

## INTRODUCTION

Here's Bob and here's Jerry. They're both in Celebration Worship at Green Acres listening to the Pastor. They've both been Christians for over twenty years. But there's a big difference between Bob and Jerry. During the message, Bob has his Bible open and he's taking notes. He occasionally nods his head in agreement and even let's out an "amen" a few times. He is totally engaged in hearing God's Word.

However, one row in front of Bob, Jerry is sitting there and he's nodding, but it's not in agreement. He can hardly keep his eyes open. He didn't bring a Bible and he's not taking any notes. Instead he's looking at his watch, and wondering when this will be over and he can leave for lunch. He's so bored he starts counting how many lights are in the ceiling or how many people in the choir have glasses. He's out of it.

Bob and Jerry are listening to the same message from the same Pastor. What's the difference? Jesus gives the answer in our passage.

Here's another example. Over in Crosswalk Worship, there are two girls, Jessica and Amanda. They're both going into their senior year in high school. They grew up in Green Acres and were baptized the same year. Jessica has her smartphone out, and she is reading the text the pastor is using. She is using her Bible app to access the live feature on YouVersion, so she is following the outline from the message from God's Word. Jessica knows her senior year is going to be full of important decisions, so she is asking God to give her wisdom and direction. She's sitting on the figurative edge of her seat wanting to hear a Word from God.

Meanwhile, three seats down, Amanda has her smartphone out also, but she isn't using a Bible app. She is busy texting her friends and checking their latest posts on Instagram, Snapchat, or Vine. She is aware there is a speaker sharing a message from the Bible on the big screen, but she's really not listening. They are both hearing the same message, but one is engaged and the other is distracted and bored. So, how do you explain the difference between Jessica and Amanda? Jesus gives us the answer in one of His most famous parables. It's often called the Parable of the Sower, but it is really the Parable about Receiving the Word of God.

Mark 4:1-20. "Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 'Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.'"

"Then Jesus said, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.' When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, 'The

secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"

"Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

Because this was one of the first parables of Jesus, He added a freebie—He gave a simple explanation. The seed is the Word of God. It gets planted everywhere, but only some of the seeds grow to the point of actually producing a harvest. The four soil types represent different levels of receptivity to God's Word.

When I first started studying this parable years ago I thought these categories were permanent. I thought a hard-hearted person would always be hard-hearted. But I've come to see that on any given day it is possible for each of us to reflect all four types of soils.

I agree with Ray Stedman who wrote: "I used to read this story as though these various soils were four different kinds of people, who remained the same all through their lifetimes. But I have come to see that what our Lord is describing here is not four types of persons, so much, but conditions of our heart at any given moment. Whenever the Word is being taught, people are in one condition or another. We have all been callous, at times. We have all been impulsive in our reaction—emotional and shallow. We have all been overly worried about other matters. And we have all had times of being open and responsive to the Word. The question is how are we receiving God's Word at this moment?"

Here's the sermon in a sentence: The spiritual impact of a Bible message isn't based on the content of the message; it depends on how the Word is HEARD and RECEIVED. Jesus repeated this phrase many times, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In this powerful parable Jesus shows us there's a wrong way and a right way to receive God's Word.

## **I. THE WRONG WAY TO RECEIVE GOD'S WORD**

Jesus spoke of people who hear, but they just don't get it. He said, "They may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding..." (Mark 4:12) Then He goes on to describe the wrong ways to hear the Word.

### **A. A hard heart where the Word is stolen**

Some of the seeds fell on the hard pathway and the birds swooped down and stole it. This represents a person who hears the Word, but doesn't retain it. It goes in one ear and out the other.

According to Jesus, there is an invisible process happening right now. Satan and his demons are trying to actively steal the word from your heart and mind the way those birds stole the seed from the pathway. Don't ever be surprised if you have trouble concentrating when you read the Bible or hear the Bible taught. The enemy's most effective tool is distraction.

Sometimes in the middle of a message a baby will start crying, or someone will get up and walk out. The devil didn't make those people do that, but if you lost your concentration on the Word, Satan is smiling. If you allow your mind to wander, don't be surprised if you go on a mental journey including what you're having for lunch today, what you have to do tomorrow, or something you need to fix around the house.

You don't think of yourself as a hard-hearted person, but if you can't concentrate on God's Word, your heart is like the hard soil on the pathway.

### **B. A shallow heart where the Word is starved**

The second condition represents someone who hears the Word and it is planted, in fact they receive it with joy. They are excited and happy about the Word of God. But there's no depth to their faith, and they aren't truly grounded. They are depending on the warm fuzzy feeling they get when someone sings a high note, or the pastor makes a powerful point. But by Tuesday they become discouraged and distressed.

