

Jer #12 – 'You have not listened to me'

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Jeremiah

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Bible Text:

Jeremiah 35:1-19

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We continue our studies in the book of Jeremiah. We turn to chapter 35, the story of the family of the Rekabites. We've just been singing of a people who refused to listen to the Lord. That was true of the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day. We're going to be looking at the whole of this 35th chapter but to take as our theme words found in verse 15 for God says to the people of Judah, "You have not listened to me. You have not listened to me."

It's hard for me to believe that it was 40 years ago this year when the American folksingers, Simon and Garfunkel, introduced their song "Signs of Silence." January, 1966. It went to the top of the pops. How much better the songs were in those days than they are today. A beautiful melody and a real message in the song. The theme of the song is that in a world full of noise there is little real communication. They sang about people talking without speaking and for our purposes today, people hearing without listening.

What a brilliant picture of our world, a world of constant noise. In a lift, in a department store, in a waiting room, even young people walking along the street among the autumn leaves and the sun shining and God's world all around them, they've little black things poked in their ears so that they will always hear noise, and yet perhaps little real listening, for listening is a humble activity. It means that I must keep quiet. I must wait for another voice to come and receive that voice and understand that other voice and be guided by it. I must stop pretending that I know all the answers; that I am self-sufficient. I must put aside my self-will and I must listen and be directed by another voice.

Children listen to their parents. Students should listen to their teachers. It's perhaps the core sickness of our modern age. People hear but they refuse to listen. In our world, they don't listen to the past, they don't listen to tradition, they don't listen to each other. Look at politicians arguing on a news program, neither one of them is listening to what the other one is saying. Most tragically of all is the refusal to listen to God, the refusal to acknowledge that the meaning of our lives must come from outside ourselves. A guidance for our lives must come from that other voice, the voice of God.

Such a refusal to listen is not new, 2,600 years ago the people of Judah were refusing to listen. There's an example in Jeremiah 34. Read it when you've an opportunity. King Zedekiah and the people half-listened. They set free their slaves but then they changed their minds. They rejected God's word and they broke their promise. They did what they wanted. They refused to listen and so in the next chapter, chapter 35, the prophet goes back in his memory 10 years earlier to an incident which took place during the reign of King Jehoiakim, he goes back into the past to highlight what listening really means and from this chapter this morning, I want to speak to you, first of all, an illustration of listening; secondly, the implications of listening; and thirdly, the importance of listening.

First of all then in verses 1 to 11, an illustration of listening. Verse 2, God says to the prophet, "Go to the Rekabite family and invite them to come to one of the side rooms of the house of the LORD and give them wine to drink." These Rekabites were nomads, traveling people who dwelt in tents. Some scholars tell us that they were metal workers, traveling blacksmiths. At any rate, they lived outside society. They had a countercultural lifestyle. They didn't fit in with the culture of their day and they were looked down on by ordinary people; they were regarded as primitive, unsophisticated, throwbacks to the past. They didn't live in houses, they lived in tents. They didn't live in cities, they lived out in the desert. They were only in Jerusalem temporarily. Babylonian war bands were coming into the land from the northeast, it was dangerous, and so for safety these Rekabites left their wandering life and came for a few weeks or months into the city of Jerusalem and no doubt all the sophisticated city-dwellers would be talking about these strange people with their unusual clothes and customs and way of life, these eccentric Puritans, as one commentator calls them. They would be in the news.

So God tells Jeremiah to use these strange Rekabites as an object lesson, an acted parable. The prophet brings them to the heart of the religious establishment, to the center of power. He tells how where they were was near where the chief officials lived, the power brokers, the movers and shakers. It would be a very overwhelming place for such simple people to be. Here they were at the center of things among the important people and Jeremiah says in verse 5, "Then I set bowls full of wine and some cups before the men of the Rekabite family and said to them, 'Drink some wine.'" And by every rule of Eastern hospitality, they should have accepted. In the East when something is set before you, you're expected to take it. Whether it's a pig's eye or a cow's tail, you're supposed to eat it. It's very bad manners to refuse anything.

So there's a lot of pressure on these people, intimidating surroundings, important people, a lavish meal, bowls full of wine. A lot of pressure to accept but the Rekabites aren't intimidated. Verses 6 and 7, "But they replied, 'We do not drink wine, because our forefather Jehonadab son of Rekab gave us this command: 'Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine. Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things.''" Jehonadab had been a reformer. You can read about him in 2 Kings 10, an ally of Jehu, the militant, aggressive, anti-Baal reformer. Jehonadab had joined with Jehu in killing the priests of Baal in the northern kingdom and destroying the altars of Baal 250 years earlier. Jehonadab was a man who was passionately against idolatry of any kind.

