



Have you ever thought about what you hear versus what you actually listen to? There is a difference in the words “hear” and “listen.” For example, think about the last time you were watching TV. You were focused on watching your show, and right at the climax of a scene the all-too-predictable commercial came on. As you prepared to tune out or find the remote to fast-forward the show, the volume of your TV magically increased right as the commercial started! Has this caught anyone else by surprise? Marketing agents realized many people tune out during the commercials so to get your attention they have turned up the volume.

Do you remember the last flight you took? After finding your seat, sitting down and preparing to fall asleep, the flight attendant stands up and begins her spiel. You know what I mean. She invites passengers to follow along on the little card in the seat back in front of you. The card explains what to do in case of an emergency. She usually looks bored as she goes through the motions once again. You can't blame her. Although people are told to listen carefully “as we go through the safety features of this Boeing 737,” we hear her words but would prefer not to listen.

We have commercials raising their volume and people sharing life saving information and we brush off both. With so much vying for our attention, what do we listen to? This morning we're starting a new series called “Parables: More Than Just Stories.” In this eight-week series we will cover a variety of different parables Jesus told in His time on earth. The series title gives you a glimpse into what we're going to study. The parables of Jesus are more than just stories, as we're going to see this morning. Open your Bible to Mark 4.

Let me set the scene. Jesus is teaching by the Sea of Galilee. With the news getting around about the miracles He's done, the way He teaches, and the sheer excitement of hearing this captivating teacher, more people are flocking to see Him. The crowd has gotten so massive, He is forced to get into a boat and teach from the water. It seems a bit counter intuitive to be further away but actually it's not. If you've spent any time around water, you're familiar with the way sound bounces off of water, increasing its range. Imagine what this would look like: Jesus standing in a fishing vessel, teaching to an array of people sitting on the seashore. The boat is His pulpit and the water is His sound system.

As He taught, Jesus was aware that there were all kinds of people in that crowd. On His right, there were the religious leaders dressed in their fancy clothes. They kept a close eye on Jesus,

already thinking of ways to destroy Him; they weren't really listening to His message. Near the back was His own family who had come to have some serious doubts about His mental stability. They weren't listening much either. Then there was the majority who weren't interested in His teaching, but were mainly there to see the latest miracle He might perform. Yet in the midst of all this, there are a few people who are really listening. Sitting in the front row with eyes fixed on Jesus were His disciples; they may not be an extremely impressive group, but they're eager to listen.

The question becomes, How do you teach a crowd like that? Do you just blandly go through the motions like a bored flight attendant? Do you turn up the volume like TV marketers? Mark simply tells us Jesus taught them many things by parables. The word “parable” comes from the Greek word *παραβολαίς* (*para-bo-lāis*). The word can also be translated as story, proverb, lesson or illustration. Parables are a way to teach eternal truths through stories of everyday life that appeal to everyone. They are stories about ordinary things that convey a deeper message. This is how you teach a crowd like this—with parables.

Scattering Seed

Now that we have an understanding of the location and the people gathered, Jesus gives us the parable.

“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear” (Mark 4:3–9).

The story begins with an emphatic “Listen!” from Jesus. It could have simply been to gather their attention, but I think there is a deeper meaning. Jesus didn't just want the people to simply hear this story, He wanted them to listen!

He had to share a story people could understand; in fact, there might have been a farmer sowing his seed on the hillside even as Jesus spoke. It was inevitable that not all the seed would land in an ideal location. Unlike the modern method we employ,

farmers would sow the seed first and then plow it under. The crowd knew all about seed falling on the hard pathway that cut through the field. They knew all about the rocky limestone hiding beneath the thin layer of topsoil making it too difficult for the seed to take root. They knew all about thorns hidden in the soil. There was nothing unusual about this; the stones and thistles that infest Palestinian fields are legendary.

The fourth soil is what every farmer is looking for. It's good soil, the right consistency with the right nutrients, and free from rocks or other growth inhibitors. In other words, it's the perfect home for a seed. This soil produces a harvest of thirty-, sixty- or even hundred-fold. This would have shocked Jesus' audience because the average seed in Palestine yielded about seven, eight, nine or in the best case scenario, ten times the amount of seed sown. To hear about seed yielding a harvest this abundant would have seized the attention of the crowd.

Notice that there is one thing that doesn't change in the parable—it's the seed. The seed is good. The problems shared are not because of the seed; the problem lies with the soil. Some scholars actually say this parable should be called "The Parable of The Soil" and not "The Parable of The Sower." Throughout the parable the seed is good, but it's also vulnerable. Seventy-five percent of the seed won't bear fruit. This would be very discouraging if the parable ended here. Thankfully the story ends on an encouraging note for the farmer. For the crowd, Jesus simply says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," and then He's finished. End of sermon.

The Secret

The crowd has dispersed and now Jesus has some personal time with His disciples.

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,

"they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,

and ever hearing but never understanding;

otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"
(verses 10–12).

