

## Did You Get the Word?

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Matthew 13:1-23

The Archie League Medals of Safety were handed out a few months ago. A few years ago I took an interest in the Archie League Medal of Safety awards because at one point I got to thinking about a group of people who have managed to keep me alive for many, many years. And they have kept you alive too. People you have not met, nor likely will meet. The Archie League Medal of Safety Awards are handed out once a year to air traffic controllers who have played a significant role in helping pilots avert serious aviation disasters. The Archie League Medal of Safety awards are focused on these men and women in the control towers of airports across our country who are minute by minute in conversation with pilots helping them get off the ground and back onto the ground. And sometimes it is their voice, their quick thinking, their split decisions that are the only hope of a pilot and plane in trouble. I think of Al Hurst, an air traffic controller in Southern California, received the award for helping two airliners, Southwest 2049 and SkyWest 6100, avoid a mid-air collision in the skies above Los Angeles. I think of Ken Hopf at Boston's Logan Airport who received the award for helping a young woman land a small plane she had never flown before after her father passed out at the stick. I think of Scott Dittamo in the Newark Air Tower was observant enough to notice that Air India Flight 145 on its final approach did not have its landing gear down. Last year the President's Award – given to the air traffic controller who executed “the greatest save” – was given to two controllers in Florida who guided down from the skies over Orlando a Cessna, piloted by a father with his young son sitting behind him, whose engine was on fire. This year the award was given

to two controllers who diverted a Piedmont Airliner seconds away from landing on an occupied taxiway instead of the runway at Boston's Logan Airport.

When I read about these stories it sensitizes me to those moments when I'm sitting in a Boeing 737 flipping through my magazine and we are making our final descent– that there is this conversation going on all around me of dozens of pilots in dozens of planes talking to the control tower hanging on every word of instruction so that they can get their plane and the souls on board safely to the ground. I love how in transportation they refer to passengers as souls. The lives and souls of tens of millions of people every year hang in the balance of the conversations that take place between these men and women in control towers and airplane cockpits. To get a feel for how important these conversations are imagine yourself sitting in a commercial airliner 35,000 feet up in the air that is getting ready to descend to your destination and by accident you hear over the intercom the pilot talking to the co-pilot and you hear him say, “You know Charlie, what do you say we turn off the radio and try to land this thing without talking to air traffic control.” And the co-pilot says, “Yeah, why not? We don't need them. We can figure this out on our own.” How does this make you feel? Do you applaud this pilot team for their sense of self-confidence and experience? Do you like their bravado and can do attitude? Or is it your every impulse to jump out of your seat and rush into the cockpit and threaten harm if they do not turn on that radio and listen to everything, and I mean everything that the air traffic control tower has to say? Disaster looms, doesn't it, if these people are not listening to what is being said from beyond? Danger ensues when the pilot does not hang on every word that should emanate from the lips of the air traffic controller. Some of you are pilots and so you know better than the rest of us what all this is about.

Last week we were in Savannah for the night and we stayed down along the Savannah River which gives you a front row seat to watch these massive

“For the truth is God is speaking all the time – the airwaves are full of the word of God...”

cargo ships make their way into and out of port of Savannah. It's staggering to consider how such massive boats – each a couple hundred thousand tons -- can float, not to mention dock. But then you realize that these massive vessels are so utterly dependent on the radio waves of the local control station and the tiny tugboats to guide them safely to their destination. One wrong instruction and disaster follows. You cannot arrive on your own.

Most if not all the amazing things we do as human beings we do not do on our own. Most if not all the amazing things we do as human beings we do not do on our own. We rely upon the guidance, on the words, the wisdom, the direction of voices beyond us. This is a truth that goes as far back as the first page of the Bible when God said it is not good for the man to be alone. We are more amazing when we do not go it alone.

And yet I wonder how many of us think that we really are going this thing alone? How many of consider ourselves alone in the cockpit with no headphones? How many of feel like we are piloting through life on our own?

It wouldn't be a surprise if that is the message you got somewhere along the way -- that you are in this thing by yourself and that life is a matter of learning from your mistakes, trial by error, and that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and that the best school to go to is the school of hard knocks. It's best to figure it out on your own. Turn off the radio and see if you can't land this thing without any help. In fact, the more you do it on your own, the more

respect you are bound to garner among your peers and colleagues.

Not so, of course, if you pilot a plane. It's a dangerous fool who pilots a plane without listening to every word from the tower.

