

Is Anybody Listening?

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

This is one of those hard passages to preach on because it is so familiar. This parable is so much a part of our awareness and consciousness. The parable of the sower. You know the story, “A sower went out to sow.” And you know the results, four types of soils. Some seeds fell along the wayside, some on stony places, some among thorns, and some on the good soil.

The parable is so plain, so clear, and so familiar that simply to read the words is sufficient to enable us to get the point. So we can just move on. No need for a long sermon. But I don’t want to dismiss it quite that quickly, nor ignore what the Lord would have for us to learn. After all, the plain and ordinary character of the story is the whole point of speaking in parables, allowing those ordinary life-experiences to represent and illustrate deep and profound spiritual truths.

This is one of Jesus’ most autobiographical parables, in that he himself is clearly the lead character. The absence of his personal presence in the parable is striking, but the identity of the sower is obvious. Further, there are meanings given and interpreted for us for in many of the details of the parable, something you don’t often have. Usually a parable just makes one point, and all the details are subservient to that. But here, in this parable, there are more symbols. The seed is the word of God. Mark’s gospel tells us that, “The sower sows the word.” Luke’s gospel tells us that, “The seed is the word of God.” And the four types of soil are, of course, four descriptions of the condition of human hearts. The emphasis is upon the reception and response of the heart.

But when Jesus began, as he “sat beside the sea” and as

“great multitudes were gathered together to him,” he had a very profound and challenging question to ask. “Is anybody listening?” There were a lot of people there. But how many were listening?

As God speaks today through his word, even as that word is being preached, that same question will arise. Is anybody listening? Sometimes, in a discouraged frame of mind, you might be ready to throw in the towel, to give up, because it seems sometimes like nobody is listening. In the big picture of our culture, our nation, that seems like an obvious observation.

The question seems so appropriate for Christians today. In some form or another, we all feel the weight of that question when we confront the unbelieving world in which we live. The gospel is being preached in so many places, in this country and around the world, but is anybody listening? The gospel is being preached here, it is being preached, but is anybody listening?

If you look at the outward data, the outward evidence, and you might think the answer to that question is obvious—No, nobody is listening. Nobody seems to be responding. You can look at the culture in which we live, the cultural changes and transformations that have taken place just in the last generation, and you might conclude that nobody is listening to Jesus. You might observe the moral standards now considered acceptable, normal, and ordinary, things which the Bible identifies as sin. The purity of marriage. The sanctity of life. Truthfulness. Respect for authority. Honor given to the sabbath day. In every one of those areas, we might well ask, “Is anybody listening to Jesus?” Jesus might have looked out on the crowds gathered before him in Matthew 13 and reached the same conclusion.

So he taught a parable that so clearly identified the dangers of unbelief, a warning to those who were not listening to him, not

submitting to him nor honoring him with their heart and life. And in the clarity of the parable, the unbelieving heart of those who who would reject him is represented by three types of soils. These four soils are not four different types of Christians. They are not three different types of Christians with only one describing the unbelieving heart. Rather, all of the first three types of soils identified describe and define,

I. THE UNBELIEVING HEART.

First,
v.4

No need to speculate about the meaning of this parable.
v.19

Some seed is sown along the path. Sometimes the word is preached, and it doesn't fall upon receptive soil. In a sense, it doesn't fall on soil at all. It falls upon the path, where there is no opportunity for germination. No chance of the seed taking root.

In the parable, “the birds came and devoured them.” In the explanation, with the spiritual reality of Jesus' lesson, “the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.” The wicked one is active, the evil one is eager and energetic in seeking to bring immediate and complete destruction to the effects of any preaching of the Word of God. So ours is a spiritual battle, and our enemy is out to destroy any and every attempt to preach God's word. Whenever the word is preached, wherever the word is preached, as often as the word is preached, Satan is active in his attempt to snatch the word out of the hearts of those who hear, as a bird snatches up seed sown along the path. This is nothing else but a description of,

A. A hardened heart.

That's why so many people today are not listening! Their hearts are hard. As soon as they hear the word, the Devil snatches it away—the word that was sown in their hearts is gone, destroyed. Thus, they do not understand! They do not believe. And many, many people find themselves in that awful and dangerous position, for when they stand before God they will have no excuse. They heard the word, but they would not believe. They would not understand. They would not bear fruit.

