

# A New Year's Resolution

Happy New Year sisters and brothers. Laura and I had hoped to extend holiday blessings to you all last Sunday, but a little bit of snow got in the way. We do hope you had a joyous and blessed holiday season.

We had a good, though sometimes chaotic, holiday season. One of our Christmas experiences was helping our 11-year-old grandson Rowan pick out one of his presents at Walmart. He made the comment that this was EPIC! That sounded pretty amazing, so I asked if there was anything better than “epic.” He immediately said “legendary!” I guess that present was really good, but we didn’t make it to “legendary” status yet. I’m not sure today’s sermon will be up to our grandson’s standards of “epic” and “legendary.” But just in case, a page of sermon notes is provided in the bulletin for you to follow, filling in the blanks and taking some notes if you like. There are also pens available on the back of many of the blue chairs.

The book on 2019 is closed; and as a new 2020 book begins, I challenge you to consider a specific New Year’s resolution we all desperately need to make. It’s a resolution we all consistently fall short of doing perfectly; one we all need in order to survive and thrive as followers of Jesus.

My Sunday School class on Luke is well aware of this resolution. It’s been our class theme ever since we studied today’s passage back in the Fall of 2017. We call the dramatic event that takes place in today’s passage “The Transfiguration”. Jesus’ appearance changes to something we might think of as sci-fi in our culture, and it catches our attention and dazzles us. Yet one of the most amazing and compelling things that happens, I think, is God the Father speaking. He intervenes in the middle of Peter’s ramblings to tell Jesus’ closest disciples (the big three, Peter, James, and John) something they needed to resolve to do better. Listen to what he tells them in verse 35:

“A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; *listen to him.*”

**Listen to Jesus!**

Even these closest followers of Jesus, who had been with him for nearly three years, were vulnerable to being distracted from listening to Jesus. It was true then, and it's still true for us today. You and I are vulnerable too, and we need to resolve to listen to Jesus like we've never listened before!

Do I have your attention yet?

You and I need to listen to Jesus like we have never, ever done before.

Do you believe that?

Listening to Jesus is one of the most vital, the most critical resolutions you and I as his followers can make. In order for us to make a reasonable, measurable resolution, one that has some teeth to it, let's explore today's passage and its context by asking the following three questions:

1. Why should we listen to Jesus?
2. What does listening to Jesus really mean?
3. What will help make us better listeners?

## ***1. Why listen to Jesus?***

If we care to admit it, we all struggle from time to time to listen to Jesus. The first question, why listen to Jesus, is like asking ourselves, who is this Jesus I am following? It's a question we should never tire of asking!

In our passage today, and the verses just before it, there are three excellent reasons why we should listen to Jesus. The first is found in verses 18-20. Listen to the exchange that takes place:

“Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “God's Messiah.”

Jesus preps his disciples with the question of who the crowds say he is. They give various answers to his question, none of them correct, by the way. Then he pops the big question, kind of like a Christianity 101 final exam for these disciples. “What about you, who do you say I am?” Without hesitation Peter declares, “God’s Messiah.” Peter states our first reason to listen to Jesus quite clearly: he’s God’s Messiah. He is not just “a” messiah, not a man-made messiah, but “the” messiah, the promised one from God. **Is He worthy? – He is!** Jesus is God’s chosen one!

Being God’s Messiah would seem to be enough reason to listen; but Jesus goes on to a second reason in verses 23-26. He teaches his disciples, and us, that following him is the easiest thing you will ever do in your life. Or is it? Listen to what Jesus says:

“Then he (Jesus) said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

Have you heard this before? Have you wrestled with what Jesus says here? Following Jesus is difficult, not easy. It’s a life that has a cost to it. It is a road we cannot travel unless we listen to Jesus.

Jesus follows this description of a difficult life with a solemn warning for those who do not listen to him. He characterizes those people as ashamed of him, and declares that he himself will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory. Sisters and brothers, it is absolutely necessary to listen to Jesus to walk the difficult path he calls us to; and in doing so, we make him proud of us. Let us not be ashamed of the one we claim to follow. Listening to Jesus is the only way we can navigate this life. By doing so he will welcome us home to glory with those words we long to hear: “well done good and faithful servant.”

Yes, Jesus is God's Messiah and yes, he is absolutely necessary for us to make the difficult journey in this life; but there is one final reason why we should listen to Jesus. Listen again at what takes place in verses 34-36.

“While he (Peter) was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them (the disciples), and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone.”

Here's the final reason: God the Father gives his personal divine endorsement to Jesus. This is my chosen one, listen to him! And notice, as the cloud clears, the disciples are left looking at Jesus alone. The message and visual is loud and clear: we need to listen to Jesus, and to him alone!

That's our Jesus. He's the one God sent. He's the one making it possible for us to live as he intended us to live. He's the one the Father said we need to listen to.

Those three excellent reasons should motivate you and me to listen to Jesus like we've never listened before. But what does it really **mean** to listen?

