

## **“Listening”**

**Deuteronomy 18:9-22**

**April 6, 2014**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Many see the main body of Deuteronomy as an exposition of the Ten Commandments. If that is so, then the chapter before us today clearly fits under the fifth commandment, which commands the honoring of one’s parents. The fifth commandment has long been viewed as extending to all authority, and beginning midway through chapter 17, Moses treats three of the key authorities in Israel’s national life: the king, the priest and the prophet. Today’s passage deals with the prophet, and Israel is told that their main duty with respect to any prophet God raises up is to listen to that prophet.

Listening is a crucial part of loving relationships. Have you ever felt like the teacher in the Charlie Brown cartoons? The teacher is speaking, but the class only hears the indistinct sounds of “Whah, whah whah.” Like all preachers, I have certainly felt the sting of not being listened to. The occasions that bother me most are the more intimate occasions of counseling or discipling one or two people. I might see a dangerous path someone is on, and I call their attention to it in the form of a warning. While it’s not often that people will openly disagree with me, it is not an infrequent occurrence that they will not heed the warning. They won’t listen.

Sadly, I must also admit that I too am guilty of not listening. When I don’t listen to my wife, I can see the hurt it brings to her. She feels like she is a non-person to me when I don’t listen to her. Why is it that listening is so hard for people whose ears work perfectly well? Jack Miller tells the story of asking his wife for several years the question, “If you could change anything about me, what would it be?” For years, her answer was the same. “Jack, you don’t listen.” And for years, he didn’t listen to her about his not listening. He could repeat to her, almost word for word, what she had said, so it took him a while to understand what she meant. The kind of listening she meant is the same kind of listening spoken of by Moses. It’s the kind of listening that requires the humility that puts another person before us and their interests before our own. We don’t listen because our hearts are proud. Why should we listen if we already know what’s best. That is an approach to life that will destroy us, especially when applied to God. One of our chief duties when it comes to God is to listen to him, and that’s what this passage is all about.

### **I. The Importance of Not Listening – v. 9-14**

Before commanding us to listen to any prophet God might appoint, Moses tells Israel about their need to be careful not to try to listen to God through any other means. In particular, he has in mind the practices of the Canaanites living in the land before Israel. He spells out some of the more common of these: divination, fortune-telling, omens, sorcery, magic or necromancy. A “charmer” is not referring to a charming person, but to a person who casts spells. A necromancer is one who attempts, like King Saul would later attempt, to contact the dead for the purpose of guidance.

What is the attraction of these various ways of hearing from God? All of them seek knowledge in order to gain control of our lives. They are often used to address our need for guidance. If a person is facing an important decision, for example, the search will often be undertaken to gain certainty by these means. A person considering a job change wants to know that a mistake is not being made. Someone considering marriage to a specific person wants to know whether or not a mistake is being made in the choice of that life partner. Or some might attempt to utilize these means for more selfish purposes. It’s not hard to imagine the opportunities for this in our day, including such things as purchasing stocks or gambling on sports games.

Why are these things wrong? They are wrong because they amount to trusting in ourselves instead of God. To trust in God for guidance means that we believe fully in what God has chosen to reveal to us. That means at least two things. First, we believe that everything God has chosen to tell us should be heeded. Second, we believe that what God has chosen not to tell us does not need to be known. In other words, we trust him both in what he has said and in what he has not said. God is faithful to direct us to the next step we need to take, but we often want to know ten steps down the road. God says, “Take the step I’ve shown you to take and then trust me for the next one.” We are not to attempt by these other occult means to gain the knowledge God has chosen not to give us.

I notice that all the Canaanite practices mentioned here relate to various occult practices with one exception. Verse 10 says, **“There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering.”** At first glance, that seems not to fit in this section which is all about the warning not to attempt to hear from God by occult or psychic means. Is there a connection between child sacrifice and seeking to hear from God through occult means? I think that’s precisely the point of including child sacrifice in this list. Christopher Wright says it like this. “God knows there are more things that destroy human life and dignity than physical fire.” Listening to the wrong voice can be just as destructive as fire.

Note that God says three times that these practices are an abomination to him (v. 9, 12). An abomination is something that is detestable. From our

perspective, it would be akin to cuddling up to a wasp nest. Most of us shudder at the thought. My hatred of wasps was refreshed this past Sunday when one stung me right below my eye. God's view of seeking divine knowledge through psychic means is even stronger. He detests it.

Are there voices you listen to other than the voice of God speaking through the Scriptures? For many, it's the voice of a parent who made you feel like you were never good enough, no matter what you did. For others, it might be the voice of friends, who tell you to go ahead and do that thing that you know down deep you shouldn't do. Don't listen to those voices.

## II. The Importance of Listening – v. 15-22

Verse 15 could not be more clear in telling us the voice to whom we are to listen. **“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.”** He goes on to explain that he will not speak to them directly, as was attempted at Mt. Sinai (called “Horeb” here). On that occasion, the direct voice of God terrified the people so that they asked God no longer to speak to them in such a direct way. Instead, they said, speak to us through Moses. God agreed with them and said that he would speak to them from this point forward through prophets he would raise up.

