

WHEN GOD SPEAKS ARE YOU WILLING TO LISTEN?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

The Gallup organization recently asked a randomly selected group of 1,236 adults the question, "Would you say you have made a commitment to Jesus Christ or not?" A record 74 percent said yes. That percentage is up from 66 percent in 1988 and 60 percent in 1978. In releasing the results of the latest poll, the organization noted that "the findings are based on what people say about themselves and do not necessarily indicate a deep and lived-out commitment." In other words, 74 percent said they had a relationship with Jesus Christ, but not all had one in which they were going to listen to what he said about living out their lives to his honor and glory.

Now when we come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as our Lord, we come empty and spiritually bankrupt, for we were designed to house him. Then as Lord of our lives he saves us, and we are told, "You are not your own," but our life now belongs to the Lord. We find out from the Scriptures that our new Lord wants to offer his plan of redemption to mankind in and through us in a variety of ways in our generation. In order to accomplish all that he wants to do through us during our stay on earth, we need to listen to him as individuals and as a church when he speaks to us by his Spirit and the written word. As a result of our deep and lived-out commitment to him, which includes our willingness to listen to him, we live in a way that glorifies him. We experience within the wholeness, peace and joy he promised us, and through us he brings redemption to the world around us.

This morning I want us to turn to Luke 9:37-50. We will address the question, "When God speaks, are you willing to listen?" For on the Mount of Transfiguration we heard the words of Our Heavenly Father to Peter, John, and James: "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" (9:35.) Notice that this is not a suggestion, but a command. We need to listen to our Lord because he has "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). We will be encouraged from our study to practice three spiritual lessons he has for us on the subjects of living by faith, serving in humility, and encouraging our brothers.

I. Listen carefully! A lesson on living by faith

Luke 9: 37-45

Our Lord has just experienced his wonderful transfiguration on the higher slopes of Mount Hermon. While praying in his humanity he was ushered into eternity and given again the glory he had before the incarnation, "...before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). Once he entered into eternity he was seen by Peter, John, and James speaking with Moses and Elijah about his forthcoming exodus by way of the cross, burial and resurrection, and his return to the Father. For me the most wonderful part of the transfiguration was our loving Lord's willingness to step out of eternity, where he fully knew his own glory, power, and authority, back into time and space and walk toward the cross as the passover lamb who came to take away the sin of the world. As you will recall, Peter, John, and James saw Moses and Elijah with Jesus, and suddenly being enveloped in a cloud, they heard the commanding voice of the Father say, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" (Luke 9:35.)

One might ask why the Father would have to insistently command the three disciples to listen to his Son. Well, on two out of several occasions we have found up to this point, the disciples were not in tune with the plans of the Father or the Son. For example, after serving with the Lord for two and one-half years, they were still struggling with the issue of whether he was really the long-awaited Messiah. They couldn't quite figure out who Jesus was. That truth had come to them only within the week preceding his transfiguration by special revelation of the Father (Matthew 16:17). Then, shortly after that revelation, we find Peter and the other disciples out of tune with God's plans for his Son when Jesus told them that he must go to Jerusalem "...and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third

day."

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You."

But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (Matthew 16:21-23.)

Now in Luke 9:37-45 we have events going on at two different levels: On a human level, we have just read about the problem our Lord was confronted with as he physically descended the slopes of Mount Hermon to meet his other nine disciples. On a spiritual level, we have a picture of our loving heavenly Father having just arranged with his glorified Son for him to descend to earth with his glory veiled, in restricted humanity, to offer the hope of salvation to a fallen, Satan-controlled world littered with demonic and twisted humanity suffering the spiritual, emotional and physical consequences of sin. In the midst of their dark and hopeless condition, people were turning to the religious community, only to find it just as spiritually impotent as they were and equally dead in sin. Let's look at Luke 9:37-40:

And it came about on the next day, that when they had come down from the mountain, a great multitude met Him. And behold, a man from the multitude shouted out, saying, "Teacher, I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy, and behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly screams, and it throws him into a convulsion with foaming at the mouth, and as it mauls him, it scarcely leaves him. And I begged Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not."

