

Thursday Group Studies
The Fatherhood of God
Study 2
October 26th 2017

Listening to the Father

For the next three studies I plan to develop the following aspects of our response to the Father in Christ; Listening to the Father, Walking with the Father and Worshipping the Father. We will then complete the series with a study on, ‘The spirit of adoption.’ In this way we will attempt to keep in line with the theme of knowing the Father personally.

Introduction

Listening to the Father is simply another way of speaking about being Fathered or parented by him. It is not some ‘special’ attitude or knowledge gained by certain religious groups. Jesus it seemed had no problem or hesitation in listening. From the Garden on it has been essential for all humanity to listen, both for identity and joy. The central blessing of the Covenant had been rejected for religious non-listening. But when the true listener, Jesus of Nazareth, came few were listening and none like him. For Jesus the true Son, listening and hearing the Father was not just a good theological base for ministry, some pragmatic angle on being a good disciple, it was central to his life as a man (identity and joy), and therefore his ministry to humanity. ‘Like father like son’ was at full practical pitch in Jesus. But it was more than a mirroring of the Father we see in Jesus, it was utter delight. To like the Father meant he liked being a son. So for us to like being in the Sonship of Jesus then means we will be all about the Father (simple!!).

Entitlement Thinking and a miserly Father

We saw last study that what Jesus did and spoke was so much like Father he said it was actually the Father speaking and acting (John 14:24). The things he heard from his Father (John 15:15) were not simply instructions from a book but revelations from within communion with the mind and heart of the Father. Slaves are simply told what to do, friends are invited into the wonder and intimacy of what makes the other tick. So our Lord’s world/life was inseparable from the Father. But our world is far different. Nothing in the world system comes from the Father. I deal with just one aspect of this, our sense of entitlement.

We live in a world where personal and national entitlement, rather than a trusting appeal to the Father has become the mindset. To feel entitled is to presume two things. Nothing is freely given, it must be demanded and winkled out as a ‘right’. That is, the whole reality of Father’s prodigal giving is denied. Secondly we presume that we have the right to have or do something. This then leads to our life being the legal working out of our rights: In which case the true sharing of love is often forgotten because it seems so risky.

The world breeds this illusion of entitlement. It is seen as the way ‘par excellence’ to get and secure what we need, the way we can achieve our rightful fullness. Entitlement replaces trusting expectation. Where the heart of the Father is not known we must attempt to find our filling through human resources and systems. So we hedge ourselves around with entitlements of wealth, security, dignity, acceptance etc. This would never have entered the first couple’s minds before the fall.

They would have been too busy swimming in the flood of Father's gifts and giving to have sensed any need of entitlements. So it was for Jesus and so it is for us who hear and know the Father through Jesus. Listening to Father was not complicated for Jesus, why then is it for us?

Listening, a tricky business for Sinners

'Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.' Stephen Covey. To put it Biblically, when the human heart is driven by a conscience which seeks to justify itself then the ear is always listening with a view to replying not understanding. The ear will be hearing everything as possible put-downs or indications of weakness or strength, opportunities to claim our dues. The flesh cannot be silent or subdued in this world of squirming and erupts with veiled or flagrant self-justifying replies. It was so for the disciples prior to them knowing the Father.

When our Lord declared to the disciples that conversion to his life with the Father was impossible apart from God, Peter heard, what seemed to him, a condemnation of his so called piety. The Lord's words were heard with a view to the flesh replying. Peter began to protest, "*Behold, we have left everything and followed You!*" In other words his piety and sacrifice must count for something in the 'deal' regarding salvation. Peter was locked into a mentality of entitlement that heard nothing about his need of grace and therefore nothing of the Father's present mercy upon him. Peter knew nothing about Father's parenting. Peter's heart was all focused upon what he had given up not what Father was giving. In this sense he was the demonstration of a non-listening humanity.

But Jesus, truly listening to Peter, seeing the darkness of an un-Fathered man, refused to be drawn into arguing fruitlessly with Peter's flesh. Rather his words went directly to the heart of how it really is when Father calls and parents us. Gifts emerge everywhere, hearts are overwhelmed with the quantity and the spirit of them, and entitlement shrivels into the pathetic cry for divinity that it is. *Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life (Mark 10:23-30).*

Listening to Father opens our hearts to the Father's heart. We are no longer servants sacrificing ourselves for breadcrumbs off his exclusive table. We discover that the dungeon of our fear and dread and self-inflated entitlement, flames with light. Father's prodigality transforms our 'entitlement tombs' with flaming light. He does not offer us a candle to hold as we bump our way to freedom, counting every bump and seeking the approval of the world for every bruise. Peter found no affirming 'friend' in Jesus who would confirm him in his illusion that he had brought much to God. Rather he found a true friend who simply declared the grace of the Father, and allowed that to kill the root of religious striving. Peter, listening to his flesh cry out for due entitlements, would never come to love the Father of our Lord. First the pride of his 'sacrifice' for Jesus must die. He must come to the end of his religion. He must face the powerlessness of his strivings to produce love like Jesus had. This he would discover in the face and question of a simple little girl as his commitment to Jesus crumbled through denial into cursing. But when the Father had pulverized Peter's entitlement tower building, when he took him into the death of his 'listening Son',

being turned by the prodigality of mercy Peter loved the Father. The fullness of his Saviour now filled him.

So listening to the Father, his Son and the Holy Spirit is no simple matter for human beings. Hence the confounding words of Jesus, “If you have an ear then hear” Did Peter have a hearing ear? Not in the exchange above. Why was that? Was our Lord’s revelation of the present Father and His prodigious giving a figment of his (Jesus) imagination? Was the revelation faulty or deficient to men like Peter? Was Peter actually the main player still? Was he the ultimate determiner of gaining Father’s blessings? No, we are dealing with faithful Father and truly aware Son and patient Spirit, playing Peter out in his rebellion. Like ours, Peter’s heart was old and crusty, full of the entitlement scourge of his religion. Before he would hear he must be brought to the end of his self-sacrifice for God. He must be brought to the horror of seeing that the only thing he was entitled to was death. He must feel that and indeed feel it from within the holy bones of his Saviour. He must see the horror of his Jesus becoming his pride and self-serving spirit. He must see that to bring the blackness of his tomb of sin and guilt to its end his Jesus must come to his end. Peter’s conscience must hear from the only mouth that could speak it, “It is finished Peter!” He must hear from the only one who could take him, “Father, into your hands I bring Peter!” Then and then alone Peter would see his entitlements as the rubbish they always were. Then Peter would be awash with the prodigality of the Father’s giving and know it. Then Peter would be confronted with a creation in which the Father had given him all things. Then Peter would have ears to hear. When he “Tasted and saw” the goodness of the Father, then he had an ear to hear of more and more of Father’s goodness shown in Jesus.

Remember Alexander Smellie’s comment from our first study, explaining Edwards said, Knowing God, “Is not cold and careful task work. It is the outgoing towards God himself, in love and in life, of the soul which God has touched and inhabits. It is “the motion of a hidden fire,” trembling in the breast, warming all the heart, consuming in its ardent flame the dross of our sins, cleansing, energising and transfiguring us until – miracle of miracles – even we are heaven’s fine and burnished gold.” *Religious Affections* (p.9-10).

After Peter shed his religion and knew the Father as Jesus did he could write, *Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.*