

## ‘LISTENING’ LUKE 10:38-42

**[St Mark’s Online Services – Sunday, August 2, 2020]**

### **1. The Kingdom and the Need to Listen.**

Who doesn’t want to be a good listener? Apart from a few narcissistic exceptions to the rule, it seems to me everyone can appreciate the value of good listening. It’s a fundamental of all good communication. It’s a skill people the world over would like to possess and develop. It’s not like Christians are the only people who value good listening.

Even the most rudimentary internet search unearths scores of articles that reflect this interest. The “Five Fundamentals of Effective Listening”<sup>1</sup>; “Seven Keys to Effective Listening”<sup>2</sup>. And the list goes on. These articles cover things like keeping an open mind, attending to non-verbal cues, maintaining eye-contact, asking good questions etc. And reading such articles will reinforce that in the world the key question that people are trying to answer when it comes to listening is a question about how to be a good listener.

Of course, that interests the people of the kingdom too. And the Bible has things to say in answer to that kind of question. But I wonder if what sets the Bible apart when it comes to this topic is that it’s less interested in how to listen, and more interested in who we listen to. That is, when it comes to the kingdom and the need to listen, this is our key question. To whom do you listen? And, in particular, are you listening to the king of the kingdom? Are you listening to Jesus? So this is our question this morning/evening. And we’re considering it by reflecting on these five short verses from the end of Luke 10. They’re verses which capture just one short moment in the life of Mary, Martha, and Jesus. And I want to explore this with you today/tonight by thinking about each of these characters in turn- the sister who does not speak, the sister who does speak, and then Jesus himself, and what we’re left to ponder when he speaks.

### **2. A Moment in the Life of Mary, Martha & Jesus.**

#### **- the sister who does not speak**

So let’s begin with Mary- the sister who does not speak. And I trust you noticed that about her. No word from Mary is recorded in this section at all. Both Martha and Jesus talk about her, but she is noticeably silent. And her silence underscores what she’s known for here- not for talking, but for listening. When Jesus arrives at her house she

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<sup>1</sup> <https://leadingwithtrust.com/2015/04/19/the-5-fundamentals-of-effective-listening/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lifehack.org/875455/keys-to-effective-listening>

takes up a spot at Jesus' feet<sup>3</sup>. This is the position of learning that disciples took in those days<sup>4</sup>. It's a position of humble listening. And by taking her place at Jesus' feet<sup>5</sup> she is recognising Jesus' importance.

And she is, in this moment, embodying a principle of discipleship that the gospel of Luke has already been at pains to stress.

5:15. [Read 5:15]<sup>6</sup>

6:47. [Read 6:47-48a]

8:15. [Read 8:15]<sup>7</sup>

8:20. [Read 8:20-21]

9:35. [Read 9:35]

And, as we read a couple of weeks ago in 10:16. [Read 10:16]

And also 10:24. [Read 10:24]

This is not an obscure theme in the gospel. It's central. Perhaps we could even say paramount. And noticing that will help us to understand Jesus' reaction to Martha here. But for now we're noticing Mary. And she has learnt, it seems, just how important it is to listen to Jesus.

### **- the sister who does speak**

But what of her sister? The sister who does speak here. What about Martha? Well, Luke tells us that when Jesus arrived at her home, Martha welcomed him. And it's quite likely, I guess, that welcoming Jesus meant welcoming his 12 disciples who were on the road with him too.

By opening her home, Martha has almost certainly committed to cooking a meal for 13 hungry travellers. This is hospitable and generous at any time. But I think we're even more impressed with it if we remember Jesus' words from earlier in the chapter. You might recall that back at the start of Luke 10, Jesus sent out 72 of his followers on a mission. And he told them that in the towns they went to they would find some people welcoming and others rejecting. And he told them that they'd be able to recognise those who would be receptive to their message by the way they showed hospitality. So it has to be significant that so soon after that, we find Luke telling us about this woman Martha

<sup>3</sup> The feet she would later anoint – John 12:3.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Acts 22:3 where the Greek talks about Paul sitting at Gamaliel's feet.

<sup>5</sup> Notice there are many others who find themselves at Jesus' feet in Luke's gospel: 7:38, 8:28, 8:35, 8:41, 8:47, 17:16.

