

30 September 2007

## How's Your Hearing?

Reading: Luke 8:1-15

One of the finest prayers I ever heard was prayed by a man in his eighties. Jack Laburn, or "Uncle Jack" as he was affectionately known, was quite a character. He'd had an illustrious career. Since he had such a wealth of experience and had served with such commitment, the church made him an honorary board member--a kind of "deacon emeritus." One night, during a time of prayer at a Board meeting, we heard his big, booming voice. I shall never forget the authenticity of his prayer as he conversed with the Lord:

"Lord," he said, "the other day my grandchild said to me, 'Grandpa, you're not listening.' And I recalled that, just a few weeks ago, my wife, Eunice, said to me, 'Jack, you're not listening!'" Then I remembered how, when I was a child, my father used to say to me, 'Jack, you're not listening!'" And Lord, worse still, I wonder sometimes whether you don't have to say to me, "Jack, you're not listening!"

Uncle Jack then proceeded to confess that he had "a hearing problem." You could not help but admire him for this acknowledgement. Yes, he had some definite ideas, as most of us do, but he wanted to be attentive to the Lord. And he had the grace and the humility to change his mind.

So let me ask you this morning, "How's *your* hearing?" The parable before us is about hearing--really hearing what God has to say to us.

### **I. YOU SEE, IT IS POSSIBLE TO HEAR AND YET NOT TO LISTEN, TO RECEIVE THE AUDITORY SIGNALS, BUT NOT TO GET THE POINT OF WHAT IS BEING SAID.**

That's apparently what was happening to some of Jesus' hearers.

#### **A. The Parable in Context.**

Let me try to put the parable in context. Jesus' popularity had grown. People were coming in their droves to hear him and see the miracles he was performing, so much so, that he had to keep on the move. The sense of excitement and anticipation in the crowds was almost tangible. He was speaking about the kingdom of God. That meant different things to different people. But it was generally agreed that when it came, it would be a vast improvement on the present situation. There was mounting opposition among the religious establishment, but the masses were on his side. They were hanging on his words. But many were not really hearing what he was saying.

## B. The Situation of the Original Hearers

Then he does a strange thing. He tells them a little story about farming. The chances are that most of us have read the parable or heard a sermon or a lesson on it. We immediately read that the disciples asked him to explain it to them and that he did so. We *have* the interpretation. In fact we have probably never read or heard it without the interpretation. But remember that when Jesus first told the parable neither the crowds nor the disciples knew what he was talking about. Of course, you have to credit them with some intelligence. They knew that he was not just speaking about farming practice.

## C. A Simple Enough Story

Listen to it.

<sup>5</sup>"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 of the air ate it up.

<sup>6</sup>Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup>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, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

***That was it!*** It is just possible that there was a farmer in the distance. In any event, the hearers would have been familiar with the sight of a farmer scattering seed. Remember, this was not the Fraser Valley and farming methods were a little different.

In Jesus' world it seems to have reflected standard procedure for broadcast sowing. The farmer recognized that his seed would land in many different kinds of soil. But sowing often preceded ploughing, and a farmer would simply walk up and down the rows of his field, tossing the seed out by hand; then using a wooden plough drawn by oxen or donkeys, he would create furrows in the soil so that as many of the seeds as possible could take root<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps I should state the obvious here. I do so because it helps with the interpretation of the parable. The farmer obviously wanted as much seed as possible to take root and produce a crop. That, after all, is why he was sowing the seed in the first place. He didn't just do this for his morning exercise. Nor did he disperse the seed indiscriminately. But the region is extremely rocky. In addition to the many rocks on the surface, there

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 106.

were unseen rocky ledges under a thin layer of soil. And, of course, there was the inevitable pathway. No farmer would deliberately throw seed onto the pathway, but the occasional gust of wind would blow some of the seed onto the compacted footpath.

#### **D. The Puzzled Disciples**

Luke tells us matter-of-factly that “the disciples asked what this parable meant” (Luke 8:9). Matthew gives us a little more information. He tells us that they asked Jesus, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” (Mt 13:10) The answer to that question is fairly involved. I am not going to attempt to explain the role of parables in too much detail this morning as that would take us off at a tangent. Suffice it to say that this was an intentional switch. (I shall include a note on this subject at the end of the sermon). Jesus’ explanation enables us to see exactly what the parable is about and it is as relevant today as when he first told it.

## **II. EACH OF US HEARS THE WORD OF GOD, BUT THE QUESTION IS: “ARE WE LISTENING?”**

In this parable Jesus identifies four kinds of hearers. The seed is the word of God. Whenever the word is proclaimed, it meets with a response.

