

A NEW

# PLAYLIST

HEARING JESUS IN A NOISY WORLD



THE **CONNECTED** LIFE

JACOB ARMSTRONG



# **A New Playlist**

## **Hearing Jesus In A Noisy World**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **LET IN THE LIGHT**

My mom had me stand on the far side of the kitchen. She stood all the way on the other side of the living room. From twenty feet away she held a page of advertisements from the Sunday newspaper. "What does this say?" Mom asked. "Can you read this?"

I was caught. The jig was up. Mom now knew what I had known for some time. My inability to read aloud a Sears buy-one-get-one-free sale

revealed a simple truth that would be a game-changer for third-grade me. I could no longer see clearly. I needed glasses.

In my small hometown, the optometrist's office of Dr. Loyd Baker was in one of the oldest buildings in town. When we arrived, Dr. Baker took me into a little office in the back. With the lights off and illuminated letters on a back wall, he told me I was nearsighted and taught me the meaning of the term. (I know, you're saying, "I thought this book was about what I should hear, not what I can see." Just hang in. I'm getting there.)

After my eye examination, Dr. Baker brought me into his showroom of glasses frames. There were maybe ten to choose from but only two in children's sizes. The first pair, which he called a "Disney Special," had Mickey Mouse ears on the sides. I would risk certain death if I wore those on the Gladeville Elementary School playground. The second and only other pair available was made of a solid plastic that weighed more than most third-graders can lift. They were large. They were brown, the color of mud or something worse. They were ugly. I took a deep breath and pointed at the mud-colored spectacles. "I'll take those."

Two weeks later my glasses came in and I could see! I felt like a new person. That morning I was able to make out the dew on the grass and the clouds floating across the sky. I knew my new look wasn't great, but I was excited and hopeful about the day.

I had been on the school bus five minutes when I heard the first cry of "Four-eyes!" Yep, the name-callers of Bus 129 were no more clever than that — the old "Four-eyes." Still, it stung. I tried to stay strong, but as they came up with even more creative names for me and my new brownish glasses, tears began to form in the corners of my eyes. I'm sure now there were only a few insults, but they bounced around in my mind until they lodged in my heart.

The bus arrived at school, and I rushed to my desk in the front row of Ms. Settler's class. I had been given this special seat because of my inability to read the blackboard. Right before class started, I saw my teacher make her way toward my desk. I dropped my head. I didn't want to talk to anyone, much less my teacher. I wanted the day to be over. I wanted to

bury my head in my mom's embrace and tell her about the cruelty of elementary school. I imagined walking into my house and throwing the glasses across the room.

Ms. Settler approached, put her hand on my shoulder, and, in a voice that still echoes inside me, said two words that changed third grade forever.

"Cool glasses."

Cool glasses. That's what my ears heard. That's what my brain decoded. Sure, I was only eight years old, but for some reason ... I believed those words. I believed Ms. Settler. I believed she was right. I believed she told the truth.

I had to choose that day whom I would listen to, what message I would believe, and how the words would shape the way I was going to live. And third-grade me sided with Ms. Settler. I put aside the put-downs, I let go of the libel, and I let in the promise. I claimed cool. Henceforth, when I heard anything negative about my glasses I had something else to hold on to.

## **Jesus Sees Your Heart**

Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22). There has been much discussion about what Jesus was actually talking about in this verse. He was giving us a metaphor, and, like a lot of metaphors, it can be understood in different ways. I don't think Jesus was talking about just our eyes; he was also talking about our ears and our hearts. He was giving us a warning about what we choose to let in and what we choose to keep out. He was talking about living in a way that we let light in and keep darkness out.

For many of us, thinking about choosing what to take in and what to keep out is more easily said than done. Some of us feel that our lives are headed in so many directions that it would be difficult to slow down

enough even to make an assessment, let alone make changes. Think of all the things that come into your brain in a given hour. You might consider your to-do list for the day, the safety of your kids, your retirement savings, the heartbreak of a friend, and what time your favorite TV show is coming on. Think of the feelings that move through your heart. In that same hour you might feel content, tired, excited, frustrated, anxious, thankful, and angry.

In other words, there is a lot going on in your mind and heart — all the messages you're hearing and all the things you feel compelled to do. Assessing and changing those things seems too much to ask. You might think, *If you could just see my heart ...*

Well, Jesus sees your heart.

Let that sink in.

Jesus sees your heart.

Jesus *knows* your heart. There is no pretending.

And Jesus cares about your heart.

