

John 10:22 Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

Dear Friends in Christ,

A HEARING PROBLEM—OR IS IT A LISTENING PROBLEM?

A sure sign that we are not as young as we once were is when the hearing goes. My wife, maybe even children, could tell a story or two on me. But I'm not up for that much humble pie this morning, so you'll have to ask them. Yet, here is the irony, when someone is near death hearing is the last sense to go. When the senses of sight and smell have shut down, even after a person loses the feeling of touch, when she walks near death's door, a person can often still hear. More than one supposedly unconscious person has heard doctors or family members discussing the hopelessness of their medical situation. Imagine hearing that conversation!

Hearing is one thing. Listening is another. If you have kids around the house you know what I mean. And so do you married people, and anyone who has a boss. Hearing and listening can be two very different things.

People don't listen to the things they hear for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is poor hearing—it's not clear. Sometimes it is ADHD. A person just can't concentrate enough to make what he heard real. Sometimes people are so self-centered that they can hear what others say, but they just don't care enough to really listen. Sometimes we can hear and ever understand, but we run around shouting "La, la, la" with our hands over our ears so that we can claim we didn't hear. We heard, but we *chose* not to listen.

A Tangent – Jesus' Example Re: Church Traditions

But before I go further with the hearing and listening, I want to go off on a tangent. In confirmation class, the students love to lead me off on tangents. I guess they think it's kind of like recess. But you know that recess has a purpose too. Here is the tangent. Has anyone ever told you something like this: "We're Christian. We don't celebrate Christmas because it's not in the Bible." I'm not picking a fight here. I'm just offering an explanation because I hear that once in a while. Right here in our reading, that is what Jesus is doing—not Christmas, but something like it.

In the first verse of our reading we hear, "***Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area***" (22-23). Jesus was at the Feast of Dedication at the temple. The Feast of Dedication was a celebration that started about 150BC (just round numbers). The Jewish nation at that time was under the thumb of unneighborly neighbor, Syria. The Syrian neighbors desecrated the Jewish temple and did a bunch of other nasty stuff. The Jewish people revolted. When they revolted and re-took Jerusalem, they rededicated the temple. It was such a day of joy that to this day, the Jews celebrate the Feast of Dedication. Today it is called Hanukkah.

You will notice that this was not a celebration commanded by God in the Law of Moses. Other special celebrations like Passover and the Sabbath day, etc.—were all commanded by God. But this

one, the Feast of Dedication, was not. And yet Jesus was there in Jerusalem celebrating it. He had to travel a long way from Galilee to celebrate this day. A nice reminder that our customs don't need to be "commanded by God" or "in the Bible" to be valid in God's church. We should examine what we celebrate, and avoid things that are contrary to God's Word. But we can use our Christian judgment to celebrate things like Christmas or Easter or Reformation in a God-pleasing way, even though they are not in the Bible. Jesus in John 10, verse 22 is proof of that. But that is a tangent.

Hearing, but not Listening

Back to hearing and listening. People of this world listen to Christianity. And they pick up the things they take a shining too. And the parts they don't like so much—well, they ignore those. "I really don't agree with God on that point." Okay. He's God. You are dust. You're choice.

You get that same impression from the people around Jesus. They approach him, they encircle him, they ask him, "***How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.***"

In a different place, in a different time it might have been a fair question. But this is more than two years into Jesus' ministry. He had done miracles. He had changed water into wine. He healed people long distance. He had given sight to blind people and made the lame walk. He had fed huge crowds from a lunchbox. And now they say, "***If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.***" Perfect example of what I was saying. Some people can hear, but they don't listen.

Jesus answered, "***I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me.***" Jesus directed them to the proof. Anybody could claim to be the Christ. Over the centuries many people have claimed to be God's special messenger. Jesus knew that a claim by itself is meaningless. All the evidence was already on the table. So he tells them back away a bit and look at the big picture. And if they had stood back and looked at the 2+ years of Jesus' teaching and preaching and miracles, they would have seen clear proof. "***The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me.***" (25). The message was loud and clear. The only way they could avoid it was to their ears with their hands and run around in circles shouting.

Listening to, Not Just Hearing, the Shepherd

But some do hear and listen.