Before He gets to explain the parable, Jesus shares some difficult words. If you're thinking, these are difficult verses to understand, you're in good company. We might not even like what we think Jesus is saying. It can sound as if Jesus is saying that the disciples get an explanation because they are special, but everyone else has to stay in the dark because Jesus really doesn't want them to be forgiven. But that's not the full story.

In order to understand what Jesus is saying think back to who was in the crowd that day. Do you remember the vast majority of the crowd were resisting the truth about Jesus? Jesus describes

the "secret of the kingdom of God." The Greek word here used for secret is *μυστήριον* (*mystērion*). Just like it sounds, it can be used to explain a mystery or a deep truth. The "secret" is that the kingdom of God has drawn near in Jesus Christ. He was God in the flesh. The kingdom had arrived in this meek and lowly Jesus. The Pharisees resisted this secret. His family resisted it. The crowds resisted it. Jesus explains, these people who resist Him don't desire an explanation.

Jesus isn't saying the truth is concealed from eager, hungry listeners. He is saying the truth is concealed from hardened and calloused hearts. Instead of straightforward teaching, they get parables. Why? Because parables, or stories, have a way of drawing people in. People let their guard down with a story, and if they take the time to think about it, they might even learn something new about themselves. This is what Jesus wanted the crowd to do; to think about the parable.

The Parable of The Soil

Now that the secret is explained, Jesus can go on to explain the parable.

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word" (verses 13–14).

First, we see that the disciples still had a great deal to learn about the Kingdom of God. Fortunately we still have a great deal to learn about the Kingdom of God too. The seed in the story represents the word of God; it's the secret of the Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about back in verse 11. It's the word of God that was reconciling us to Him through the life of Christ. Understanding this brings clarity to what James wrote. *"Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you"* (James 1:21). The planted word is the only thing in this world that has the power to save!

Jesus explains, the word is likened to seed scattered upon the soil by the sower. We're going to see the four different kinds of soil represent the different responses when people hear the word of God. As we go through these four responses, think about how all of these kinds of people would have been sitting in the crowd, listening as Christ taught. The overarching theme we're going to see is, the soil of my heart defines my response to Christ. This might be tough to comprehend, so let's study Jesus' explanation of the four different soils and how they relate to our hearts.

The Hardened Heart

The first explanation Jesus gives us is about the seed that fell on the hard, packed down soil.

"Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them" (v. 15).

This is the path the farmer uses to access the field; this path represents a hard heart. It represents people who hear the truth about Jesus and give you a blank stare. They may respond with, "The God thing is great for you, but it's just not for me." In other words, it doesn't scratch where they itch. In this example, no sooner does the word fall than Satan comes and snatches the word away. What a tragedy this is for the Gospel.

What's ironic is that religious people can be the most hardened. In the New Testament book of Acts, we find a perfect example of this hard heart. The early church has experienced substantial growth and is flourishing. The religious people aren't too excited about this new growth so they persuade some men to spread poignant lies about a young man named Stephen. After being falsely accused, Stephen is dragged into court where he must defend his character. When the room quiets down from the commotion of all the false witnesses, Stephen preaches a powerful message on the sovereignty of God the Father. He clearly summarizes the power of God and ends his speech beautifully with the love of Christ.

After reading Acts 7, you would think that after a message like he just preached everyone in the courtroom would have fallen on their knees, repented in tears, and surrendered their life to Christ. Unfortunately it was the opposite. Their hearts were so hardened they took Stephen outside and stoned him to death. The Bible tells us the people who witnessed this "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." The hearts of these people were so full of pride, maybe disappointment, frustration and anger they couldn't handle the word of God.

The good news is the hardened heart doesn't have to stay that way. The soil is good; it just needs to be properly prepared. Throughout time God has brought His gentle plow to the hardened heart. Maybe you're here this morning because God has begun plowing your hard heart. For years you've denied Christ and rejected the word, but recently something happened and you've become open to God's word. This may be a result of a family tragedy or maybe a newborn has come into your home, changing the soil of your heart. We're glad you're here this morning.

A Shallow Heart

The next soil represents a shallow heart.

"Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away" (verses 16–17).

The so-called "rocky soil" has a thin layer of top soil covering the rock. These are people who respond to Christ with an immediate joy. They sense their needs are being met in a sincere way. Perhaps they see Jesus can fix their marriage or deliver them from a personal struggle they have been battling for years. Maybe they are surrounded by genuine loving Christians, and

they desperately want their life to be like theirs. The problem we encounter here is a lack of depth. There is little consideration of the hard claims of Christ, and of the need to follow even at such a high cost.

