



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 8:1-21

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Listen Slowly

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

There is one thing I am sure of after almost 25 years in ministry: just because you come to church, doesn't mean you really hear the message. As a matter of fact, I've discovered that on any given Sunday there are some who use this as an opportunity to catch up on their sleep! You would be amazed at what I see from up here. I've seen people fall asleep and practically bump their heads on the chair in front of them. There are people who doze off and drop their Bible. There are people who suddenly awaken with a snort. I have even come to know those people who like clock work will be asleep before I'm done with my introduction. I've heard from another pastor who saw a married couple doze off together with their heads propped against one another. I've heard a pastor tell about an elder who fell asleep, and when his wife elbowed him, he stood to pronounce the benediction!

In many ways, this is similar to the situation we find Jesus in here in Luke 8. Jesus is preaching in the region of Galilee. The crowd has become huge. As he taught, Jesus was aware that there were all kinds of listeners in that crowd. There were the religious leaders who were already thinking of ways to destroy him. They weren't really listening at all. There were some from his own family, and they had their own questions about Jesus. Then there were many who weren't interested in his teaching, but were there to see the latest trick that Jesus would perform. Yet, in the midst of all this there are some people who are really listening. Up in vv. 1-3 we see that with him are the twelve disciples and some women who were supporting them of their private means. They really wanted to hear from Jesus. They're not a very impressive lot, but they're really listening.

Luke 8:1-21 raises the question, what kind of listeners are we? That's the thread running through this passage. The verb "to hear" occurs several times in this passage. In v. 8 Jesus says, "**He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**" In v. 10 he speaks of those who hear but don't understand. In v. 18 he says, "**Take care how you listen.**" This is the question we have to deal with this passage, what kind of listener am I? I hear the Word, but do I really hear it?

THE SOWER

Jesus speaks to that issue first in the parable of the sower. Parables were the method Jesus used to speak to a crowd with all kinds of listeners. A parable is simply a

story from everyday life that conveys a deeper spiritual truth. Often Jesus just told the story and left it at that. Those who were eager to learn would think about it, and perhaps even ask Jesus what he meant, while those who didn't care might be intrigued, but never get the deeper meaning. Jesus gives the parable of the sower itself in vv. 4-8, and then he gives the explanation to his disciples in vv. 9-15. Let's look at the story first.

"When a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable: 'The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great.' As He said these things, He would call out, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear'" (vv. 4-8).

This is a story people could understand; there might have been a farmer throwing his seed on the hillside even as Jesus spoke. This would be like telling a story about computer salesmen in Silicon Valley and the various responses to his product. They knew all about seed falling on the hard pathway that cut through the field. They knew all about the rocky limestone that sat beneath the thin layer of top soil. They knew all about thorns hidden in the soil. There was nothing unusual about this.

Notice the seed is the one thing that doesn't change in the story. The seed is good. The problems that arise are not because of the seed. The problem lies with the soil. There are forces at work in the soil that can hinder the effect of the seed. The seed is good, but it's also vulnerable. In three out of four cases the seed is not allowed to bear fruit. That would be a bit discouraging except for what he says about the fourth soil. The fourth soil produces a harvest a hundredfold. That would have surprised Jesus' audience. The average seed in Palestine yielded about ten times the amount of seed sown, so a hundredfold is an amazing harvest. The story ends on an encouraging note.

For the crowd, Jesus simply says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," and then he's finished. That's all they get; end of sermon. One of them might go home and tell his wife, "Hey, I heard that carpenter from Nazareth today. He gave us a lesson on farming." But it was different for the disciples. Look what happens in vv. 9-10.

"His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant. And He said, 'To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND.'"

Now you might not like what you think Jesus is saying. It sounds as if he's saying that the disciples get an explanation because they're special, but everyone else has to stay in the dark because Jesus really doesn't want them to understand. But that's not the full story. In order to get what Jesus is saying we have to remember who was in the crowd that day. Many of them had been resisting the truth about Jesus. The "mystery of the kingdom of God" is that Jesus is the Son of God who is ushering in the kingdom of God and inviting people to repent and come under that rule. Many resisted that. Jesus says it's these people who resist him who don't get an explanation. Only those who come to him – asking, seeking – get to know the mystery. Jesus is not saying the truth is concealed from eager, hungry listeners. He's saying the truth is concealed from hardened and calloused hearts. Instead of straightforward teaching, they get parables. While these parables are a stepping stone for some who are eager for the truth, they're a stumbling block for others whose hearts are hard. It's a dangerous thing to resist God's truth. It's a hazardous thing to keep pushing it away. Your heart becomes less and less receptive; your spiritual senses are dulled.

He then goes on and gives the explanation of the parable to his disciples who are hungry to learn. The explanation helps us understand how it is that so many people were resisting the truth about Jesus. The disciples needed to know this. They were starting to get worried. They felt Jesus needed some public relations work, or maybe he needed to go to seminary and learn how to preach.

"Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they

are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance" (vv. 11–15).

