

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

² *One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. ³ The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel.*

Samuel answered, "Here I am." ⁵ And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

⁶ *Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."*

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

⁷ *Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.*

⁸ *The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."*

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ *The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" (1 Samuel 3:1-10)*

Are God's Servants Listening?

We had a wonderful Vacation Bible School this past week. 75 kids came! I'm thankful that God blessed us with so many children to hear his word. But in one respect this week was like every other week of VBS I've ever been a part of: sometimes, the kids had trouble listening. And it wasn't just the preschoolers. Even the older kids had moments when they tuned you out. Now, that didn't surprise me. I've been in the ministry too long to think that kids hang on my every word – I don't even think that about adults! Even though adults come here because they want to, sometimes they don't pay attention. I'll be honest with you, sometimes when I'm sitting on your side of the pew, my mind wanders. I'm not proud of that fact and I doubt you are either. This is our opportunity to hear God speak to us. We are God's servants. And servants need to know what their master has to say to them. But are we paying attention? **Are God's servants listening to him?**

I.

The story of Samuel leads us to consider that question. **Are God's servants listening? God's Word alone gives us God's message.** Samuel was the son of a woman named Hannah. But he was raised by the high priest, a man named Eli. One night just after they had gone to bed, Samuel heard a voice call his name. He assumed it was Eli. He ran to see what Eli needed. But Eli told him he hadn't called him and sent him back to bed. Probably, Eli figured that Samuel had drifted off to sleep and dreamed that voice was calling him. So Samuel went back to bed. Again, that voice called, "Samuel!" Again, he ran to Eli and again, Eli sent him back to bed. It wasn't until this happened the third time that Eli realized that Samuel wasn't dreaming – God was calling him.

Samuel and Eli lived in the Old Testament era when God worked through prophets that he called and spoke to directly. At Samuel's time, only part of the Bible had been written – the five books of Moses, the book of Joshua and a handful of psalms. Throughout the Old Testament era, when the people were still waiting for Jesus and the New Testament, God sent prophets to supplement their understanding. The word he spoke to men like Samuel was no different than the word he commanded them to write down. It was the same word of God that we have in our Bibles.

Eli knew that. So he instructed Samuel to go back and if God called again, to answer, **"Speak LORD, for your servant is listening."** Eli told him to give a response of faith. God did call again and gave him a message. But what about those earlier responses? Samuel and Eli lived in a time of spiritual decay. People were paying less and less attention to God's Word. Eli's own sons were known for disregarding the Word God had given Moses and the first message God gave Samuel was one of judgment against Eli's sons. So, it took Eli a little while to realize what was happening. And more important, God had to call Samuel four times before he listened. Each of the first three times God called, Samuel ran to someone else.

Now, I don't want to be overly critical of this young man. Rather, I think he illustrates what happens to believers in every time and place. Until Jesus comes back, we will always live in a time of spiritual decay. People today aren't all that interested in knowing what God's word really says. So even believers find themselves listening to the wrong people when they should be listening to God and his Word. How often don't we get our opinions from Fox News or MSNBC or CNN? How often don't we care more what our friends think than what God says? How often don't we treat their words as if they were the word of God?

And it's worse even than that. We often look for God's Word in ourselves. People treat prayer like it's the Word of God. Prayer is very important. It's a gift of God and I'm planning to teach a Bible study about prayer in September. But prayer is not how God speaks to us. Prayer is how we speak to God. While we need to talk to God, even more, we need to listen to him. We need to hear his word. In the same way, we Christians often treat our effort as if that's the Word of God. We're working so hard at reaching out or at changing our lives or at raising our kids – and we act as if somehow we're going to find God's directions for our lives in our effort or in our being good. In the end, what all this has in common is the basic assumption of our age: God speaks to our hearts. What does your heart tell you? What do you feel? People today treat those questions as if they were the same as: what does God say?

You know what? That's totally wrong. God does not speak directly to our hearts. God does not speak through our effort. God doesn't even speak in our prayers. We speak in all those things. God speaks through his Word. Today, the only way we can get his word is through the Bible. The Bible says, **“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”** That heart that you were born with, that heart that our society tells us again and again to listen to, that heart is deceitful above all things. You know what deceitful means, right? It means that it lies. And God's word says that it cannot be cured! Not in this life, anyway. We were all born sinners. That's the state of the human heart before God gets to it. And that sinful heart is totally and completely contaminated. It's not part good and part bad. It's totally evil. It doesn't want to know God. It doesn't care what God says. It believes that the only God we should worship is ourselves. So of course, our sinful heart wants us to listen to our heart when we want to know what God says.

