



Hearing Jesus

Luke 8:16-21

Grace Waco | 3.3.24

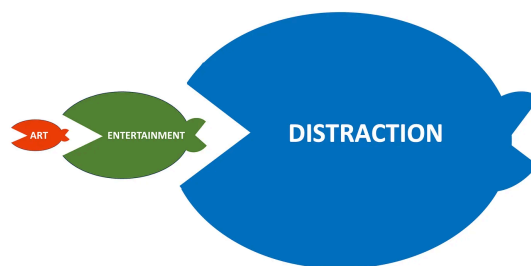
A few weeks ago I came across an article from an author I subscribe to, named Ted Goia, that began to make the rounds online. The article is called “The State of the Culture”.¹ In it, Goia attempts to provide a broad view of where American art and entertainment are headed, and comes to a bleak conclusion. In years past, the worry for most art critics like Goia was that entertainment would swallow up art. Less museums, more movie theaters. Less thoughtful music, more copy and pasted singles.

But the issue now is that, according to Goia, we have moved as a culture into post-entertainment. For the first time ever, there are less original TV shows being produced, and far less investment in new musical artists. I would even add that entertainment is becoming a bit stale: how many spin offs, sequels, and prequels can we all take?

The result is that there is a new industry which is dominating culture and swallowing up both art and entertainment: *distraction*.

“Call it scrolling or swiping or wasting time or whatever you want. But it’s not art or entertainment, just ceaseless activity. The key is that each stimulus only lasts a few seconds, and must be repeated. It’s a huge business, and will soon be larger than arts and entertainment combined. Everything (instagram, youtube, facebook, twitter) is getting turned into TikTok .

Goia images it like this:



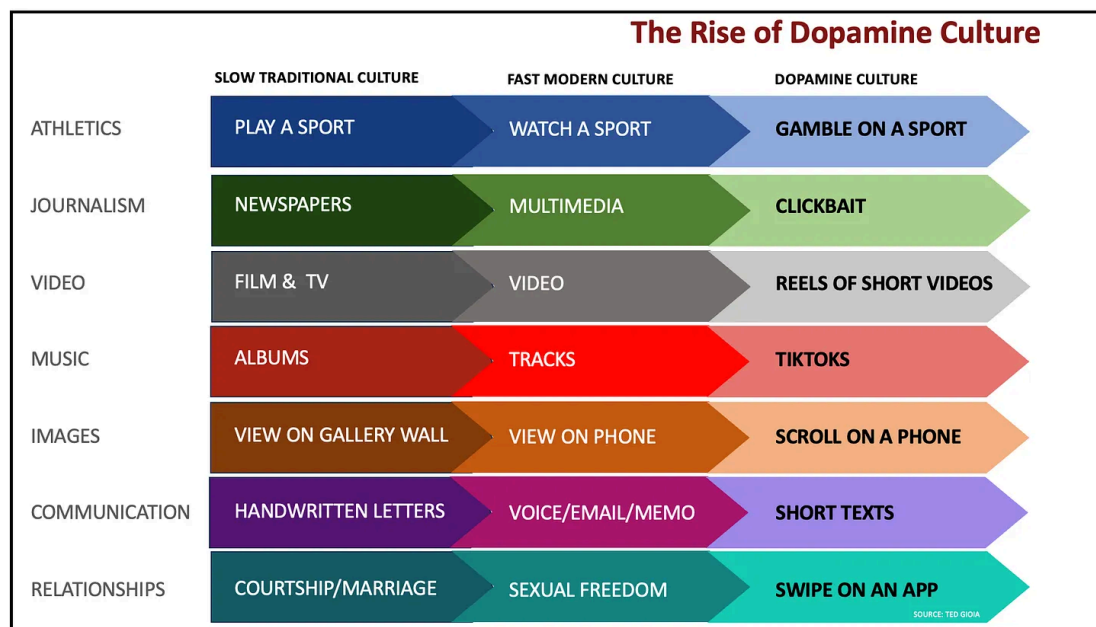
¹ <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/the-state-of-the-culture-2024>



