

## **PARABLE OF THE SOWER**

Text: Luke 8:4-15

Date: 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2017

We know of wine connoisseurs. Many of us here could be regarded as sermon connoisseurs. We have heard hundreds of sermons and expect solid preaching. And rightly so because we are dealing with the Word of God. We know what is good or not so good. From time to time we may even have had 'roast preacher' for dinner. But today the shoe is on the other foot. We will focus on you as listeners. How good are you at hearing the Word of God? I mean actually taking it in and doing it? For our own sake this is probably more important than having a good preacher. So much depends on it. Your own forgiveness and life depends on how you respond to God's Word. As does the hope others might hear from you.

As we look at the Parable of the Sower we see Jesus talks about hearing God's Word, and yet, in some ways, not (really) hearing it. In Luke 8:5 Jesus begins, "*The sower went out to sow his seed.*" Then in verse 11 he interprets that: "*Now the parable is this: the seed is the Word of God.*" So he is saying the sower is the one who proclaims the Word. Then there are four kinds of soil, which Jesus says are four ways of hearing the Word. Firstly there is the seed that fell beside the road. That's where the "*... devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they may not believe and be saved.*" Then there is the seed on the rocky soil. That refers to "*...those who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while but in time of testing fall away.*" Thirdly there's the seed that fell among the thorns. That refers to "*...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.*" Finally there is the seed that fell on good soil. They stand for "*...those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a good crop.*"

At the end of the parable Jesus makes sure we get the point: "*He who has ears to hear, let them hear.*" That means it's not enough to have ears on the side of your head. Everybody has those. But there is another kind of ear. We could call it a 'spiritual ear', or our 'heart-ear', if you like. Jesus speaks of "... *those with a noble and good heart*". It's a heart that is open to God. It is an ear that hears, in the preaching of the Word, more than just words. There is a beauty and a truth and a power that is heard. It is a truth that is compelling and transforming. That's the kind of hearing Jesus is calling for. That's what this parable is about.

Then to stress the issue of hearing even more, Luke tells us how Jesus explained the purpose of the parable. (: 9-10) "*His disciples asked him what this parable meant. 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'*". Jesus actually quotes from Isaiah 6:9. There God was telling Isaiah his ministry as a prophet would not only save people. It would also be a judgment for others. God was declaring that time had run out for the Israelites. Some people would have receptive hearts and respond well to Isaiah's prophecy. Others would have hardened hearts and reject the prophet's message. And in doing that bring judgment on themselves. Jesus is saying that the same thing is occurring with his message.

Jesus never told parables simply to convey a good piece of wisdom as did other rabbis. Which people could take or leave. His parables were about the kingdom of God and the need to respond to that kingdom. The heart of the kingdom was Jesus himself. Jesus and his parables were inseparable. To fail to understand and receive Jesus was to fail to understand the parable. The only way to 'get' the parable was to accept Jesus as King. Those who rebelled against God would "...*hear but not understand*" and so be confirmed in their rebellion. They would not perceive the real meaning of the parable. They just saw it as some odd story. So the parables had a three way effect. (1) For those who rejected the presence of God in Jesus, their inability to understand the parable was a sign of God's judgement. (2) For those open to receive Jesus the parable drew them

in to make a decision for Jesus. (3) For those who believed, the parables gave further insight into the truths about the kingdom.

This teaches us something very important about preaching or witnessing for Jesus. You are not just passing on a bit of information. You are declaring Jesus as King. That demands a response. Will you serve him or not. So when proclaiming the Word of God does not soften a stubborn person and save and heal, it is not necessarily ineffective. The preaching of the Word may be doing God's terrible work of judgment. It may be hardening people, and making their ears so dull that they will never want to hear it again. There is a judgment in this world. Not just at the end of time, but right now as you hear this word. So take heed how you hear! Don't be cavalier in the hearing of God's Word week after week. This is not spiritual entertainment. If the Word of God is not softening and saving and healing and bearing fruit, it is probably hardening and blinding and dulling.

Which brings us to the last mention of 'hearing' in this text. It comes in a surprising place. You might expect it to come in verse 15 after Jesus has explained the parable. But it comes in verse 18 after Jesus spoke about the lamp on a stand. He says "*Therefore* (in other words he is now concluding the matter) *consider carefully how you listen*". That's the whole point of the text. Take care how you hear. Preaching is one thing. And it is crucial. But hearing is another thing. And it is just as crucial.

