**Whoever Has Ears to Hear**

February 16, 2020

Mark 4:1-20

Key Verse 4:9 “Then Jesus said, ‘Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.’”

Last semester I taught the abstract algebra at the University of Toronto. I found my teaching evaluation by students very puzzling. Some said, “Very detailed and professional explanation of each topic.” The others said, “The professor did not explain the concepts and examples clearly, that is, he often skipped steps during proofs, which made it difficult to follow.” Some said, “One of the most incredible professors who have taught me.” The others said, “The lectures were mostly irrelevant. It did not provide me with more information than the textbook.” There were two opposite responses to the same lecture. Through this passage I began to understand what Jesus meant, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” Our attitude determines what we learn. Through the parable of the sower, Jesus teaches that those who have a right attitude can bear abundant fruit. But those who do not have a right attitude cannot bear fruit.

**First**, Jesus taught them many things by parables (1-8). Jesus faced mounting opposition to his gospel ministry. The religious establishment called him demon possessed. Even his family members thought he was out of his mind. Jesus could not teach in the synagogues any more. However, Jesus did not back down from teaching the word. When the synagogues were closed to him, Jesus went to the lake. When Jesus began to teach, a large crowd gathered. They were thirsty for the word of life. They came to Jesus, one needy person at a time, two by two, in families, and by groups from communities, until they formed a large crowd. The crowd was so large that Jesus got into a boat and taught from the boat. All kinds of people were there: Pharisees, paralyzed men, tax collectors, prostitutes, and the demon possessed. Look at verse 2. “He taught them many things by parables.” Jesus taught them the word of God. Their real need was for the truth of God in their souls. They were miserable because they lived in ignorance of God. They were miserable because they struggled endlessly under the power of sin and death. But the word of God could give life to their souls. The word of God could heal their inner beings and restore the image of God in them. The word of God could make them wise for salvation and empower them to live as children of God in this troubled world. We learn from Jesus that what people need most is to have God in their hearts through the word of God.

Jesus taught in parables. A parable is a simple story with a deeper spiritual meaning. Parables are stories from everyday life that teach spiritual truth. They are called earthly stories with heavenly meaning. Until now, Jesus had preached, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” But here Jesus begins to use parables. Why? There are two reasons. The first reason is that by telling simple stories, the Pharisees cannot use Jesus’ words against him. Whenever Jesus taught the truth, the Pharisees always found something against Jesus. For example, when Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven,” the Pharisees thought that Jesus was blaspheming. The second reason is to hide the truth from those who have no learning mind. Look at the parable of the sower in verses 3-8. “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, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

Put yourself in the place of a person in the crowd that day who heard this parable for the first time. It sounds like a story about a farmer sowing seed and no more. Someone might have traveled many miles, skipping work and hiring a babysitter to come and hear this parable. They might have thought that they made a mistake in coming. Yet Jesus challenges his listeners to understand that there is more to the parable than they might think at first. Jesus said in verse 9, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” Those who had no commitment to Jesus went away disappointed, but the disciples asked Jesus about the parable. Look at verses 11-12. “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.’” We share our secrets only with whom we trust. We never share our secrets with casual acquaintances. Likewise, Jesus shared the secret of the kingdom of God only with his disciples. The secret of the kingdom of God is revealed only to those who have relationship with Jesus. Those who do not have commitment to Jesus hear the parables and do not know their meaning. They see and do not perceive. They hear but do not understand. Those who refuse to acknowledge God cannot understand the parables at all. God will not be mocked. Those who are proud before his words are sent away empty.

What is the secret of the kingdom of God? Here the secret is the mystery. It simply means something that was hidden and is now revealed. It is the mystery form of the kingdom. The Old Testament prophets did not know it. They only saw the Messiah coming and setting up his kingdom. But they did not know that King Jesus had to die on the cross and rise on the third day and ascended into heaven. He will come again and will bring the visible kingdom of God on earth. Until then, it is an invisible kingdom which will be in the hearts of men, but the King will be absent. We call this the interim phase of the kingdom. The parables of the kingdom of God are about this interim period; It is about what it will be like when the King has been rejected and the kingdom postponed until he comes again to set up his kingdom. Each parable starts with, “The kingdom of God is like…” We will study two parables about the kingdom of God next week in detail.

**Second**, Jesus explains the parable of the sower (13-20). Look at verse 14. “The farmer sows the word.” Jesus compares a seed to the word. As a seed has the potential for life in itself, the word of God has life in it. In those days farmers used a “broadcast” method of sowing. They spread their seed generously and it fell on all kinds of soil. In verses 15-20, Jesus compares soil to human hearts. It represents 4 different responses to the word. Even though the word of God has life in it, it needs a proper soil to produce fruit.