## ***2. What does it really mean to listen to Jesus?***

In my preparation, I found there is a difference between our Western concept of listening and the Hebrew idea. In a helpful article, Dr. Lois Tverberg puts it this way:

“The word that means “hear or listen,” *shema* (pronounced “shmah”) is an excellent example of the difference between Hebrew, which stresses physical action and Greek and Western culture that stresses mental activity.

Listening, in our culture, is a mental activity, and hearing just means that our ears pick up sounds. But in Hebrew, the word “*shema*” describes hearing and also its effects – taking heed, being obedient, doing what is asked.”

She goes on to give this illustration:

“Any parent who yells at their children, “Were you listening?” when they ignore a command to pick up their rooms understands that listening should result in action. In fact, **almost every place we see the word “obey” in the Bible, it is translated from the word “shema.”**

Has any parent not been there or any child not heard something like this? or perhaps, from my perspective, any husband for that matter!? I found a cartoon that puts it well **for us all**. (*cartoon is shown*) A husband and wife are sitting at the table. The wife is holding a letter and tells her husband, “I got the test results back from the ear doctor. You’re not hearing impaired, you’re listening impaired.” I can relate to this so well. How about you?

The author continues with what I find fascinating both as a Gentile, and as one who wonders what Peter, James and John understood when God told them to listen to Jesus.

“The word “Shema” is also the name of the “pledge of allegiance” that Jesus and other observant Jews up until this day have said every morning and evening. It is the first word of the first line,

“Hear (Shema), O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might... ” (Deut. 6:4-5)

By saying this, a Jew would remind himself of his commitment to love God, to dedicate himself to following God and doing his will.”

The disciples on the mountain heard God in effect say, “You know how you are supposed to pay attention to me and obey? Well, the same applies to Jesus!” By listening to Jesus, we express our commitment to him, we show our love for him, we dedicate ourselves to follow him and be obedient to him. That, my friends is what listening really means! **To listen is a call to action!** The question is, how are we doing? Is there anyone here today, anyone in the world that does not need to resolve to listen to Jesus like they have never listened before?

### ***3. What will help make us better listeners?***

Asking why listen to Jesus and what listening to Jesus really means, leads us to our final question: What will help make us better listeners? Here are two important practical ideas.

Every year around this time our church provides Bible reading plans, encouraging us to spend consistent time in God's word. Those guides are available today out in the Fellowship Hall and on the church web site at [efcbemidji.org](http://efcbemidji.org). Feel free to pick one up and use it. Our church office also has Bibles for sale each week.

As you read your Bible and listen to Jesus, have paper and pen handy. Try writing a summary of the verses you read. Put them in your own words. Write down ideas and questions that you think of while reading.

Another way to focus on God's Word is to choose a verse or two, and think about it all week. Write it on a card, tape it to the bathroom mirror, and over the kitchen sink. Use the verse as wallpaper on your digital devices. Talk about it with your family and friends. Really "chew" on the truths Jesus wants to teach us.

The point is, resolve to have a daily, consistent time spent listening to Jesus from his word. What is He telling you, and are you listening? Be personally responsible for your walk with Jesus.

Taking personal daily ownership of your faith in Jesus is one way to listen better. The second way I'm thinking of this morning has become less and less popular as I've watched over the past 40 years. It's called attending and participating in church, regularly spending time with the body of Christ. Followers of Jesus need to be invested in a local body on a weekly basis whenever possible. If this church is where you are attending, plug in! If you attend regularly someplace else, plug in there! We need to share our faith and what Jesus is teaching us with one another. You and I need to be encouraged and built up in our faith. And we need to encourage and build OTHERS up as well. The body of Christ has a give and take component that involves time and personal contact. **You are worth my time to invest in your life. Is it worth your time to invest in someone else?**

Both a personal daily walk and participation in the body of Christ Jesus are important, vital tools to sharpen and improve our listening skills. Are we ready to listen better in 2020? Faithfully using these tools will help us do just that.

## **Conclusion**

I started this morning by challenging you to consider a specific New Year's resolution we all desperately need to make, as we close one book and open a new one. In reality, sisters and brothers, we never really close the book on one year and open a brand new book. We simply turn the page and go on. We continue to follow Jesus. We listen ("shema") to him.

## **Listen to Jesus**

Listen to Jesus,  
he's God's true Messiah as Peter did say;  
Listen to Jesus,  
to journey this difficult life in His way;  
Listen to Jesus,  
it's what God desires most for me and for you;  
Listen to Jesus  
it's the best thing that we can resolve to do.

*Scott & Laura Engelstad  
12/29/2019*

Let's begin today, keeping our eyes and ears focused and tuned in to our Lord Jesus. Let's resolve to "shema," to listen, like we never have before. As Jesus would say, "he who has ears to hear let them hear!"

*(a short video on listening is shown)*

## ***Ending prayer:***

Lord Jesus,  
We confess we do not always listen to you like we should.  
Oh Lord, give us hearts in tune with your Word.  
May we be ever eager to hear your voice.  
May we listen to you like we never have before.

Amen

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