When I was a high school pastor I saw this frequently. Students would introduce me to a friend they'd been praying for. This student would begin attending our high school ministry, wanting what their friends had. Eventually one night, during our service, they would respond to Christ by raising their hand, indicating that they had placed their trust in Christ. Within a few weeks or months they were nowhere to be found. They shamefully went back to their old ways and seemed to forget about God. They thought Jesus would miraculously solve all their problems. If anything, yielding to Christ can create more problems! It leaves the question, Can the rock ever be penetrated? Of course it can. All it takes is a small crack for a seed to drop in and the strong roots of a tree begin to grow. God can do that in their lives! I've seen many of these students I just spoke about come back to Christ at a later time in their life. The seed found good soil and they finally surrendered to Christ.

A Cluttered Heart

The thorns in the third soil represent a cluttered heart with too many distractions.

"Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (verses 18–19).

The soil here is good, but within the soil there are thorns. On the outside the person looks like they have surrendered their life to Christ but slowly, over time, the word is choked out. Unfortunately this happens all too often. There may be too many things going on in a person's life and they feel divided. They say things like, "When work slows down I'll start reading my Bible again" or "After we're done remodeling the house we're going to focus more on Christ." When those times pass, then something else comes up—the desires of the world, the distractions of expensive toys, getting more stock options—the list goes on. Don't get me wrong, they're not bad people. They are just so caught up with the desires of this world they don't have time for the Kingdom of God.

We've seen all of these examples in pop culture time and time again. Two books on John Lennon claim the ex-Beatle experienced a brief period as a born-again Christian during the 1970's. While living the life of a virtual recluse in New York, Lennon became an avid viewer and reader of TV evangelist Billy Graham. At some point during 1977 Lennon declared that he had been saved. For a time Lennon's daily conversation included: "Praise the Lord" and "Thank you, Jesus." 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." Unfortunately his wife was displeased with Lennon's changed outlook. Lennon began to challenge her interest in the occult and was disappointed that 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 seemed like there was a true repentance in Lennon's life. The answer is explained in the parable. Hardness? Shallowness? Clutter? One of those things, for sure or maybe a combination of all three. These three soils represent the greatest enemies the Christian will face—the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Good Soil

Thankfully there is hope in the final soil.

"Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown" (v. 20).

Jesus simply says they "hear the word, and accept it, and produce a crop." He doesn't give us much of an explanation. He simply wants us to know they hear it, and they accept it, and fruit begins to appear. There is nothing flashy here; just slow, quiet, steady growth in the believer's life. This is the example of a true disciple of Christ, someone who had the soil of their heart prepared and ready for the word to be planted.

Years ago a five-year-old boy sat in the back pew of a small church and placed his trust in Christ for the first time. The seed was planted. Quickly confusion came within the boy; his mom loved the Lord while his father loved his beer. The confusion continued for this boy right into his junior high and high school years. When the temptation of alcohol and drugs were presented to him he couldn't resist and gave into the pressure of his peers.

The path he had chosen was taking him in the opposite direction he wanted to travel. It started with drinking, progressed to smoking pot, to selling pot, escalated to taking acid and finally cocaine on a regular basis. He was entrenched in the desires of the flesh. Arrest after arrest changed little in his life, until one day he met a man while attending his DUI class. As they were leaving the class this older man turned around and said: "If you don't quit what you're doing you're going to be dead in five years," and then proceeded to invite him to a church service.

After months of attending church the seed finally began to sprout. The lifestyle of drinking and drugs became a thing of the past and there was hope for a bright future. The once high school drop-out began attending bible college and got hired at a church

where he met his future wife. God had radically changed his life's direction. Now he began leading others to Christ and bringing the Gospel everywhere. His life was completely changed and bearing the kind of fruit Jesus talks about in the good soil.

The story isn't complete for this man. I was the young boy in the pew. I had the cold handcuffs on my wrists as a teen. I cried to God to save me from my addiction. I share this because if God didn't change my life I'm fairly confident I would be dead or in prison today.

Understanding the parable in this kind of depth requires some response from each of us. First, let's look at a corporate response, a way we can all respond together. No matter where you stand with Christ, if today is your first time attending church or if you've been following Christ for decades, each one of us can examine the condition of our heart. We can take the time to be introspective and evaluate what is really taking place in our lives. Just as Jesus taught and people were left thinking, we too can contemplate our response to the parable.

Secondly, let me speak specifically to those who have already made a commitment to following Christ. Will you let this message serve as a humble reminder of our call as Christ followers? It is our job to produce a crop. Will you continue seeking to live a life that bears a crop? This might mean making some minor, or major, changes in how you live. Maybe your business ethics have slowly turned to a place you're not proud of. Maybe you've been harsh with your roommates. Maybe you've neglected living a life of worship. Maybe you have lost your passion for creating healthy relationships with your lost neighbors. Whatever your situation, let this message be a reminder to produce a crop.

Finally, let me conclude by addressing those who have never placed their trust in Christ. If you're here this morning and God has readied the soil of your heart, He has been readying your heart, so I invite you to place your trust in Christ. The Bible is clear that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We know that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. The response on your part is to confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead. Remember that before you do this to count the cost. The cost of following Christ is great but the benefits are so worth it.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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