**EARS TO HEAR**

September 28, 2014

Luke 8:1-15

Key Verse 8:8b “When he said this, he called out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”

The Parable of the sower is a very familiar portion of the Bible. It can be very tempting to think to yourself, “I’ve heard this story hundreds of times before, and there is nothing new here for me.” Because we think that we know this story so well, we can close our ears to what Jesus wants to say to us. In fact, that is the point of the parable. Right after Jesus told the parable, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” It is also very revealing that right after Jesus told his disciples the meaning of the parable, he said, “Therefore, consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.” How we listen and respond to God, as he speaks to us, will determine the amount of growth and spiritual fruit we will have. Another way to say it is this; the condition of our heart will determine what God’s Word can do in our life. Each person will be held accountable for his response to the truth he hears. God’s Word comes to us many times, and the condition of our heart will determine what happens to that Word. May God help us to be good soil at this moment so that God’s word can work and bear fruit 100 times.

**First**, faithful women of God. Look at verses 2-3. Luke notes the participation of many women in Jesus’ ministry. Some of these women are mentioned by name: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. These women had received Jesus’ grace of forgiveness of sins. Out of thanks, they loved Jesus and took care of Jesus and his disciples out of their own means. Mary Magdalene had been freed from seven demons. They tormented her with lust, jealousy, melancholia, guilt, condemnation and so on. She experienced hell on earth. She might have been beautiful on the outside, but when she went into fits of rage and vented her fierce anger with demonic strength, no one wanted to be around her. So she had no friends. But Jesus loved her and understood her. Jesus drove out the demons and set her free. Jesus taught her to live by the word of truth and have victory in her life. Jesus gave her peace, hope and love. So she loved Jesus and served Jesus gladly. Her delicate hands may have become calloused as she learned to cook and clean and sew. But she was happy. There were also Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household, Susanna and many others. Jesus’ company consisted of more than 20 people. Preparing meals for 20 people every day requires a hard work. These women sacrificially served Jesus’ ministry. In every successful ministry there are sacrificial women of God working behind the scenes.

**Second**, those who receive the secret of the kingdom of God. Look at verses 4-8. “While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: ‘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. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 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.’” Here begins Jesus’ famous parable about the four heart soils. Without Jesus’ interpretation it would be only a story about farming. With the interpretation of Jesus we can find the secrets to the kingdom of God. After finishing his parable, Jesus called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” What does this mean? Does it mean that some people have ears, not for hearing, but only for wearing earrings? No. It means that hearing Jesus’ word requires greater attention than we give to a news flash on the twitter. We must not let Jesus’ word go in one ear and out the other. After hearing Jesus’ word we must let it sink into our hearts and mediate deeply on it. Most people in the crowd were not coming to listen to Jesus’ words, but for something else.

On the other hand, Jesus’ disciples really wanted to understand Jesus’ teaching. So they went to him and said, “What does this parable mean?” Look at verse 10. “He 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.’” Through the parable of the sower Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. To those with no spiritual insight, it was just an interesting story about farming. But to those who want to know the secret of the kingdom of God, it was the most meaningful explanation about how the word of God works and how to receive the kingdom of God in their hearts. Those who let Jesus’ teaching go in one ear and out the other never understood what Jesus was really saying. They heard the best parable from the best Bible teacher, but they went away without the secret of the kingdom of God. They missed the chance to gain eternal life. Jesus grieves over such people. Nevertheless Jesus did not stop preaching the word. Jesus comforted himself, remembering Isaiah 6:9, which says, “Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.” Though most people did not listen to the word, Jesus would continue to teach them and never give up.

**Third**, the seed produces fruit in a noble and good heart. Let’s humbly listen to Jesus as he explains his parable. Look at verse 11. “The seed is the word of God.” Jesus reveals that God’s word is the one seed that can be planted in a person that has the potential to grow and bear fruit that pleases God Almighty. It is amazing that one small seed contains all the genetic information it needs to grow to be a flower or wheat. The seed is the word of God which has great life-giving power. Charles Spurgeon’s conversion story is remarkable. One Sunday morning a snowstorm forced him to join a small Methodist worship service, though he was a Baptist. The pastor could not get to the church, so an elder prepared the message quickly and spoke on Isaiah 45:22: “Turn to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth.” As he finished his short message, he looked right at Spurgeon and said, “Young man, you look very miserable. And you will always be miserable--miserable in life and miserable in death--if you do not obey my text. But if you obey now, this moment you will be saved. Young man, look to Jesus Christ!” Spurgeon testified that a cloud of darkness rolled away. He accepted the blood of Christ with a hymn of praise bursting in his heart. Spurgeon went on to preach the gospel to over ten million people in his lifetime. The word of God has tremendous power to grow and bear fruit. However, the hearts of people must be right for it to bear fruit.

