

## Are You Really Listening to the Word?

**Luke 8:1-21**

**Key Verse 8:15, “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.”**

In this fast-moving age, there are so many things competing for our attention. We are overwhelmed by too much information to process every day. We are used to skimming through emails, social media, news, and books. While listening, people are often distracted by various thoughts, even at this moment. Right after hearing a short presentation, do you know how much of it you will retain? Less than 50%. And research shows that nearly 75 percent of communications that are received are interpreted incorrectly.<sup>1</sup> This is usually due to prejudice and distractions.

The key word in today's passage is to hear/listen (9 times). The parable of the sower is one of the most well-known parables of Jesus. Everybody has probably heard about it. It may not be entertaining for you anymore. So, do you need to hear it again? We will see that Jesus' parables unsettle our settled thoughts and reorient us towards the kingdom of God. His word has huge potential to produce a huge crop and transform our lives. The key is *how* you listen and respond to the word. Are you really listening to the word and experiencing the kingdom of God? What does it mean to really listen to the Word? We can think about three things: 1) Have ears to hear, 2) Hold the word fast, 3) Consider carefully and obey. I pray that God may help us to really listen to His word and become a good soil!

### 1. Have Ears to Hear

V1 says, Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God: “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news.” In Jesus, God's rule is breaking into our world. God's rule is good news for the poor, it is freedom for the oppressed; it brings forgiveness for sinners, peace for the restless, and hope for the hopeless. Wherever Jesus comes, there is the kingdom of God. Wherever the gospel is preached, there is healing and restoration. Whoever receives the good news of God's kingdom can experience forgiveness, healing, and hope.

In V2-3, Luke draws attention to Jesus' ministry. In particular, he mentions some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. They joined and supported Jesus' ministry which was revolutionary in their time. In ancient society, women were oppressed and undervalued. The rabbis refused to teach women and despised them. But through Jesus, many women experienced healing, forgiveness and restoration. They became his followers. They had ears to hear and responded to the gospel of the kingdom. At one time they had been miserable, but now they were restored as beautiful daughters of God. Jesus welcomes all kinds of people who are poor in spirit and blesses them. Jesus' community may have looked scandalous to the world, but it reveals the beauty of the kingdom family. May our community reflect the grace and beauty of Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia M. Buhler, “Managing in the New Millennium”

Now, a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him. There were many kinds of people with different interests and issues. Jesus told the parable of the sower. People lived in an agrarian culture, so Jesus often used farming imagery. (How many of you have a green thumb? I grew up as a farmer's son and still enjoy gardening in my backyard.)

A farmer went out to plant seed. In ancient Palestine, a farmer did not use a tractor, but would walk through the path of a field and scatter seed from a bag draped over his shoulder. As the farmer scattered it across his field, some seed fell along the path, where it was trampled on, and the birds ate it. Other seed fell on rocky soil. It began to grow, but the plant soon died because the soil was too shallow. Other seed fell among thorns that grew up with it and crowded out the tender plants. Still other seed fell on fertile soil, like black dirt in Illinois (which is apparently one of the best soils in the world). This seed grew and produced a crop that was a hundred times as much as had been planted.

This is a plain story. You don't need someone to explain it to you. Everybody knows this Farming lesson 101. But after telling this parable, Jesus called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." (v8) The Message version paraphrases it, "*Are you listening to this? Really listening?*" Jesus is exhorting us to do more than just hear.

Jesus' disciples knew that he was not just teaching them a basic farming lesson. They had ears to hear and the desire to understand. So, they asked him what this parable meant (9). In v 10, Jesus 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.'"

They were "given" knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God. Jesus' parables are not Aesop's fables with moral lessons, but simple stories that point to the secrets of the kingdom of God. Jesus' parables both reveal and conceal the truth about the kingdom. They reveal it to the real listener; but they conceal it from a casual hearer. The real listener has the desire to understand and asks humbly, "Would you explain it to me, Lord?" God is more than willing to reveal the secrets of the kingdom to those who earnestly seek and ask. But Jesus' parables become a judgment for the casual hearer who doesn't have desire to listen. Which group do you want to belong to? To the real listener or the casual hearer? I pray that we may have ears to hear and ask Jesus!

