



Given all the listening you do, you might think you're good at listening. You're not. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but research indicates that you only remember between 25 and 50% of what you hear. Which is actually pretty bad, right? That is failing. But I want to argue that you're not actually a bad listener; you're a bad hearer.

Have you ever been in a conversation with your spouse or your boss and you are listening to them, sort of, you think, until their voice goes up like this... and then you realize you are supposed to say something but even though you were listening, you didn't really hear anything? Me neither.

In the passage we are about to read Jesus finds himself dealing with a whole crowd of people listening to him, but not hearing a word he is saying. I think this passage is so important to you and me because we are just like that crowd—we may listen to Jesus, but far too often we don't actually hear him. We aren't listening carefully and so we miss a transforming reality that is right in front of us. So let us hear what Jesus has to say. Listen carefully to our passage today, Luke 8:4-18.

Jesus Tells the Parable

"While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (verses 4-8).

So Jesus tells this cryptic story about a seemingly bad farmer, and we are about to see nobody in the crowd quite understands what Jesus is talking about. But before we get there, let's talk about what Jesus' followers did understand, because they did understand some things, and being a farmer in ancient Israel is a little different than living on the San Francisco peninsula.

Jesus' disciples understood three major things in this story. First, they understood that this farmer was not a bad farmer, just a normal one. The land in Israel was rocky and hilly. It wasn't like what you and I think of when we think about a farm today:

lines of perfectly arranged trees and shrubs so when you look as you're driving by in your car you feel like you feel like you might get a seizure but you can't look away! No, the land didn't allow for that. Farmers instead would scatter their seed in every possible place because they would not know where the seed might grow best.

Second, they understood that all three of these dangers—birds, rocks, and thorns—were simply a part of reality for farming in ancient Israel.

Third, they knew that a crop yielding a 100 times what was sown was a lot. Not totally unheard of, not totally unrealistic, but far more than any farmer could really hope for. Average crops yielded about 35 times what was sown. Every once in a while you might get a crop yielding 60 times more. One hundred times more is a lot.

The Disciples Ask Jesus

Jesus' disciples get the farming metaphor, but what they don't get is the spiritual meaning behind it, and so they ask Jesus,

"His disciples asked him what this parable meant" (v. 9).

Before we listen to Jesus' explanation, I think it is worth noting that the disciples don't get it at first. When Jesus says, "those who have ears to hear, let them hear," even his disciples don't have ears to hear.

But they have hung around Jesus long enough to know they can ask him. I don't know how long you've been hanging around Jesus, but I want you to know that he welcomes your questions, your hard questions. Why did this happen to me? What about all the bad things Christians have done? Doesn't this create more bad than good? Whatever your question may be Jesus is willing to engage questions from anyone who really seeks an answer. If you're the one with questions this morning, ask them.

Jesus Explains His Parable

But the disciples already know they can ask Jesus for an explanation and so they do, but before Jesus explains the parable he says,

"He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that 'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand'" (v. 10).

Parables work sort of like this picture: a whole bunch of zebras. But if you look closer, if you are willing to squint your eyes a little bit, you see something more, something bigger.

When Jesus talks about the “secrets of the kingdom of God,” he doesn’t mean secrets the way you keep your kid’s Christmas presents a secret from them, going to great lengths to find new hiding places and eventually wrapping them in technicolored sheets of paper in random size boxes to throw them off. No, by secrets Jesus means more like the “secret” image in this picture: the secrets of the kingdom of God are available to all who would look for them, but if you won’t look for them, you won’t find them, even if they are right in front of you.

Jesus goes on to explain his parable and we find out that the irony of the parable is that the crowds don’t hear that the parable is about them not hearing well.

Stolen by the Devil

“This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved” (v. 11).

A farmer would have a bag of seed over his shoulder, and he would reach into the bag, grab some seed, and throw it out into the field. But some of the seed wouldn’t make it; it would fall onto the path. And on that path people would walk on it, birds would come and take it. Jesus says that the seed is the word of God, and the seed that falls on the path gets snatched up by the devil.

The book of 1st Peter tells us that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. And like a lion, or like a crow, he snatches the word of God away from many people. These are people who have heard the word of God and yet are hardened against it; unwilling to believe that the kingdom of God is, in fact, coming; unwilling to believe that God sits on a throne in heaven and that one day he will make everything right again.

Rocky Ground

“Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away” (v. 13).

The rocks in these fields were really layers of limestone underneath the surface. A plant would sprout up out of the seed, but as its roots shot down to find water, they would find none. They would hit that hard rock, and while that caused them to look like they were growing quickly, in reality, that plant was never going to last once it hit the rock.

Jesus says that many people’s faith is like that. They sprout up in good times; everything looks like it is growing, but as soon as their faith is tested, as soon as there is persecution, as soon as

there are hard times, as soon as things begin to go wrong, their faith starts to wither.

The lie that these people believe is that God owes them something. The lie that if you follow Jesus, everything will go great for you. You’ll get promoted at work, and marry the girl or guy of your dreams, and be so happy all the time, and your marriage will be blissful happiness all the time, and you’ll get into the college you want, and you’ll never get seriously sick, and never have money issues. Your kids will be perfect, your friendships will never be hard.

