

Luke 8:1-21

Introduction

For some sitting here this morning, the next twenty minutes or so may be of no value whatsoever. The passage before us explains why: it's all about hearing.

You may have heard the story of three old men standing at a bus stop. The first says, "It's windy today." "No, Thursd'y," the second says. "Not right now," says the third, "I've just had a cup of tea."

We can hear someone without understanding them. You and I can hear the words of Jesus without understanding what he's saying to us. And that is a very serious matter indeed. This passage is a warning to us. And I'm going to look at it under three headings. It warns us not to merely hear God's word. To listen carefully. And to put it into practice.

So, let's look at it together. Firstly: Don't merely hear God's word.

Don't merely hear God's word

The opening four verses set the scene.

Jesus is travelling **about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God**. With him are the Twelve disciples and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases and were supporting Jesus' ministry financially. And as crowds gather to Jesus, Luke records a parable that he told them. It's a story from everyday life that Jesus uses to teach them. And it's meaning is this: merely hearing the word of God is not enough. It demands a response.

First, Jesus tells the parable. Then, he explains it. It's about a farmer who goes out to sow his seed. In the context, the farmer is Jesus. The seed is the word of God. And just as a farmer scatters his seed far and wide in the hope of a good harvest, so Jesus is going from one town and village to another proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God in the hope of a crop. The quality of that crop will depend, however, on the quality of the soil that the seed falls upon. And that's where you and I come in.

The first seed Jesus tells us about falls along a path, where it gets trampled on and eaten by birds. Jesus tells us in verse 12 that the birds represent the devil, who **comes and takes away the word from their hearts**. And notice what he says next: **so that they may not believe and be saved**.

There may be some sitting here this morning who have the message of *salvation* within your grasp. Eternal life is there for the taking. It's within reach. It's so close. Yet it will do you no good. Before you know it, it will be snatched away. Even now, as the word of God is entering your ears, you're ignoring it. It will soon be forgotten.

The second seed falls on rocky ground that has just a thin layer of soil. It takes root. But the roots can't penetrate the rocks below. And the plants soon wither. Jesus explains what this means in verse 13. It's those who **believe for a while but in the time of testing they fall away.**

It's possible to listen to the word of God and respond enthusiastically to the message of salvation... and yet, when times of testing come, to fall away. This too might describe some here this morning. When times are good, all might seem well with you. But when hard times come, as they come to all of us, it will become evident that the roots of your faith had no depth as your spiritual life dries up and withers.

Friends, this is a bleak picture. There's no pleasure to be found in it. But Jesus is warning us for our good. He's like a surgeon who opens up the wound in order to heal it. So, if you and I would have Jesus to be the doctor of our souls, we need to keep going.

The third seed falls among thorns. When it grows into plants, the thorns grow too and chokes them. In verse 14, Jesus says that this **stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.**

Jesus taught us to bring life's worries to our heavenly Father in prayer. When we do that, they become one means by which he nurtures our faith and causes it to bloom and flourish. But for some of us here this morning the worries of life, will have a different effect. Rather than deepening your faith, they will choke it and stunt its growth. And here's a sobering thought: the riches and pleasures of life will have the same effect. There may be some sat here today who, in years to come, will walk away from the salvation that God holds out to you in Christ, because you find the riches and the pleasures of the world more appealing.

It's a depressing thought. But we must press on because there's one more type of seed. This is the seed that falls on good soil. It comes up and yields **a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.** When this seed falls on those with a noble and good heart, says Jesus, who hear the word, retain it, and persevere in it, it produces an extraordinary and abundant crop. This is a huge crop, which more than compensates for the disappointment of the other three types of seed.

Now... between the telling of this parable and its interpretation, Luke records a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. It begins in verse 8: **When [Jesus] said this, he called out, 'Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.'**

And in verse 9 we're told: **His disciples asked him what the parable meant. 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."**

Those words are shocking. They may even sound heartless, as though Jesus doesn't care about these 'others' who fail to see or understand. But rather, his words are deliberately provocative. There *is* a shock factor to them. It's a little bit like me saying to my children, 'I've got a delicious chocolate cake here. But none of you will want it, will you!' And, of course, that provokes a response. 'Yes, we will. We love chocolate!' Jesus is provoking the crowd to respond to what he's saying. And he's provoking us to respond too. He's laid bare the wound so that he can apply the salve.

Friends, I'm being direct with you this morning. But no more direct than Jesus is. I take it that none of us here *want* to have the message of salvation snatched away from us. None of us here *want* to fall away in times of testing. None of us here *want* to have a stunted faith that doesn't grow and mature. We want to be good soil that receives God's word and produces a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

So, the question that Jesus is pushing us to ask ourselves is this: 'How can I hear what Jesus says without missing the meaning? How can I avoid hearing but not understanding? How can I hear *and* understand?'

And Jesus gives the answer in the next three verses. It's not rocket science. He says: Listen carefully, which is our next heading.

Listen carefully

Jesus is still speaking to the crowd gathered round him.