### **A. In the first place, there are HARDENED HEARERS.**

*<sup>12</sup>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.*

The seed never even gets an opportunity to germinate. Since the places where the seed fell are likened to people who hear the word of God, we have to say that although the seed was snatched away, it was ‘received.’ There is an implied culpability. This is scary and I certainly hope it does not apply to anyone here this morning. But one observes this. There are those who seem totally impervious to the word of God. Either they oppose it or they show total indifference towards it.

The point is: they *do* respond. Hostility is a response. Indifference is a response. As with all analogies, there is a point at which the analogy breaks down. A pathway can’t help being a pathway, but a hearer who is *like* a pathway chooses to reject or to ignore. The tragic thing about it is that the word of God contains such good news. Wrapped up, in that tiny seed is the miracle of life. It contains the potential of fruit.

### **B. Secondly, there are SUPERFICIAL HEARERS.**

*<sup>13</sup>Those on the rock 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.*

Matthew's Gospel explains that the shallowness of the soil that covers the rock is one of the reasons the seed sprang up so quickly. Those represented by the rocky places are drawn to what appear to be the attractive aspects of the message. But these hearers have a hearing impediment. They fall away the moment there is some hardship. If they had truly committed to the word, hardship would not deter them. They would realize that difficulty is nothing in comparison with the marvellous salvation they have received. That's the interesting thing. Persecution and hardship do not deter the one who genuinely receives the word of God.

That's how it was in the early church. The apostles rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). Testing refines the true believer. It's not always pleasant, but it doesn't cause us to fall away. That's because we do not selectively clutch at the peripheral aspects of the message. We embrace the message as a whole. It is such good news that a little hardship does not deter the true believer.

### **C. Thirdly, there are SELF-ABSORBED HEARERS.**

*<sup>14</sup>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.*

Where there is fertile soil, it supports the plants as they germinate and grow, but it also supports thorny weeds. And, as we all know, weeds can be quite prolific. In this case, the weeds suffocate the plants. What appeared to be so promising at first came to nothing. The seed did not land up on the bone hard pathway or on a shallow layer of soil that concealed a rock. It actually landed in good soil. But in the end, it was no more fruitful than the seed that was trampled and eaten by birds or shrivelled up because it could not put down substantial roots.

Inevitably life entails certain worries. What's more, we all need to make ends meet and enjoy a little recreation. But when we have not responded to God's word in faith, the worries of life can throttle us. When we have not genuinely experienced the riches of his grace, then worldly wealth becomes all-important. It cannot buy true happiness or guarantee good health. That's why Paul tells us not to place our confidence in wealth which is so uncertain, but to put our hope in God (1 Tim 6:17).

We all need some recreation. But when we become preoccupied with pleasure and entertainment, the young plant is choked. Such a preoccupation can only be a sign that we have not appreciated the true riches that are ours. If we hear the good news of the word of God, money cannot dominate our thinking, nor do we need to put our confidence in uncertain riches. No pleasure can compare with the sheer joy of knowing Christ. We certainly will have worries and concerns, but we need not be overwhelmed by anxiety.

All because we hear the word of God and receive it for what it is. You haven't really "heard" the good news unless it liberates you from the thorns of anxiety and materialism and hedonism.

**D. Fourthly, there are RESPONSIVE HEARERS.**

*<sup>15</sup>But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*

When the farmer went out to sow his seed, he had one thing in mind: he wanted to harvest a good crop. And, by the way, the Lord does not tell us that a quarter of the seed fell on the pathway, a quarter on rock, a quarter among thorns, and so on. At the most basic level, there were two outcomes: some seed bore fruit and other seed did not. There is only one acceptable result.

Those who truly *hear* the word of God do produce fruit. What's more, no farmer realistically expected a hundredfold. I'm told that "thirty times more than was sown" was a really good crop with which a farmer would be pleased. "Sixty times" was way beyond reasonable expectation. But a hundred times was more than could ever be hoped for. Yet the message so captivates the responsive hearers, that they flourish and grow beyond even the most optimistic expectation. They hear the good news and take it to heart. Their growth seems out of all proportion to what was sown. But then, after all, the seed *is* the word of God!

I do need to emphasize one thing. When we look at the hardened hearer and the superficial hearer and the self-absorbed hearer and the responsive hearer, we are not thinking of different personality types. This is not a Myers Briggs evaluation. It's not as though the responses are determined by the type of disposition one has. You know, some are excitable and optimistic and others are deep and contemplative by nature. This has nothing to do with temperament and everything to do with attitude of heart. The Lord describes the responsive hearers as "those with a noble and good heart."