<sup>6</sup> See also 2:46 (where Jesus himself is the listener) 5:1, 6:18, 7:29.

<sup>7</sup> See also 8:18.

who was extremely hospitable to Jesus and his disciples<sup>8</sup>. This is a woman who's not just performing a cultural duty. I think we're meant to conclude that she's genuinely interested in Jesus. Like her sister, she sees how important Jesus is.

What's more we've just finished hearing Jesus talk about what it means to love, and we learnt from the Samaritan man in Jesus' story last week about what it looks like to love generously, to go out of your way to love. And on this score as well, Martha's conduct exemplifies Jesus' teaching.

In both these respects, what comes immediately before this section predisposes us to viewing Martha's hospitality very favourably. And even here in this passage, the way Martha is described is very positive, at least in some respects. Because she's a servant. The original word translated in verse 40 as 'all the preparations' is, more literally, 'much service'. She was distracted by 'much service'. And then later in the same verse the word translated as 'work' is the same word again- the word for service- 'my sister has left me to do all the serving myself'. It's the word the rest of the New Testament uses to describe Christian "ministry". Luke wants us to know that Martha is not just twiddling her thumbs. She's not outside playing with the pets while Mary's in listening. She's not reading the paper. Martha is servicing. She's ministering to the needs of Jesus and his disciples. In this too, Martha is someone to be commended.

And yet, there are some significant differences between Mary and Martha, aren't there? Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, but Martha is on her feet working, and then standing to talk to Jesus<sup>9</sup>. And Mary is attentive to Jesus, but Martha is distracted. That's the word verse 40 uses. Or as Jesus puts it in verse 41, she is 'worried and upset' about many things. And while Mary is quietly listening, Martha is complaining. [Pause] No doubt the frustration has been simmering out in the kitchen. We know what that's like don't we? It's not uncommon in our house for Tamara and I to have guests over and for one of us to be working in the kitchen while the other talks to our friends in the lounge. And it's not unheard of that the one working in the kitchen begins to feel frustrated that they're doing all the work themselves! And that's what's going on here. Martha's simmering frustration leads to an outburst. To put it in today's language, she has a bit of a melt-down. Her sacrificial service gives way to self-pity, and as the emotional dam bursts, she finds fault with both her sister and Jesus! She's cranky with Mary for not helping her. And she's cranky with Jesus for not doing anything about it.

### **- when the Lord speaks**

Well, how will Jesus respond? What happens when people get cranky with Jesus? How does he react? There's a lot of tension in the air after Martha's melt-down and it falls to Jesus to respond. No doubt every ear in the room was trained to hear what he would say. Verse 41.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, Luke uses the same Greek root verb ('to receive') in verse 8 and verse 38 to underline this connection.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek makes this distinction explicit. In verse 39 Mary 'sits' silently but in verse 40 Martha 'stands' to speak.

[Read 10:41-42]

Jesus' response is rich in compassion and clarity. His repetition of Martha's name is full of tenderness. And he doesn't tell Martha she's been doing the wrong thing. There's no rebuke for Martha here, only kind compassion. And yet, Jesus' words also bring great clarity. They clarify things for Mary and Martha, and no doubt for the disciples listening in. And they ought to clarify things for us too.

Jesus clarifies that Martha is worried about many things, but Mary has chosen to focus on one thing- the one thing Jesus describes as necessary. And Jesus clarifies that whilst Martha has chosen to do good things, what Mary has chosen is better. His compassion here is mixed with firmness. Jesus is clearly telling Martha that he's not going to tell Mary to get up and help in the kitchen. In fact, he's suggesting that Martha should leave her pots and pans and her broom and tea-towel and come and sit down too.

Of course, Jesus isn't saying that serving is unimportant. No doubt at some point that evening, Jesus wanted to eat. He wasn't suggesting that food didn't need to be prepared. But he was saying that there is something more important to human survival than food. And this is something the Bible teaches from beginning to end. Right back at the start of the Old Testament God taught the Israelites: 'man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.'<sup>10</sup>

Let me be clear. I don't think Jesus is saying that Martha was wrong and Mary was right. He's simply saying that Mary grasped something Martha did not. After all, Martha welcomed Jesus and served Jesus. But Mary could see that welcoming Jesus and serving Jesus find their proper orientation and their proper fulfilment when you listen to Jesus. Mary had realised that all the other important things in life need to be understood in the context of the one essential thing- paying attention to the word that comes from the mouth of God- and from the mouth of his son Jesus.