I really don't know that much about sheep. I have never tended any. I only know what I have read about them. It is said that sheep require more care than any other livestock. Among their many handicaps, the greatest is simply how they are built. They are built to be lunch for predators. They don't have claws or sharp teeth. They don't have the size of a buffalo as their protection. They can't run or jump like a white-tail deer. They don't have holes in the ground like a badger, nor can they climb trees like a squirrel. Sheep need a shepherd. But here is the point: sheep realize this. They know they need a shepherd. And the voice of their shepherd is known by them. Because sheep in some way know their vulnerabilities, sheep do not cozy up to strangers like friendly dogs do. Sheep are skittish. However, they do know their shepherd's voice as well as any child knows his mother's. And when sheep hear the voice of their shepherd, the sheep suddenly relax and can lie down. They know that one stronger than them is with them, and he will protect them. They follow where he leads because there is a circle of protection around him.

"***My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they know me.***" Those who do know him, by God's grace, they listen. They don't just hear, they listen.

Jesus once told a parable of a man with two sons. "[This man] went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?" (Matthew 21:28-31). Or to put it into the language of today's sermon, who heard his father? Both of them. Who listened? Only the one who went.

Let me be clear. Listening to Jesus does not make us into Christians. Being a Christian makes us listen. Listening to his father didn't make that child his son. But because he was his son, he went to the vineyard to work. Listening to the shepherd doesn't make you his sheep. You are his sheep, and you learn to listen to his voice.

So let's state it like a math problem. "If you are a Christian, then you will listen to Jesus. If you do not listen to Jesus, then you..." You fill in the blank.

Many are the people who claim to be Christians. Many are the people who have been confirmed as members of this church, who claimed that Jesus was their shepherd, but where are they? When will they listen?

"I don't have time for Jesus. Activities, work, I need rest, kids, family, car repairs, doctors. I know Jesus. I'll get to Jesus when I have the time." If you know Jesus, then when will you make time to listen? ***"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."*** If you listen to Jesus, then why don't you love your enemy? If you listen to Jesus, why don't you make God's kingdom, rather than retirement or a bigger house, life's priority? If you know Jesus why don't you stop your sinful habits? Tell the truth, even on the income tax forms. Stop looking at those websites and images. Put time into the people God has put around you instead of the latest technological distractions. Take care of the body God has given you. Admit your faults rather than covering them with half-truths. These are the things Jesus says. People who know Jesus listen to him and do what he says.

Which proves why we need a shepherd. We are defenseless before spiritual dangers. Equally great is the danger within. We do not accidentally wander, we love to wander. We prefer to wander.

Safety with the Shepherd

Which points out why we need a Shepherd. The shepherd Jesus loves us, even when we wander. He loves us so much that he laid down his life for us. He shed his blood to pay for our daily and continual sins. ***"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish."***

Not content to do that for us, he daily guides and guards us. ***"No one can snatch them out of my hand."*** For all who realize that they are surrounded by spiritual dangers every moment, who realize that they lack the power to resist the enemies, who admit they are only sheep who need a shepherd—for them, Jesus is near.

It is natural for every Christian to be concerned about staying in the faith to the end of life. But that worry is put to rest with these words, ***"No one can snatch them out of my hand."***

This is where we have one of the great mysteries of Bible teachings. On the one hand God's word warns us against falling away from faith. We can read these warnings in Hebrews chapter 6, in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 and in other places. But words in other places, like these words of Jesus, assure us of God's complete protecting care.

So is it a mixed message? I think it is one of those places where the final answer is beyond our understanding. It will be understood when Jesus comes again.

One man wrote this about these words of Jesus, "[Jesus' words] teach us, not about *our* faith but about *His* faithfulness... assurance concerning Him rather than ourselves."¹ Keep your eyes on Jesus, not on your own faith. Simply believe and accept that Jesus is faithful. Any time you feel that urge to wander out of the shepherd's care, you will hear the shepherd's voice. Don't just hear it, listen to it. Sometimes it is your own conscience calling you. Sometimes your friend, your parent, your pastor, your spouse. Listen to that voice of Jesus. He is keeping you safe in his hand. Listen to that voice that he is your Good Shepherd. Amen.

¹ Edersheim, 634; emphasis his.