The first soil was the path. Look at verse 15. “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.” These people are hardened like a path and the word cannot penetrate into them at all. It just lays there until Satan comes and takes it away. Sowing the seed is a spiritual battle against Satan. It has been this way since the time of Adam and Eve (Gen 3). Satan takes away the word of God and in its place he puts his lie. For example, last Friday was Valentine’s day. Satan lies that romantic love is everything, and if you do not have a boyfriend or girlfriend, you are a loser. But the Bible says that God loves you and you are dearly loved. Just as a seed cannot grow unless it penetrates the ground, so the seed of God’s word cannot grow unless it can penetrate the heart. Farmers can remedy this problem in their fields by plowing them. The plow breaks up the hard ground so that when the farmer plants, the seeds will be able to penetrate the soil. Just like those farmers some of us need to plow the soil of our hearts so that God’s word can enter in. We need to prepare our hearts to receive the word of God. For example, Jesus said in Luke 14:26, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children…such a person cannot be my disciple.” Based on that word, Sam’s uncle said to him, “Marry a woman who loves Jesus more than you.” Many who are deceived by Satan’s lie about Valentine’s day would harden their hearts and reject God’s word. Then they cannot experience God’s love. Furthermore their life will be miserable. Sam’s uncle realized it only after he got divorced from his wife. But if we accept God’s word, it can bear fruit and we will be filled with God’s love.

Look at verses 16-17. “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.” When it talks about rocky soil, it is not talking about soil with a lot of stones in it. No, it talks about limestone bedrock below the level of the plow. What happens is that the seed goes in; it finds the soft soil. The ground is warm; there is moisture and water there, and it starts to grow. But the roots can’t go down because they hit bedrock. These people heat up in an instant and they cool off in an instant. Some have labeled them “impulsive” people. Those like rocky soil seem to be excellent Bible students. But their problem is that they have no root. In the parable, trouble and persecution are compared to the sun. Sunlight is necessary for the growth of any plant. Likewise, trouble and persecution because of the word are necessary ingredients to spiritual growth. Through trouble and persecution, false hope is eradicated from our hearts and the true hope of the kingdom of God is purified. Through persecution we can have a deeper and more personal faith in Jesus. A tree in a greenhouse cannot grow to maturity. It must be planted outside and exposed to the sun, rain and wind. Sometimes it will be blown by a strong storm. At such times, the tree can take deeper root and grow all the more to be a giant tree. So trouble and persecution is not the real problem. The real problem is whether we have a root or not. Trouble and persecution because of the word offer a good opportunity to take root. But those whose heart is like rocky soil do not commit themselves to the word of God. They become emotional and then abandon the word of God. Taking root in the word of God is essential in order to grow and produce abundant fruit.

Look at verses 18-19. “Still others, like the 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.” Have you pulled out weeds in the garden? The worst thing that can happen is that you break the weed off at the top, because it comes back stronger than ever. You got to get the whole thing out. Weeds grow better than anything – faster, taller. Good seed and dormant weeds compete together, not good for the seed. The weeds squeeze out the life of the good seed. The weed roots restrict the good seed, drink its moisture, veil its sunlight, and the good seed dies. This kind of people receives the words of God well and takes root. But growing alongside the word are the weeds of worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and desires for others things such as boyfriends and girlfriends. People who don’t have money generally think that money will solve their problem. They worry day and night about their future, thinking they need money most. On the other hand, those with money live in a false sense of security like the rich fool in Luke’s gospel (Lk 12:20). They seek fun and pleasure and fulfillment in the world, instead of living for God’s glory. When the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and desires for other things come into one’s heart, we should immediately pull them out like nasty weeds. Otherwise, they can choke our spirit and make us unfruitful.

Look at verse 20. “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.” The good soil people are different because they accept the word. They not only hear it, but they accept it. They accept it as the word of God to be obeyed and put into practice. God told Father Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing...and all nations on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). Father Abraham accepted this promise and trusted God with his life. He obeyed God’s command to go to a new land. At various times in Abraham’s life the word of God came to him. Each time, Abraham obeyed the word of God immediately. So God made him a blessing to all peoples on earth.

God’s word has life-giving power in it. What determines whether we are fruitful or not is our attitude toward God’s word. If our lives are unfruitful, we cannot blame anyone else. We cannot blame God. It is totally our own responsibility. When Jesus saw his wicked and adulterous generation, he could have despaired, but he never despaired. Jesus saw God working in the hearts of his disciples. They were like good soil. So Jesus focused on raising them in the midst of many kinds of opposition and troubles. We can learn from Jesus what we should do in our time. Instead of despairing over rejection and apathy by students, we should come to Jesus and hear his word and understand it so that we may produce a fruit 100 times.

We tend to think about the different soils in the parable, and try to find which one we may be. This is valid. Yet, the main point of the parable is the reality of preaching the gospel. There will be a rejection and fruitlessness in some people. There will be those who give only lip service to the King. However, there will be a good soil and those good soils will produce 100 times and make up for any loss in the other 3 soils. In the end, the gospel work will be successful. So instead of being discouraged, we should spread the gospel diligently without worrying about whether we are wasting our effort. Because we cannot see who is the good soil on the outside, we should spread the word generously and yet we should face the reality that there will be path, rocky soil and thorny soil. Rather being discouraged, we should rejoice that God will bear fruit 100 times in the good soil.

Big Idea: We should spread the word generously without discouragement.