

Ears to Hear
Matthew 13:1-23

Why don't they get it? This is the teacher's perennial lament. You've determined the objectives you want your students to learn, keeping in mind their ability and interest level. You've designed your methods with the objectives in mind, and implemented them carefully. You make up a test, based solely on the objectives that you have taught. You've done everything right. But half of the class flunked the test. What went wrong?

Jesus knew that His disciples would have similar experiences. He knew they would encounter such frustrations and disappointments. And so, to give them some perspective, He taught them the Parable of the Sower, a parable which is indeed a great comfort for preachers, and for all those who try to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

And why is that? Because the main point of this parable is that God is the One Who is responsible for the results of the Ministry of the Word. It's not the quality of the preaching or the witnessing that somehow produces the outcome. Instead, the response is determined by the heart of the hearer.

Jesus makes this point shockingly clear, as He quotes in verses 14 and 15 from Isaiah 6, which we read responsively this morning. In that passage, God sends Isaiah into a preaching ministry, but at the same time tells him that his message will fall largely on deaf ears. And just as Jesus packaged his messages in parables, so God told Isaiah to tell the people not to understand. God told Isaiah to bring about heart-hardening and spiritual blindness among his listeners.

Now this makes no sense at all. In the first place, anyone who has spent any time in the book of Isaiah knows that he was nothing if not direct. In fact, he's so straightforward about the nature of the people's sin and so insistent about their need for repentance, that we often put the book down, wearied by the repetition. Isaiah didn't try to hide anything from anyone.

And neither did Jesus' disciples. Are there any writings in the Bible more clear about the need for repentance than Peter's epistles? Did John hold anything back about the divinity and humanity of Christ? Paul may not always be easy to understand, but the essence of his Christ-centered message, that God saves sinners by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is never in doubt.

So why don't people understand such a clear message? Well, think again about the main point of the parable of the Sower and the soils: the reason that people don't receive God's truth doesn't lie in the message, but in the heart of the one who hears. That's why Jesus says that anyone who has open ears should hear His words. The comprehension problem isn't in the speaking, but in the hearing.

So, what are the different types of hearers? In what different kinds of soil will the seed of the Word of God will be sown? Jesus says the first group of listeners are like soil by the wayside, and we all know what happens to ground that is used for a path. In dry weather it becomes packed down and hard, so any seeds that fall on it would just bounce off, and would therefore be easily consumed by scavenging birds. Seed that falls on the wayside has no chance.

What does that have to do with human hearts? I think it points back to the sobering truth we encountered in the previous chapter, the sad fact that some people's hearts are simply hardened against the gospel. The Pharisees, for example, were so determined not to trust in Jesus that they could look at His miracles of healing and come to the conclusion that His power was not divine but demonic. And Jesus said that people who had become so hard, so opposed to the clear work of the Holy Spirit could not in fact be forgiven – they had passed the spiritual point of no return.

And don't we get glimpses of a similar sort of hardness more and more often in today's world? With violent crime soaring and murder rates rising, with anarchists trashing our largest cities and with the twin scourges of cancel culture and anti-semitism spreading in what used to be known as the land of the free, we Americans have no room to deny that evil does exist in this world. And unfortunately, that means there are some folks who never will respond to the good news of Jesus Christ, no matter how sincerely or winsomely it is presented. Just like the birds carry away seeds scattered along a path, the gospel never has a chance to take root in all too many hardened hearts.

But that's not the only problem Jesus identifies in His parable, for He next turns to the seed which falls on thin, rocky soil. Every gardener knows how easy it is for seed to sprout up in such a place – but it soon withers and dies, as its roots can reach no moisture. Jesus says that this type of soil is like those who receive the word with joy, but soon fall away in times of affliction or persecution.

Now, when we hear the word "persecution," we generally think about ISIS thugs or communist bullies, and we cannot deny that far too many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world regularly find themselves in physical danger from such organized opposition. But it is also true that many who experience such violence actually have their faith in Christ strengthened. Many of those slain by the ISIS thugs on the beach in Libya, for example, were actually calling out the name of Jesus with their last breath. There's no way such martyrs fit Jesus' description of stony places.

So who are the people who have no deepness of earth, who have no firm roots in themselves? Those whose response to affliction, those whose reaction to persecution turns them away from Christ. And we all know folks who fit into this category, don't we? Have you ever

heard someone say, “I don’t believe in God because if God were real, He would never have allowed me to get sick? Or He would never have allowed this relationship to fall apart? Or He would never have allowed my loved one to die?”

Why do such people fall away from Christ? At root, it’s not because the problems they face are so serious – it’s because they have a hearing problem. Oh, unlike the seed on the wayside, their problem isn’t spiritual hardness – they hear the words that Christ speaks. But you might say they have what we call “selective hearing.” They have heard the gospel, all right, but only the parts they wanted to hear.