Jesus compares the seed to the word. This is the good news that Jesus came to usher in the kingdom; that we're called to come under his rule. That word is like the seed scattered upon the soil. The different kinds of soil are the different kinds of people who hear the word. There are four kinds of soil which mirror different responses to the word; responses which were in the crowd that very day and are even represented in a crowd like we have here today. Make no mistake – you and I are somewhere in this story.

Jesus says three things keep the seed from bearing fruit. *The first problem is hardness.* Some seed fell among the hard, packed down soil of the road. These are people who hear the word about Jesus, but perhaps it doesn't make any sense; it doesn't scratch where they itch. They say, "Maybe it's good for other people but not for me." No sooner does the word fall than Satan comes and snatches the word away. What makes a heart so hard? Sometimes it's just pride: "I can do it myself. I don't need God's help. I don't need a crutch." Sometimes it's a history of disappointment. We feel God has let us down so much that we've built a shell of protection around ourselves. We won't trust anyone; we can't afford to. What's ironic is that religious people can be the most hardened. The hardest hearts in the crowd that day were Pharisees. The good news is that the hardened heart doesn't have to stay that way. The soil just needs to be loosened. Every so often God comes to the hardened heart with a plow. Some of you are here this morning because God loves you so much he has begun to plow the field of your heart. Something has happened; a hard thing, or maybe even a good thing like a new baby, and God is using that thing to soften your heart.

The second problem is that of shallowness. The so-called "rocky soil" has a thin layer of top soil covering the rock. These people have an immediate, joyful response to the word about Jesus. They sense their needs are being met in a profound way. Perhaps they see that Jesus can fix their marriage or help them get a job. Perhaps they see genuine love coming from Christians and they want that. The problem is there is no depth. The soil is not deep enough. Their commitment is shallow. They flirt with God's truth. There is no consideration of the hard claims of Christ and of the need to follow even when it seems our needs are not being met. And so when trouble arises on account of the word; when we discover that being a Christian doesn't solve all of our problems, and even

creates new ones, then we fall away. Can the rock ever be penetrated? Of course it can. All it takes is a crack in the rock for a seed to drop in and a tree to grow. God can do that too.

The third problem is the problem of clutter. The soil is good, but within the soil there are thorns. There is an outward conformity to Christian faith, but there are things which slowly, over time, choke the word out. Call it clutter or competition. There are too many things going on at once. It's like a guy with three women in his life; he's spread so thin he can't please any of them. The thorns represent a secret attachment to this life which keep us from staying with Jesus. Jesus speaks of "worries." You can get so caught up in everyday life that you don't have time for the kingdom. These aren't bad people, but the kingdom is just one thing on a long list of priorities. Soon, it's edged out. Jesus will have no rivals. He also speaks of "riches and pleasures." There is a subtle pull in our culture which tells us how we all should live – these clothes; these schools; this kind of house; this kind of car; these kinds of vacations. All of these things can choke out the word. You can lose your soul just trying to get by; just trying to raise your kids, send them to college, pay the mortgage, and build a little nest egg for the future. If we're going to bear fruit we have to clear out the clutter.

Perhaps an example will help at this point. Two books on John Lennon claim the ex-Beatle experienced a brief period as a born-again Christian during the 1970s. While living the life of a virtual recluse in New York, Lennon became an avid viewer and reader of TV evangelists and, at some point during 1977, declared that he had been saved. Billy Graham was the main influence. For a time Lennon peppered his everyday conversation with "Praise the Lord" and "Thank you, Jesus." One writer says it lasted for "a matter of months." Robert Rosen writes, "One day [Lennon] had an epiphany—he allowed himself to be touched by the love of Jesus Christ, and it drove him to tears of joy and ecstasy. He drew a picture of a crucifix; he was born again, and the experience was such a kick that he had to share it with Yoko." In the following weeks, he attended church and took his son to a Christian theater performance. He even called The 700 Club help line to request prayer for his health and troubled marriage. Geoffrey Giuliano writes, "He prayed for forgiveness when he stepped on insects or snapped at the maid. He became convinced that Jesus was personally protecting his son." His wife was displeased with Lennon's changed outlook. Lennon began to challenge her interest in the occult and was disappointed she wouldn't join him in watching Graham's telecasts. In the end, his wife won. In his final years, Lennon was living a life dictated by astrologers, numerologists, psychics, herbalists, and tarot-card readers.

What happened? It's explained in the parable of the sower. Hardness? Shallowness? Clutter? One of those, for sure. Is a person like that saved? Only God knows, but

it's very clear that you want to be in the fourth category. *The fourth soil is what Jesus calls the "good soil."* Jesus says they "have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance." There is nothing flashy here; just slow, quiet, steady growth. It's a process and it's one that takes effort on our part. It's not just what you do with one sermon. The issue is your "career response" to God's word. "An honest and good heart" beats fast for Him. Its consuming passion is to walk through life in dependence on God and in submission to his word.

We talk a lot about God's grace, and we should. We know that we can't earn our salvation through good works. We know that salvation and growth comes by grace through faith. But make no mistake about it: God will hold you responsible for how you respond to his word. Are you hungry for it? Do you hold it fast? Proverbs says, "Watch your heart with all diligence, because from it flows the springs of life." In other words what you are flows out of your heart. So watch it. No one can do that for you. Here Jesus tells us what to watch out for: hardness, shallowness, clutter – any one of these can choke out the word.

