

Can You Hear Me Now??

And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" Thus Jesus ended His teaching. But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ...And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

You all are familiar with the parable of which Jesus spoke – it concerned a sower and seed. Of particular note is that He clearly indicated that it was a key lesson leading to the understanding of all the parables. This wasn't because other parables were 'built' upon it, but simply because it addressed the fundamental issue of how you hear the Lord. Jesus was saying, 'If you can't hear the message on hearing, how will you hear any other?'

The old adage, 'Seeing is believing' is patently false. On the other hand, to say 'Hearing is believing' is a basic truth of the scripture when it is applied to hearing from God. Romans 10:17 says, "So then faith comes by hearing the word of God."

Consequently, let's examine this important parable (Mk 4:3-20) in more detail for so much depends upon what and how we hear.

"Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow." Jesus clued them in to what the lesson was about with the first word – Listen! Or Harken! He used this exclamation with only two parables and each time added, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

In this case, He addressed hearing and in the second, speaking (Mk 7:14-16); that is, what goes into the heart and what comes out of it.

He explained that the sower sows the Word of God. Clearly, this pertains to all of us who share the Word whether pastor or pedestrian – anywhere, anytime. But perhaps even more importantly, it speaks of God Himself as the ultimate Sower.

And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. Jesus later said, "... these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts."

At another time, He also admonished, "Therefore take heed how you hear." (Luke 8:18) This is relevant to the parable because how one hears God's Word is directly related to the condition of the heart. In this first instance, the seed fell by the wayside or literally, "a traveled way or road". This isn't where seed is normally sown for it is hard-packed from myriad travelers. As a consequence, it has no chance to germinate for it never gets below the surface. The old saying is 'in one ear and out the other'. Not only that, but Satan himself is instrumental on stealing it away "immediately" through distraction, doubt and/or disputation. It's the ole 'harden and heist' ploy he has found so effective.

Hardened hearts cannot hear. That's why the scripture says, "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground." (Hosea 10:12). Hard

hearts are fallow ground and unreceptive to the seed that is sown upon it. Jesus said of the people of His day, "...the hearts of this people have grown dull (literally, thick).

Their ears are hard of hearing," (Mat 13:15)

So how is such soil broken up? It's plowed. "For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that plows should plow in hope," (1 Cor 9:10) Of course, many a missionary has held this hope. But pertaining to the heart, the important question is has God been plowing in your field? You know, many difficulties, trials and breakings come our way for this express purpose.

We need to remember that we cannot train ourselves to be Christians; we cannot discipline ourselves to be saints; we cannot bend ourselves to the will of God: we have to be broken to the will of God. (Oswald Chambers)

It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to produce rain, broken grain to give bread and broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. It is the broken Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever.

Dwight L. Moody said that one of the happiest men he ever knew was a man in Dundee, Scotland, who had fallen and broken his back when a boy of fifteen. He had lain on his bed for forty years and could not be moved without a good deal of pain. Probably not a day had passed in all those years without acute suffering. But day after day the grace of God had been granted him, and when Mr. Moody was in his

room it seemed as if he was as near heaven as he could get on earth. When Mr. Moody saw him, he thought he must be beyond the reach of the tempter, and he asked him, "Doesn't Satan ever tempt you to doubt God and to think that He is a hard master?" "Oh, yes," he said, "he does try to tempt me. I lie here and see my old schoolmates driving along, and Satan says, 'If God is so good, why has He kept you here all these years? You might have been a rich man, riding in your carriage.' Then I see a man, who was young when I was, walk by in perfect health, and Satan whispers, 'If God loved you, couldn't He have kept you from breaking your back?' " "And what do you do when Satan tempts you?" "Ah, I just take him to Calvary, and I show him Christ, and I point out those wounds in His hands and feet and side, and say, 'Doesn't He love me?' The fact is Satan got such a scare there nineteen hundred years ago that he cannot stand it; he leaves me every time." That bedridden saint of God did not have much trouble with doubts; he was too full of the grace of God.

Some things are ruined when broken, but the heart that God will use, is at its best when broken. (Mark Roper)

Jesus continued the parable, "Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away."