The verse from Matthew 6 about letting in light is found right in the middle of a section of Scripture in which Jesus talks about how much he sees, knows, and cares about our hearts. In Matthew 5–7 we have the longest continuous collection of Jesus' words. It is traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus said the words while seated on the side of a mountain.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with this description of the setting: "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them" (Matthew 5:1-2).

And when Jesus began to teach them on the side of that mountain, it was buckle-your-seatbelt time, because he took the religious understandings of the day — and really the way people looked at their lives — and turned

them upside down. It was a breathtaking sermon, if that's what we want to call it, that has stood the test of time for two thousand years. Nobody can touch it.

I think about that as someone who says and writes a lot of words each week. Usually when I go back to a sermon I preached a few months ago, I feel great sympathy for my church. Even in cases where it is a good sermon, it is not a Jesus sermon. Jesus' words become more, deeper, richer every year.

And I am convinced that what we hear from Jesus, in that longest continuous collection of his words, is someone who sees the hearts of busy, distracted people and cares enough to speak into their ears and minds and hearts words that could become a new playlist. Jesus has a new playlist for us that, if we will only listen, can change everything.

## **Jesus Didn't Keep Walking**

If you feel constantly on the move, know this:

*Jesus was on the move.*

After his baptism around age thirty, Jesus was on the move. He traveled from town to town across the sea and back again, from here to there and from there to here. His days were filled with speaking, teaching, healing, making miracles, and, we would assume, all the normal things that go with daily life. It was during those days that people began following him around — just a small group of friends at first, but then large crowds. At the beginning of Matthew 5, we learn that when Jesus saw the crowds, when he really saw them, he stopped. He went up on the side of a mountain that, before amplification, must have formed a sort of natural amphitheater, and he sat down before the crowds and began to teach. They could hear him. His words entered their ears, passed through their brains, and settled into their hearts.

Jesus was on the move, but when he saw the crowds, he didn't keep

walking.

*Jesus didn't keep walking.*

He stopped. He sat down. And he began to teach.

Now, that may sound strange to us. In our time, most people stand when they teach — behind a podium or perhaps moving around a stage. Often when I speak, I want to get my congregation's attention. I know they are busy. I know their minds and hearts are moving as fast as their lives are. I know they are tempted to look at their phones. So I use every technique I can think of to get their attention. I move from one side of the stage to another. I show a video. I rehearse my sermon until I'm blue in the face.

*But Jesus ...*

Jesus sat down to teach. It takes a lot to sit and teach, so we know that the words Jesus spoke carried great authority. But it's not the kind of authority that bosses you around; Jesus cares about your heart. The Sermon on the Mount is all about our hearts.

For centuries, religion had focused on outward expression, on what we do. This, of course, is important. But Jesus was more concerned with the movement of our hearts than the movement of our hands and feet. Jesus taught ideas such as these: "You've heard it said, Don't murder; I say, Don't be angry in your heart. You've heard it said, Don't commit adultery; I say, Be careful what you ponder in your heart."

It was in this context, speaking about our hearts, that Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22). What we open our hearts to can determine whether we live a life filled with light or filled with darkness.

## **The Last Hours**

I have the opportunity to spend time with people during their last hours



on earth. It is one of the greatest privileges afforded to a pastor. I stand with family members when we know the end is near. I sit next to bedsides and have conversation, prayer, and tears.

I'll never forget being with John in his last few hours. In particular, I remember the window. It was next to the hospital bed that had been brought into John's bedroom. As he spoke, the afternoon sunlight danced across his face. John had been one of my mentors in the faith. He had a fifty-year head start on me in the ministry, but he treated me as an equal. John was a former marine, a businessman, and a pastor. In my estimation, he had done it all. At the age of eighty, he beat me in a canoe race. He was the one who taught me how to serve Communion. He told me how important it would be to spend time with my kids. I loved John. He was fun, funny, and fiery. And in his last hours, he called me in.

John told me to look out the window. I did. I saw his yard. John said, "Do you see the road?" I didn't but, heck, he was dying, so I said, "I think so, John." He said, "That's the road you came in on." And he began to talk about my journey from where I lived to where he lived. He used my drive to his house as a metaphor for his life. He talked about the movement. He talked about the twists and turns. I don't know if it was the pain medicine, but it was incredible. I looked out the window with him, and I swear I could see his life. With clarity he talked to me about each church he had served, about his time overseas serving our country, but mostly about his family, his friends, and how good God is. He shared some regrets. He shared some mistakes. He shared his heart. John spoke of Jesus as if he just happened to be Jesus' closest friend. We stared out the window and felt the light on our faces.

