Hear the Word, Do the Word
Luke 8:16-21

A few months back we were given a set of head torches so we could go on night hikes. Now imagine if we invited you along to join us one night, and I gave the command to the girls – ok, turn on the head torches girls, because it's dark and we want to see where we're going; and then, having turned them on, we all stuffed them in our backpacks, and proceeded to stagger along in the dark, you'd think 'these Slacks are strange people'.

And that scenario would be funny if it wasn't that Jesus says that is exactly what some people do with the word of God.

Light and Exposure
Jesus switches metaphor from the word of God being seed falling on the ground, to it being light breaking the darkness. And Jesus says that the word of God, as light, is going to have two results:

Firstly, it lets you see the light: In v16 he says you put a lamp on a lampstand – and not under a bed – 'so that those who enter *may see the light*.' So the word of God is a lamp that *gives* light so you can *see* the light. Like a head torch helps you find the path at night, so God's word helps you find your way in a dark world, it helps you see the truth in a mixed up world.

But Jesus says the light of God's word also brings exposure. V17: 'for nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.' Jesus is saying that how people respond to his word reveals stuff about them. It reveals where our hearts are at. And as the light of his word shines in our hearts it exposes stuff in our hearts: areas of sin, or pride, or idols that we worship in place of God, and through his word the Holy Spirit convicts us of stuff so we can get it out into the light, repent of it and grow more like Jesus.

But the implication of what Jesus says in v16, is that not everyone responds positively to the light.

Smothering the Light
Having knowledge of Jesus' teaching is not enough. You could hear Jesus preach, you and I can come to church and hear a sermon, we can read our Bibles every day, you can have the light, but then stick a bucket over it. It is possible to hear God's word, but then smother its voice in your life.

Now, how and why would someone want to do that?

1. Disbelief. And for the crowd listening to Jesus this was the big one: they simply didn't believe some of what he was telling them. And Jesus' own family, as we'll see, almost certainly fell into the same camp. And if you're not yet a Christian this could be you. You see there is a spectrum we can fall along from outright rank rejection of Jesus, to seriously trying to work out whether this is true or not, but not being quite there yet. If that's you, don't allow disbelief to smother the light. If you are genuinely seeking the truth, you'll find Jesus to be true. And for Jesus' brothers it was the resurrection that persuaded them,

because it suddenly became clear that Jesus, their older brother, was who he said he was.

2. Not listening. We live in an age when anyone can have a blog, anyone can broadcast their thoughts, where everyone thinks their opinion is as valid as everyone else's. And what happens is that when it comes to the Bible, and eternal matters, people read or hear something and instead of listening we start speaking – 'well it might say that, but what I think is this…' And in our desire to say what we think, instead of listening, we smother God's voice.

3. Sheer busyness of life. Whether it's work or study or family, our lives can be so busy the word of God and listening and pondering on God's word are just squeezed out and the light is extinguished. However you do it, you've got to create the space to listen and to apply and to let the word of God shine in your heart.

4. Laziness. It is possible to just be spiritually sluggish. That was what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews diagnosed as their problem. They weren't maturing as Christians as they should and he tells them in 5:11 that they had become 'dull of hearing' – they're slow and sluggish and slothful when it comes to hearing and applying God's word. And if this is you, it's not that you don't have the time, it's that you spend it on other stuff: like TV, or internet surfing or whatever. And irretrievable minutes of your life tick past.

5. By taking offense. Maybe you hear the preacher say something, and you don't like it – it might have been good, it might have been truth, or he might have made fun of Americans which is bad, and would never happen here, but whichever it is, you take offense; or maybe you read something in the Bible, and take offence at that and think, 'huh, I don't agree with that'. And what happens is that this wall of offense goes up. We get huffy, and shut down. We take the bucket and put it over the light and smother God's voice to our hearts. Now, you might keep coming to church or you might keep reading the Bible, but you stop listening and pondering and applying. The wall deflects the light and keeps it from penetrating the heart.

6. By listening critically. In v18 Jesus says 'take care then how you hear' – so we need to listen carefully, but there is a difference between listening carefully and listening critically, just as there is a difference between going to a restaurant to eat and enjoy a meal and going there as a food critic to pick holes in the chef! And the sad truth is that if you have been around church long enough you can become a sermon taster, a food critic. And we critique what we hear through the paradigm of our favourite preacher, or writer, or theological system and the word of God never gets through to our hearts – we filter it out unless it comes packaged in a certain way.

7. When darkness pushes back. Spiritual darkness isn't an inert passive thing. Whether it is our own sinful nature, or sin in the lives of others, when darkness gets exposed it doesn't take it lying down; and if the Empire can strike back, so spiritual darkness pushes back. So when the word of God starts illuminating areas of your life that God wants to deal with, and you start fighting that sin,

things can heat up pretty quickly and sometimes the temptation is there to drop out of the fight, and succumb to the push back.