Now according to the Mark 9:14-29, the Lord and his three disciples came down from the higher slopes of Mount Hermon to find a large crowd of Jews surrounding the other nine disciples who were in an argument with the religious scribes. But as soon as the crowd saw the Lord, they all turned and ran toward him and greeted him. Then a man who had a son said to the Lord, according to Matthew 17:15, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic [epileptic, literally moon-smitten], and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water." Mark 9:17-18 records, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and stiffens out." Mark goes on to record that the boy had been like this since childhood, and because of it the spirit had caused him to be dumb and deaf, and sought to kill him by throwing him into the fire and water. In summary, then, we have a young man who was an epileptic and possessed with an unclean spirit. As a result he was deaf and unable to speak except when the unclean spirit took full control and caused the boy to scream, go into convulsions, and foam at the mouth, and he was often in danger of losing his life as he fell into the fire and water, for unclean spirits, or demons, are always trying to destroy life. How the demon got into him we don't know, but this is a tragic situation. We see a father who loves his son, whose heart is absolutely worn out because he has tried everything and nothing has worked. He is desperate, and as he sees Jesus right in front of him, he goes for broke!

At this point let's address three questions:

(1) Are all those afflicted with epilepsy possessed with an unclean spirit? The Scriptures very clearly say no, because, according to Matthew 4:24, the people of Syria "... brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics (moon-smitten), paralytics; and He healed them." Matthew shows that people were able to distinguish between demoniacs and epileptics. But in some cases a demoniac may find an epileptic and possess him.

(2) Are all deaf and dumb persons possessed with an unclean spirit? No! First, in Luke 1:8-20, Zacharias, a priest of Israel, was performing his duties in the temple of Jerusalem when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that his aged and barren wife Elizabeth would have a child who would become the forerunner of the Messiah. This good news was

so overwhelming to Zacharias that he questioned Gabriel, and as a result of his unbelief, Gabriel said, "...you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words." In this case an angel caused Zacharias' dumbness. Second, take the story of Moses and his meeting with God at the burning bush. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and asked him to go to Egypt and deliver the people of Israel from their 400-year enslavement, he responded by protesting to the Lord, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." And the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:10-11.)

(3) Are some dumb, deaf and blind men and women around us in that physical condition because they allowed themselves to be possessed by an unclean spirit? According to the gospels, the answer is yes (see also Matthew 12:22). Satan seeks to counterfeit all of God's works, whether it be the incarnation, miracles, spiritual gifts, sending prophets, or causing someone to be deaf and dumb or blind.

May I speak a word of caution at this point? According to the Scriptures, this boy we have been discussing was possessed by a demon that made him dumb and deaf (Mark 9:25), but it is important that we do not attribute all sickness to demon possession. We need to keep in mind that sickness can be attributed to any of the following: (1) The consequences of the wrath of God against fallen humanity, resulting in some of us being born dumb, deaf, blind (John 9:1), or crippled (Acts 3:2). (2) The consequences of our own sin (1 Cor.11:28-30). (3) The work of God, as we just saw. (4) The work of Satan and his demons (Job 1-2). The reason I bring this up is that there are many now telling young Christians that these kinds of things are of the devil and they ought to be delivered, and it's not always the case. Our experiences need to be measured against all of these four possibilities.

Now let's look at Luke 9, verses 41-43a:

And Jesus answered and said, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you, and put up with you? Bring your son here." And while he was still approaching, the demon dashed him to the ground, and threw him into a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.

Six things occurred as the Lord faced the father of the boy, the disciples, the Jewish scribes, the boy himself, and the crowd.