I preached John's funeral. John told me what to say, and I kept my word. John — who lived an esteemed, distinguished, decorated life, who moved all over the world and had a million experiences — asked me to describe his amazement that Jesus cared about his heart.

I'm going to shoot you straight. I've sat with many, many people before they died, and I can't *ever* recall a time in those last few moments when someone wanted to talk about a beach house, a fancy car, a business venture, or a 401(k). I'm not saying those things aren't important, but in

the final moments, what people talk about is the condition of their heart.

They talk about regrets, often about fear, but mostly they talk about their family, their friends, their God, and their heart. Period. Deathbed conversations focus on children who have been taught, nights serving the less fortunate, and relationships that have lasted. People talk about vacations gone awry and moments of great laughter and surprise. They share stories that are amusing and meaningful. They talk about tragedies overcome and healing in the midst of pain. There is less talk about salaries and more about promises — promises shared with God and with people. These are the matters of the heart.

## **The Difficult Things**

Jesus cares about your heart. He wants you to open your heart to his words, to listen to what he has to say about the things that matter most.

*Hearing Jesus' words means letting him have access to the difficult things that affect your heart.*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about all the things that no pastor wants to talk about and no congregation wants to hear. Jesus covered it all: worry, anger, lust, where we spend our time, how we spend our money. If you're looking for an easy passage of Scripture to read, stay away from the Sermon on the Mount. Hearing Jesus' words can be difficult. But Jesus loves us so much that he won't ignore the things that affect our hearts the most. He just loves us too much. Jesus' longest sermon is all about what we let into our hearts.

So, if we want to hear a new playlist, we will first have to come close to Jesus to hear his words. Like the crowds that gathered around him, we will have to sit down and listen to what he is speaking over us. We will also have to be aware of the other playlists that we've allowed into our hearts in our busy, anxious, overscheduled culture. We have to recognize what is playing in our ears when we wake up, when we're at work, and when we go to bed. Some of these messages have become such a part of our lives

that we don't even realize we have the headphones on. But we do.

There is a playlist of distraction, schedule overload, and anxiety that is playing loud and clear, and it is crushing your heart. And so I want to introduce you to the new playlist found in Jesus' words. And you can choose to play it. You can put it on repeat and listen to it over and over again.

The playlist of our culture says, "You are supposed to do everything! You are supposed to be all places! You are supposed to say yes to all things! You've got to make everyone happy! You have to run fast, and you have to look good doing it!"

You feel compelled to be at the gym by six, get to the office by seven, work a strong twelve hours, keep the boss happy, get along with your colleagues, hit the grocery store, pick up the kids from ball practice, make dinner for everybody, go to the church meeting afterward, do the laundry, pay your bills online, finish the report, prep for the meeting, watch *American Ninja Warrior* (on DVR, of course), sleep six hours, and then do it all again. And, oh yeah, please make sure to post on Facebook to keep us all updated.

Our hearts tell us this can't be done. Our hearts are right. No wonder our hearts are anxious. Many of us are anxious right now, and it's because our hearts are listening to an unrealistic, ungodly playlist created by a culture that is moving too darn fast.

## **Simplifying the Complicated**

There were people in Jesus' day who were trying to do everything. Their schedules were full, and they were proud of it. They knew there was a lot to do, and they got it done. There were a bunch of rules to follow, and not only did they have these rules all memorized, they bragged about their one-hundred-percent success rate in adhering to them. Annoying, I know. They were the church people.

One of these groups was called the Pharisees. They weren't bad people. On the contrary, their intentions were good. They wanted to do all the things the law said to do. They wanted to be holy. They wanted to be faithful. Somewhere along the way, though, their desire to hear God's words and do what God said ended up leading to a bunch of stuff that had little to do with God. They were just doing. They were just going. At one time the Pharisees had 613 laws that they said had to be followed, 613 rules. Of these, 365 were negative commandments: "Don't do this." Only 248 were positive: "Do this." No one could follow them all.

These days, Pharisees get a lot of bad press because of Jesus' frequently critical words about them. I realize now, though, that I would have been one of them. Maybe you would too — faithful people trying to do all the things we're supposed to do.

One of the things the Pharisees did — I hope I wouldn't have done this — was try to trip Jesus up. They wanted to get him to say and do things that broke the rules. The reason, I think, was that so much of what Jesus said flew in the face of the playlist they'd been listening to.

*(Continues...)*

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