Look at verse 16. He says: **'No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them.'**

The light that shines from the lamp is the truth of God. The lampstand, which elevates the lamp so that it's light can be seen, is Jesus's teaching. Through his teaching he has made the truth of God known to the world. The secrets of the kingdom of God haven't been hidden in a jar or put under a bed. Jesus has openly proclaimed the good news of salvation for all to hear. **'Therefore,'** Jesus says, **'consider carefully how you listen.'**

When I was at school, we sometimes had to listen to a recording of someone speaking French. The recording always began with the same instructions: 'Écoute et répète.' 'Listen and repeat.' We were being warned to listen carefully. And Jesus is giving us the same warning here. Those who listen carefully, who cling to God's word and retain it, will receive more. But, he says, if we fail to listen carefully, then even the truths we *have* heard will be

taken from us. The word of God will be snatched away. **‘Therefore,’** Jesus says, **‘consider carefully how you listen.’**

So, how do we do that?

In 1739 George Whitefield, who has been described as ‘the greatest English preacher who has ever lived,’ published a sermon he had preached at Christ Church, Spitalfields in London. The title he gave it was: *Directions How to Hear Sermons*. And whilst what he says was directed at listening to sermons, it applies more generally to all the other situations when we read or hear God’s word. Here are four of his directions which I think are particularly helpful:

Firstly, he says, don’t come to church merely to have your ears entertained and not your hearts reformed, for this is both displeasing to God and unprofitable for you. He exhorted his hearers to prepare their hearts to receive God’s word with humility and meekness.

Have you considered praying before you come to church, so that you might be teachable when you arrive? It’s what we pray before we open the Bible together in the service. And it’s what we should pray before we open our Bibles at home, humbling ourselves before God and asking him to cause his word to lodge in our hearts. We cannot expect to hear what God has to say to us in his word if we don’t come to it with a humble attitude.

Secondly, Whitefield says, listen attentively. After all, he says, God teaches us in his word how our pardon, peace, and happiness may be secured. How can we doze or daydream while his ministers speak of such things?

What could you do to help you concentrate when you’re listening to a sermon? Do you put your phone away? Would writing notes help you? When you’re reading the Bible at home, do you find a place where you can be quiet with no distractions? Do you choose a time of day when you’re alert and, conversely, avoid those times when you’re tired and sleepy?

Thirdly, he says, apply everything you hear to your own heart.

Do you listen to sermons and find yourself thinking, ‘I wish so-and-so was here for this. It’s just what they need to hear!’ Before we think of others, we should first apply God’s word to ourselves. What sin is God convicting me of? What promise does he want me to take hold of? What aspect of my thinking or behaviour does he tell me to change?

Fourthly, he says, pray and keep praying. Pray before, during and after every sermon. Ask God to give you the will and ability to put the things you hear into practice.

And that leads us helpfully into our final heading. It’s not enough merely to hear Jesus’ message and listen carefully. We need to put it into practice. That’s our third heading.

Put it into practice

Please look down again at verses 19 to 21: **Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.'**

He replied, 'My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.'

Biological bonds were important to Jesus. He loved his family and was the perfect son. No doubt, he was also the perfect brother. But the point he's making here is to do with the spiritual bond that exists between him and his people. And he's saying two things.

He's saying, firstly, that those who belong to him do so in a new and special way. We do so as members of his family. When we come to Jesus a new bond is forged between us and him, and between one another. It's a spiritual bond that transcends all physical bonds. We are made members of his family.

But notice, secondly, what marks us out as members of his family. It's not that we come to church every Sunday and listen to God's word being preached. It's that having listened to God's word, we put it into practice. It's not that we go to home group and study God's word together. It's that having studied it, we put it into practice. It's not that we all use the same Bible study notes to help us read God's word. It's that having read it, we do it.

At the end of the day, this is the crucial difference between the four different soils in Jesus' parable. All four soils receive the seed. They're all people who hear God's word. But the first three fail to put it into practice. It makes no difference to their lives. The word gets snatched away. It withers. It gets choked. What they've heard fails to produce a crop. It's only the fourth group that produces a crop. And that's because these are people who listen carefully to God's word, cling to it, and put it into practice. To truly hear God's word is to internalise it and live by it. It's to trust the promises he makes to us and to obey his commands. Only then will it produce the harvest that he desires.

Conclusion

So, how's your hearing?

The message of Jesus requires a response. Simply hearing it isn't enough. Friends, don't merely hear God's word. Whenever you open the Bible, whether you're at home or at church, pray that God will give you a holy hunger to hear what he has to say to you.

Listen carefully. It concerns your salvation. The things the Bible speaks of are matters of life and death. It's your eternal wellbeing that's at stake. What could be more important? We can only pity the person who hears the word of life but pays it no attention. And then don't just listen. Put it into practice. And live by it.

'Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.'

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we want to be those who hear your word, retain it, persevere in it, and produce an abundant crop. So please give each of us a humble heart. Grant us a teachable spirit. Help us to listen carefully to all that you say to us in your word. And having listened, enable us to put in into practice. We ask it in Jesus' name and for your glory. Amen.