And we can understand such a temptation, can’t we? Who doesn’t enjoy hearing about forgiveness and love and God’s unconditional acceptance of us? But if it’s all the same to you, we’d rather not hear about all that stuff about sin and the need for repentance and holiness. Much less are we interested in what the Bible says about how we are going to experience trials in order to make us like Jesus, or how we need to take up our cross and practice self-denial, or how we can expect to go through persecutions because Jesus did.

But in spite of our desires and preferences, we need to hear the whole counsel of God. We need to hear everything Jesus has to say, even those words about suffering and chastening and opposition. For if we try to kid ourselves, if we imagine that following Jesus will guarantee us a pain-free life, we too will wither at the first sign of testing. We will end up like the stony places where the seed has no depth of earth.

But Jesus goes on, comparing a third group of hearers to soil full of thorns and weeds. Seed falls there, all right. It even grows up. But because its vitality is choked by all the vegetation around it, it produces no fruit.

Jesus says this type of soil is like people who have heard the gospel but whose life is choked with one of two things – worries and cares on the one hand or riches and pleasures on the other. Because of these distractions, such people have heard the Word, but it has borne no fruit in them.

And so if the first group didn’t really hear the word at all and the second group heard the word selectively, this third group hears the word faithlessly. For some of these faithless hearers may acknowledge Jesus’ power and goodness in their minds, but they still give themselves over to anxiety instead of trusting Him. In the face of all their problems and responsibilities, they insist on worrying instead of relying on Jesus to take care of them. Do you know anyone like that? Maybe, like me, you see that person in the mirror all too often. And such worry and anxiety robs our lives of fruitfulness.

Of course, there is another way to hear Jesus’ words faithlessly – to focus our attention on all the good things this world has to offer. Some hear what the Bible says about storing up

treasure in Heaven, but they devote their lives to gaining worldly wealth anyway. Still others have heard Jesus' call for His disciples to be holy, but they are too enamored by the sensations and experiences this world has to offer, too busy pursuing pleasure to care.

So, what do such worriers, misers and libertines all have in common? The focus of their lives is inward rather than outward, on themselves rather than on God. So, even though they may have heard the Word of God, they have missed its main point.

For the fact is that we don't become Christians in order to please ourselves. We don't become Christians in order to feel good. We don't even become Christians in order to be saved from Hell. No, if we have truly heard the Word, if we know that God saves undeserving sinners like us by His free, amazing grace, we will follow Jesus, not for what we can get out of the deal, but for what we can give to Him. We will follow Jesus, not for our benefit, but for His glory.

To prove this, let's look at Jesus' parable again, this time at the good soil. For why does a farmer plant corn so close together? Is his primary concern how tall or straight the plants may be? Why do growers of peaches prune their trees to look like a vase with wide, spreading branches? Do they just like their trees to look that way?

No, the farmer's concern is fruit. He plants corn close together to maximize the number of ears he produces on each acre. He prunes his trees so they will produce larger fruit that is resistant to both drought and frost. And God has a similar purpose for us. He wants His Word to take hold in the lives of those who hear it so that we might bear fruit.

But what does this fruit look like? Well, we could go tromping off to Galatians 5 where Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit, but let's stick with Jesus' parable for a moment. What does every fruit have in it? Seeds. In this parable, what are the seeds? The Word of God. So if a believer is going to bear fruit, that means he's going to be multiplying and spreading the Word of God somehow, right? Instead of being focused on himself, his only concern will be to tell others about Jesus. Instead of grouching about his pain or affliction, his desire will be to glorify the One Who has saved his eternal soul. He won't let the seed of the word bounce off of his closed ears and his hard heart. He'll take the seed of the Word into himself, let it germinate, and then show it and share it with others.

But as we seek to do this, as we seek to bear fruit by spreading the gospel, we need to remember the lesson of the parable. After all, those who listen to us might have the same response that many people had to Isaiah and to Jesus. They might not listen at all, or they might listen selectively or faithlessly. They might even persecute us in some way for our faith, but at the end of the day that's not our problem. We are God's ambassadors, not God's heart surgeons. We can't make anyone else believe the truth about Jesus.

But just as we ourselves responded to the gospel in faith, we can be confident that others will too. And so Christ wants us to share the good news of the gospel everywhere we go, not just with our lips, but with our lives. He wants us to bring more people into His Kingdom, so that He might receive the praise and glory that He deserves. And so in order to share that fruit, in order to spread the Word, we have to be like the good soil. We must first receive the Word. We need to have ears to hear.

And so this week, will we listen, really listen to God's Word, not just on Sunday morning and at weekly Bible study but every day? Will we listen to the Word, not selectively or faithlessly, but with humble and obedient hearts? Will we listen in order to spread the Word? Will we listen in order to let the light of Christ shine? Will we listen in order to seek and to save the lost?