

Listen!

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone
Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, September 17, 2006; Bryn Mawr, PA
Psalm 19

“There is no speech, nor are there words...”

Movement 1 – We are in Training

We are trying to be Christians. We are trying to walk with Jesus, we are trying to do right by God, we are trying to be like Christ, and we are trying to be Christians. Maybe some of you are further along than I am. Maybe some of you have mastered the walk, maybe some of you are perfect in your faith and your life, but I am far from it. I am going to be honest with all of you, there are times that I do things which are not Christian. There are times when I fail to follow Jesus’ footsteps. There are times when I reflect on my actions, and I believe that I was not a particularly good Christian that day. So I say that I am trying to be a Christian. I am trying to walk with Jesus, I am trying to live my life right. I am trying to be a Christian.

You have heard me make this point before, you have heard this argument before, but I think it is something which we need to return to again and again for that reminder of who we are and who we desire to be. Especially with Baptists, there seems to be a heavy emphasis upon the immediate conversion, and an expectation that right after the conversion we are different and changed. Maybe you have met that person who on Saturday is a cussing, drinking, selfish, individual. Maybe you have meet that person who on Saturday does not live with any of the marks of Christ, does not walk in the path of Christ, and does not claim Christ as Lord. But then on Sunday, something happens, a sermon is preached, a song is sung, and the individual changes. The individual loses the colorful speech, the individual loses the selfish view of life, the individual loses all that pulled him away from Christ and changes. And the change sticks, and the person is new in spirit and in life. Maybe you know someone like that. Maybe you have experienced that immediate conversion, that change with ease. With God, anything is possible.

Yet I contend that most of us grow into our conversion, we grow into our faith, and grow into becoming the people we believe we are called to become when we say “yes” to Christ. The mid-1800 pastor and theologian, Horace Bushnell, criticized the immediate conversion, because he rarely, if ever, saw someone’s life change in a way that stuck. Instead, Bushnell said that we are to be nurtured into our faith, we are to grow into our conversion, and change over time.

I think that is how it is for many if not most of us. We grow into our faith, we nurture into our belief and change over time. The hope is that we are never done growing, and the challenge is that we are never done growing. So I see the church as a training ground, as a place where we can boldly try to be Christians. We can make mistakes, because this is to be a safe place. We can drill the fundamentals before we go back out into the world. We can condition our minds, our bodies, and our spirits to walk with Christ in this gymnasium of Christ.

It is like we are the participants of “Joe’s Gym” in the movie *Dodge Ball*. We have decided to enter into a dodge ball tournament, but we don’t know how to play. We don’t know the fundamentals, we don’t know the basics, and we have to look to someone to train us into a well-oiled dodge ball machine.

Just as medical students train to be doctors, just as law students train to be lawyers, we are training to be Christians. So imagine yourself, a new person, ready to be shaped and formed into the new person of Christ, ready to learn the basics, the fundamentals and to be a Christian. Let’s jump into the training as we try to be Christians.

Movement 2 – What is our Source?

We need an example. We need something or someone to show us the way, to give us the basics, and teach us the fundamentals. We need an example that will show us how to be Christians and how to be a church. This is a dangerous moment for most neophyte Christians, because like youth, we are impressionable. We could be swept up by the first idol and personality that comes around. We could be swept up by the first program offered to us. I've seen churches that look at other "successful" churches and decide to follow their lead in the search to be a Christian. I've seen pastors try to copy lock-stock-and barrel each and every action, idiom, and idea of the mega pastors of mega churches. They go to training seminars, they learn the fundamentals, they study the methods and then try to apply them in the effort to be a church or a Christian. More often than not, churches will follow the lead of the pastor, assuming that he or she has the answer, knows the way, and can offer direction for the best and right way to be a Christian.