So this is not a contrast between someone who knows how to be a good host and someone who knows how to be a good listener. It's not that these two sisters have different skill-sets or different spiritual gifts. It's just that one of them understood the moment they were in better than the other. Mary's choice was wiser. And what made Martha's the poorer choice has everything to do with who it was that had walked through their door. This is not about how to listen. This is all about who to listen to.

And Mary recognises who Jesus is. And of all the things she could have done to demonstrate she knew how important he is, this is the one thing she chose. To listen. And Jesus says: 'it will not be taken away from her'. [Pause] That last line of the chapter is beautiful isn't it? This is Jesus' word of promise for Mary. If you seek me, you'll find me. If it's me you want, it's me you'll have. Many other things can be taken from you in

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<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 8:3.

life, but if you choose to listen to the word that comes from the mouth of God it will never be taken from you<sup>11</sup>.

I was reading these verses a few weeks back with three friends of mine from my Moore College days. Two of them are pastors of churches. The other friend used to be a pastor but is no longer. And as we talked about these verses and what they mean, my friend who's no longer a pastor was telling us about how much he loves his walks on the beach in the mornings where it's just him and God, and he reflects on the word and talks to Jesus. And it occurred to me as we talked that he's an example of exactly what Jesus is talking about in verse 42. Over the course of his almost 50 years of life things have been taken away from him. One of those things in his case is his role as a pastor. In one sense at least, his ministry has been taken from him. But of course, he still has Jesus. He still has the word of Jesus. He still has his walks on the beach with Jesus. And that will never, and can never, be taken from him. What a stunning word of assurance this is. And with that word, Luke 10 comes to an end.

### 3. Who Am I?

So, where do we find ourselves in these verses? What do they say to us? Once again today/tonight I want to return to the question I've asked the past two Sundays as well. When it comes to my life as a disciple in the kingdom, who does Jesus say I am? What does Jesus say here in answer to this question: who am I? [Pause] And once more, I think this passage yields two answers to that question. On the one hand we find ourselves in Martha, and on the other hand we find ourselves in Mary. Let me explain.

#### - a servant

In the first place, like Martha, I'm a servant. And this is an important thing to say because it may be less obvious than what we'll go on to say. But it's vital here that we see how Jesus accepts Martha's service. She's hospitable to Jesus and his disciples- a sign that she's welcoming God himself in her life. She goes out of her way to love like all good disciples should. She's servicing. She's doing ministry here. And Jesus doesn't tell her she's doing the wrong thing. And I think it's significant for us to notice this. There is a place and a time for being a servant. Ministry does matter. Jesus affirmed this in the first two sections of Luke 10 as well didn't he? To belong to the kingdom is to be a worker. To belong to the kingdom is to be a lover. There's ministry to be undertaken. Disciples serve. So I'm a servant.

And yet, what Jesus is pointing out here, is that even ministry can be a distraction from listening. Being a servant, as good as that is, can actually distract us from the one thing that's more necessary than anything else. And I think that can come to us as quite a surprise.

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<sup>11</sup> Here Jesus reiterates what he said in 8:18.

In fact, it's quite common to read this passage and to feel like Martha gets a raw deal here from Jesus. It's often the case that when we read these verses our sympathies are really with Martha. But might it not be that that's the reason why we really need these verses- why we really need to understand what Jesus is saying here!

