

January 9, 2011

Life or Death Listening

Mark 4:1-20

INTRODUCTION

Be careful little ears how you hear.

In the English tradition this has been called the ‘Parable of the Sower’ and I think all commentators recognize that this is unfortunate because what is really under examination is the activity of the soils and what that represents. I hope you will not miss the clear metaphor. Here *soil equals soul!* The way Jesus describes various states of the soul here is by using the imagery of different states of physical soil that this first century farming culture would be very familiar with.

- THE IMAGERY OF THE SOILS
- THE MEANING OF THE SOILS

So in your notes under “imagery of the soils” list four different kinds of soil, and under “meaning of the soils” list four different kinds of hearing. In other words the meaning of the soil is not simply the soul as if the soul was static (ultimately we all have the same kind of rotten soul!); but Jesus has in mind, more specifically, four different kinds of activity of the soul—namely hearing. What is on trial here is the soul in the act of hearing. Be careful little souls how you hear! How you hear is on trial today.

The Big Idea is that all of life is either receiving the word of God unto life or letting it slip away unto death.

Now this marks a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. That may seem hard to grasp because we’re only at the beginning of the fourth chapter of this Gospel. But Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and in Matthew’s Gospel (it might help you to know) we’re already at Chapter 13. What do I mean by “turning point”? Up until now the hostility against Jesus has been building until, at the end of the last chapter, the people who it would have been most helpful to embrace Jesus (namely the cultural elites and his own family) rejected him.

You remember that unpardonable sin being the full and final rejection of the Lord. Well, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” [Jn. 1:11]. And so now Jesus turns away from his own ethnic people and opens up the kingdom to the world and to the ages in a very ironic way—by speaking in a way that looks anything but open. Normally if someone was to say to you, “You’re speaking in riddles!” would that be a compliment or an expression of frustration? OK.

We can imagine the anticipating, building hush settling over the crowd as the Teacher in the boat began to poise himself toward them and pierce the silence with the opening command: ‘*Listen!*’ (3a) What a crucial opening word given the whole import of this parable! How many times are we told to do so:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall **listen**—[Deut.18:15]

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; **listen** to him [Mat. 17:5].

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will **listen** to my voice [Jn. 10:16].

Everyone who is of the truth **listens** to my voice [Jn. 18:37].

So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: “Men of Israel and you who fear God, **listen**” [Acts 13:16].

The whole world turns on *listening* to the word of God. The human race fell because its first representative did not *listen* to what God really said. Do you ever get the impression that people who you are speaking to are hearing you, but not really *listening*?

A sower went out to sow (3b)—some people think that this is Jesus talking about himself right there and speaking directly to the oblivious plots of farmland that these people were. Of course that is an accurate depiction biblically. But is the most immediate meaning? Well I think that listening to the rest of the parable will settle that.

DOCTRINE

I. THE IMAGERY OF THE SOILS

You have to appreciate that in this culture this picture was very, very familiar. And given how much everyone lived off the land, it is very likely that just over one of their horizons, as

they sat beside that lake, that all Jesus had to do is point to some landowner in the distance doing exactly what He was talking about.

A) The Wayside Soil {4}

1. *And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path (4a):* **Some** (*ho men*) can be translated “a part of,” and that fits the ancient way of the farmer walking along his plot of land, bag of seed over his shoulder, fertilizing by a method called “broad-casting,” which was exactly what the word suggests: casting a handful of seed broadly so that it covered the most amount of ground. As for this **path** we know that it was the main roads that everyone walked on in town, because nearly everyone who could afford it had their own little plot of land to live off of. It was an agricultural society. And so nearly everyone’s farmland was bordered by the roadway which was a well-traveled wayside where the soil was not cultivated and was not meant for seed, so that all the seed that wound up in that direction was pounded into the dirt like pavement or else, as Jesus continues, *the birds came and devoured it (4b)*.

