

Hear, Obey, Shine
By Jason Huff
Psalm 119:97-108, 1 John 2:1-12, Luke 11:27-36

The Gospel reading today comes from Luke 11:27-36. Listen now to God's Word. "As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead he puts it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you.""

Have you ever really been in the dark? During our recent travels to upstate New York on country roads, we were amazed to find places free from what's become known as "light pollution." Those of us who've lived in cities for a long time forget just how dark the world can be without light. Driving in that kind of darkness can be really scary. It's hard to know where you're going, especially on dirt paths and roads without any painted lines. Light helps keep us safe – whether from running our car into a tree or not stubbing a toe in the middle of the night. Light can be a real lifesaver. I was reading about how a skier and a snowboarder got lost off a slope in Switzerland the day after Christmas. They called authorities on a cell phone, but the batteries went dead right afterwards. Just after midnight, the twosome were found...a helicopter spotted the faint dim light of their MP3 player. That tiny light was enough to find them. Today's passage teaches us that we can be a light shining in the darkness for all to see...if we will just hear the word of God and obey it, we will shine for God.

Today's story starts with Jesus teaching a crowd. A woman in the crowd calls out a compliment – "blessed is the woman who bore and nursed you!" This was a flattering remark to both Jesus and His mother. In Jesus' society, a woman's value was directly linked to the stature of her children. And what this woman was saying was not a new thought; way back in Luke 1, we learned that Mary was indeed blessed by God. Jesus is actually in agreement with the woman. What doesn't get translated well in the passage is the first word. In the Greek, Jesus doesn't just say "rather," He says, "Yes indeed, however..." He's adding onto the woman's words because they are incomplete. Mary isn't blessed just because she was the mother of Jesus. She was blessed for the same reason that anyone is blessed by God...she heard the word of God and obeyed it. And for the whole story that follows, that's the whole point of what Jesus teaches us. Hearing the Word of God and obeying it are the link to God's blessings.

Jesus goes on to explain why hearing and obeying are so important. Jesus tells the crowd that asking for more and more miraculous signs proved their wickedness. They were wicked enough that they weren't listening to the Word of God Jesus was proclaiming; instead, they wanted something to wow them. But the people of Jesus' generation would have the same sign as other generations – the preaching of the Word of God.

Jesus points first to Jonah. Jonah was a prophet around 750 BC best known for being swallowed by a big fish. He ran away when God commanded him to preach to Nineveh, a pagan city known for its immorality, because he wanted it to be destroyed. After three days in the fish, he got the picture and did what God commanded. Now there are parallels between Jonah's three days in the fish and Jesus' resurrection on the third day. But Jesus' point here is that God's only sign to Nineveh was Jonah's teaching of the Word of God. The whole thing with the whale wasn't a sign at all – the Ninevites didn't see it. They heard the message from this man who came from far away to warn them of their need to turn toward God, and that's what they did.

Then Jesus points to the Queen of Sheba. Back during Solomon's reign around 960 BC, a queen from the south – by a couple of different accounts, either Ethiopia or Yemen, several hundred miles away at least – came to hear Solomon's wisdom. She was so impressed with his ability to answer her spiritual questions that she gave the kingdom a great deal of her wealth in tribute to Solomon and to God. Again, Jesus shows that some listen to the Word of God and obey it without any great signs...just a clear presentation of God's wisdom.

Then Jesus says this...one greater than Solomon and Jonah has arrived. Jesus has come with power and authority from God and has done amazing signs, healings, you name it, things that those who heard Solomon and Jonah never saw. If people believed in God because of these lesser people, then why not believe God when His own Son has come to preach? Jesus light is shining to them. And when there's light, you have to put it out to shine for the world to see! A light isn't hidden; it exists to light the way for others. Now in Jesus' time, the eyes were seen as the gateway to the soul. That's why blindness was considered such a curse. The eyes were the way that light entered a person...not just physical light, but spiritual light. The danger that Jesus warned about was that these people could clearly see Jesus' actions and words and deeds and yet they still didn't believe. The light was coming into them, and yet they were still dark in their hearts. Jesus encouraged the crowd to be fully light, without any spiritual darkness at all, so they could act as lamps in a darkened world.

Jesus' says there are two parts to becoming spiritual lamps...hear and obey. Let's look at why these two commands are at the heart of Jesus' teaching. First comes hearing. In ancient Israelite culture, they took the call to know the Word of God seriously. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 says this: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." They took this so seriously that they did write Scripture on their doorframes and wove Scripture into their garments. It was that important to them to know God's Word. We have more Bibles and Christian books and music and spiritual aids available to us than any people in any part of the world at any time. We have no excuse to not take this first step and hear the Word of God.

So let's think about it this way...how much money would you be willing to spend if a doctor could offer you a pill so that you would live to 100 without any effects from aging, and then you'd die peacefully in your sleep? How much would that be worth? \$100,000? \$200,000? Certainly that would be less than the medical bills you could rack up living that long, right? So, with that in mind, how much money would you spend if you knew it could find you peace and security with God for eternity? \$500,000? A million? Can you believe \$50? A typical Bible is cheaper than that...and for those who don't like to read, for less than \$50, you can have the entire Bible on CDs that will play in your car. You can listen to a lot of Scripture in the time it takes to get to work or the grocery. Most of the Bible was written to be read in public...so listening in your car is a perfect way to be into God's Word. Sometimes, when you hear a passage or a book read out loud, things make sense in a new way; it gives you new insight. Do it every day for long enough, and it becomes a part of you. Now I'm not saying that listening to the Bible is going to make you a Christian or can make you have faith in Jesus Christ and receive eternal salvation. But when Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy, he said this: "The Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Being in the Word of God consistently can lead you to a point of real, saving faith in Christ.