(1) As the Lord returned with his inner circle of three disciples from the Mount of Transfiguration, the scribes were arguing with the other nine disciples (Mark 9:14), apparently about the fact that, as the father said, "I begged Your disciples [who had been known to cast out demons] to cast it out, and they could not." (Luke 9:40.) The scribes may have been challenging the disciples to prove Jesus was the Messiah by casting out the demon, and using their inability to do so to discredit Jesus.

(2) The Lord looked at the scribes and the crowd and said in an almost impatient rebuke, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you, and put up with you?" These were the same words Moses used in speaking to the nation of Israel in the wilderness because they had forsaken God and turned to idols: "They have acted corruptly toward Him, they are not His children, because of their defect; but are a perverse and crooked generation." (Deuteronomy 32:5.) They were attracted to idols because behind idolatry are demons. David Gooding, in his book *According to Luke*, wrote:

The boy's twisted limbs, convulsed features and disturbed personality, and the distress of the father at seeing his only son in that condition, were an all too eloquent picture of the distress of the Father at seeing his sons and daughters in Israel gone from him, attracted by false religion and demonic powers, and become perverse,

crooked and twisted at the deeper lever of their spiritual relationships. And all this as a result of loss of faith in and love of and obedience to the Father. For the Son of the Father, it was an almost intolerable distress to have to remain among such faithless and perverted sons. "How long shall I be with you, and bear with you?" he said.

(3) The only hope for this faithless and perverse generation was another touch of the power of the "Majestic Glory." They needed to see God again loving, caring, reaching out, touching. So turning to the father, Jesus said, "Bring your son here," at which time the demon sought to kill the boy one more time.

Then, according to Mark 9:22-24, the father said to Jesus, "...if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" You can hear the discouragement in his voice, can't you?

And Jesus said to him, "If You can!" All things are possible to him who believes."

Immediately the boy's father cried out and began saying, "I do believe; help my unbelief." I hope this is the prayer of all of our hearts, because he will help us!

(4) Jesus then rebuked the unclean spirit and said in Mark 9:25, "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." Before the demon came out he caused the boy to go into convulsions, and the crowd thought he was dead. So the Lord took him by the hand, healed him, and raised him up. What the Lord was able to do for this boy physically, he was willing and able to do for the nation of Israel spiritually, for he was ready to deliver them from the terrible and destructive hold of Satan if they would just put their faith in him as their Messiah. Someday it's true that the whole nation of Israel will be saved and healed as their eyes are opened and they see that Jesus is their Messiah.

(5) As a result of this miracle, the crowd were "all amazed at the greatness of God," but still were blinded to the fact that God was using this miracle to show his people his Messiah. God wants not our amazement but our heart's belief that his Son is our only hope for salvation.

(6) Later, the disciples would ask the Lord why they couldn't heal this boy, and he would answer, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you. But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17:20-21.)

Several years ago I became involved with a man who was demon-possessed. Several Christians had sought to cast out the demon to no avail. One day as I was running on the beach, the Lord reminded me that some demons can be cast out only by prayer and fasting. I decided to do that for three days. As I fasted for this man, I remember thinking how foolish it seemed, and yet the Lord, who knew all about demons, had spoken, so by faith I continued. I felt this was a small price to pay if the man could be set free from his torment, and I was willing to try to obey the Lord in this area. At the end of the three days, I went this man's house with two other brothers and found him in his right mind. I don't know what part I played, but I do remember that I was willing to listen to the Lord that day. What joy it brought to my heart!

Jesus also asked his disciples to listen to him in verses 43b-45:

But while everyone was marveling at all that He was doing, He said to His disciples, "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement.

