

Epiphany 3
January 27, 2019

Nehemiah 8:1-10
221-281-291-332

“And All the People Listened...”

- I. With a hunger for God’s Word.
- II. With respect for God’s Word.
- III. With joy from God’s Word.

Dear Christian friends,

As I worked on this sermon I came across this verse. Jesus says, **“Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him”** (Lk 8:18). Jesus is talking about our attitude toward His **Word** – toward **Worship – Bible class – daily devotions**. If we come to LISTEN AND LEARN God has so many blessings for us in His Word. But if our attitude is IN ONE EAR and out the other then we won’t get much benefit. Then we’re just going THROUGH THE MOTIONS of **listening** to God’s Word.

In this reading the Israelites had gathered in a **“public square”** in Jerusalem to hear God’s Word. We’re told, **“And all the people listened attentively.”** Looking at these verses we see that the people ATTENTIVELY LISTENED 1)with a hunger for God’s Word, 2)with respect for God’s Word and 3)with joy from God’s Word.

I. With a hunger for God’s Word.

Nehemiah takes us to the **mid-400s BC**. But to understand and appreciate these verses we need to go even farther back than that.

About 600 years before Nehemiah – around **1000 BC** – we have David and Solomon – the GLORY DAYS of Israel. But after Solomon the Israelites splint into two **rival** kingdoms – the larger, northern kingdom of ISRAEL and the smaller, southern kingdom of JUDAH. Although worship at the temple in Jerusalem **continued idolatry** MORE AND MORE **took over** in **both** kingdoms. The Lord was nice to have around when you **needed** Him but OTHERWISE He was to leave them alone and **not interfere** in their lives. SOUNDS FAMILIAR, doesn’t it?

God wasn’t about to PUT UP with that. He sent prophet after prophet to **call His people** back to Him but they wouldn’t listen. God sent calamities – **disasters** – **hardships** but there was still no repentance. **Finally** God HAD HAD ENOUGH. The **northern kingdom** of Israel was conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians. The **southern kingdom** of Judah fell to Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies. The temple and Jerusalem were destroyed – the people carried off into exile in Babylon.

God explained WHY this happened to the Israelites. It wasn’t because the **Assyrians** and **Babylonians** had bigger armies and better weapons. **“The LORD sent word to (the Israelites) through His messengers again and again, because He had pity on His people. But they mocked God’s messengers, despised His Word and scoffed at His prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against His people and there was no remedy.”**

By Nehemiah’s time the Jews had returned from captivity and rebuilt the **temple** in Jerusalem. Nehemiah – who served as **“cupbearer”** and as a trusted advisor to the **Persian king** Artaxerxes – led the effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. That’s WHERE these verses pick up.

“When the seventh month came (about our September) **all the people assembled in the square. They told Ezra to bring out the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.”** What a change in the Israelites! BEFORE they couldn’t have cared less about what God had to say. Now they had a REAL HUNGER for God’s Word – a **hunger** because they realized what they HAD – **“the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.”** They hadn’t gathered to listen to MOSES’ IDEAS or opinions but to what God Himself had commanded them THROUGH Moses.

A real hunger for God's Word comes from understanding that this REALLY IS **God's** Word. The **Bible** is my Creator – the Lord God of heaven and earth – my Savior talking TO ME about my life and my relationship with Him. This ISN'T the comics – the **National Enquirer** – the sports page. This is GOD'S Word. Believing that we can see why David said God's Word is ***“more precious than gold, than much pure gold; sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.”***

That fact makes us HUNGRY for God's Word at church – in **Bible class** and **daily devotions** – hungry to provide our children with a **solid** Christian education. **Day after day** we're bombarded on all sides wanting our attention – TV and the news – phone calls and **text messages** – the boss – **children** – **sports**, etc. That's why it's SO NEAT – so comforting – to TAKE THAT TIME and get away with our Bibles and say, ***“Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening.*** Father, I'll be quiet now and let You talk. Tell me again of Your **love** and **forgiveness** and **promises**. Refresh and renew me. THROUGH Your Word give me Your peace – comfort – strength – encouragement.” The devil will tell us we're TOO BUSY to do that. He'll try to get us to munch on the world's JUNK FOOD instead of the meat and potatoes of God's Word. Don't listen to him! LISTEN TO GOD in His Word!

The fact that this is **God's Word** makes us HUNGRY for it and leads us to listen attentively...

