

## **How Do You Hear?**

Our New Testament Scripture is one of Jesus' parables that's included in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. It's also one of the two parables of Jesus which he explained to his disciples. These facts should underscore the importance of our Scripture for today. Parables are stories, what we might also call illustrations, to explain the meaning of the Kingdom of God. I'll read **Mark 4:1-20**:

*Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup>He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: <sup>3</sup>"Listen! A sower went out to sow.<sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup>Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."<sup>9</sup>And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"<sup>10</sup>When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.<sup>11</sup>And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; <sup>12</sup>in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."<sup>13</sup>And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup>The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup>These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. <sup>16</sup>And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup>But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. <sup>18</sup>And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, <sup>19</sup>but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>20</sup>And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."*

We preachers are used to having our sermons critiqued, and you people are graciously encouraging in your comments. Years ago, in my first pastorate I needed encouragement, perhaps more even than now. I understood the good intentions of a dear lady who commented to me, "Pastor, every one of your sermons is better than the next one." (That may take a while to sink in, as it did at first with me.)

Jesus is the perfect preacher, whose sermons are above our critique. When we find him preaching in our text today he's at the height of his popularity. The crowd is so great he has to preach from a boat out on the lake because of the press of the multitude. Any other preacher would be flattered by such a huge crowd. But Jesus knew how his sermon was being received by his listeners. And he turns the tables on us the critics and he critiques us. "Listen! Be careful how you hear," he says.

And then Jesus tells a story about a farmer, one that was very familiar to his audience. Perhaps as he spoke he pointed to a farmer at work on a distant hillside there in Galilee. Jesus pictures for us a farmer who is walking over a field, with a leather sack filled with seed strapped to his waste. The farmer by hand broadcasts the seed as he walks over the land, with all its great diversity of soil. Then, he gets his oxen and plows over this land, turning the seed into the earth, as the quality of the ground allows. And so Jesus tells this parable about the soils and says that each type of soil represents the different types of his listeners.

In farm fields, there were narrow pathways where the farmers walked between the rows of crops. This was hard ground, beaten by days and years of heavy oxen steps. Some of the seed that the farmer broadcast would blow over onto this hardened ground, which was impervious to the seed that lay exposed to the birds. Jesus says that the birds represent Satan, whose objective is to keep the word of God out of people's minds and hearts (15).

This hardened hearer is one who hears without reflection. Spiritual and biblical truth holds no interest. Biblical truth to such a person, even the words of Jesus Christ, "go in one ear and right out of the other" without penetrating the conscience. So, Jesus pictures the heart of the hardened hearer as one where Satan, like a bird, quickly and easily picks the word right off of the heart as soon as it's read or heard. The ground becomes hard because the pathway's busy, beaten down by much traffic. And the same is true of the hearts of many people today. Life is so busy, too busy in fact for the things of God.

Jesus speaks of the second category, shallow hearers. There were many who could be likened to the 2-3 inches (6-9 centimeters) of earth over a stratum of rock. When seed fell on this soil, there was just enough depth to germinate the seed quickly. But when the plants began to put down roots, there was not enough depth. Jesus was speaking about those who are initially enthusiastic.

These hearers receive the word, Jesus says, with joy (10). What preacher isn't delighted when the people hear him gladly? Jesus' hearers were so many that he had to preach from a boat out in the water to allow for the people to crowd up to the water's edge. This was an enthusiastic crowd, cheering Jesus along.

Some in Jesus' congregation were no doubt emotionally stirred, as they saw his miracles and heard his words. Perhaps some even wept, like the wealthy 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian aristocratic woman in the story, who wept inside the theatre as she watched a drama of a man who froze to death, while outside the theatre her own carriage driver was in fact freezing to death, desperately seeking shelter from the cold. It's very possible for people to get emotionally stirred and yet be oblivious to reality and spiritually unchanged.

Jesus says that these shallow hearers, like plants in shallow soil, wither away by the heat of the sun. Because they have no root, "endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away." (18-19). I have to question the quality of my faith when I ask myself what I would do if called upon to truly suffer for my confession of faith. What if I lived in North Korea, for example?