## 2. Hold the Word Fast with Patience (Four Kinds of Hearers)

Jesus said, "The seed is the word of God" (11). It is the message of the kingdom. Like seed has life in it, God's word has life with amazing potential. Here is a question for those of you who know a thing or two about gardening: What is the most foundational aspect of gardening? It is soil like Jesus said. Now, let's dive into the four kinds of heart soils that Jesus talks about.

Heart soil 1: The beaten path (12). This beaten path stands for a heart hardened by human pride and indifference. They hear the word, but it goes in one ear and out the other. This path-like heart is closed to the truth of God that extends beyond the materialistic world. We live in a sensate culture where people are taught that only what we perceive with our five senses is real. Many

ignore the unseen reality of God and his kingdom. When people hear the word of the kingdom and don't understand it (Mt 13:19), the devil comes and takes it away from their hearts, and prevents them from believing and being saved.

Heart soil 2: The rocky soil (13). Those with rocky soil hear the message with enthusiasm, responding "Yes, amen, hallelujah. Thank you for the message." But the enthusiasm doesn't go very deep. The rocky soil is too shallow for the plants to take root. (If you're into gardening like me, you know that it's by the roots that plants soak up all the nutrition and water. While tending to my backyard garden on a hot summer day, I learned this lesson the hard way. While relocating kale, I unknowingly damaged the root, which caused the kale to shrivel up in a few days time.) Often, life doesn't go as expected. As we place our trust in God, we may expect many blessings to follow, including health, wealth, and success. But when we believe in Jesus, we find ourselves at odds with the world. As Christians, we are called to live counter-culturally and challenge the idols of this world, which leads to persecution. After being stoned because of his gospel preaching, Paul said, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Ac 14:22). Faith is not about our own satisfaction and comfort, but about the kingdom of God. So, shall we back off from the life of faith when times are hard? No. We should have deeper fellowship with Jesus through his word (Col 2:6-7). Then we can take root in God's living word that provides plenty of moisture to thrive even under the heat of summer.

Heart soil 3: The crowded soil (14). Those with crowded soil hear the message and seem to grow initially, but their hearts are crowded out by thorny weeds. (When you tend to a vegetable garden, you can see how quickly weeds can crowd out the soil. Weeds spread like wildfire, taking up space, stealing nutrition, and ultimately choking the plants.) I believe that many Christians living in America are like crowded soil. Many things around us distract us from hearing the message. Jesus names some of these weeds: the worries of life, building up wealth, and having fun.

Our hearts are often entangled in the worries of daily life. By default, we are anxious and worry about tomorrow, the unknown future (anxious about our health, food, gas prices, housing, school studies, careers, marriage, raising children, not to mention things far beyond our personal control, such as war, natural disasters, global warming, etc.). Worries and anxieties can suck up our energy very quickly. Why are we so anxious and worried? Our hearts are filled with worries when we seek to build our life on things apart from God.

Our Capitalistic society runs after money. Money rules the world and people's hearts. The American dream pursues material success that would promise security and happiness. But riches are deceitful (Mt 13:22). While money is necessary and useful, idolizing it traps us in many foolish desires.

Also, pleasure seeking chokes our lifeline to God's kingdom. Jesus is not saying that we should live like hermits, avoiding any fun. Actually, Jesus attended enough parties to be labeled a "glutton and drunkard" by the Pharisees (7:34). But when pleasure seeking takes priority in our hearts, we can never grow.

Today people often say, "Go with what your heart desires" or "Follow your heart." This common advice assumes that our hearts are trustworthy. But in reality, the human heart is entangled by

worthless idols. John Calvin said, *“The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.”* Anything that takes God’s place is a worthless idol. In his *“Counterfeit Gods,”* Tim Keller puts it like this, *“An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”* Can you identify anything in your heart that replaces God? As long as our hearts are crowded out by idols, we cannot experience the kingdom of God and bear fruit. How can we get rid of worthless idols? Here is the good news. When we confess our idols to Jesus, he will uproot all our thorns because he came to conquer our idols by his blood and restore us to himself.

Heart soil 4: the good soil. V15 says, “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.” What does “a noble and good heart” mean? Actually, Scripture says, *“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”* (Jer 17:9). Then, what is “a noble and good heart”? It acknowledges the corrupt condition of the human heart; it admits that our heart is constantly going astray, looking for satisfaction apart from God. So, it is not a perfect heart, but it is humble and honest, and listens to the gospel message.