I had a friend from seminary who loved the theologian, Karl Barth. Now Barth is a great theologian with much to offer, with many ideas to ingest, and with a profound vision of the church. Yet my friend went a little to far, and began to speak as if he were Barth. With every comment, debate, or discussion, he would start by saying, "Now Barth says,..." and we would receive another pearl of wisdom from Karl Barth. I have nothing against Barth, but I want to be a Christian, not a Barthian. I want to learn from and follow Christ, not another human. Yet we are constantly lured into camps and followings. There are people who will take a disingenuous high road by telling you to read the scripture, but then telling you how to read it. As we are searching and trying to be Christians, we find ourselves in a library full of books all offering one path or method or plan for Salvation. They are all shouting for our attention, they are all claiming to have the true and right way to follow Christ. Yet they lead down many paths, some good, and some not so good. And some work for you and others don't. How do we choose? How do we decide which way to go, which book to read, or which teacher to follow as we strive to learn and be Christians? We need someone to guide us, help us and teach us. We need an example in being Christians.

Movement 3 – Listen!

We need to stop and listen. We need to sit still, just for a moment. We need to stop asking questions, we need to stop searching and just listen. We need that moment when we stop talking, stop looking with a critical eye, stop criticizing, stop shouting and just listen. We need that moment when we sit still, when we let the craziness of the world continue and we listen. In the movie, *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean's character was trying to speak to his father. He was trying to get through, trying to call for help and offer help. Yet his father would not listen. Instead he offered advice that wasn't needed. He offered advice that wasn't necessary, and he made himself busy so he couldn't listen.

We do that as well with our lives, with our church and with God. We get so caught up in keeping up that we no longer take the time to listen. We need to take that moment and hear God speak. It is that moment when we let the other churches run their rat race of growth and gilded crosses, when we let the other Christians run after their new modern prophet and messiah who points the way to the happy Christian inside of you, and we just stop and listen. We open the bible, and we ask all of those who are trying to tell us what it says, all of those who are trying to tell us how to read it to just shut-up for a moment and let us listen to the word of God. Detrich

Bonhoeffer urged this kind of reading. He saw theologians and churches telling the scriptures what to say, and forcing interpretation onto the scriptures. He saw theologian and churches shouting so loudly for the scriptural support of the Third Reich, that no one could hear the voice of the scripture. Instead, Bonhoeffer urged Christians, to listen to the scripture and to allow yourself to be interpreted by the scripture. Can we step out of the din and the chaos and listen to the scripture? Can we stop long enough to hear what the scriptures are saying? Listen to the words of Christ again and again. Listen to the words of the psalm offered to us today. Listen to God speaking through the scriptures and offering us a way to walk with Christ. We need to stop and listen.

Movement 4 – The Law Speaks

We need to let God speak. We need to hear what God has to say to us. In the psalm today, we see what happens when we listen to God speak. When we listen to the Torah, when we listen to the law or the instruction of God our eyes are opened, our spirits are refreshed and we are made whole. Remember that Torah, means instruction, and that is what the psalm is speaking of today. The Law of the Lord is the instruction of the Lord. And when we listen to the law, we find the right path to walk, the right way to go. It is like that moment when you are driving and you realize you are lost. You feel your stomach tighten because you are going to be late for your appointment, and you don't know where to go. Yet then you find your way, maybe someone points you in the right direction, maybe you realize that you were reading the map upside down, or maybe everything began to make sense. Your nerves relax, your anxiety dissipates with the wind, and you move with ease because you are on the right path.

Do you hear what the Instructions of God can do for you? It will revive the soul, it will make wise the simple, it will rejoice the heart, it will enlighten the eyes, it will endure forever. The law, the decrees, the precepts, the commandment, the fear and the ordinances of the Lord all offer us grace, glory and the way to live in the light of the Lord. All we have to do is listen. Listen to the story and the instructions of God. Let the word of God fall over you, and hear what God has to tell you. Don't let anyone else tell you what God is saying. Don't let anyone else tell you what God means. No, you sit, read and listen to the words, the writings, the inspiration and the instruction of God. C.S. Lewis spoke of this psalm often and said that in this psalm, the climax of the Lord is found in the Torah. The way in which we find the Lord, we follow the Lord, and we live in the Lord is in the writings and the instruction of the Lord.