The reason the demand for distraction is growing so quickly is because there is an addictive factor hard-wired into it. It's of course similar to the rush of Dopamine, the chemical released in your body when you feel pleasure, that you get with finishing a book or a TV episode that draws you in: but a book takes days to finish, a TV show at least an hour. In this model, you can get that rush of dopamine in a few seconds, which can form a habit where your brain needs this distraction in order to feel normal. One teacher describes this effect on young children:

I see it massively as a teacher. Kids desperately pleading for toilet breaks, claiming their human rights are being infringed, so they can check TikTok... saying that silence in lessons scares them or freaks them out. When I was at school I remember a lesson in which we got to watch a film was a relief or even pleasurable. My students today often say they are unable to watch films because they can't focus. I had one boy getting quite emotional, begging to be allowed to look at his phone instead.²

What Goia argues is that we are living in a “Dopamine Culture” where nearly every normal interaction is being subverted by this instant dopamine rush. Ultimately, the pleasure we receive from these hits lessens over time, so we actually need more or more intense iterations. It is very similar to how pornography affects the brain. The scariest thing is that Goia goes on to conclude, and I believe he is right, that big media outlets *know* they are fostering dopamine addiction, but double down because it profits them. Here is one more image to convey this:



I bring this extended introduction up mostly just to set up a contrast and show you how difficult it is to follow Jesus sometimes in our world. We need the help of God’s Spirit, we need the grace of God, especially when you look at our text today and see Jesus’ admonition in **verse 18**: “Take care

² <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/13-observations-on-ritual>



how you hear". Hearing, listening, paying attention—this is how the kingdom of God works. Or as Paul says in Romans 10:17, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." The word of Christ, we saw last week, is like a *seed* sown by Christ. It's the word of his Gospel, his good news of how he died and was raised so that we might die to our sin and be raised anew with him. The way we are raised with him is through faith—but we will never get to faith without hearing.

We all want to be the good soil from last week, because it produces good fruit. This week we learn that a heart with good soil is one who hears well. How can we take care how we hear, in a "Dopamine Culture"? Let's examine in our text three aspects of good listening: 1) Listening Expectantly; 2) Listening Humbly; and 3) Listening Actively.

Listening Expectantly

When I was in high school I once took a bad fall during basketball practice and thought I had a concussion. My whole world was kind of just spinning for almost an hour. My mom took me to the ER and as it turns out, my brain was fine, but I had busted my eardrum. When you can't hear correctly and you are used to hearing, it upsets your entire equilibrium and balance. Later I had to go back to an ENT doctor and get my hearing checked. And you put on these big headphones and they play these very faint noises—so faint that sometimes you think they are just in your head.

I think that often we think that in order to test our hearing, Jesus speaks in these very faint, almost indecipherable voices. Jake mentioned it last week—that oftentimes God feels like a "mystery" to us. He feels distant, like a low hum. And this is certainly true: God whispers more than he shouts. Sometimes he is a fire, but more often, he is the "still small voice" of Isaiah. But this does not mean that God does not want to be known.

Think again about the seed image. Just because a seed is small, doesn't mean it doesn't contain great potential. Late in Luke 13, Jesus will compare his kingdom to a mustard seed, which although the smallest of seeds, grows into the largest of trees. This is Jesus' point in **verse 16**. The image is quite simple. In Jesus' day, lamps were obviously candles fueled by oil or wax. A jar would immediately extinguish the light by cutting off the air. Beds were not lifted up off the ground on a frame but rested on the ground. To put any light under a bed would be to cover it completely. What kind of foolish person lights a lamp only to immediately extinguish it? Lamps are *meant* to be seen, to give off light.

Do not forget that Jesus is called not only in John's gospel the "Word" but also the "Light". Light, or lamp, is also an image used regularly in the Scripture to speak of God's word, as in Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." It's why as kids in church we learn the song: "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine", because what light is meant to be hidden? So Jesus' small parable here is illuminated for us in **verse 17**. In the end, everything will be known.



Which has at least two serious implications. First, **God himself will be made known**. He may seem a mystery now, but he *desires* to be known. He has not created the world and came to save his people in order to remain a mystery forever—his mystery is for the purpose of eventual revealing—like a Christmas present is wrapped to create suspense, but is intended only to be opened.

What this means is that we have an opportunity in hearing. We do not listen like those who doubt we will ever hear—we listen as those who expect to hear. We listen as those with *faith*. This is Jesus' description of the good soil, the good hearers, in **verse 15**. It is fruit that comes with patience, a quiet expectation that although we may not see the fruit right away, God is working.