OK, more interactivity this morning...by a show of hands, how many of you have memorized some Scripture...beyond John 3:16 and Psalm 23? Memorizing things has fallen out of favor in recent years because it's easier just to look up everything on a computer. I used to think that way, but now I realize just how important it is to know Scripture. When you do that, you have it in your head when you need it. When you're confronted with a moral dilemma or a question about faith, you need to know an answer that makes sense now. In our Christian Life class that will be coming up after the New Membership Class, we'll be talking about things like how to memorize Scripture effectively and sharing our faith in ways that make sense.

Let's get to looking at obedience. Question for you...how many of you learned how to do your job, either the job you do now or the job you did, from a manual? Or maybe from classes? How many of you learned from somebody teaching you on the job? Everybody's got to be trained somehow. The Bible trains us in righteousness. It tells us how God sent His Son to give us forgiveness and how we can be transformed by Him into godly people if we simply allow Him to do it. The Bible shows us how we can obey and what the transformation that God will bring about looks like. It gives us a means to know what it means to be right with God.

Now, think about it this way. How many of us would read the training manual for a piece of heavy machinery or a piece of equipment in the shop and then say, "I disagree with the manual, so I'm going to use this thing my own way?" Or when we forget how to use the equipment, do we just go ahead and turn it on anyway? That's the way to lose a finger or an eye, or even your life if you're not careful. The manual exists so that you won't get hurt, that you'll use the equipment the right way. The Bible is the same way; if we read it and forget about it or decide not to follow it because we disagree with something we read in it, we're setting ourselves up for disaster. But if we follow it, if we learn to obey it, then the Bible is being used for its right purpose. And unlike the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba, who obeyed God based on the limited testimony of Jonah and Solomon, we have the full Word of God given to us by Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself. As I'll be teaching in the Membership Class, you can have full confidence that the Scripture is exactly what was written. We have no reason not to obey it.

Once we have listened to the Word of God, we know what God wants of us and what He expects. Our ignorance is wiped away and we are left with obedience. And when we read the Word of God, we realize that we cannot obey on our own. Jesus' words are too difficult. In our sinful human selves, there's no way we can do it. But in faith, by putting faith and trust in Jesus Christ and turning away from sin, we can obey. The Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba obeyed the Word of God, even though it was something they only understood in part. It is a real possibility. And when we fail, we know that we have forgiveness through Jesus Christ, who became one of us, lived and died, laughed and ate and cried and walked among us, who knew the temptation of sin yet never did sin, so that we could be forgiven even when we disobey.

But obedience is what God desires. We aren't made simply for forgiveness. The Holy Spirit works in us so that we can become like God in our actions! Two weeks ago, we talked about checkpoints to see where we are along God's path. Obedience is one of those checkpoints where we examine ourselves. You can't obey unless you've heard the Word of God and know it; otherwise, how can you follow it? But the more we know of the Word of God and internalize it, the more fully we can obey! A lot of us pray that God might show us His will for our lives, what job we should have, what choices we should make...and sometimes the answers seem to come, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes we can't tell if things are happening because God orchestrated them or because they simply fell into place. But if you really want to know what God's will is, it's already been given to you. It's right in the Bible. If you hear and read the Word of God and obey it, you will be following God's will. It's that simple.

A lot of people think that the Bible is just about what not to do, but that's not true. There are things that the Bible says are off-limits for His people, but mostly, obedience is a positive thing. Obedience to God isn't just not being evil! It's being transformed. I looked this week at a random letter in the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Philippians. His teachings are all telling people ways to obey. He says things like, rejoice in the Lord! Let your gentleness be evident to everyone. Don't worry but present your prayers to God with thanksgiving! Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is admirable – think about these things. Put into practice what you have learned about being Christ-like. May your love abound in knowledge and insight so that you will be discerning. Look to the interests of others as well as your own. They're all things that make us obedient. Our nation's laws teach us most of the negatives, but God wants us to shine by our actions, to obey by carrying out His will and showing others what it means to be godly. We know how to obey by hearing. Hearing and obeying feed off one another.

It may sound like a lot more work than we expected to hear the Word of God and obey it. But those of us who are willing to do these things are called blessed by Jesus Himself. We become the same kind of light in our world that Jesus became in His time. We aren't a substitute for Him, but we light the way for others to find Him. We shine like a lamp put in the center of a room so the whole place is illuminated. Even if we're just one tiny light, in the darkness around us, that light makes such a huge difference! When we hear and obey God's Word, we have the chance to make an eternal difference. That's really important for us to understand.

Christian author C.S. Lewis wrote about just how important our perspective is on being the light of Christ to others. He wrote in his book *The Weight of Glory*, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations--these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit...remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you may talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.” Every single person you meet every single day is immortal, and each of us will be raised from death either to everlasting glory with Christ through His merciful forgiveness or everlasting destruction through his righteous judgment. What a blessing it is to be able to shine the light of Christ so that other people might see God’s glory and receive His forgiveness and enjoy Him throughout eternity!

Let’s leave here today determined to do as Christ commanded. Ignorance is no longer an excuse. Just by getting into the Word of God and studying it and determining to follow it, we can be saved through faith in Jesus Christ, and we can be a light so others might find salvation too. Let’s do it this week...hear, obey, and shine. Let’s pray.