I call these people "Alka-Seltzer" Christians. When you drop two Alka-Seltzer tablets into the water, they fizz like crazy for a few seconds, and then they settle down into a funny tasting medicine. These Christians are happy people, but when the happy feeling fades away, so does their faith.

This is a subtle warning that we can't base our faith on our feelings. Some people want to come to church and get charged up with enough happiness to last them until the next Sunday. But Jesus said when the heat of the sun starts bearing down and trouble comes (as trouble will) these people fade away. When the heat gets turned up in your life, you need more than an emotional faith. You need a deeply rooted faith in Christ to take you through the trouble

### **C. A crowded heart where the Word is strangled**

Some seed fell on good soil. But as the wheat began to grow, so did the weeds and the briars. And these wild plants became to choke out the fruit-bearing potential of the plant. The good plant was strangled by the junk plants.

I think this is the condition most believers suffer from today. Chances are you're not so hard-hearted that you don't hear a word I say. And there are probably not too many people who just hear, giggle, and forget the Word.

But there are many of you listening to my message today that love the Bible. You receive it and hide it in your hearts. You want to see a spiritual harvest of truth. But then there are some other people, organizations, and activities demanding your attention and allegiance until God's Word can't be fruitful.

In verse 19 Jesus identified at least three things that choke out the life of God's Word. There is worry, wealth, and the desire for more stuff. Picture how these evil vines can grow and destroy a good plant. Our English "worry" comes from the Latin word *wurgen*, which means to strangle. Worry will destroy your spiritual health. Jesus didn't say wealth is a thorn bush, He said "the deceitfulness of wealth." Money tells you a lie. We've all heard it. The lie of wealth is this: "Hey, if you get enough of me, then you'll be happy. If you get enough of me, then all your problems will be gone." That's the lie of wealth.

In the early 1990s a book was published entitled, *The Day America Told the Truth*. Thousands of Americans were interviewed and asked what they would be willing to do for \$10 million. One third of Americans surveyed said would be willing to abandon their family and friends for \$10 million. That's the deceitfulness of riches. This madness to get-rich-quick is hurting our culture. That's why gambling and lotteries are so popular in America. There's a reason lotteries have become the poor man's tax. You've heard horror stories about people who won the lottery. Money isn't the root of all evil; but the Bible says the LOVE of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

## II. THE RIGHT WAY TO RECEIVE GOD'S WORD

Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Mark 4:9) Everyone listening to Jesus probably had ears on the side of their heads, and they listened to what Jesus said. But listening to Jesus isn't the same thing as having an ear to hear. Hearing the Word of God is more of an art than a science.

But Jesus did say there is a kind of heart condition where God's Word takes root and produces a crop. This is an open heart where God's Word is multiplied. Now before we talk about this, how many different kinds of receptive hearts did Jesus talk about? If you say, "Four" you're not exactly correct. He talked about two broad categories. First, He talked about poor soil (or heart conditions) and He gave three examples: A hard heart; a shallow heart; and a crowded heart.

Jesus' second broad category is productive soil (heart conditions) and He gave three examples of that. Did you catch it? Some produced thirty-fold; some produced sixty-fold; some produced a hundred-fold. Unless you were a Jewish farmer you might not have understood that. A thirty-fold harvest was considered a very weak harvest. A sixty-fold harvest was considered a good harvest. But a hundred-fold harvest was a miracle. It was a super bumper crop.

Our spiritual goal is to be fruitful. But are you content to be only mildly fruitful—a thirty-fold harvest? Are you content to be moderately fruitful—a sixty-fold harvest? Or is it your desire to cultivate such a receptive, fertilized heart that there is a miraculous multiplication of God's Word?

That doesn't happen accidentally. It only happens intentionally. For instance, on planet earth, only a small percentage of soil is naturally fertile, around rivers and where there is volcanic soil. But everywhere else, the soil must be prepared. In other words, rocks have to be removed, trees and stumps must be taken out; the ground must be plowed and fertilized.

The same is true for our hearts. The rocks of apathy and indifference must be removed. The trees and stumps of carnal thinking must be rooted out. The thorn bushes of worry and worldliness must be pulled up by the roots. Not many people have a heart naturally receptive to God's Word, but there are some things you can do to develop a receptive heart.

### **A. Hear God's Word attentively**

There is a great difference between passive listening and active listening. Passive listening is when you aren't really paying attention. You might have your television or radio on for background noise, and you aren't really paying attention to what is being said or sung. But active listening means that you are paying close attention to what is being said.

