human life. Do you know, for example, what He says about anger, criticism, sex, marriage, divorce, work, money, the tongue, forgiveness, and dress?

Ears that hear listen when God speaks. When it comes to His written word, the Bible, that means they regularly read it.

We have ears that hear by doing a second thing. We correctly interpret what God says when we hear Him speak.

When someone speaks to us, we always interpret what he or she says in order to understand it. And we always apply principles of interpretation in doing so. Suppose you hear a news commentator say, **"The White House said that a government default would be catastrophic."** How many of you take him to mean that the president's house said that? None of you do. What do you take him to mean? It's that the President said that. You take him to mean that because you're applying a principle of interpretation called **"word association."** Over the years, the distinctive house in which every President lives became so **"associated"** with the President himself that **"the White House said"** now means **"the President said."** It's true. When someone speaks to us, we always interpret what he or she says in order to understand it. And we always apply principles of interpretation in doing so.

It's the same when God speaks to us in the Bible. We interpret what He says in order to understand it. And whether we're conscious of it or not, we always apply principles of interpretation in doing so. If we apply right ones, we'll correctly interpret and understand what He says. If we apply wrong ones, we'll misinterpret and misunderstand it.

Take Psalm 46:10, which is routinely reproduced in pictures and on plaques, **"Be still and know that I am God."** Almost all Christians, without being conscious of it, apply this principle of interpretation to it. Immediate context (the verses before and after) is irrelevant to determining what a verse means. Thus, they take this one to mean that Christians should quiet themselves before God. He'll reveal Himself to

them when they do. But a few Christians apply this principle. Immediate context is essential to determining what a verse means. Thus, they take this one to mean that pagan nations should stop warring against each other and recognize the sovereignty of God. Which interpretation is correct? The second is because the principle it applies is the right one.

We all apply principles to interpret whatever the verse before us means. So let's learn and apply the right ones. Having ears that hear (understanding what God says) requires it. I've written a study titled *Bibleworms* that will assist you in doing just that.

We have ears that hear by doing a third thing. We make and as best as we can, carry out the decision to do what God says. Remember what I said. He speaks and tells us the most important things we need to know about the most important matters in our lives. There is no good reason, therefore, not to do what He says. So let's just do it. When He speaks, it's simply good sense, wisdom, to act and live according to what He says. It's bad sense, utter foolishness, not to.

I mentioned Ephesians 5:28, for instance. Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. Realizing the depth of that insight about marriage, I interpret it in order to understand it. People naturally love their bodies, which means they give detailed attention to them. They also faithfully nourish, care for, and please them. I should love my wife just like that. I should give detailed attention to her and faithfully nourish, care for, and please her. It's good sense to do that and bad sense not to. So, I just do it.

Conclusion

That brings us to verses 24-25 in closing. Jesus teaches that the more we seek to hear God's voice, the more we will. The less we seek to hear it, the less we will. What we hear from God is proportional to the effort we put into hearing. So let's put our best effort into it. Let's read, correctly interpret, and do what God says in the Bible. We'll find this when we check our hearing if we do. We have ears that hear.