In the rest of verse 18 Jesus tells us why. "*Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.*" What does that mean? Well, there are two parts, the positive and the negative. Take the positive first: "*Whoever has will be given more...*" That refers to the fourth soil: "*...the seed in the good soil, stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a good crop.*" Can you see it there? Whoever has, to him more will be given. What they have already is "*...a noble and good heart.*" And the more that will be given is "*...a good crop*". They persevere to produce 100 fold. But now look at the negative half of verse 18: "*...whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.*" That refers to the other three soils and the failure to

hear with a good heart and with true spiritual ears. In the first three soils there is a hearing of the Word of God. But in each case what they think they have, is taken away.

(:12) With the first soil they think they hear the Word, but the devil snatches it away. They hear the gospel of grace but an inner reaction says 'What a load of religious nonsense that is!' And they reject what they hear. (:13) With the second soil they think they have the Word with faith and joy. But they have no root to sustain them in the hard times. Their faith is superficial. It's an enthusiasm or emotional high when things go well. But then they suffer badly. They get sick or there's an accident. They lose their job. Or they are persecuted for being a Christian. And they give up their faith. What they think they have is taken away. (:14) With the third soil they think they have the Word of God in their lives. But they get so involved in work and getting all the riches and pleasures of life. They buy everything that they want. And then they are either worried about how to pay for it all or need all their time to look after it. So they choke their spiritual life to death spending little time with Jesus and his Word. They fail to grow up in their faith. Which eventually withers and dies off. So the point of verse 18 is to interpret what was happening in the four soils. Three times it comes true: "*Whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.*" And one time the opposite comes true: "*Whoever has will be given more.*"

You can see the main point of the parable is clear and very urgent: "*Therefore consider carefully how you listen!*" There is so much at stake for all of us personally. I cannot think of anything worse than you hearing me preach God's Word right now and the devil getting in your ear. 'Listen to this guy going on! This religion stuff is just narrow minded fundamentalist bigotry. I'm not coming here again!' I cannot think of anything sadder than for you to lose your enthusiasm for God. You haven't set your roots deep in the Word, getting to understand the depth of God's grace. You don't realise the compassion he has for you when you struggle with the harshness of life. I worry deeply about so many who say they are time poor, as our western culture wants to have it all and we are left with an unmanageable debt crisis. All that time spent working and maintaining our stuff. But do we make time to hear what God is saying to us?

But it is not just that there is so much at stake for each of us personally. There is much at stake for others as well. There would be no point in calling ourselves 'Hope in the Hills' if we were not really hearing what Jesus is saying to us. Look at verses 16-17. *"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."* Verse 16 ties in with verse 15. The good soil refers to those who Jesus says *"...produce a crop"*. That is, they 'bear fruit' or 'do good works'. The reference to the *"light"* in verse 16 is the same thing as *"producing a crop"* or *"bearing fruit"* in verse 15. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:16 *"... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"*.

Jesus is saying when we hear the Word, take it in and reflect on it, it affects how we live. We do good, which is a *"light"* that helps others see their way to also come to know Jesus. So how you listen to the preaching this morning is not just a personal matter. If your 'listening' is shallow or being choked by all the worries or pleasures of this world it has an impact on others. Our faith is not a personal thing we hide under the bed or tuck away for no one to see. It has to be out in the open for others to see. Jesus is the light of the world and as we listen to him he shines through us.

Now I know we saw earlier in verse 10 that Jesus spoke in parables to have a hiding effect. *"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'"*. That may look like a limitation to the offer of the gospel to everyone. But it isn't. It is a reality check that not everyone will respond in faith to the grace that Jesus offers. And they will be judged for it. For a period Jesus is withholding things by using parables so that the Pharisees in their unbelief keep pushing for Jesus to be crucified. That is Jesus' whole purpose for being there. He is there to suffer on the cross to achieve forgiveness. But as far as Jesus' disciples are concerned, after Jesus death and resurrection, they have to take what Jesus gives them and make it know as far and wide as possible. As Jesus also put it in Matthew 10:27, *"What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops."*

So in the end, the point of the parable of the sower is not only that your own salvation and fruitfulness depend on how you hear the Word of God. It is also about how the Word of God spreads in the world is dependent on how you hear the Word of God. That is why Jesus says so strongly in verse 18 *"Therefore consider carefully how you listen."* That means if we are those who already bask in the love of God there is an urgency for us to be regular in church every Sunday to hear the Word preached. There is an urgency for us to be regular in small groups studying the Word together. There's an urgency for us to be involved in reading the Bible for ourselves. To be praying and reflecting on what God is saying. It means we are careful to listen. We don't allow ourselves to go shallow. We ensure the busyness of work and life does not choke our faith. Preaching the Word of God as I do is a high calling. Hearing the Word is also a very high calling. On it hangs not only your own salvation. So does the spread of the light into the world. So please, consider carefully how you listen!