Faith is not an empty leap in the dark. It is a leap, no doubt, but it is a leap with expectant hope that one day the dark will be made light, that all your questions and doubts will be answered. How do we know that God will reveal everything in the end? Because he has wrapped up all his revealing in Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us that Jesus is the “yes and amen” to all of God's promises. Which means that everything will be revealed *in* Jesus. He came to reveal God, the true light, and when he comes again, he will “bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” So when you are struggling to believe God desires to be known, when he feels distant—your comfort comes through this simple reminder: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

Listening Humbly

The first implication of everything being known is that God will be known. The second implication is that **we** will be known. God's secrets will come out, but so will ours. The lamp on the stand both illuminates and exposes.

I think you know how terrifying this sounds. No one wants to be exposed. Fear of exposure is the first fear of man. After sinning in the garden, Adam and Eve hid themselves from God, covered themselves up. Before, there were no secrets, now they living in secret. Before there was nakedness, now there is hiddenness. But when Jesus comes again, there will be nakedness again. Everyone will be seen for who they really are, and there will be a kind of separation: in one place Jesus calls it “sheeps and goats”, here in **verse 18** he calls it “the ones who have” and “the ones who have not”. When all is revealed by Jesus, there is a great divide that only gets greater. There is no middle ground.

Remember here in our text in **verses 16-18**, Jesus is speaking to his disciples—so this hearing is not simply the hearing of salvation, but of discipleship. It is the kind of hearing we need not just to come to Jesus at first, but to follow him closely until the end. In other words, hearing the word of Christ is vital for saving faith, but it's also vital for sanctifying, continuing faith. You can have a saving faith that hardly ever produces fruit in this life. It's those in **verse 14** — which I think



possibly could include some Christians — who grow some fruit, but never full, mature fruit, because of the thorns of the cares and riches and pleasures of life. It's a kind of half-hearted, miserable Christianity that never lives into the kind of fruitful freedom Jesus offers.

Spurgeon compares these followers of Jesus to those who enter into the boat of salvation, and cannot fall off of it—they will make it to their destination of life with God—but they can fall on the boat, break their bones, and spend the whole journey in the infirmary.³

So why should we take care to listen? So we don't end up fruitless, so we don't miss the real joy of following Jesus. Jesus tells us in **verse 18** there are two outcomes when we respond to his word. When he speaks, we can listen, and receive more and more life from him, or we can fail to listen, and what goodness we have will slowly fade away.

What is at stake is nothing less than our intimacy and our delight in Jesus. We may consider ourselves close to Jesus, good moral Christians—but if we do not listen to Jesus, whatever intimacy we have will be taken, choked out like the fruit in the parable from last week. Just like the quick hits of dopamine slowly fade into less pleasure, so if we fail to learn to listen to Jesus, to take care how we hear, our experience of Jesus and delight in Jesus will slowly fade away.

Later in Luke, Jesus will tell us that “unless we become like a child, we cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven”. G.K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* reminds us that it is precisely our desire to “grow up” and leave behind our imagination that dulls our senses to the beauty of God.

“When we are very young children we do not need fairy tales: we only need tales. Mere life is interesting enough. A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door.”

Remember that the dopamine culture we live in discourages our listening and encourages our addiction. Children are often obsessive, able to do the same pleasurable thing and again, but they are not addicts. It is much harder for them to lose that feeling of wonder by doing something again. I would venture to say it is because they are good listeners. You may not feel like your child or your little brother or sister is listening to you, but the reason children—especially babies and toddlers—grow mentally at such an astounding rate is because they are taking in so much of the world for the first time, listening to it, as it were. They are patient, in no rush to get anywhere. So Jesus says we must become like children again: ready to listen to the sound of his goodness, ready to receive, ready to learn.

All of this is confirmed by the second story in **verse 19-21**. The crowds are back, and Jesus' family can't get through them to speak with him. We aren't left with much of a story here: we don't know why they wanted to talk to him, or what they wanted to say. But Luke includes it here to make another point about *hearing*. Notice they are “outside” with the crowds. The way that we come into

³ I regret to say I couldn't find this in Spurgeon. But I heard it from Tim Keller. So if Spurgeon didn't say it, Tim Keller did. <https://podcast.gospelinlife.com/e/the-sower-on-hearing/>



intimacy with God, into his family, into being close and connected to Jesus, is not through our pedigree. It's not an assumed thing. The way we get near to Jesus, the way we break through the crowds and get "inside" with him, is by hearing his word.