According to the other gospels, our Lord left the crowd at the foot of Mount Hermon and began moving south into Capernaum in Galilee, then through Perea to Judea and Jerusalem. This period would be a time of teaching about the events that lay just over the southern horizon. He said to his disciples, "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." In Mark 9:31 he then

adds, "...and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." Remember that God the Father had just appeared in a cloud on Mount Hermon at our Lord's transfiguration and said to Peter, John, and James, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" (Luke 9:35) The Lord now turned to his twelve disciples and said to them, "Listen! My ministry and my life on this earth are about to come to an end, and the purpose of my life and ministry is about to be fulfilled, for I was sent to this world as the passover lamb "to save that which was lost" [Luke 19:10]. The plan begins in Jerusalem where I will be delivered into the hands of men. But don't be depressed, for after I am killed I will rise again." He wanted them to get the full picture here. Now this was the third time the Lord had mentioned his death as well as his resurrection: once at Caesarea Philippi before they went up to the Mount of Transfiguration, again as they came down the mountain, and now as they moved toward Jerusalem. But at no time did the disciples understand this statement.

On a human level it must have been very hard for the disciples to think about the experience of the transfiguration and see the miracle with the demoniac, and at the same time try to think through how the powerful Son of God was going to be placed into the hands of wicked men. It simply was too hard to understand. After all, hadn't Jesus been declared by Peter as "the Christ of God," and wasn't he always talking about bringing in the kingdom of God? And now he was talking about a death on a Roman cross. The idea of the Messiah being crucified by the Romans seemed to be a contradiction in terms. They also may have been afraid to ask the Lord to explain a little more because of the rebuke, "Let these words sink into your ears!" On a spiritual level it appears that our Lord had been breaking the reality of his coming death and resurrection to them slowly. We see this principle at work later when Jesus would tell his disciples in the upper room the night before he was to be arrested, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." (John 16:12.) But in any case God the Father seems to be concealing the truth for the moment. You might wonder why. I think the reason is that God in his graciousness continues to teach us step by step, day by day, year in and year out. We don't get all truth all at once. As Paul reminds us, "For now we see in a mirror dimly..." (1 Corinthians 13:12).

When God speaks, are you willing to listen ?

II. Listen carefully! A lesson on serving in humility

Luke 9:46-48

And an argument arose among them as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for he who is least among you, this is the one who is great."

Our Lord and his disciples returned to the city of Capernaum, and on the way the disciples were privately arguing about the question of which of them might be the greatest. The disciples may have been reviewing the fact that Jesus had selected Peter, James, and John to go up the mountain with him and left the other nine at the bottom of the mountain. Among the three it looked like the Lord was zeroing in on Peter to become the leader among the twelve. It appears that all of them may have been thinking of the coming kingdom without facing the issue of the coming cross.

Our Lord saw their hearts and knew that it would be necessary to deal with this spiritual problem now before he went to the cross, so that after the resurrection they would start off their ministry in humility rather than pride and competition. It is not wrong to want to be ambitious for the work of the Lord and to use your spiritual gifts to please him. But it is wrong to be ambitious within the body of Christ to the praise of men. So our Lord showed them how to determine who is the greatest. He looked around until he found a small child, and taking advantage of this teachable moment, he said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name [as unto the Lord] receives Me." A child has no position of power or influence; the most a child can do for us is to love us, and in return we are in a position to do many good things for the child. So he wants us as his disciples to receive all men and women with the same attitude in which we would receive this child, without partiality. That means we will receive men and women from all ranks of life, from the very poorest to the ordinary to the richest, in his name, and seek to help them physically, emotionally and spiritually. If we do that we receive

him. Then, whoever receives Jesus receives him who sent him. For the least among us is the one who is great. And our model, of course, is Jesus himself, as Mark 10:45 records: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