This next category describes those who have made a beginning but who simply, because of entanglement in the things of the world, have ceased being fruitful. And this type of hearer is perhaps the saddest, the most tragic of all, because these distracted hearers are so promising. It's one thing to have multitudes of shallow hearers, who have sauntered into the church for the excitement of a momentary rush of religious activity and feel-good therapy and then casually drift away, as easily and nonchalantly as they came in the front door. But then it is quite another matter when people "sign up" for the long haul, and by all appearances are dedicated to the cause of the Kingdom. In fact, some of the hardest workers in the church can have hearts that are totally unchanged by the gospel of the cross. There are a lot of good works going on, but hearts are far from God. It's sad and tragic to see those who once were apparently zealous in kingdom service become bitter or simply disillusioned unbelievers.

Some came to Jesus and indicated a desire to follow him, but Jesus knew that their lives were entangled. A devoted church worker might still be living under the control of another "lord," an idol, another god. People in pursuit of personal agendas never let the word of God penetrate their hearts and change their lives, attitudes and behavior. I have always been amazed how so many church people can keep functioning faithfully as good church workers in the organization, yet have hearts far from God and filled with personal ambition, animosity and bitterness that can spread like poison through a church's fellowship.

Jesus says to distracted hearers, who are being choked by some type of thorn weed or other, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (9).

And the good news is that Jesus sees that in his congregation there are always receptive Hearers (8, 20). This parable is about the various soils, but it's also about the seed of the word of God. Jesus speaks the truth about the inexorably successful word that accomplishes God's purposes: It will, as Isaiah says, accomplish what God desires (Isaiah 55:10-11).

The seed of the word falls on good "soil," upon the hearts of those who are open. These who are receptive are made open by the grace and Spirit of God. Jesus refers to this when he explains why he uses parables (4:10-12). No one can believe in a crucified Savior and king apart from the faith-inducing word and Spirit of God. So, that's why we must "listen!" as Jesus says. We who have ears to hear must be careful to hear and less intent on critiquing the preacher. Are we listening to God's word as though it were a matter of life and death?

In April of 1985, college student Michael Lewis, took a flight on Air New Zealand from London to Los Angeles, California, where he was to connect with another flight on to his destination near Oakland, Ca. Before the plane landed in LA, the flight attendant told passengers traveling on to Auckland to "wait in the lounge until an announcement of the flight." On hearing the word, "Oakland," Lewis complied. Then when a New Zealand official announced what Lewis thought was the airline's connecting flight to Oakland, he boarded and then settled into his seat for the one-hour flight. But less than ten minutes after take-off an elderly lady seated near Lewis commented with a sigh how she was dreading the long journey of 13 hours to Auckland. It soon became clear that he was taking a detour of about 13,000 miles and 12 hours in Auckland before he would finally arrive at his intended destination in Oakland. Explaining his "accidental odyssey," Michael Lewis simply said, "They talk different" (*Time Magazine*, April 15, 1985). Michael blamed the announcers, you might say, the "preachers," but he was not being careful how he was hearing. Receptive hearers do not want to take chances on eternal matters. We must be careful to be open to hear clearly the word of God.

Receptive hearers are those who hear the word, Jesus says, and accept it (20). It's one thing to know and quite another to obey. Accepting the word comes by walking with God and by being in touch with his word. We simply must let the word dwell in us richly and let it direct us and through the Holy Spirit shape us into conformity with the crucified and risen Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:16). This is what Eugene Peterson has calls "a long obedience in the same direction." No more than you, I don't like the tough times, and I wish the Christian life of obedience were easy. But it's not. But during the tough times often we are closest to Christ and most like him, who suffered for us. So, the receptive hearers are also productive.

Jesus spoke of the productivity of the good soil in terms of thirty times (a good-enough harvest), sixty times (more than most farmers would expect) and a yield of a hundred times what was sown ("beyond their wildest dreams" verses 8 and

20, *The Message*). The conclusion of this parable seems to be that all who belong to Christ are good soil and will produce some degree of fruit, the fruit of being like Jesus. Whatever the condition of our hearts, each one of us here today can become receptive, fertile and productive soil. God changes hearts.

Scottish preacher James S Stewart says, "Well, God has his own ways of deepening the shallow soil. Sometimes he drives a ploughshare of grief right through it. Sometimes he digs and delves with the instruments of discipline and affliction. The shallow soil, said Jesus, 'lacked moisture': sometimes the moisture God supplies is the moisture of bitter tears." Join me in asking God for grace to deepen and soften the soil of our hearts, whatever that may mean, whatever that might cost.