All too often, even we Christians fall into that kind of thinking. Most of the time, it's not deliberate disobedience. Like Samuel, we don't know any better. We're just doing what seems natural and logical. But that's no excuse. Like Samuel, we have to learn that we will never encounter God until we encounter his Word. We need to learn that it is our own sin that drives us to listen to anybody else but God's Word. It's our own sin that finds it hard to listen in church. Like I said, I'm no better at that than you are. For that sin, we deserve God's punishment in hell.

But God has loved us. God sent his Son to take away that sin. Jesus stood in our place, first of all in life. We can't give God our whole and undivided attention. We can't live here without listening to the voices around us. We don't even know all the times and all the ways we let someone else lead us instead of God. So Jesus came to live a life of perfect attention to God and his Word. He never let anything or anyone take the place of God's Word in his heart, because Jesus' heart was perfect. Because Jesus was a real human being, that counted as true obedience. Because he was the Son of God, it counted for all of us. God sees us as perfect because Jesus was.

And then Jesus died on the cross to pay for all the times our minds wandered, for all the times we listened to the sinner in our hearts instead of to God's Word, for all the times we wanted something different because we wanted to sin. Jesus suffered the death and the hell we have coming for that sin. He paid every drop of it. Then he rose and declared that we are free from the guilt of our sin. We will not be punished for it, in hell or anywhere else. We will live with him in heaven.

And through that promise, Jesus created a new believer in our hearts. That believer loves God. That believer listens to God and his word. That believer wages war against the sinner inside us. And God strengthens that believer through his Word. God does a miracle – he built the power of the Holy Spirit into the Word and that Word conquers the sinner inside us and builds up the believer inside us so that we can hear what God really has to say in his Word. He changes us so that we listen to him.

II.

The Word of God is the way that God works in our hearts. It's how he gives and strengthens our faith. It's how he gives us power to live for him. It's how he leads us to want to live for him. It's how he tells us what a Christian life looks like. **Are God's servants listening? The Word belongs to young and old alike.**

How old was Samuel when the Word of the Lord first came to him? We don't know for sure. Probably, he was teenager – maybe even in his early teens. At that very young age, God made him a prophet, a man who proclaimed the Word of God. God gave him the word and he gave it to us as well. That word is not just for adults. It's for children, too. It's for every person who was born with a sinful heart. We all need to hear of God's love and forgiveness. And we all need to hear how God wants us to live. So, it was wonderful that 75 children – many as young as four years old – gathered here this week to hear the word of the Lord. And I can tell from talking to them that they understood the lessons. By the power of God, they took them home and made them a part of who they are.

Our kids need to hear the word. What do you think is more important for us parents to do? Provide food and clothes and an education for our children or teach them about Jesus? You know what I'm going to say, but here's why: food and clothes only last for here. Jesus gives them eternal life. For that reason, here at Peace, we begin Christian education at three and four years old and continue it all the way through high school. But don't think that's the end all and be all of Christian education. Our children need to hear the word at home. You, their parents, need to talk to them about Jesus. Ask them what they learned in Sunday school or VBS. Make the Word of God part of your life at home. Consider having regular devotional time with your family so that your children hear you sharing God's word with them.

To do that, you need to wage war against the sinner in your heart. At my last church, I once asked the church council how many of them had devotions in their homes growing up. Not one man raised his hand. I won't ask the congregation to raise their hands, because I know how hard it is for us to make the Word of God the center of our lives at home. It's hard for the same reason that it's hard to pay attention: the sinner inside us doesn't want us to listen to God's word. For us adults, it's also hard because we might feel like we don't know enough to lead those discussions. We're not qualified. I understand that feeling. But let me ask you, did you know everything about raising kids when your first child was born? Or did you have to grow into that job? It's the same with sharing the word with our children. We have to grow into the job. But you have to start somewhere.

And you need to hear the Word yourself. What are you going to say to your kids? Not what you feel in your heart, but what God says. But that doesn't mean you should be too afraid of messing it up to talk about it. God has done a wonderful thing. He gave us the written word. He built the power of the Holy Spirit into that word. But the power is not built only into the verses as you read them. It's built into the meaning. It's there whenever we apply and explain what God did through Jesus. That's why God's power is in sermons and Sunday school lessons. When you tell your kids what Jesus did and what it means, the power of the Holy Spirit will be working.

When you hear the message and then you share that message with your own family, God is working. He works in your heart while you listen. He works in their hearts while you share. And he works in spite of all our failings. We are sinners and we can never get it exactly, absolutely, right. It's amazing that anyone hears the word through our confused mumblings. But God built his power into the word. And he does his work even through us when we share that word. So hear it. Come to church and hear it. Come to Bible class and hear it. Bring it home and share it with your family. And God will work through that word. Amen.