B) The Shallow Soil {5-6}

1. *Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil (5).* By **rocky** Jesus doesn’t mean a covering of gravel or anything like that. He meant that underneath a few inches of nice topsoil was a ground that was too hard or rocky for roots to sink down deep. His next words let us know that—“since it had no depth of soil.” The cause of the plant springing up was a shallow layer of soil that looked good from the surface. Often times plants that have roots choked and suffocated under the ground can bloom faster than others because the nourishment all goes upward since gravity won’t work anymore for the roots. At first these will even look more beautiful than the ones that are sinking lower into the richer soil. But it’s all under the surface. Unlike the first and the third bad soils, this one takes two verses to explain because it will be under the surface where the agent of death strikes: *And when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away (6)*. The sun was the instrumental cause of this plant’s premature death, but the material cause was the stuff of the soil itself. It did not allow the **root** of the seed to fully germinate and burst forth. The light of the sun wasn’t bad: the sun was just being for plants exactly what plants so desperately need.

C) The Weedy Soil {7}

1. *Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain (7)*. I say “weedy” here because the material that chokes the word here is not the sharpness of the thorns themselves but the binding and suffocating action of these infestations. The weed, though, reminds us that nature’s norm tends toward the wild. In the ground that Adam cursed, life is actually the unnatural element that takes cultivation. It is the “thorns and thistles” [Gen. 3:20] that get first dibs on the rain and sun.

D) The Fertile Soil {8}

1. *And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold (8)*. This means the amount of grains per plant. Nothing whatsoever is said about how these soils got good or bad. In fact, anyone who wants to argue that it is implied would wind up proving too much. If some soils were good and others bad before the sowing, then either the sower did it (which is inconvenient to your argument) or else the soils were made that way from the beginning (which is also inconvenient to your argument). Either way, the soil did not make itself either good or bad. It is better to simply start where the parable starts. In his book *The Gospel According to Jesus*, John MacArthur explains the birds-eye view of this primary parable:

The point of this parable is not that something is wrong with the sower or his method. Nothing is wrong with the seed. Nothing is fundamentally wrong with the *composition* of the soil, either. The problem is the *condition* of the soil.¹

Do you understand what MacArthur means by the difference between the soil’s **composition** versus the soil’s **condition**? You might ask, aren’t they the same thing? No they’re not. By composition we are speaking of the soil’s essential elements, the design itself. By condition we mean what has happened to that same stuff. The Bible teaches that God made everything and He said that it was all “very good” [Gen. 1:31]. And the Bible also teaches that due to Adam’s sin, everything that was good has fallen or corrupted. So that if you take me out to any plot of land and point to any soil and ask me, “Is that soil good or bad?” My first answer is going to be “Both,” and then I’ll start to explain to you how a good thing can go wrong. And we have classes here that explain all that in more detail.

But Jesus is not giving us a story here about some people’s hearts being naturally good and ready to hear and other people’s hearts being naturally bad and unready to hear. He is giving us a picture of *the soul’s act of hearing itself*. Parables are not meant to teach everything all at

¹ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2008, fp. 1988); p.131

once, but only a few things, and usually, one main thing. These souls “made of soil” are all hearing the “seed of the word,” but are they all listening? How they each came to be that soil: this parable isn’t a picture of that—yet. Jesus main initial point is to listen to this listening, to listen carefully: *And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”* (9).

II. THE MEANING OF THE SOILS

First notice that verse 14 parallels the verse 1 so that *the sower who went out to sow (1) is The sower sows the word (14)*. Consequently there should be no doubt that the seed equals the gospel-word or, as Matthew’s account calls it, “the word of the kingdom” [13:19].

A) The Hardened Hearing {15}

1. Who are these wayside, hardened hearers? Luke’s Gospel makes it clear that—unless God intervenes—these are people on their way to hell: “then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, *so that they may not believe and be saved*” [8:12]. They are those who stand at the periphery, on the sidelines, indifferent, wandering, floundering, not really even sure why they are here or what they are doing out there as a result. They are completely unresponsive. What we call the “personality” of these people may vary widely and can confuse the untrained gospel-farmer. But whether they are naturally gregarious or naturally despondent, when it comes to spiritual things, all the waving of the hands in front of their eyes gets nothing but glassy stares and quick changing of the subject. This person winds up hanging around Christians or the church or reading books that contain divine truth and has unwittingly become accustomed to filtering out everything genuinely about God himself and redirecting the theological traffic to the surface, nodding the head and checking boxes whenever needed. Such a hardened heart does not know they are doing it most of the time. When it is brought up—as I am bringing it up right now—the theological traffic cop comes out again (like a cell that fights a virus) and re-assimilates that into a grid of ready-made subconscious excuses for why that is not really what is happening. And the vultures are ready to pluck up yet another pack of seeds that would have awakened your soul!