So in an abrupt shift of metaphor, Jesus tells us a story about God, our Father in heaven, and he says that God is like a farmer who is out sowing seed. And the seed that he is sowing is the seed of his word. His word to us -- his message to us. And this word that God has for us is a word that when it takes root in us causes us to bear fruit. And not just a little fruit but a lot of fruit. And not just a lot of fruit but amazing fruit. Incredible fruit. That is the promise of this story of the sower and his seed: God wants to plant the seed of his word into our lives, each one of our lives, because it is God's desire to give us the opportunity to bear abundant and beautiful fruit. God wants our lives to be lives of bearing amazing fruit. Fruit that gives the world and gives us great joy. There is nothing better in life, I think, than when you are bearing fruit for the world to enjoy. And God's promise is that if you receive my word and let it take root in you, then you will be about the joyful life of bearing fruit. That is God's ultimate goal for you to give you the joy of bearing the fruit of his kingdom. It's not to whip you into shape. It's not to make you feel guilty all the time. It's not to keep some kind of scorecard on your life. God's word is intended to give you the joy of bearing fruit.

So it's no surprise that when we hear Jesus tell us this story about receiving his word the first and last

word we hear Jesus say is, “Listen. Listen for my word. Listen to my word. Listen.” In the 23 verses I read to you from Matthew, Jesus uses the words *listen*, *hear* and *understand* at least 20 times. Listen, hear, and understand. If you want your life to bear abundant kingdom fruit, listen, hear, understand.

For the truth is God is speaking all the time – the airwaves are full of the word of God – if only, Jesus says, we would but listen, hear and understand. God speaks to us in his creation. God speaks to us in his Son Jesus. And God speaks to us in his Scripture as Jesus teaches us to understand it. God speaks to us in creation. God speaks to us in his Son Jesus. And God speaks to us in his Scripture as Jesus teaches us to understand it.

God speaks to us in creation. The heavens are declaring the glory of God, the psalmist says. This incredible and beautifully balanced creation is giving us a word on God – God’s goodness and sustaining spirit, God’s creative web of beauty and interdependence – surrounds us every day in the earth and sky and water of his creation. Listen, hear, understand.

God speaks to us in Jesus – the incarnate Word of God – who takes on our flesh and speaks human language and tell us the stories of the kingdom and the standards of the good life. Jesus – the suffering servant who gives up his life for his friends and overcomes death itself. God with skin on with four accounts of his life in the Bible. Listen, hear, understand.

Speaking of the Bible – the incredible story of God and his people with a life lesson on every page – and Jesus the teacher who tells us what to pay attention to – Love God, Love Neighbor, Love Enemy. This sacred text, the word of God, handed down to us over 100 generations. Listen, hear, understand.

If you want to live an abundantly fruitful life, God says, you begin by listening, hearing and understanding my word – the word in creation, the word in Christ and the word in Scripture.

Now the thing is it’s not that you can’t manage through life without it. Millions and billions do. Millions and billions survive without paying much attention at all. They have families, hold jobs and sometimes even make a lot of money without ever listening. And God says, “If that’s all you want, then that’s all you’ll likely get.” But if you want the joy, the incredible joy of bearing kingdom fruit, of living your life for heavenly purposes, of discovering the deeper meaning of your days, then build your life around listening, hearing and understanding the Word of God.

Early in her ministry Mother Theresa heard a word from God that she should build an orphanage for the outcasts of Calcutta. She took this word to her superiors and asked their permission. “How much money do you have?” they asked. She reached into her pocket and pulled out three pennies. “I have three pennies,” she said. “You can’t build an orphanage with three pennies.” “You’re right,” she said, “but with three pennies and the word of God I can build anything.”

Jesus said, “... the one who hears the Word and understands it, it is this one who indeed bears fruit ... a hundred fold, sixty fold, thirty fold.” And this word? This word from the tower? Maybe the most important thing it does is that it tells us about all the other planes in the sky...the ones we can’t see out of our little window. Be concerned, says the word, about all the other souls.

Are you getting the Word -- the Word from this incredible God whose greatest desire is for us to have the great joy of bearing the fruit of the kingdom? The word of God surrounding you in the world. The word of God in Jesus. The word of God sitting on your shelf, that book called the Bible. You’re flying through the air ... and the word is all around you ... do you land this thing alone – or do you put on the headphones?

“For the one who hears the Word and understands it – it is this one who bears much fruit.”

So every Sunday in our bulletin we publish these Bible readings. This summer the readings are on the life and teaching of Jesus. An average of about 8-10 sentences a day. You probably read on average about 500 sentences a day of all sorts of stuff – at least I hope you do. And then there are these 8-10 sentences your church suggests you read called the word of God. The teaching of Jesus. Vectors from heaven. This seed that the farmer is sowing on your soil. Your soil. Is it rocky soil, hardened trafficked soil, thorny soil, or good airy open soil. Who knows? But I can tell you one thing the farmer is sowing. He is throwing seed left and right. He is showering you right now with so much seed that you look like you’ve been in a hay barn.

Listen, hear, understand. Headphones on. A word coming in. Fruit a hundred fold. And every hope for good landing.



# Did You Get the Word?

---

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell  
July 16, 2017

---

  
Church of the Palms

© 2017 Dr. Stephen D. McConnell  
3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323