Those with a humble heart retain the message after hearing it. To retain means to understand the message and “hold it fast” (ESV). It means to go back to meditate on the message of the kingdom day and night. Some of us read and recite God’s word every day. Deuteronomy instructs us to talk about God’s words *“when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates”* (Deut 6:7-9). In today’s terms, let your computer screen saver display God’s word every hour, journal a verse that speaks to your heart, and set reminders to meditate on God’s word. (When I was a student, my computer screen saver was set to display God’s word “Have Faith in God!”; it helped me to hold it fast). Writing Bible reflection is an excellent way of retaining the Word. It is a very helpful tool given to us.

What is the whole point of meditating on the word, talking, reciting, and writing it down? It is to put Jesus’ word first. Against temptations and distractions, we make Jesus and his promise the number one priority in life. When we face a problem, we tend to dwell on it for a long time. But we should focus on Jesus’ word and hold it fast. We should let Jesus speak over our life situations. This will allow us to reject the devil’s lies and see things through Jesus’ promises.

This requires patience. As we persevere in God’s word, we can absorb enough nutrients from the gospel of Jesus. When the seed of God’s word takes deep root, it produces a huge crop. What is this crop? It is the kingdom of God that our souls are longing for. It is to meet Jesus, receive complete forgiveness of sins and become Jesus’ family; to grow in the image of Jesus day by day; love, Joy, and peace become ours. Jesus wants to give us his kingdom. So, listening really means holding Jesus’ word fast. May we hold the gospel fast and bear fruit with patience.

### 3. Consider Carefully the Word and Do it

In v16-18, Jesus exhorts us to consider carefully how we listen. The parable of the lamp is a straightforward story. People light a lamp not to hide it, but to let the light shine. Likewise, Jesus

teaches not to conceal the message of the kingdom, but to reveal it. Like a lamp, the word of God shines and reveals the secrets of the kingdom.

So what should we do? Jesus says, "Therefore consider carefully how you listen" (18a). We should consider carefully how we listen. Why? Jesus says, "Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them" (18b).

In this fast-moving age, many of us are used to multitasking. It worries me how many people text and drive. Multitasking is pretty common during online meetings with the camera off. Some people say, "I am more productive when I multitask." But research shows that error rates in the workplace rise by 50 percent with multitasking.<sup>2</sup> Now when it comes to Jesus and his word, multitasking is a bad idea. Jesus deserves our full attention. How much we receive depends on our attitude towards God's word. So, let's pray to spend intentional time with God that is free from distractions.

Habitual hearing is another problem when it comes to God's word. If we think that we already know, we cannot seek and ask. Then, even what we have will be taken from us. But if we carefully listen to what Jesus says, we will be given more. As we carefully listen to the Word, it reveals our heart condition and illuminates the dark corners of our lives. So, take care how you listen so that "the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2Pe 1:19). Then, we will see Jesus and his glory.

In v19-21, Jesus drives his point home. He said, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (21). Jesus is saying that obeying God's word is the number one priority in life. When you hear the message of the kingdom of God, hearing is not enough. If you really listen to it, you will put it into practice. As we do so, we can experience the blessings of Jesus' kingdom family. If you know who is talking, you will really listen to him. The Son of God, the Messiah, King of kings and Lord of lords visited us so that we could become his kingdom family. We used to be slaves to sins. Now in Jesus, you are not a failure, but sons and daughters of God; heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Ro 8:17). This is a tremendous identity. If you really know your identity as kingly family, you will think like a kingly family and act like a kingly family. Listening really means doing God's word.

Are you a real listener or a casual hearer? Through today's passage, we have learned how we can be real listeners. To be a real listener, we should have ears to hear, desiring to understand God's word; hold it fast through making it our first priority; and do it as Jesus' kingdom family. What kind of soil is your heart? What kind of soil do you want to be? Like Illinois' dark dirt, the best soil in the world, may we become good heart soil, holding on to Jesus! What is an idol that steals your attention and time? Are you going through a difficult time of testing? Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He wants to give you his kingdom and life to the full as his family. May God bless us to become real listeners so that we can produce the beautiful fruits of his kingdom! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> John Medina, Brain Rules.