Of course, the point Jesus is making here is widely misunderstood in the world today. There are so many people these days who think Christianity is about what we do, how we live our lives for the sake of others, doing to others as you would have them do to you. There are so many people who think the Good Samaritan parable captures what it means to be a Christian. But as we saw last week, the real point of that section of Luke 10 is that being neighbourly is not the way to eternal life. People can't justify themselves. They need God to justify them. People can't love their way into heaven. The only way to get to heaven is to be loved. By Jesus himself. And yet, so many people today still think that being like the Good Samaritan or being like Martha is the way to God's heart. Which is why most unbelievers reading this parable will naturally side with Martha. But the surprising thing the Bible says to us, time and time again, is that loving or serving your neighbour is not at the centre of the Christian faith. That's not the 'one thing' that's essential to being a follower of Jesus Christ. [Pause] The one thing that is essential is to listen to Jesus. This is the difference between giving and receiving. And that's the same distinction we heard Jesus making in 10:21 as well.

[Read 10:21b]

I really hope you understand this. When we serve we can take pride in our service- in what we give to Jesus. We can try to justify ourselves. But when we listen we acknowledge that we need to receive from Jesus- he alone has what we need. [Pause]

But of course, it's not just in the world that this misunderstanding is prevalent. It's also in the church. It's not just unbelievers who find their sympathies here are with Martha. It's many believers too. So we too need to hear Jesus reminding us whilst we are servants, there's something else that's more essential to who we are. Listening. I am a servant. But the point of this last section of Luke 10 is that there's something even more basic to who I am. I'm a listener.

### **- a listener**

Listening to Jesus is how the Christian life begins. As I've just been saying, we don't enter the kingdom by working or loving or serving. We enter by listening to Jesus and receiving what he reveals to us. But listening is how life in the kingdom continues too. Listening is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple from the beginning to the end.

But what do we actually mean when we talk about listening to Jesus today? After all, for Martha, that wasn't a complicated thing to work out. He was in her lounge-room, in the flesh, and he was talking! But Jesus isn't in our lounge-rooms- at least he's not in mine. Not in the flesh anyway. So how do we listen to him now?

Well, in some ways that's a whole other sermon. But at the very least today I should point out that this is why we Christians take the Bible so seriously. Because in the Bible we can read the words Jesus actually said when he was in the flesh in people's lounge-rooms, like we have this morning/evening. In the Bible we have page after page of the words that come from the mouth of the Lord. And this is why we read the Bible in our homes, on our i-phones on the way to school or work, and when we meet together on Sundays and during the week. That's why we pray that the Spirit of the risen Jesus who still speaks through these ancient words would give us ears to hear his voice.

And this is also why we don't just read. Because true listening is not just about words going in our ears. It's about the truth of those words penetrating our hearts. So we meditate on God's words, we turn them over and over, we pray about them, we talk about them with others, we read what other people have said about what they mean. We might take some time to regularly walk on the beach and to talk with Jesus about what he's said. We might carve out a whole day every so often just to swim around in God's word and to let our minds and hearts soak in it. We treasure time alone with God. Like Mary, we're attentive to Jesus. We attend to the Lord and to his word.

And we let it shape us. We respond when it corrects and rebukes us. We're provoked by it into work for Jesus, into the love of our neighbours, into ministry. We relish the way it grows in us the character of Jesus and teaches us repentance and obedience. Because we know that there's a real danger of listening but not putting it into practice, there's a danger of just hearing and not also doing<sup>12</sup>.

But we also know that there's another danger- one that Jesus warns us about here. And that's the danger of being distracted from hearing by doing. This is the danger of being like Martha- being so busy trying to be a servant that we fail to be listener. And we must hear Jesus on this point this morning/evening. Even ministry can deflect us from listening. And that applies to the person writing the sermon for Sunday as much as to the mum or dad running a busy household. Jesus says to us through these words- it's better to be a listening disciple than a busy servant. It's better to be a listening disciple than a busy servant.

So let me ask you. Is there time each day when you slow down to listen to God's word, or are you too busy and too distracted to make time for this? Do you find your Christian identity in your service of others, in your ministry, or in who you are as a little child before him, hanging on every word the Father speaks? Are you comfortable being alone with Jesus, or does that just feel like an awkward silence? Is your mind full of worries and things you're upset about it, or are you focussing gladly on the words of Jesus your Lord?

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<sup>12</sup> See Luke 6:46-49.