2. Now how does this soil generally work when the seed falls on it? Remember that it is hardened and unresponsive, and as it is trampled, forms harder and harder layers of useless seed on its surface. That collecting surface of seeds might as well be a pouring of concrete. Jesus says in Matthew’s account that this person “does not understand it” [13:19]. So Jesus says that it is the understanding that does not take in this seed. The fact that the devil (represented by the birds) plucked it up is simply the occasion. The focus is on the

uselessness of the soundwaves of the preacher's voice on him or the ink on the page to him: not that the word is powerless in itself, but that this heart was not fit for it. The words bounce off like a bullet ricocheting off Superman's chest. And that is not a superpower that you want! "He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing" [Prov. 29:1]. What is going on here is that there is a causal relationship between the seed of truth and the hardness of the uncultivated soil. The more the truth hits, the harder the defenses of the heart get. The author of Hebrews talks about a person who comes into church week after week, getting so close to the things of God, tasting the goodness of the Spirit and how impossible it is to restore such a person as their heart gets singed by the same flame that opens up the one who is cultivated. And then he follows it up with the same kind of farming imagery that Jesus uses here:

For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned [Heb. 6:7-8].

The same warmth of the sun that softens the foliage hardens the clay. When *any* person who has not been born again becomes comfortable around the hearing of God's word, yet has no place for it, the conscience becomes seared and he or she is unable to realize that they are hardening rapidly beyond their ability to control or care to control.

B) The Superficial Hearing {16-17}

1. *And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy (16).* Now remember I said that with the second soil the damage is under the surface and so there can be the appearance of much spiritual enthusiasm. Notice that Jesus mentions 'joy' as the external characteristic of this person's response to the word. But *they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while (17a).* Here is the person who is all feeling and experience, but no care for substance or truth. What are roots after all? I mean in our age of scientific knowledge—they are nothing but the germination of the DNA contained in the seed. They are the **information** of the life of the crop. Now this is a person who doesn't look like they have a hard heart. They're all smiles and rolled up sleeves. They're ready to hit the mission field and in fact many of them do. How many times have I heard a brother or sister say about someone who has just fallen away to the uttermost: "I don't understand—I served on the mission field with them! They were so compassionate!" But they had no room for the information of the word. They said to the Word what the innkeepers of Bethlehem said to the Word made flesh on Christmas night—no room here!

2. So while the soil hardened against truth is the cause of death, Jesus also lists for us the occasion: *then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away (17b)*. What is the link between leaving no room for gospel content and this tribulation or persecution? One of the most difficult doctrines for sinners is that anything bad could ever happen to the individual, given the supposed goodness of man projected upon the goodness of God. Man is assumed to be good and God must take on this same goodness. But then bad things happen. Such a worldview has no categories for expecting and dealing with tribulation and persecution. During the happy season, the heart is hardening under the surface against truth about a big God—and then, it happens: the hot sun of suffering hits and the seed is severed from the soil leaving friends and onlookers dumbfounded.

Tragically the church culture can actually cultivate this uncultivated ground. We can do that by only telling people an inch-deep-worth of the gospel and discouraging people from counting the cost of following Jesus. But half-truths will kill you if you leave out the half that will make you alive. As J. I. Packer said,

The result of these omissions is that part of the biblical gospel is now preached as if it were the whole of that gospel; and a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth.²

3. All this to say that the shallow hearer is also a hardened hearer. The only difference between the first and second soil is that the shallow hearer is hardened *under* the surface instead of *at* the surface. Their hardening is harder to see. It delights in half-truths and rolls the eyes and shrugs the shoulders at whole truths that demand our whole attention.