During the early part of my senior year of high school I was in real trouble. It was November, and, because of an argument with the administration, I had just been thrown out of the Children's Home where I had lived for some eight years. All I had was the shirt on my back, and I had nowhere to go. I remember how cold and helpless I felt as I walked some seven miles toward the home of the only man I knew would take me in, a humble English teacher named Don Vaughan. There were six or seven of us they just called "Don's boys." He would come around to the orphanage, take us to the shore, and so forth. He invested his life in us. I was about a mile from Don's home when I collapsed on the ground from the emotional strain, and the next thing I remember, as I was being put on a stretcher to be taken to a local hospital, was Don looking down at me and saying, "You're going to be all right, Ron. You're going to live with me until we can get you a place and a job." I then remember waking up in his guest room, warm and safe. I thought, he loved me so much, and I had no way to repay him. Some 15 years later he came out here to visit our family, and it was at that time I found out that he was a Christian all during my high school years, and I never knew it. I asked him why he never told me, and he said he knew they were "preaching at us" all the time at the home, and he didn't think I needed another sermon, but a cup of cold water in the name of Christ. My eyes were so full of tears, I couldn't see. "He who is least among you, this is the one who is great;" "the greatest among you shall be your servant."

When God speaks are you willing to listen ?

III. Listen carefully! A lesson in encouraging our brothers

Luke 9:49-50

And John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to hinder him because he does not follow along with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you."

In light of the rebuke the Lord had just given to his disciples over the subject of who would be the greatest in the kingdom, John may have been hoping for some praise from the Lord for the way in which he humbly reacted to a man casting out demons by saying, "Lord, you gave us power over demons, and we had a wonderful time doing that, but something strange happened to us recently when we all were walking here in Capernaum and saw a guy casting out demons in your name. But he wasn't in our gang, so we tried to hinder him." John may have been thinking that this man was not a true follower of Christ, and so he confronted him and sought to hinder him for casting out demons in the name of Christ. Now, there were many Jews within the religious community who could cast out demons (Acts 19:13,16), so casting out demons wasn't anything new. But this unknown Jewish fellow was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. John and the others moved in quickly to try to stop him because they had never heard of him, and they thought only they had the "patent" on casting out demons in the name of Jesus. However, there is no indication that they stopped him, although they tried.

In Mark 9:39 the Lord gives us more insight into what he said: "for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me." Earlier in Matthew 12:30 our Lord had told his disciples, "He who is not with Me is against Me." There our Lord was speaking of a man's inner response to Christ. But here in the Gospels of Luke and Mark Jesus was talking about a man's outward conduct. So they were to regard someone who did miracles in his name as one of them unless he spoke evil of Jesus.

I think at times this is a problem among us at PBC. Sometimes I'm afraid we think that when another Christian church or group outside of our ministry expresses the truth we are teaching about Jesus in a different fashion, with a different style of music, or form of worship, or style of preaching or teaching, or a different emphasis in the community, we seek in either word or deed to try to hinder them with an attitude that we are the only ones who are truly following the Lord. But each Christian and each local church and para-church ministry has been placed in this community by our risen Lord to proclaim the gospel in a variety of ways. "For he who is

not against you is for you." Menlo Park Presbyterian Church is not against us. Campus Crusade for Christ is not against us. Jews for Jesus is not against us. Young Life is not against us. PBC South is not against us.

The spiritual responsibility of this body of believers is to listen to the voice of our risen Lord as to what emphasis on ministry he desires for this local church within this particular community, then rejoice that he has even included us, and further rejoice in all the other ministering groups in the Bay Area who are seeking to listen to the voice of the risen Lord for their emphasis and direction.

In summary, if you were asked the question today, "Would you say you have made a commitment to Jesus or not," could you say yes, and, if so, does that commitment to Jesus mean you are willing to declare him Lord of your life? To declare him Lord of your life means that you realize that "you are not your own." You need to ask yourself the question, "When God does speak through his Son, the word, and the Holy Spirit, are you willing to listen?" If you are open to listen to the teaching of our risen Lord, then within this passage of Scripture are three spiritual lessons for all of us to practice: Develop a Christian lifestyle by the power of the Spirit in which you are living by faith, serving in humility, and encouraging your brothers in other ministries.

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