It seems in the worship of Baal at that time, wine played a large part. The priests of Baal and the worshipers of Baal got drunk and got into an ecstasy and into immorality in the worship of Baal. Baal was the god of fertility, the god who gave harvests. He was especially attractive to people who were settled farmers or who dwelt in towns and Jehonadab was so anti-Baal that to keep his family safe, he said, "I want you to stay away from the wine that they drink. I want you to stay away from the houses they live in. I want you to stay away from the vineyards and the crops that the Baal worshipers cultivate. I want you to keep away from those temptations. I want you to live like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived, a simple pastoral lifestyle. I want you to separate from the temptations of the modern world."

His descendants obeyed his command. They listened so faithfully that here 2 ½ centuries later, they're still obeying his command. Under considerable pressure, they're still steadfast, still insisting on remaining different. Nothing could tempt them to break their promise. Here are people who really know what listening means. God is saying if you want an example of good listeners, look at the Rechabites. After 2 ½ centuries, the word of their ancestor is still shaping their lives, still governing their behavior. They are people who really listen. An illustration of listening.

Let's come secondly in verses 12 to 16 to the implications of listening. To the implications of listening. We need to say that this passage is not about abstaining from alcohol. That is how it has sometimes been misunderstood. In Salford in Lancashire in 1835, the International Order of the Rechabites was founded. It was a total abstinence organization which spread throughout the United Kingdom. When I was a small boy, I used to see Rechabite literature. But Jeremiah here is not commanding the Rechabites, God is not commanding the Rechabites for their policy of abstaining from wine, we would have to say also we should not build houses or we should not plant crops. Nor is he criticizing them for this. He's not praising it, he's not finding fault with it. That isn't the point at all. The focus is rather on their faithful listening. Their faithful listening, they heard their forefather, they listened to his voice and they determined that they would keep their promise to their leader and the point in the chapter is the contrast between the obedience of the Rechabites and the disobedience of the people of Judah.

Think about it for a moment. They obeyed an ordinary man, a fallible human leader. The people of Judah are disobeying God, an infallible divine leader. Jehonadab told his family one time, once not to drink and they obeyed him for 250 years. God told his people over and over and over again what he wanted from them, they disobeyed him every time. They obeyed about earthly temporal issues. Judah disobeyed about eternal issues. They had obeyed for hundreds of years. Judah had disobeyed for hundreds of years.

Look at God's analysis in verses 12 to 16. This is the point, "Go and tell the men of Judah and the people of Jerusalem, 'Will you not learn a lesson and obey my words?' declares the LORD. Jehonadab son of Rekab ordered his sons not to drink wine and this command has been kept. To this day they do not drink wine, because they obey their forefather's command. But I have spoken to you again and again, yet you have not obeyed me. Again

and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you. They said, "Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them." But you have not paid attention or listened to me. The descendants of Jehonadab son of Rekab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed me."

"They obeyed him but you won't obey me." That's the point of the chapter. That's the implication. That's to shame them. If these people can obey their ancestor about a much less important matter, why can you not obey your God about that which is supremely important? They were supposed to be the people of the word. The word of God shaped them. The word of God created them but they weren't listening to the word. How can some people obey this but they won't obey this? It's appalling. It's illogical.

But how true to life. People will obey trivial things and disobey more important things. A golfer out playing golf, his ball goes into the rough, it's lying in long grass, it's very difficult to hit. He wouldn't dream of moving it, even if nobody could see him. He's a real golfer. He'd be ashamed. He'd feel he was betraying the game of golf even to move it by an inch to improve his lie. Not done. If anybody in the golf club accused him of doing that, he'd be angry, he'd be furious. The same man would cheat on his wife. Many tournament golfers have done so or get involved in some dodgy business deal. They'd obey the rules of golf but he won't keep his marriage vows.

A wealthy woman will change her wardrobe at the whim of the fashion writers. I'm exempting all the women here from that charge. But she won't listen to the doctor who warns her that she's killing herself by smoking. And yet more damaging foolishness is in not listening to the voice of God. People will listen to financial consultants, talk to them about their pensions and investments and take their advice seriously, they'll pay them for their advice. The world listens to the environmental experts. We were told this week that fish stocks are getting exhausted and everybody was concerned about it, talking, "We need to listen to this." People listen to their health advisers, sales of broccoli have recently doubled. People have been told it's good for you. In one of the most encouraging pieces of news I have heard for a long time, we're now told dark chocolate is very good for you. It's a health food. There is a whole campaign to improve children's school dinners. People listen to these things, they take them seriously, and that's good. That's good, but they won't listen to the God who made them; who knows what is best for them; who can save them; who offers them everlasting life; the God to whom each and every one of them will one day answer. It's just exactly Jerusalem in 600 AD. The charge is as valid now as it was then, "You have not paid attention. You have not listened to me."