Of course, there are many things that are important for life in this world, and Jesus isn't saying here that we should all give up eating and drinking, and give up our jobs or our education, and give up social interaction and just retreat to a cave somewhere with torch and a Bible. He's not saying that. Because we are servants. There is work to do for Jesus. There are people to love. But Jesus says that there's something more necessary than all those things. There's something more essential to who we are. Humble listening to Jesus.

And that word "humble" is important isn't it? Because this final passage of Luke 10 lands us where the previous two did as well. At the heart of being a disciple of Jesus is humility. It's the humility of being a little child rather than one of the wise and learned. It's the humility of knowing you need to be loved and justified by God rather than trying to justify yourself. And it's the humility of being a listening learner at the feet of Jesus.

And humility is at the heart of discipleship precisely because of who it is that we follow. Ultimately, Mary's response was not better than Martha's because listening is better than serving, but because Jesus is better serving. Martha was in the kitchen. Mary was with Jesus. Jesus who deals compassionately with the suffering. Jesus who sees through hypocrisy like a laser. Jesus who has no tolerance for injustice. Jesus who absorbed the terrible way he was treated with seemingly limitless patience. Jesus who heals people, who forgives people, who tenderly restores the broken. Jesus whose life was taken from him on a lonely cross outside Jerusalem as he suffered and bled for the sake of people everywhere who've spent so much of their lives failing to listen to him. [Pause] I don't know if you noticed this but in the very first verse we read today/tonight Luke told us that this interchange between Jesus and Martha and Mary happened while Jesus and his disciples were 'on their way'- verse 38. On their way to where? [Pause] Well, let me take you back to Luke 9:51<sup>13</sup>.

[Read 9:51]

Jesus stops on his journey to share this valuable lesson with his two friends Martha and Mary, and with us. But this was really just a detour. He was headed for his destiny in Jerusalem. Because that's why he'd come. He came because he knew that the only thing more essential to our lives than us listening to him, was him enduring death in place of us. And that is by far the most astonishing thing Jesus ever did, and the most powerful word the Lord ever spoke. And I want to ask you tonight what Luke asks each of us in his gospel: Is there anyone who deserves your attention more than the man who came from God, the Lord of heaven, who surrendered himself to death that you might have life?

Can you see why I say that when it comes to listening in the kingdom, the issue is not so much how we listen as we who listen to? Because there's no one worth listening to as

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<sup>13</sup> cf. 17:11.



much as him. And that's why there's nothing more essential than listening. Mary understood that. Martha still had that to learn.

You see- at the end of the day that's what these five verses are here for. They're not here to tell us that Mary was better than Martha. They're not even primarily here to tell us that Mary's response to Jesus was better than Martha's. They're here to tell us that Jesus is better than every alternative. They're here to tell us that the man who was in their lounge-room that day is the one every faithful Old Testament Jew longed to one day see and hear. He's the one who every spiritually hungry person in their day longed to spend time with and to listen to. And he's the one who every wise person since the days of Mary and Martha has paid careful attention to. Because all the ministry in the world and all the other voices in the world and all the distractions in the world only last a lifetime at best. But you can have Jesus forever.

I have a friend called James. And a couple of months ago he lost his Dad. I knew James' Dad and he was godly man I had the deepest respect for- a humble man who served Christ faithfully and who'd spent decade after decade listening to Jesus. And I was texting with James in the weeks before his Dad died and he was sending me updates on his Dad's condition. In those last few weeks James' Dad could no longer serve anyone- everyone else was ministering to him. And in his last few days he couldn't even talk or eat. He was largely non-responsive. Except for one thing. When his wife or one of his children read the Scriptures to him he would nod his head as he listened.

And that's what I want for myself. I want to listen to Jesus till my very last breath, to recognise his voice with joy, to die with his words ringing in my ears. And that's what I want for my children, for all those I love, and for every one of you watching today/tonight. Because I am a listener. And if you're a disciple of Jesus, you are too. And you can listen to other people for as long as life lasts, and you can be distracted by a great many things- many of them good, and you can have years and years of ministry that bears great fruit. But one day they'll all come to an end. But you can have Jesus and his words forever.

An hour came for James' Dad when he stopped nodding his head. And he stopped breathing. But the next thing he heard was the voice of Jesus. And he's still listening to him now.

[Read 10:41-42]