**Conclusion**

So, how's your hearing? Or should I say, how's your listening? The word of God comes to us as a word of amazing grace. It is good news, such good news that it calls for all you have. If you think you can respond to it half-heartedly or superficially, you haven't understood it. It's the greatest news in all the world. It's about knowing God and having him transform your life. How's your hearing? If your hearing is right, the seed will not be trampled underfoot or snatched away, the plant will not shrivel because there is no root, the cares of this world will not crush you and the pleasures of this world will not enslave you. Instead, you will flourish and produce abundant fruit. Jesus said: "Those who remain in me and I in them will bear much fruit . . . This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:5, 8).

**Note:**  
**The Switch to Parables**

When asked by the disciples why he was speaking to the people in parables, he said, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven is given to you but not to them” (Mt 13:11). It may seem from what he said that he told parables to keep people from understanding the truth. This would be strange to say the least--a teacher with an important message who adopts a deliberate strategy to ensure that the message is not understood.

There were several reasons for Jesus’ switch to a more parabolic method of teaching.

**1. It depicts the response to the word of God as proclaimed by Jesus.**

In the first place, we must realize that Jesus was aware that many who were listening to him with apparent eagerness were not actually accepting what he was teaching (John 2:23-25; 6:41, 42, 66-69). They were excited, even fascinated by what they saw and heard, but the word of God was not having the desired effect in their lives. From one point of view, he was summarizing the response to his own proclamation of the word of God.

**2. It recognizes a distinction between two classes of hearers.**

In a sense, Jesus places the truth beyond the immediate grasp of those who are rejecting it while, at the same time, making it accessible to those who wanted to hear it and act upon it. In this connection, his quotation from Isaiah 6 is significant (Mt 13:13-14; Luke 8:9-10). The people to whom Isaiah was sent had, of their own volition, rejected God’s word. Isaiah’s ministry to them would not result in a change of attitude on their part. It would hasten judgment and this would in turn lead to salvation (Is 6:11-13).

Grant Osborne places the matter in perspective for us. He acknowledges that Jesus spoke in parables to conceal the truth from unresponsive hearers. But he asks a further question, “Was this *the* purpose of the parables or *a* purpose?” He then explains:

For those who reject the presence of God in Jesus (the leaders of the Jews) the parable becomes a sign of sovereign judgment, further hardening their hearts. For those who are open (the crowds) the parable encounters and draws them to decision. For those who believe (the disciples) the parable teaches them further kingdom truth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 295-6.

### **3. It was part of a deliberate strategy.**

This switch was part of a deliberate strategy related to the accomplishment of his mission. This purposeful shift runs parallel to two other factors:

- “His time had not yet come.” He knew that matters could come to a premature head, and he took steps to see that this did not happen (John 2:4; 7:6, 30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 12:53-54; 13:1; 17:1).
- He ensured that he would not too quickly be identified as the Messiah. This would have been counter-productive, especially in view of the misunderstanding that surrounded the term and the expectation that the Messiah would be a political liberator (Mark 1:24-25, 38-39, 43-45; 7:36; Luke 4:41; John 6:15).

The switch to parables as his main (not exclusive) form of public teaching worked in conjunction with “the timing motif” and the “messianic secret.”

### **4. It was a way of preserving the truth.**

Günther Bornkamm insisted that “Jesus’ parables aim at making things clear.”<sup>3</sup> *His parables did not obscure the truth so that it would be lost; they packaged the truth so that it would be preserved.* Perhaps Roy Clements comment is the most helpful.

Jesus is not merely seeking to tantalize or educate his hearers; he is wanting to challenge them at a fundamental level. On the surface, such stories seem innocuous; charming little narratives full of familiar images that easily capture your attention. In reality they’re a kind of Stealth bomber, specially designed to evade our psychological defenses, insinuating themselves inside our mind in spite of every barricade we may seek to erect, and then dropping a highly explosive charge targeted at the most vulnerable point in our spiritual complacency.<sup>4</sup>

### **5. It was an ingenious way of packaging unwelcome truth.**

The bottom line is that parables convey truth in a way that precepts cannot. Think of the “parable” that Nathan told King David (2 Sam 12:1-13). The story got to him before the message did. The simple but powerful teaching contained in the parables is available to us. Their message is as relevant today as it ever was. They explain, they illustrate and, above all, they challenge us to response and commitment.

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<sup>3</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 69.

<sup>4</sup> Roy Clements, *Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 7, 8.