Friends, what about ourselves? We say that we are the people of the word of God, we're followers of Christ, the word is supposed to be as central in your life and mine as this Bible is in this meetinghouse. It's the focus of attention. That's why it's here. We're people under the word. But are we people under the word? I ask you, are you really listening to God? If I were to ask you what he said to you this morning in your private devotions, could you tell me? If I were to ask you what you were going to do about what God said to you this morning, could you answer? Are you listening to God? Have you been changed

by God's word during the past month? Could you answer? What have you started doing recently that you didn't do before because God told you to? What have you stopped doing that you did before because God told you to? Are you embarrassed by those questions? Is any answer you could give vague at best? Are we listening? People hearing without listening. We hear the word of God, oh yes, but are we listening? Is there too much noise? Have you just got the little players of the world into the ears of your soul so there's just too much noise coming out? You need to take more time, to make more time for listening. Listening to God implies obedience, faithful, practical, personal, long-term, costly obedience. The Rekabites are an example of such listening. They listened and it shaped their lives. The implications of listening.

That brings us thirdly and lastly in verses 17 to 19, to the importance of listening. The importance of listening. All this had happened 10 years ago; this is out of chronological order in the book of Jeremiah. Why does he go back to it now? Because of what's about to happen. Verse 17, "I am going to bring on Judah and on everyone living in Jerusalem every disaster I pronounced against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them, but they did not answer." God's patience is exhausted. The final judgment is about to fall. Nebuchadnezzar's armies are going to capture the city and take the people into exile and the ultimate reason is not political, it is not military, it is spiritual, they did not listen. That's God's verdict and that's going to be the ultimate verdict on every human who hasn't trusted in Christ, they did not listen. They didn't listen to the voice of God in whatever way they heard it and every human being does hear the voice of God either in the word of nature, or in the voice of conscience, or in the Scriptures. What a tragedy. So much noise. So much sound. So many voices. So much hearing. Never to listen to the one voice that matters.

Are you a person today who has never really listened to the voice of God and do you hear God's voice speaking to you now? If so, what is he saying? And how will you respond? For if you will not listen, you will certainly face terrible and everlasting judgment.

My dear friends, it's so foolish because there is a great reward promised for faithful listening and that reward is illustrated by the lovely promise given to the Rekabite family at the end of the chapter. "You have obeyed the command of your forefather Jehonadab and have followed all his instructions and have done everything he ordered.' Therefore this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Jehonadab son of Rekab will never fail to have a descendant to serve me.'" It's quite exciting decades later to read in Nehemiah 3:14 that "The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Rekab." Still there. The family is still among the people of God. God is saying, "This is what happens to good listeners. I bless good listeners. I give a future to good listeners. There is life for good listeners and their children." My friends, in listening, in really listening to our God and supremely to his Gospel, that is our life. That's where we get guided. That's where we derive meaning. That brings us peace and joy and hope.

Simon and Garfunkel's song ended pessimistically, "No one dared," they said, "disturb the sound of silence." No one dared disturb the sound of silence but the Rekabites did. Here they came into Jerusalem, old-fashioned, eccentric, ridiculous, narrow-minded

fundamentalists. How the people must have laughed at them but they didn't care, and in their persons and in their lifestyle and in their commitment, they were shouting into the noisy silence of their day and they were saying, "It is possible for ordinary people to live under the authority of the word of another. It is possible in this wicked world to live under the authority of the word of another. It is possible to be different because we have heard another voice." And I really believe that as a people, as families and as individuals, it is part of our calling in the early 21st century to be the Rekabites of our society, not necessarily in the specific ways in which they were different, although it is a valuable witness in our drink-sodden age to abstain from alcohol, and it is valuable to sit lightly to possessions in our materialistic age, but that's not the main point. The main point is in having the courage and the commitment to be different because God says so; not to be crowd-conditioned; to be salt and light no matter what the world thinks because we've heard a word, we're listening to the voice of another.

That's our calling, to listen to the sound of a different drummer and to walk out of step with the world, to the rhythm of a different beat so that people may notice us and ask questions and be led by grace to listen for themselves to that voice and to walk a new path. Amen.