

Do You Have Ears? Then Hear!

by Coty Pinckney 1/24/2009

Do you listen? How is your hearing?

Jesus thinks listening is vital: He says, "Whoever has ears to hear had better listen!" (Mark 4:9 NET).

Most of us have the physical equipment to hear. And yet so often we fail to listen.

Listening is never easy, is it? All of us are so easily distracted – even in church. For example, when someone gets up during a service, perhaps to go to the bathroom, at least one-third of the eyes in the sanctuary follow the person out the door – making sure, I suppose, that the person doesn't fall down.

Sometimes we listen, but don't really hear. This was the case with Ezekiel. God tells His prophet that to the people of Israel:

you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice. (Ezekiel 33:32 NIV)

Ezekiel had become an attraction, an amusement. And note that the people *responded* to his preaching! They expressed devotion, but their actions belied their words. So Ezekiel was to them a performer, a maestro, fun to listen to but having no impact on their lives. They responded aesthetically – but they did not really hear him.

In Mark 4, Jesus emphasizes again and again the importance of truly hearing Him.

- Verse 3: His first word to the crowds is, "Listen!"
- Verse 9: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"
- Verse 23: "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"
- Verse 24: "Consider carefully what you hear!"
- Verse 33: "Jesus spoke the word to them, [literally] as much as they could hear."

In this chapter, He relates the parable of the farmer who sows seed on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil. The seed on the path is eaten by birds; the seed on the rocky soil and among the thorns initially springs up, but dies; the seed on good soil bears a hundredfold more seed.

We frequently understand this parable as referring to evangelism: the evangelist spreads the word; some people never respond; some people appear to respond, yet fall away eventually; others respond and bear fruit. That interpretation states an important truth.

But in context in Mark, I believe it preferable to think of the different grounds as *yourself at different times*. Ask yourself: How am I responding to the word I hear *right now*? What barriers prevent me from hearing the word and putting it into practice?

We all want to be like that good soil, multiplying the seed of the word, bearing fruit, giving to others God's love and life. What does this parable teach us about overcoming barriers to hearing – so that we might be that good soil?

Let's consider the three bad types of ground in turn:

The Road

Jesus explains that Satan is like the birds eating the seed; he takes away the word before it has a chance to germinate.

For us, this corresponds to having the word go in one ear and out the other. It never even registers in our brain. We are distracted while we are listening, or have preconceived ideas that do not allow us to hear the truths being stated.

This happens to all of us to some extent. We might be in church, supposedly listening to a sermon, perhaps even looking at the preacher – but suddenly notice that for the last five minutes we've been thinking about our plans for the afternoon and haven't heard a word he has said.

What are your barriers? Are you rejecting the word outright? Or are you feeding on it, allowing it to permeate you and change you?

The Rocky Soil

Many of us have heard sermons or read the Bible and responded in our hearts: "Yes, yes, that is true. I agree with that. I will change my life to reflect that." Unlike the soil beside the road, in this case we do hear the word, and we mentally assent to its truth. But then we fail to act on it consistently and persistently, so that there is no fruit. In those cases, we are that rocky soil.

The Thorns

When we are like the thorny ground, we hear initially, and agree. Our understanding of the truth deepens. So far, so good.

But then we are confronted with a decision. Obedience to the Word will cost us something: Respect. Success. Health. Financial Security. And so we reject the truth. We acknowledge it. We may even proclaim it. But we don't live it. We instead love the world.

Once again, I propose that all of us act this way at times. We may have a good, solid grasp of biblical truth – but then say:

- "Let's be practical. Surely God doesn't mean for me to do that! I might lose my job!"
- "Yes, I can obey God in that area – after I make enough money and attain financial security."
- "Wow, that's such a noble sentiment – but it's simply not practical. Maybe people 2000 years

ago could act that way, but it doesn't work at the dawn of the 21st century."

Have you responded to God's truth in this way at times? I certainly have. We can all come up with a zillion reasons why living according to God's word is not practical. But "the righteous one shall live by faith." (Habakkuk 2:4). Living by faith means we obey God whether or not that obedience makes sense from a human point of view. Living by faith means we find our security, our satisfaction, our accomplishment, and our self-worth in God alone.

So how can we avoid being bad listeners? How can we instead become like that good soil?

First, we surely must depend on the Holy Spirit, confessing our inadequacies, our sinful hearts, and our desperate need for His help.

Second, we must *spend time and energy trying to understand*. This is what Jesus tells the disciples in Mark 4:24-25. We can paraphrase these verses:

You have ears; you have used them to hear; now *see* what you hear! Perceive it, contemplate it, mull it over, understand it thoroughly! How deeply are you digging into the bag of the word of God? Pick a big scoop! Gather as much seed as you possibly can, and then even more will be given to you! He who grabs hold, who really latches onto what is there, will receive even more. If you don't take hold, you'll find you don't have even what you think you have.

So will you commit yourself to using those ears of yours? Will you commit yourself to seeing what you hear?

Our small groups are beginning a season of discussing and applying the previous Sunday's sermon. Here are some guidelines for sermon listening that will help us to see what we hear – and thus will help us to become good soil, making those discussions profitable:

Take the teaching of God's word seriously. God's word is more important than anything you learn in school; it is more important than anything you read in newspapers; it is more important than anything your boss tells you in a staff meeting. Give at least as much effort to understanding the sermon as you would to what you hear in these other contexts. This includes preparing yourself for worship: Going to bed early enough on Saturday night that you are alert in church, and preparing your heart Sunday morning.

Pay attention. Taking notes is often helpful here. Note taking forces you to focus on the speaker, and keeps some of the seed from falling beside the road where the birds eat it. It also requires you to do some thinking and reflecting even while the pastor speaks.

Realize you won't catch everything, but be sure to pick one or two thoughts from the sermon, reflect on them, and apply them! When we lose focus, Satan is apt to accuse us: "You lost focus and missed the last few minutes; you might as well stop listening now." Don't yield to that temptation. No one will catch everything. Simply resume listening, and ask God to open up the rest to you. Then focus on the specific message that you need to apply in your life.

Ask good questions about the sermon and its text.

What is the intended message of the writer? Does the sermon capture the main point of the text? What doctrinal truth is emphasized here? How is that truth consistent with the rest of Scripture? What promise is given? Have I been leaning on that promise? What errors or sins does this passage warn against, which I easily fall prey to? How can I use this passage to fight against such sins? Are there duties and responsibilities in this passage that I am neglecting? How does this passage feed my joy in Christ? How can I use this sermon to increase my joy this week?

Resist the urge to be like the music critic at the concert. Don't evaluate the sermon, trying to give it a grade of A, B, C (or worse!). Instead, listen for what God is saying through His Word. The sermon may be poorly organized and poorly delivered – but, if the word is preached truly, there will still be a message for you. And when you speak to any preacher after the sermon, try to avoid a blanket statement about the quality of the sermon. Fred and I would much prefer to hear you say, "What you said about X really hit me. I'll meditate on that this week, and try to put it into practice. Pray for me." Or, "I didn't understand what you said about Y. Can we talk about that later?" Or, "I hear what you were saying, but doesn't this other Scripture contradict that point?"

So engage the word! Listen to it! Work hard at hearing it!

All of you have ears. May you hear, and may the word of God dwell in you richly.

[Parts of this devotion are excerpted from my sermon on Mark 4. You can read that in its entirety at <http://www.expository.org/mark4a.htm>.]