And they can not use the devil as an excuse. That isn't what this parable is about. And when God hardens their heart, they can't use that as an excuse, for when God hardens a man's heart it is a matter of his discipline and judgment. So the point of the parable is not that some people want to hear the word and believe but are prohibited from doing so. Instead, the point is the heart of some people is accurately described as a path, a path devoid of all soil upon which the seed of the word could grown. And they will be condemned for their unbelieving heart. They are, indeed, children of the devil rather than children of God. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

The second soil, representing again the unbelieving heart, is described in verse 5 as the stony place, or rocky ground. Perhaps we would say its not as bad as the path, but almost. Not much soil is there, since it is mainly rocks.

Have you ever tried to plant anything in soil filled with rocks? Its frustrating, isn't it? It's almost impossible. It is certainly not worth the effort, for what we read in verse 6 so aptly describes what happens to many people who seem, initially, to hear the word God with what appears to be believing faith.

v.6

Seed sown on the rocky ground is doomed to destruction,

because there is not enough soil to sustain life. There is no opportunity to develop roots, no ability to gain the stability and vitality that roots provide. There was an initial germination, an initial sprouting of the plant, but then the sun comes out and scorches the land, destroying whatever growth had begun. Again, in the earthy, everyday description of the parable, “they did not have much earth.” They wither away in the heat of the scorching sun. This is a description of,

B. A shallow heart.

Again, we know how all of this should be interpreted, for Jesus gives us the interpretation. There is an immediately positive response to the word, even joy.

v.20

Yet the shallow nature of the soil, representing the heart, has an obvious effect. The result is inevitable. A rejection. A falling away.

v.21

Tribulation and persecution may well arise in your life, and though it will always come as the manifestation of the evil nature of sinful men, still God uses those trials to strengthen and purify your faith. But in the shallowness of our world, as it was with the world of Jesus’ day, people turn to religion in order to meet their own felt needs. They come to Jesus to get from him what they want, what they think they need. They come for the benefits, the privileges, the blessings. And surely, beloved, those things do exist, and you who know and love Jesus will know a measure of that.

But the benefits that come to you are not the main point. The blessings you receive are not the motivating or sustaining foundation of your faith, because if they were, what are you going

to do when tribulation or persecution comes?

And it will come. To quote Jesus’ own words in John 16, “In the world you will have tribulation.” Peter says,

I Peter 4:12 “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

So don’t be surprised. Don’t be unsettled, don’t be shaken. But what if your common understanding of the gospel was something along the lines of the prosperity gospel, the health and wealth gospel. Believe in Jesus and everything will go well. Trust Jesus, and you won’t get sick, you won’t suffer. You’ll get rich. Obey God and he will make you wealthy.

Such a faith reflects a shallow heart, a heart preoccupied with itself. A heart preoccupied with its own needs, with the satisfaction of its own desires. And beloved, that is the culture in which we now live. The predominate god of our age is the god of self, the god of self-advancement, self-satisfaction, self-rule, self-actualization, self-esteem, and self-love. And when that god of self assumes a primary place in the exercise of your faith, Jesus would call your faith shallow. So shallow, in fact, that when trouble does come, and it will, such a person “immediately he stumbles.”

Luke’s gospel tells us that “trouble” might also be a time of testing.

Luke 8:13 “And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root;

they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.”

One of the benefits of this parable, for believers, is to warn us to be on guard against the very earliest evidences of this shallowness, and while I wouldn’t wish to scare those with with a soft heart and a tender conscience, I do want you all to consider the dangers of this tendency to be so self-absorbed in your faith. A self-absorbed heart is a shallow heart, a heart unprepared for the trials and temptations of this world. And roots, deep roots, are so often the result of the hardest trials of life. No doubt many of you could fill in the blank there with your own experiences. The strength of your faith, in terms of deep roots, is built upon the hardest and most difficult experiences which God, in his providence, causes you to endure. The one who has a deep and abiding faith responds by calling out to the Lord and waiting upon the Lord. The one with a shallow faith falls away.