C) The Distracted Hearing {18-19}

1. *And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful (18-19)*. Here we have someone whose soil is allowing for the seed to settle in, and yet, something else looms larger—namely, the world: “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” [1 Jn. 2:15]. So it should be obvious that the thorns represent these three things listed: a) cares of the word, 2) deceitfulness of riches, 3) desires for other things—those things can include anything from status to relationship to the bright blinking lights of how other sowers are supposedly sowing. So notice that there has been a progression in these three soils: from the

² J. I. Packer, Introduction to John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh 1959); p. 2

completely unresponsive, to the quickly responsive but shallow, to, now the soil that seems to hold the seed for a while, yet all summer long until harvest, the things that really move this person are really worldly things. When they think of the gospel, when they think of the church, when they think of heaven—they really think that it had better be filled with things out there, or else, they don't really want to have anything to do with it. They won't invest in it.

2. What do these distractions look like (if we could put them on 'slo-mo')? Well no one has captured these worldly whispers better than C. S. Lewis in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. When the truth hits you as if there were nothing around but you and truth, the moment you raise your eyes from the words of Scripture, the enemy reminds you of your gurgling stomach and shows you the passing cars and busy people. When you come to church expecting something more, the enemy has learned to show you neighbors who “sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes.”³

D) The Cultivated Hearing {20}

1. *But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit (20a)*. One implication of the good soils is that they all last. You remember that statement of Jesus to his disciples: “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” [Jn. 15:16]. So these are people who reveal that they're saved.

2. Oh what a hated truth this is! The idea of spiritual excellence! There's those measurements again: *thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold (20b)*. They excel spiritually whereas others do not. And what is worse, that excelling and regressing spiritually is tied to what our soils are doing with more of the word—American heresy! But so it is, that soils that hear the content of the word—the doctrinal information of the word—or, to say it one more way, soils that hear more and more of the truth that is in the seed, spring to life and produce more and more fruit: “since you have been born again, not of perishable **seed** but of imperishable, *through* the living and abiding word of God” [1 Pet. 2:23]. “Of his own will he brought us forth *by* the word of truth, that we should be a kind of **firstfruits** of his creatures” [Jam. 1:18]. Not only is the doctrinal content of the word of God the only thing that forms any area of true spiritual life, but James is saying that God's firstfruits back to himself are his saints who treasure the word all the way down into every square inch of their soil.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Collins, Glasgow 1942); p. 16

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – Objection: “If the Christian message is so obviously true, then why do so many people reject it? Or, why do so many people who claim to receive it interpret it in so many different ways?” Implicit in these kinds of questions is the argument from numbers, which, in the study of logic, is an error in thinking called the *ad poplarum* fallacy.

So why doesn't the same truth produce the same result in every single heart? This parable of Jesus helps us answer that question. Even the skeptic doesn't want to measure truth by numbers if they're thinking consistently.

To the Saint – If I can reiterate something from our Signs of Life study: if you are concerned or turned off when we speak of identifying “types of people” in the church to assess spiritual health because your only category for that is some kind of a witch-hunt and your only thought is, “Well only the Lord knows the heart!” Yes, well this is *the Lord* speaking and telling us, over and over again, in Scripture, that this is what the soul looks like when it hears the word, and this is what the soul looks like when it rejects it. How many times in how many places in Scripture do we have to be told that this matters! God is always telling us “This is what it looks like—it doesn't look like anything else—this is what is looks like!” before we surrender and admit that we are supposed to talk about these things, a lot! Take some time this week to see which of the bad soils you may face the biggest temptations to being. You know when we do membership interviews and when your small group leaders interact with you, we're already going here. I hope you know that. This is a small enough congregation for me to think a lot about how each individual hears based on a lot of symptoms that the Bible speaks a lot about.

To the Sinner – The most important thing you'll ever hear is the good news of sins forgiven and righteousness freely given. If you don't hear it, you will die in your sins.

CONCLUSION

How is *your* hearing? The one clearest lesson from this parable is for each of us to examine ourselves for our hearing. James tells us to “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” [1:21]. Truly anytime we hear the Lord speak to us it is a matter of life and death since He says, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” [Jn. 6:63]. So test yourselves as you hear the word of God and take in more of the word to make it fruitful.