And if you believe that, when a time of testing does come—when someone you love gets cancer, when you lose your job, when someone gossips about you and causes real damage to a relationship—you’ll be like a plant that grows up but withers when it hits rock bottom. You’ll find out that the word of God was growing in false soil the whole time. You’ll find that you weren’t listening carefully when he said that there would be suffering before his kingdom returned in full; you just heard the part about everything being better.

Thorns

Jesus goes on to say that it is not just those who go through times of testing that fall away, but also those with access to good things.

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches, and pleasures, and they do not mature” (v. 14).

Like thorns and weeds growing up around a plant, the cares and riches and pleasures of this world block that sprout from seeing the sun, and drink up all the water in the soil so that the seed can’t grow.

Jesus says the reason some people can’t hear me is because their TV is turned up too loud. And honestly, I think this is the most dangerous one for us living on the Peninsula. We have access to so many riches and pleasures. The cares of this world surround us here on this strip of land—great weather, unlimited things to do—this is such an incredibly wealthy area. And if you are not careful to listen, all these things will choke out the word of God in you and your spiritual growth will be stunted and malformed. The word of God that promises the coming kingdom of God will be white noise amidst the cares of this world shouting for your time and attention.

Some of you are feeling convicted now. Don’t worry, we are almost to the good news of this passage!

The Good Soil

“But the seed on the good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (v. 15).

So what about the good soil? When I lived in Madison, Wisconsin my boss had a garden in the backyard. Everybody has a garden in the backyard in Madison; they call themselves the Berkeley of the Midwest. But I grew up in San Mateo, I've never grown anything. My wife and I have dying succulents, the hardiest of plants, in our apartment! But when I moved to Madison, I helped my boss plant seeds in this garden. I watered the garden sometimes. And what I didn't realize about farming is that it is an obnoxiously long process. For those of you who are like me, here is how you farm.

You buy these tiny little round things and you put them in some dirt that makes your yard look ugly. And then, for about a month a couple of times a day for 20-30 minutes at a time, you pour water on the dirt and make mud. You just stand there, with a hose in your hand making mud like a child. And after you do this for a month, you see a little tiny green thing in your box of mud, and then you wait longer for other little green things to pop up and get taller.

Then you water your dirt, mixed with plants now, for a while longer until you start to see flowers bud. You continue to wait while continuing to water of course, and eventually you get your first tomato. And it is exciting! You chop it up, you put it in your salad; everybody in the family gets 1/6th of a tomato, but everyone is happy about it.

And after that you wait some more, while watering, for more tomatoes to pop up. But then they do, and pretty soon you have a few new tomatoes every day. In fact, pretty soon after that you start having too many tomatoes to eat and so you start giving them away to all your neighbors! It's actually kind of incredible. But it takes forever. It takes a painstaking amount of perseverance to grow tomatoes.

People who are like the good soil have painstaking perseverance. They hold to the word of God, the promise that the kingdom of God is coming. They grasp it with all their might, bearing fruit with patience.

It takes faith. Not blind faith, but like the faith it takes to water a plot of dirt for a month. The seed has been planted. If you water it, it will grow. But until it starts to come up it is easy to wonder if it ever will be worth it when it does.

But let me just say, in the meantime, there are ways to cultivate the kind of perseverance it takes to be like the good soil. That kind of perseverance doesn't just spring up out of nowhere.

- Read stories about God's faithfulness in the past. Read stories to your kids about God's faithfulness in the past
- Take time to meet quietly with God each day. Turn the TV off. Put your phone on Do Not Disturb and listen to him.
- Pray for Jesus to return and to fix this broken world.
- Ask yourself every day, if Jesus really is going to return and make everything good and true and beautiful and right

again, if he is going to wipe out death and sin and pain and tears, what effect should that have on how I spend my time today? How I interact with my coworkers today? How I do my job today? How I treat my spouse today?

It takes time. Birds will come and try to steal the seed. Rocks and thorns will try to stop the seed from growing. But with patience, through good times and bad, that seed will grow and bear fruit.

All Things Being Revealed

Jesus has explained his parable to the disciples and to anyone who would read this book, but he is not quite done.

"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open" (v. 16).

What is Jesus talking about? Remember at the beginning of this passage when Jesus talked about the secrets of the kingdom of God? One day, Jesus says, the secrets of the kingdom of God will be fully revealed—that hidden picture will come into focus—namely, that the kingdom of God is coming in power to remake and renew and restore this broken world and the people in it.

And this is good news! Nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest. Though your life may look like a pile of mud right now and the world may look like a pile of something worse than that, God has planted a seed in you that will grow up, in fact, that is growing up and will bear fruit. And one day this hope that you hold to will come to completion.

"Therefore, consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them" (v. 18).

The question to ask yourself today is not, Which soil am I? No. The question to ask is, How do I become the good soil? Are you willing to fight the birds that will try to steal the seed from your heart to make you jaded and hopeless?

Are you willing to listen and believe the word of God, even in suffering? To see past the cancer and the killings; the loneliness and the lackluster realities in your life?

Are you willing to rip the hands that are strangling you—the cares and pleasures and riches of this world—from around your neck and stay focused on the word of God bearing fruit in your life?

The kingdom of God is coming. Jesus, the Great Farmer, will return. Therefore, friends, listen carefully.

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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