But you can also come under pressure from outside. That's what happens to Jesus as his family come for him. And whether it is opposition from friends or family or the wider society, when the push back comes we can be tempted to tone things down a bit and put a bucket of the word of God.

So if the danger is there as Jesus says to smother the word of, what's the answer? How can we allow it's light to shine and not extinguish it?

Take Care How You Hear
V18: Jesus says, 'take care then how you hear' - which means there action we can take that will help us hear well, and at the risk of burying you alive under points I want to give you five scriptural guides to help you listen well:

1. Listen with faith. In Hebrews 4:2, the writer is talking about the ancient people of Israel: 'the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.' You see it's not simply a matter of hearing it. To benefit from God's word you have to mingle it with faith. And the reason you can do that is because it is His word, and you receive it as such.

2. Listen with reverence: Modern society doesn't do reverence, and the concept of reverencing a book is totally alien to a culture that thinks the highest authority is our own reason. But just listen to what Paul says to the church at Thessalonica: 'We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.' (1 Thess 2:13). So the man or woman who listens with faith recognizes this is God's word and is going to give it a place way above what anyone else says. Our ideas and blogs and twitter comments are two a penny, but the word of God is in a different league.

3. Listen with humility: James says in James 1:21 'receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.' Su and I had a medical colleague who was just plain un-teachable. You could not teach her anything. She always knew better, she always had an answer. There was no humility that maybe someone could tell her something she didn't know. Now, if we want to grow and mature in faith, we've got to stay humble and open and teachable: my daily reading, this message, just might teach me something, so I'm going to listen.

4. Listen Thoughtfully: In 2 Tim 2:7 Paul he says something extraordinary to Timothy: "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything." In other words, 'Timothy, spiritual insight, understanding, knowledge, comes ultimately from God, it's his word, but he gives you that as you *think*.' So, this business of listening well, it's not about being a spiritual guppy fish, mouth open expecting to be fed, swallowing anything that comes along. It's thinking over what you read and hear, and as you think and ponder and meditate and study, God gives you the understanding.

5. Listen Prayerfully. So we listen with faith and with reverence and with humility and thoughtfully; all the time praying: 'God feed me from your word: as I read it this morning, as I listen to this sermon, as you shine your light in my heart, feed me from your banqueting table.'

And the reason this business of listening carefully matters, Jesus says, is because (v18): 'for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.'

Just like if you exercise a muscle it's going to grow, so exercising yourself spiritually pays back. But if you're a spiritual couch potato, if you just want to tell others your opinion, if you run away when the word of God brings things into the open, then like an under-exercised muscle, you're just going to get spiritually flabby. You're going to be the spiritual equivalent of the man on the couch with his can of beer, the only thing that's going to grow is your beer gut.

But Jesus says that those who make up his real family have a different attitude:

Hearers and Doers

As a result of the crowd, Jesus' mother and younger brothers can't get near him. Now Mark tells us why they've come to see him: they think he's off his rocker – 'He's out of his mind' (Mark 3:21). And let's face it, if you had an older brother who started going around claiming to be God and the Messiah, you'd be phoning for the men in white coats as well.

But the point is, if your family think you're crazy for becoming a Christian, you're in good company. In fact the Bible makes it pretty clear that if you are faithful to God and his word, you're going to face opposition and rejection. But Jesus says here in v21 that he counts you as his brother or sister – and if Jesus is your brother and God is your Father, you don't need to worry too much what others think.

And Jesus takes the opportunity to spell out what it means to listen carefully: v21: 'my mother and my brothers' – those who make up my family – 'are those who hear the word of God and do it.' Now, the order there is crucial. It's 'hear' first, then 'do'. You don't become a member of Jesus' family by doing good works. You become a Christian by believing the Gospel - it's his gracious gift to you, which you receive by faith.

But the Christian life doesn't end there. Like, 'I've believed, so now I can live like I want: where's the couch and the TV remote and the beer can?' It's: 'hear the word of God *and do it'*. And one happy irony is that the classic statement of what this means, is made by James, one of Jesus' brothers who was, in all likelihood, standing outside as Jesus was saying all this. This is what James says: James 1:22 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.' It's possible, James says, to hear the word of God and deceive yourself, because all you do is hear and not do, and you walk away and forget all about it. It doesn't change the way you live.

But it's the person who hears the word of God and does what it says who is the true member of Christ's family – because the word of God has landed in good soil and it's bearing fruit, you're fighting sin, repenting, serving others, laying down your life for your wife, when you get one. He's the Christian. Whereas Jesus leaves a big question mark hanging over the guy who says, 'yeh, I made a commitment to Jesus, I prayed the prayer' but he's been on the couch, life unchanged, ever since.

So instead of putting a bucket over the light of God's word, let's be those who hear it and then do what it says.