Through the course of gardening, I've noticed that plants in shallow

soil will put the energy of growth into their visible parts versus the roots just as Jesus said. At least, in this case there is some soil and a place for the Word of God to germinate. But a shallow heart is a fickle one.

The Lord continued, *“These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble.”* Often, when a plant has adequate soil conditions, environmental ‘persecution’ will cause it to generate more root growth and thus a more stable situation. However, when the soil is thin or shallow because it’s sitting on a bed of rock, the plant will wither under ‘tribulation’.

Isn’t it interesting how He characterized these as “immediately” receiving the Word with gladness. Visible receptivity of an audience is not a dependable measure of the effectiveness of teaching. The wise pastor/teacher knows that the length of the line at the tape booth after the sermon is not as important as the depth of the hearts that heard it. The rise of so much Christian celebrity in churches, denominations and in society at large is a testimony to the shallowness of our spiritual lives.

Popularity can be like a spiritual ‘narcotic’ if you would; among the pastorate, it is a plague that can blind the shepherds to the true condition of the sheep. Sadly, in these last days, it has skyrocketed even in movements that were once

very focused on the Word and obedience to the Spirit. And so, a lot of our churches are filled with folks that have a good display ‘above ground’ but not much root.

For believers, in pew or pulpit, seeking popularity among the congregation is very dangerous. Fundamentally, it is me-focused rather than Christ-focused. Now, most if not all of us naturally enjoy the ‘strokes’ of being popular. However, it is not the same as being loved, though on the surface it can appear that way. Popularity is a nice word for what is basically a subtle form of worship. Some Bible teachers think that the desire for it was the sin that toppled Satan (see Isa 14:12-17). Entertainers live for it – the ‘all eyes on ME’ desire.

Paul wrote to an immature Corinthian church caught up in the divisive cult of popularity, *“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?”* 1Cor 3:1-4

In the parable of the sower, you can consider the roots which come from the good seed as a picture of faith. Shallow, rocky heart soil responds almost too quickly to the seed because it’s a mostly visible, carnal, popular response. It does not result in true faith.

And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. Oh, those thorns! Many a good sermon has dealt with this. Jesus explained, “Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”

Let’s consider two things herein – cause and effect. The soil is good, the seed is sown, but the story is sad. This is because of three thorny issues – cares of this world, deceitful riches and lust.

We can recall from another parable that the sower of bad seed or tares is Satan. And though he is instrumental in fostering thorny thistles, he is not the sole culprit. Our own sin nature can do plenty of damage so to speak.

The “cares of this world” is literally anxiety and specifically pertains to eternal issues. That is, it isn’t simply your late mortgage payment or stress on the job. Perhaps more importantly, it points to insecurity and thus angst about the truly big issues – everlasting issues. Christians who are insecure in this way will not bear fruit. As people living in this world, we face all the extremities of daily life like everyone else. We aren’t exempt from them. As believers, we learn to deal with those difficulties and cares by faith and patience. If, however, we are anxious about eternal issues, those MUST be weeded out – such insecurities are not a part of God’s planting. They are founded upon lies and doubts. Paul wrote, “Be

anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;” (Phil 4:6)

“Deceitful riches” is also translated beguiling abundance. We are quite quick in this country to assume that all abundance is the blessing of God and that any lack of satiation is related to being out of His will. Wrong. Simply wrong. In fact, the scripture clearly shows that the fundamental problem in Sodom which led to its judgment was not immorality. Speaking to Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel declared, *“Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.”* This abundance led to iniquity – *“And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit.”* Eze 16:49, 50

I’ve got friends who have loved the Lord who landed that ‘great job’ and just disappeared spiritually. The Lord says, *“If riches increase, Do not set your heart on them.”* Psa 62:10 In fact, I’ll submit that one of the greatest perils in the affluent Laodicean church of today is the deadness of abundance (Rev 3:17). Of course, this is completely counter to what you hear in the so called Christian media. The Bible, however, is clear that although abundance CAN be God’s blessing, riches are inherently deceitful and beguiling. They choke the good seed and thus cheat you out of much, much more than they ever deliver. Christians are naïve to

believe every enhancement to their 'quality of life' in the carnal sense is heaven sent.