Now maybe this is too vague for you. Maybe you are wondering, "What exactly is the Torah?" Literally, the Torah is the first five books of the Bible, contains about 613 commandments, as well as stories and other writings. Literally, you could walk away from this message thinking that all you need to do is purchase the cassette tape of James Earl Jones reading the Old Testament and you will be changed. Yet I think we need to go deeper and beyond that. The Instruction of God goes beyond memorizing 613 laws, it goes beyond just the first five books of the Bible. The Instruction of the Lord continues through the prophets calling a people to return to God. It continues to Kings of Israel trying to be right by God, or neglecting God. And as Christians we believe that the Instructions of the Lord are found at their fullest, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the life, the teachings, and the actions of Christ we hear and see the Law of God lived. Listen to that law, listen to that Instruction that encompasses the entire Bible. Read all of the scriptures, and let them settle in your life. Ask yourself, where you are in the scripture, and listen to the voice of God around you. If you still need something more concrete to hold onto, remember what Jesus said to the man about the commandments, love the

Lord your God with all of your Heart, Mind, and Soul, and Love your neighbor as yourself. We have heard this in Deuteronomy 6 as well, and we are told these two commandments are the summation of all of the teachings and instructions of God. Listen to God. Let God speak to you, and guide you to where you need to be. Listen to God!

Movement 5 – Our Eyes Will Be Opened

And we will hear God leading us. We will hear God calling us as we try to be Christians. God will tell us what fundamentals we need. God will guide us to where we need to be, all we need to do is listen, and we will hear God leading us.

We will have a new vision; we will be given new sight to see as we haven't seen before. It may start with hearing the heavens telling the glory of God. It may start with the day and the night pouring forth knowledge with no speech and no words, but we will hear it. We will look around and hear God's glory with the knowledge that God created all of this, and you and me. Maybe you will look at your family differently. Maybe you will hear God calling you to listen to your family, to see your family with new and different eyes. Maybe you will look at your place of work or school differently. Those individuals who get on your nerves, the ones who push you farther than you have been pushed before are also children of God, and maybe you will begin to see them in that way. Maybe you will look at your church differently. Maybe you will see all the members of this church as people just like you – trying to be Christians. Maybe your eyes will be opened to the vision that God has given us, and you will have a new fire to live into that vision. Maybe you will have a new vision.

I once knew of a pastor of a large mega-church. There were at least 4,000 people on the campus at any time. The church was growing in leaps and bounds and the pastor seemed to be listening to Jesus. Yet he had a heart attack, and afterwards realized that he wasn't listening. He was following the whims and desires of his own heart. He was following the expectations of the people, but he was not listening to Jesus. After the heart attack, he started listening and started changing who he was and how he did his ministry. He received a new vision by listening to God.

We will also receive a new vision when we listen to God. We will see all the ways God is working in our lives, we will hear the ways God wants us to work in other's lives when we listen to the whole, entire instruction of the Lord. We will hear God leading us.

Movement 6 – We Will See Ourselves

And we will see ourselves. The last part of this psalm is powerful and provoking. It is challenging and uplifting, and it is necessary. Because when we listen to God, when we are given the wisdom and the vision to see ourselves in the most honest way, we could despair. Remember how I said I am trying to be a Christian? That could cause us to weep, because we want to be Christians, and because Christ deserves us to be Christians, yet we can only do so much. It could cause us to weep because we cannot reach the level of perfection we desire. Yet the psalm offers us a prayer and a response to our fallen selves and continue our relationship with God. What can we do but ask God for help. What can we do but ask God to keep us from the hidden faults and transgressions. And then to know that God will still love and redeem us even when we fall. You have heard the last verse before. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." We say them after we pray together. I say them before I preach. It is because if I am in total control, if I am following my own whims, then I will probably slip. Instead I rest on the Lord, pray that is enough. Just as I am, I go to the cross and pray that will be sufficient. Just as I am I listen to God, and pray God will still listen to

me. Just as I am fallen but trying and look again to walk with Jesus. And I am here to tell you that God does listen, Christ will still listen, and just as you are, God loves you. We try to be Christians, we try to walk with Christ, but we know we can't do it all the time. But listen to God. Hear the compassion of God, and know that just as you are, God still loves you and accepts you just the same.

AMEN