To teach us which hearts bear fruit, Jesus compares our hearts to soil. Look at verse 12. “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.” When we picture the image of a path, we see many people, bicycles, dogs walking and driving back and forth. All these things become like a steam roller turning the soil almost into a hard paved road. In the parable, the birds quickly came and ate the seed that fell on the hard path. The birds represent the devil. If our hearts become pounded down with doing many things that keep us running around, we never have an opportunity for God’s word to be planted deep in our heart soil. In fact even if we hear God’s word every day, the devil will come and take the word away. What is the final result of the devil constantly taking away the word of God? Jesus said: “so that they may not believe and be saved.”

In this famous parable about four soils and yielding a crop, the word “save” is the only tangible fruit Jesus gives us. There are other possible types of fruits; maybe the fruit of love. Or the fruit of self discipline. Many would say the fruit of disciples. In this passage the only fruit specifically named is being saved. This reminds us of 1 Peter 1:9, “for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your soul.” Those with path-like heart are busy doing this and that in this world, but they are not busy making sure that they will obtain the goal of their faith, the salvation of their soul. In the end they miss obtaining the most important goal of all, the salvation of their soul. In this world of endless entertainment, fast food, fast travel, fast information, we ourselves must be responsible to put the brakes on our own busy lives so we can make time to meditate, pray and focus on God’s word so that God’s word may take root in our hearts.

Look at verse 13. “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 time of testing they fall away.” In this verse Jesus reveals an important secret. Jesus first shows God’s word is joyful. He says, “Receive the word with joy.” I remember the moment I first began to understand the way of God’s salvation. I was very joyful. Then fiery testing came soon after. I almost failed my qualifying exam; I had some conflict with others in the church. All these fiery testing had one point; to take my focus and faith away from God’s salvation. I learned that in the vineyard, they intentionally do not water the vines so that vines can take deep roots. Then they can survive in the time of drought. If we water the vines, vines become dependent and do not take deep roots.

The next soil Jesus speaks about is the soil that has thorns growing in it. Farming land is not only about tilling hardened soil, getting rid of the rocks and planting the seed. It is also a continuous labor of pulling out thorns and weeds. If this is not done, the seed will sprout but it will never bear any fruit because the thorns will choke off all the life giving nutrients such as sun light, water and other needed minerals. One of three spiritual thorns is life worries. Worry, if not pulled from us, will choke the word of God from bearing fruit. Ironically the greatest defense against life’s worry is faith in God’s word. Jesus told his disciples who were overwhelmed with every kind of worry: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.” (John 14:1) Every worry can be pulled out when we literally take Jesus at his word and trust in God and trust in Jesus.

Now let’s look carefully at the one type of soil that produces fruit. Look at verse 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.” The good soil stands for those who accept the word of God with a noble and good heart. The good hearer does three things. First, he listens attentively. Second, he keeps what he hears in his mind and heart and thinks over it until he discovers its meaning for himself. Third, he acts upon it. He translates what he has heard into terms of action. I learned that Jesus has been emphasizing in putting God’s word into practice. In the past, I thought Bible study is transmitting information from one person to another like other math studies. But I realized that Bible study should be focused on helping others to be good soils and bear fruit.

In verse 15 we see that when these noble and good hearted people hear the word of God, they retain it. Unlike the path hearted people or the rocky hearted people, Jesus says these noble and good hearted people retain God’s word. The word retain is a small word but when it is applied to the word of God, it has the power to yield a crop 100 times what was sown. How long should we retain God’s word? Jesus uses the word “persevere” to tell us how long. “Persevere” means to never give up, especially when facing trial. The Bible from beginning to end is full of people who persevered with God’s word to the very end. Jesus Christ is the best example. Hebrews 12:2,3 encourage us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Jesus persevered through all opposition and suffering because of the joy of the kingdom of God that was awaiting him after his death. This is exactly the same joy and glory Jesus promises to all who will retain God’s word and persevere with it.

The seed of the word of God has the power to give life. The kingdom of God can grow until it bears 100 times what was sown. But the word of God needs a noble and good heart. At any time, our heart can take on one of the four characteristics Jesus talks about in this parable. When our hearts are hardened, we have to pray earnestly and ask God to soften our hearts. Only God can turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh (Eze 36:26). Then the seed of the word of God can bear good fruit in our hearts.

Jesus also teaches us how to see gospel ministry. In this relativistic age, there are many who show no interest in truth. They will not respond well to the gospel. When we see them, we can be discouraged. However, just as in Jesus’ time and Isaiah’s time, there is a remnant of truth-seeking people who will accept the gospel and bear its fruit. When even one person believes and is saved and grows, his or her life can become a blessing to the whole world. In the end, there is abundant harvest, 100 times what was sown, more than what was wasted in the path, rocky soil and thorny soil combined. So we should not see wasted seeds and despair, but rather we should see the abundant harvest and rejoice. We must pray to meet these kinds of people in this new fall semester. When we persevere in faith, God will bear much fruit through us. May God bless each of us to bear much fruit and to be a blessing.