"Lust for other things" is simply the desire for everything else, i.e., what you don't have – perfect job, home, spouse, things, power, position, prestige... When you focus on what you don't have and thus lust for it, your 'achievements' are inevitably fruitless from a spiritual standpoint. On the other hand, when thankfulness fills your heart soil, spiritual fruit grows and flourishes.

Thus, these three things are thorns in your heart. They are the cause of unfruitfulness in the life of the believer. Now, for the 'effect'. Lack of fruit is the end result for sure but what we should note is the process – Jesus said that these things, "*entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.*" To choke, in the Greek, is 'to press round or throng one so as almost to suffocate him'. It's a cutting off of the air supply, the pneuma. This clearly points to the quenching of the work of God's Spirit which the Word says is indeed fruit (see Gal 5:22,23 and Eph 5:9).

The sobering part though is that this choking leads the heart soil to become unfruitful which, by definition, implies that it once did bear fruit or at least began to bear. Individuals, churches, movements and denominations are all at risk. Usually, this 'becoming' is so gradual that it goes unnoticed. People, churches and organizations that were once spiritually vital and fruitful often become only the superficial image of what they once were and they don't even realize it.

"But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." Finally, the good ground – it is broken up with enough depth to support hearty root growth. It is also free from thorns and thistles. As a result, "...*these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.*"

Three things are put forth – to hear, to receive or accept and to be fruitful. The first group in the parable represented those who never really heard the word. The second group heard but didn't receive it, that is, take it to heart. The third group heard and accepted but stumbled in fruit-bearing. This last group goes the whole distance.

Now, fruit glorifies God and more is better. Jesus said, "*Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.*" (John 15:8) However, there is no comparison given by the Lord between the fruit-bearers. He doesn't say or ever indicate that those who bear 100 fold should celebrate over those who bear 30 fold. In a similar parable about 'talents', the Lord gave to each servant a set amount of resources, to one, five talents, to another, two talents and to the last one talent. You know the story. (Mat 25:14-30) Apart from the doubtful sluggard who hid his one talent, the others gained an additional amount exactly proportional to what they had been given. Both were commended and rewarded.

In addition, we should comment on the fruit. First, it is always brought forth with patience (see Luke 8:15) and it comes in its season. Culturally, we are conditioned to expect quick fixes and 'McFruit' but spiritual fruit takes time.

Next, we must discern what's fruit and what's phoney. True fruit is the result of grace. In Leviticus 19, we see a picture of this principle – the law instructed the Jews who planted trees to wait until the fifth year to eat the fruit thereof. Five is commonly understood to be the number of grace in the Bible. In other words, the fruit God is looking for in your life is not the result of your own efforts – it is not a work of the flesh. If you don't believe me, find an apple tree and put your ear near its trunk. (You can pretend you're inspecting it if anyone sees you.) Now, listen closely. What do you hear? Nothing! No grunts or groans. And it isn't even sweating! Yet, in due time, out pops the sweetest fruit. It's the sap. No, not you,... the tree! Ha! It's the tree's sap. Seriously, in like manner, it's the Holy Spirit in you that brings forth divine fruit.

The Word identifies the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. You can think of it as primarily being love which is manifested in joy, peace, patience, etc. Also, you can consider it simply as a fruit with multiple attributes. Think of say a watermelon – it's green and red and it has seeds (usually) and it's watery and sweet (usually)... it's one fruit with many descriptors. Such is the

fruit of the Spirit. Now, the scripture has much to say about fruit, so I recommend that you do your own study on it. Just remember, the fruit that glorifies God is the work of His Spirit.

So how do you hear? What is the condition of your heart soil? Recall, Jesus said, "*Take heed how you hear.*" And the prophet proclaimed, "*Break up your fallow ground.*" In other words, it's our responsibility – the receptivity of our heart or how we hear. Like Mary, we should sit at His feet, so to speak, to hear Him (Luke 10:39). When we do, we'll follow as sheep with their Shepherd (John 8:47a, 10:27). May God give us wisdom to listen, to submit to the work of His Spirit when our field is being plowed, to be faithful in weeding out the thorns and to be patient in bearing much good fruit.

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