II. With a respect for God's Word.

Ezra and **Nehemiah** showed RESPECT for God's Word. They made preparations to HELP the people ***“listen attentively”*** to God's Word. A ***“high wooden platform”*** was built so ***“all the people could see Ezra”*** as he read God's Word to them. We do the same here at church. Our church is built to show RESPECT for God and His Word. It's built to HELP US FOCUS and concentrate on GOD COMING to us **through His Word** and sacraments. We don't want anything DISTRACTING us from God and His Word.

We also prepare ourselves to RESPECTFULLY **listen** to God's Word. We try to get enough sleep so we **can concentrate** during the service. We have something to eat – we get a drink – we use the bathroom BEFORE church so we're NOT going out during the service and disturbing others and missing some of the service ourselves. We DRESS to show respect for God and His Word, **not as if** we're going bowling with the gang. We **try to get to church** EARLY enough to **have some quiet time** to get ourselves focused for the service. We want some time to PRAY for God's help and blessing – to maybe look over the readings and hymns – to CLEAR our minds of distractions and **worries**. We don't want to DISRESPECT GOD by showing up late. **Coming late** also distracts others and cheats ourselves out of some of the service. We want to give God and His Word our FULL attention.

“As Ezra opened the scroll, all the people stood. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen! Amen!” while they lifted up their hands and then knelt and bowed down with their faces to the ground.” Just from watching these Israelites – they didn't see this as BORING – how soon can we **go home**? They didn't act as if they were DOING GOD A FAVOR **by showing up**. Their actions showed RESPECT for God – humility before God – a sense of AWE and WONDER and PRIVILEGE to be **able to listen** to God's Word. Makes you wonder what people SEE IN US **as we come** to church. Are we showing SUCH **respect** – **humility** – **awe**?

“And all the people listened attentively.” They were hungry for God's Word. They had respect for God's word.

III. They had joy from God's Word.

“They (Ezra and the Levites helping him) ***read from the Book of the Law of God clearly and interpreted it, and the people understood what was read.”*** They carefully explained God's Word to the people. We ***“listen attentively”*** to God's Word to ***“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”*** We ***“listen attentively”*** to God's Word to BE EDUCATED **not**

entertained. We listen to God's Word and take it PERSONALLY. This isn't God talking TO OTHER people about THEIR lives – **or** God talking to me ABOUT OTHER people. This is MY God talking TO ME about MY life and my relationship with Him.

What God says sometimes REALLY HURTS when we take it PERSONALLY. ***“All the people were crying as they heard the words of the Law.”*** The people clearly heard what God expected FROM THEM and they clearly saw HOW MISERABLY they had failed God. God's judgment had fallen on their **forefathers** and they were JUST AS GUILTY and deserving of God's judgment. But UNLIKE their forefathers with their weeping they SHOWED **repentance** for their sins.

Do we hear and take God's **law** SO PERSONALLY and TO HEART? Today's readings focus us especially on the 3rd Commandment – that we “do NOT DESPISE preaching and God's Word but gladly hear and learn it.” Have you/I always had SUCH A HUNGER for God's Word? Have you/I always shown SUCH RESPECT and LOVE for God's Word? Have you/I always rejoiced ***“with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’”*** – or were we thinking instead, “BORING!”? Do you/I realize that our attitude toward and our use of God's Word really shows WHAT WE THINK about **God Himself?**

These Israelites were sorry for their sins. God's Word had GOOD NEWS for them – God's promise of the Savior **still stood**. God had not rejected them **as His people**. Nehemiah told the people, ***“Do not mourn or cry! Go, eat rich food and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those who have nothing prepared. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength.”***

We are to take God's law PERSONALLY. It hurts because those commandments **condemn** us. But **we are also** to take God's gospel PERSONALLY and it is so comforting because it **leads us** to Jesus. God has KEPT HIS PROMISE of a Savior! We have God's own Son born our brother **to be** our Savior. **In our place** Jesus perfectly obeyed **all** the commandments including the 3rd Commandment. **Bearing our sins** – including all those times we HAVEN'T hungered or **loved** or shown respect for God's Word – bearing the sins of the **whole world** – Jesus suffered and died on the cross. Jesus shed His blood – sacrificed His life – to personally pay for every single one of our sins in full. HEAR the good news GOD'S WORD **has for you!** Listen attentively to God's Word. Take this PERSONALLY and deep down into YOUR heart! **For Jesus' sake** God has forgiven ALL your sins. **Trusting** in Jesus we have a whole new relationship with God. **Clinging** to our risen Savior we are going straight to heaven when we die. God's love – His forgiveness – His promises – His **presence** are OUR JOY and STRENGTH in life and death.

“And all the people listened attentively.” God grant that that may also be said ABOUT YOU and me! Amen.

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