All of this is reinforced in the next two paragraphs.

THE LAMP

The first is the mini-parable of the lamp.

"Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light. So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him" (vv. 16–18).

This deals with the issue of how God chooses to reveal his truth. A lamp is not meant to be covered up but put on a lampstand. God's purpose is not to conceal the light but to reveal it. What is the lamp? The lamp is the gospel; the message of the kingdom. That light has been lit in the disciples, and they mustn't hide it but let it shine forth. Although Jesus has been whispering the truths in their ears, they will soon have to enter the world and preach the Gospel openly, making known what was hidden and bringing to light what was concealed. So Jesus negates the thought that He speaks in parables in order that the good news should remain hidden. On the contrary, His desire is to let the light of the Gospel shine.

That's why he commands us to "take care how you listen." We're his lightbearers. Because of that we must listen to His word with full attention. If we don't do that, the results will be fatal: "Whoever has, to him shall

more be given, and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.”

This is the law of spiritual atrophy. For a while now, since my knee surgery, I've been going to a gym. I've never really been into gyms, but they still won't let me run so this is what I have to do – get on one of those “low-impact” machines and lift some weights. It was a little bit intimidating trying to figure out all these new machines and I found myself using muscles I haven't used for awhile. At first I was sore and I felt like I was getting weaker. But then I started to get stronger. The more I use the machines, the more I can branch out and use new ones. The more I use my muscles, the stronger I get.

The law of spiritual atrophy says use it or lose it. If you use the truth he's given you, the more truth he'll give you. But if you don't use the truth he's given you, in the end you'll lose it. God holds you responsible for that. If you reject the truth now, you can't expect him to entrust you with deeper truth. Use it or you lose it. The stakes are high. You can lose everything if you're not careful how you listen.

THE FAMILY

This is dramatically reinforced in what happens next.

“And His mother and brothers came to Him, and they were unable to get to Him because of the crowd. And it was reported to Him, ‘Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You’” (vv. 19–20).

Finally, here is a word for mothers! Jesus' mother and brothers arrive and they can't even get inside the house because it's so full of people. In Mark's gospel it says that they were very concerned about Jesus. This is the normal concern of a mother for her son. And everyone would have expected Jesus to drop everything and go see his mother. In those days, it was family first, all the way.

It reminds me of a story first Lady Laura Bush recalls about her husband. One night she and George were staying overnight at the home of his parents. She says, "George woke up at 6 a.m. as usual and went downstairs to get a cup of coffee. He sat down on the sofa with his parents and put his feet up. All of a sudden, his mother yelled, 'Put your feet down!' George's dad replied, 'For goodness' sake, Barbara, he's the President of the United States.' Barbara said, 'I don't care. I don't want his feet on my table.' The president promptly did as he was told, and Mrs. Bush observes: 'Even Presidents have to listen to their mothers.'"

Well, Jesus isn't quite so compliant. I can imagine Jesus looking around at those people who were with him, sitting at his feet. These are people who had followed him; among them were the Twelve and the

three women mentioned earlier. And then he said, **“But He answered and said to them, ‘My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it’”** (v. 21).

That had to be hard for his mother to hear. But even his mother had to learn, as all of us do, that there is something even bigger than blood relations, and that is hearing and doing his word. And when we do that, then we really get to be close to him. Maybe that's a good word for mothers – in those moments when you're most concerned for your children; when you want to take control; remember that your call as a mother is not the highest call you have; the highest call you have is to be a disciple of Jesus; to hear and to do his word. Jesus says that if you want to be close to me and know me as family, then keep my word. Obedience will keep you close to the Lord. We need to put his word into practice. No one can do that for us. His word tells you to forgive. Have you? His word tells you to speak the truth in love, despite the consequences. Have you? His word tells you to pray without ceasing. Do you? His word tells you to give sacrificially and regularly. Do you? His word tells you to use your spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ. Have you? His word tells you husbands to love your wife as Christ loved the church. Are you? His word tells you wives to respect your husbands. Do you? Yes, it's a process. Yes, there is God's grace to depend on. But God holds you responsible for your response.

CONCLUSION

We hear his word, but do we really hear it? Are we listening? Have we fallen asleep? Charles Swindoll tells a story of a time in his life when things were moving too fast. Too many commitments and too little time. He began to snap at his wife and kids. Meals were choked down. We've all been there. One day his young daughter wanted to tell him about something that had happened after school that day. She hurriedly began, “Daddy-I-want-to-tell-you-something-and-I'll-tell-you-really-fast.” Chuck recognized her frustration and answered, “Honey, you can tell me, and you don't have to tell it fast. Say it slowly.” Her answer was unforgettable. She said, “Then listen slowly, Daddy.” When it comes to the word of God, some of us need to listen slowly. He has spoken. He has spoken in His Son. He has spoken in His word. He speaks in stories about seeds and lamps. Are we listening? No one can do that for you.

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