As we consider this passage, I would like to ask three questions that are relevant to us today. The first question is, “How does God speak to us today?” The New Testament makes it clear that he continues to speak to us in the way he announced here, through a prophet. Three verses are critical here. The first is Acts 3:22-23, in which Peter quotes from this passage in Deuteronomy and says that the prophet Moses spoke of is Jesus. The second verse is from Hebrews 1:1-2. **“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”** In case we still don't get the point, several times in the Gospels, we read that the voice of God thundered from heaven with this message about Jesus. On the mountain where Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John, the voice of God spoke from the cloud and said, **“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him”** (Matt. 17:5). If you read that verse in light of our Deuteronomy passage, God is saying that Jesus is the great prophet through whom he speaks to us.

So what does that mean to us? How do we listen to Jesus? We listen to him by listening to the Bible. Jesus believed that the Old Testament was the word of God that ought to be listened to and obeyed. So if we listen to Jesus, we will need to listen to the Old Testament. And we will obviously need to listen to the direct teachings of Jesus found in the Gospels. And then Jesus said that he

would lead his disciples into all truth when the Holy Spirit came, and that has some reference to the rest of the New Testament. So what this means is that we are to listen to the Bible, since it is God's chosen way of revealing his truth to us. If that is the case, then it should not surprise us to find opposition from the one who said to Eve, **"Did God actually say..."** (Gen. 3:1). He has always attacked God's word, and he always will.

In a recent book he has written about the Bible, Kevin DeYoung relates the story of attending a denominational advisory group meeting where those attending were invited to find their "norms" as a denominational community. "When I suggested our first norm should be testing everything against the word of God, I was told—and this is an exact quote—that 'we are not here to open our Bibles.' The goal of the group, apparently, was that we would listen to our hearts and listen to each other, but not so much that we would listen to God" (*Taking God at His Word*, p. 53).

If God's announced way of speaking to us is through his chosen prophet, and if that prophet is Jesus, who tells us to regard our Bibles as the word of God, then what should we think about this whole idea of God speaking to us more directly? It is not uncommon for people today to say, "God spoke to me and said..." I think we need to distinguish between God's certain speaking to us through his revealed word on the one hand, and the less certain impressions we may receive from God on the other hand. I must say that I have never had an experience of God speaking to me in a direct and certain way. I have experienced impressions that I think were from God. But what makes me certain that they were from God is that they were consistent with the Scriptures. Usually, for me, these impressions that I think have come from God's Spirit are based on the Scriptures. I will read something in the Bible and God's Spirit will speak to me about my need to repent of a certain sin. Or I will read a promise in the Bible, and it speaks to me at a deep level. But it needs to be said that anytime someone claims that God spoke to them about something, it is a second level speaking, to be placed beneath God's word.

The difference I have in mind here is something like the difference between interpreting someone's body language versus their words. Words are far more certain than body language. We used to have a woman in our church who had a scowl on her face when she would listen to me preach. I would normally interpret such body language to mean that she disagreed with me, or perhaps even that she was angry with me. But in her case, both interpretations were incorrect. When she concentrated, she scowled. When I discovered that, I made sure that the rest of the pastoral staff knew that about this woman, so that they didn't misinterpret her body language.

So God speaks to us through his prophet Jesus, and that means through the Bible. How can we know that Jesus is a true prophet instead of a false

prophet? Moses gives us a test. **“When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken”** (v. 22). Notice that the test is stated negatively. The opposite is not necessarily the case. Just because someone predicts something in the future that takes place doesn’t mean they are a prophet from God. But any failure to come true means for certain that the prophet does not have God’s Spirit. Jesus made several predictions during his lifetime. He said that he would be raised from the dead three days after his death, and it happened just as he said. He told Peter that Peter would deny Jesus three times before the crowing of the rooster the next morning, and it happened. He said that Jerusalem would fall, and it did. There were also several things Jesus predicted that are still in the future. Jesus spoke more about hell than everyone else in the Bible combined. He said that anyone not believing in him would perish (John 3:16).

This brings us to our final question. What happens if we don’t listen? What’s at stake here? Moses answers that question in verse 19. **“And whoever will not listen to my words that he [the prophet] shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.”** When God says he will require it of him, he is referring to judgment. God has spoken to us through Jesus, and our task is not complicated. Listen to Jesus, which for us means to pay heed to our Bibles as the word of God.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In the book I mentioned earlier from Kevin DeYoung, he tells a story about from John Newton, the slave trader turned pastor and hymn writer. Newton was visiting a young, simple woman in his community who was dying. He guessed that she had never been more than 12 miles from her home. Her reading had been limited largely to her Bible, but she had read that carefully and thoroughly. Just before her death, Newton prayed with her and “thanked the Lord that he gave her now to see that she had not followed cunningly-devised fables,” a quote from 2 Peter 1:16. She replied, “No, not cunningly-devised fables; these are realities indeed.” Then she looked deeply into Newton’s eyes and reminded him of his calling as a preacher with these words.

Sir, you are highly favored in being called to preach the gospel. I have often heard you with pleasure; but give me leave to tell you, that I now see all you have said, or can say, is comparatively but little. Nor, till you come into my situation, and have death and eternity in full view, will it be possible for you to conceive the vast weight and importance of the truths you declare.

Nothing is more important than the truths God has chosen to reveal to us in his word. Listen to him.