When you come to church or when you are in a Bible study, you need to be in active listening mode. Let me give you an example. You're a patient in the hospital, and your doctor comes in to give you the results of your test, or to give you instructions when you're discharged. I've been visiting people in the hospital many times when this happens. The patient and the family are paying close attention. They are probably going to write down what the doctor says. They are listening actively. There are times Dr. Jesus has something for you to hear, but if you aren't paying attention you might miss the fact that He may be using a plain orderly like me or another Bible teacher!

That's why I have always taken notes when someone is preaching or teaching. Studies have shown that you retain less than 10% of what you hear, but you retain up to 40% of what you write down. When you have God's Word memorized and hidden in your heart, you are less likely to sin.

One of the best ways I've learned to memorize scripture is by writing it down several times. Albert Einstein said, "A short pencil is better than a long memory."

In the first chapter of Psalms, the profile of a righteous man is given. Verse 2 says, "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." The only way you can meditate on the Word is when you have it hidden in your heart. So the next time you have trouble sleeping, try taking God's word. I'm not talking about medicine, I'm talking about how you should think, "This verse said, 'Cast all your cares on the Lord for he cares for you.'" That's the best word!

## **B. Obey God's Word immediately**

What's the main difference between the people who have hard hearts, shallow hearts, crowded hearts, and the one who has an open heart? The person with the open heart hears it and does it. James wrote, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." (James 1:22-24)

For years I didn't really understand the connection between the mirror and the Word, but a few months ago, I was in a hurry. I had shaved and when I looked in the mirror I saw I had left a big glob of shaving cream in front of my right ear. I thought, "I need to wipe that off." But I was in such a hurry to get dressed that I forgot about the glob. I came up to the church and met with a number of people. I couldn't understand why they kept breaking eye contact and glancing at my right ear. Later in the day I was talking to one of our staff members and they said, "Hey, David I think you have some shaving cream left on your face." I immediately remembered looking into the mirror—but I didn't obey what the image in the mirror told me.

When you hear or read something from God's Word, obey God immediately. Don't put it off, or otherwise you might be walking around with a spiritual glob you can't see.

## **C. Spread God's Word continually**

When you have a hunger for God's Word, you will listen intently, memorize consistently, and obey immediately. The way you know you have truly received God's Word is when you change places in this parable. What do farmers do with seed? They eat some of it, but most of it, they plant again. When you receive God's Word, and it takes root, it will produce fruit. And you change from being one of the soil types to become the farmer. And wherever you go you'll be sharing the seeds of the Gospel.

## **CONCLUSION**

Are you hungry for God's Word? The Bible compares itself to nourishing food. We're invited to "Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8) You must develop a healthy appetite for God's Word. When you're served a meal in a fine dining restaurant your server may say, "Bon appétit." That's French for "good appetite." Why don't they say, "Good food?" The value of the food will be in direct proportion to the depth of your appetite. The food will only be good if you have an appetite for it. The server can place a delicious meal in front of you, but if you've just eaten a dozen Krispy Kremes you probably don't have a bon appetite. You're full of junk food.

Remember Bob and Jerry? Bob came to church starving for the Word of God. Jerry was already full of so many other things that He's not hungry. The same is true of Jessica and Amanda. Jessica is famished to hear from God, and Amanda isn't hungry, she's full of her social media junk food. How's your appetite?

There is great power in simply sharing the Word of God. There is a famous pastor in Zimbabwe named Gaylord Kambarami. He is the General Secretary of the Bible Society there. One day he was passing out copies of the New Testament. He met a belligerent man who told Kambarami that if he took a copy of the Bible, he would only tear out the pages and use them to roll tobacco in to smoke. Pastor Kambarami still offered him the Bible and said, "I understand that. But at least promise me that you'll read what's on each page before you smoke it."

Fifteen years later Pastor Kambarami was at a pastor's conference and the speaker recognized him and pointed him out. He said that fifteen years earlier Pastor Kambarami had given him a Bible and he used the pages to make cigarettes. He said, "I smoked Matthew. I smoked Mark. Then I smoked Luke. But when I got to John 3:16, I couldn't smoke any more. My life was changed from that moment." And that man had become an evangelist for Jesus. There is great power in the seed of the Word of God.

What's the point of this parable? The only way to know for certain if you're a fruitful hearer of the word is if you are planting God's Word in others.

## OUTLINE

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Jesus said, "They may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding..."  
*Mark 4:12*

- A. A hard heart where the Word is stolen
- B. A shallow heart where the Word is starved
- C. A crowded heart where the Word is strangled

### II. THE RIGHT WAY TO RECEIVE GOD'S WORD

Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." *Mark 4:9*

- A. Hear God's Word attentively
- B. Obey God's Word immediately
- C. Spread God's Word continually



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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes



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