True enough is the expression, a mile wide and an inch deep. Such a faith will not sustain you. Such a faith is not true faith at all. Real faith has roots, deep roots. So here is the goal of the ministry of the gospel, that...

Eph. 4:13 “...till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.”

So grow up, people of God! I don’t mean to speak that insultingly, but as a motivation and a challenge. As you trust in God through all the difficulties and temptations of life, let the roots of your faith grow deep and strong.

The third type of soil, then. The third description of the unbelieving heart.

C. A distracted heart.

Thorns.

v.7

Again, the meaning is explicitly defined.

v.22

Two things are identified as thorns. The cares of the world. The deceitfulness of riches. Mark’s gospel adds a third, “the desires for other things enter in and choke the word.” So let me ask you, let me challenge you, how do the cares of this world seek to choke out your faith? And, even more personally, do they ever succeed?

If this distraction with the world is the characteristic of your life, then you can’t be a Christian. If you love the world and the things of the world, then the love of God is not in you. So John writes,

1 John 2:15 “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

But short of that condemnation, what about the flesh? What about the remnants of that old man in your life as a Christian? How do the cares of the world seek to harm your faith, and how do they succeed? What are the cares of this world that are most important to you, and compete with God for your attention and affection, and commitment? Those are good & healthy questions to ask, and when you know the answer, repent of your sin!

Of course, the deceitfulness of riches deserves special mention. Money, security, comfort, luxury, bank accounts, investments, houses, things, things, and things. They all vie for the affections of your heart, don't they? They all vie for your commitments, too. And your loyalty and devotion, your worship. Jesus puts it so clearly,

Mat. 6:24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Just before that conclusion, Jesus said this,

Mat. 6:19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So where is your treasure? What is your treasure? What do you treasure? The answer to that question will reveal the priorities of your heart!

Enough, then, of the unbelieving heart. What is there here to describe and define,

II. THE BELIEVING HEART.

The fourth soil, the good soil. The only soil descriptive of a Christian, a disciple of Jesus. And actually, the encouragement of this parable is that some will hear.

v.9

That's encouraging. Some people are listening! And the power of the gospel is evident, for it is the power of God unto salvation. And it is the power of God which transforms the heart.

There is no clearer description of that power than the word's of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel,

Ezek. 36:25 "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

A new heart! A heart of flesh, one that is alive! I expect you know the familiar words of,

2 Cor. 5:17 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

And in this new creation, one thing is sure and certain.

A. The good heart hears and understands.

v.8

Finally, a crop. Fruit. And the explanation,
v.23a

Don't miss both of those things together. Hearing, with understanding. And remember the purpose of the parables, from last time, they are designed to hide the spiritual reality of the message from those who don't believe.

v.14-15

But there is a positive alternative, a positive expression. Hearing and understanding.

v.16-17

So when you hear the gospel, and understand, you are blessed indeed! When you hear Jesus, and understand the

gospel, surely that is evidence that the Holy Spirit is enabling you! So Paul writes,

1 Cor. 2:7 “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, 8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” 10 But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. 11 For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. 13 These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”

So, dear friends, in Christ, we have the Spirit of God that we might understand. And such a blessing that is. That’s the good heart, the good soil. With one more obvious emphasis,

B. The good heart brings forth good fruit.

Again, v.8

And, v.23

Fruit is the evidence that you hear and understand. Fruit is the evidence that God has changed your heart. Fruit is the evidence that you love God and that he first loved you. And that’s the call of this parable, the call to bear fruit. Abundant fruit.

People of God,

James 1:22 “...be doers of the word, and not hearers only,

deceiving yourselves.”

Is anybody listening? Do you know how I know that the answer to that question is actually, “Yes”? Do you know how you can tell who is listening to Jesus, how you can tell who believes in Jesus? Do you know how you can determine the condition of the heart, and be able to identify a good heart, the good soil? By the fruit. The good soil produces good fruit!

This is what Jesus says to his disciples, and to you tonight.

John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:16 “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”

Similarly, this is the prayer Paul prays for the church in Colosse, a prayer I would pray for you as I preach this afternoon,

Col. 1:9 “...that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; 10 that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; 12 giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.”

In other words, that may you show yourselves to be the good soil!