But then Jesus adds a qualifier: we must not only be hearers, but *doers*.

Listening Actively

The reason hearing is not enough is because "real" hearing is not just information going into the head, but to use the previous image of Jesus, "real" hearing is like a seed going into the heart.

What Jesus means by "doing" the word of God is obeying the word of Jesus. It's following the way of Jesus. It's putting your money where your mouth is, exactly what has been exemplified by the story before this of Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman. Simon did nothing for Jesus—no water for his feet, no anointing, no kiss. The sinful woman not only heard Jesus, but *served* Jesus, sacrificed for him, laid her very self exposed at his feet. "Doing" the word of God is the step that happens when we hear the word of Jesus, understand the good news of his life, death, and resurrection, and take the plunge with him. It's baptism, it's worship, it's evangelism, it's faithfulness, it's repentance. James 1 says it like this:

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

In other words, "doing" the Word is a whole-life remembrance of the word. It's allowing God's word, God's seed, to sink deeply into your heart by faith and change you. It's the difference between moving from a consumer of dopamine culture to a family member in the kingdom of God.

Now here we must be careful. We can easily go on to say: "the way I listen is to follow the rules". And many of us are very good rule-followers. But good listening is not about following a set of rules, it is about following a person. The seed is not just the lowercase "w" word of Christ, but the uppercase "Word", Jesus himself. He is the seed that went into the soil in order to produce the miracle of hundred-fold fruit. This means that listening to the word is not simply about mental ascent to the teaching of Jesus, it is about listening to and obeying the *person* of Jesus. It is about attuning yourself, by his Spirit, to the *presence* of Jesus.

And there is a great risk here, a great fear. There is a great intimacy offered, fruit and joy and delight and kinship with the living God! But like the Israelites who turned away from Moses as he came down from meeting with God, we are scared of the extraordinary intimacy with God available to us. We are afraid because it requires the unmasking of everything, the revealing of our own secrets. It requires that we actually do something, change our lives, act in obedience to him.



In *The Magician's Nephew*, there is an incredible scene where Aslan the lion is singing Narnia into existence, a beautiful song of life. The children there hear it, but their stubborn uncle Andrew doesn't. As Lewis says, he "tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring, . . . [and] the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song." When at last Aslan spoke and said, "Narnia, awake!" we find that Uncle Andrew "didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl".

Like Uncle Andrew, we make ourselves stupider than we are. Offered the word, we settle for making a tamer version of Jesus. We make following him into a list of rules. We make Jesus into a religion. We make Jesus into a nice teacher. We hide our fears, our sins, our secrets. We lose the faith of a child. We would rather have the dopamine of distraction than to sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him. We would rather have the comforts of our own way than follow the hardness of his way. We would rather hide the light of the word he has given to us than share the gospel with those in need. And in so doing, we lose the word.

The Scottish poet Edwin Muir, commenting on a lifeless church he once visited, said that in their worship: "'The Word made flesh here is made word again".⁴

So if we aren't careful, if we don't really *listen* to Jesus expectantly, humbly, and actively, we can effectively "un-incarnate" Jesus. We can take the most incredible thing imaginable: the word, the gospel, that God was made flesh to "dying destroy our death and rising restore our life" into something normal again.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We can also listen: expectantly, humbly, and actively. We can turn again to the glory of Jesus. We have been given the evidence to listen to. On the mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus the Word and Light of God was revealed for an instant in all his glory to Peter, James, and John, a voice from heaven said: "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!". At the cross, the centurion said: "surely this was the son of God!" Appearing after his resurrection, Jesus revealed himself to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, pointing them to how the Word of God is all about him and is him.

Even in a dopamine culture, even now, through his Word, through his Supper, Jesus is calling to you, revealing his glory, implanting his seed that it might grow into fruit of joy and righteousness.

Don't try to make yourself believe you can hear nothing but roaring—Open up your ears and hear the song.

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/652-edwin-muir-the-incarnate-one>



