

#1555 - Sunday, April 15th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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PRAY AS YOU LISTEN THAT THE WORD PREACHED NEVER CEASES TO CONVICT YOUR HEART

Matthew 13:1-9 - "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. [2] And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. [3] And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A sower went out to sow. [4] And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. [5] Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, [6] but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. [7] Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. [8] Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. [9] He who has ears, let him hear.'"

Before Jesus told any other parables, Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this parable **first**. While it's never stated as such specifically, I think there's good reason to believe this is the first parable Jesus spoke. Which makes sense. Before He gave other truths voice, He gave this parable outlining the nature and importance of **hearing** the truth with fruitfulness. So before He gave out additional gems of truth He told these hearers about how to **listen**. This is Jesus' most **concentrated** teaching on listening. That's one reason for giving it detailed attention in this series.

But there's a second reason. Take note of the first three words in our text - "**That same day....**"(13:1). What day was this? And why does Matthew labor the point that Jesus gave this most famous parable about listening on a particular day? Those words, "**That same day....**", tell us why Jesus felt compelled to tell this parable. Here's what happened the "**same day**" as the lesson of the soils:

First, Jesus and His disciples picked grain in the fields to eat and even after endorsing their actions by reference to the Old Testament Scriptures were stubbornly condemned by the Pharisees. **Second**, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand, proving His divine identity, and the religious leaders started planning how they could "**destroy him**"(12:14). **Third**, Jesus cast a demon out of a blind man and the Pharisees told Jesus He must have been demon possessed Himself. They would rather attribute His power to Satan than bow before Him as Lord. Jesus then warned them about the unpardonable sin. **Fourth**, after healing the man with the withered hand and casting out demons and healing the blind man, the Pharisees came and asked Jesus for a sign - some proof He was who He claimed to be. He told them He was greater than Jonah, greater than Solomon, and would rise again in three days.

Then, after all of that, "**that same day**", Jesus tells a parable about the importance of **listening to divine truth**. He tells the people how hearts can stifle divine light. He tells how great revelation and grace can fall on hearts like grass seed on pavement. Gradually, something in these listeners has grown **indifferent** to what God says. The placing of this parable by all the synoptic gospel writers is the New Testament's way of saying nothing matters as much as this. Nothing comes as close to the heart of our Lord as understanding how we are to **listen** to divine truth. This is a game changer.

Jesus knew His audience. He told His parable in language everyone of His listeners could understand. Agriculture. This was the heart of Jewish life. Everyone knew about seed and soil and harvest. It is no exaggeration to say quite literally that as Jesus told this parable His listeners could **see** farmers out in their fields scattering their seed from sacks on their shoulders.

They could watch and see some of the seed landing on the paths where people walked between the different fields. There were no **fences** marking one field from another. There were boundary rocks on the corners connected by the barren pathways on which the farmers and people walked between the fields. They could see some of the seed landing on rocks. They could see some of it landing among thorns, bushes and weeds. And some would land on the rich, overturned, prepared soil. That was their future. That would turn into a rich harvest.

And what they all knew - what Jesus **knew** they all knew - was everything depended on the condition of the soil. And there it was. **That** was Jesus' teaching point right in front of their eyes. Jesus used these four kinds of soil to typify four types of heart. But He didn't mean the heart in your chest that pumps blood. He meant the soils represented four ways of **listening** to His words.

First, there was the **hard, stubborn, unreceptive** heart. It was not easily brought into repentance and wasn't worried about that anymore. Second, there was the **shallow, superficial** heart that took everything too lightly and easily. Third, there was the **worldly, divided, disloyal** heart. It opened to Christ without closing to everything else. The future unfolding of the power of the Word was always strangled out. Nothing great could happen. And finally, there was the **humble, obedient, responsive** heart. And this, of course, was the heart of hope and fruitfulness.

We're going to spend several weeks examining these four hearts. It seems proper to do this because Jesus told this parable with the expectation that people would examine their listening habits. The telling of this parable makes no sense unless Jesus wanted people to relate His words to their own hearts. Pray carefully about this. Don't assume. Jesus is calling all of us to look under the surface of our busy lives. **Listening**, like the under-side of a plant in the soil - like looking at it from the root side up - requires looking at the **underside** - the **interior** - of our beings with honesty and humility.

So first, we consider the wayside soil - the unresponsive heart:

1) **THE VERY FIRST THING JESUS EXPOSED WAS THE CAPACITY FOR OUR HEARTS TO GROW *INDIFFERENT* TO THE TRUTH WE CONTINUE TO HEAR**

Matthew 13:1-4 - "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. [2] And *great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach*. [3] And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. [4] And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them."

Matthew means for us to notice something paradoxical here. He takes pains to remind us Jesus isn't speaking to a small group. This isn't a home Bible study. There's a massive crowd. They're thronging around Jesus like teens around Justin Bieber. They can't get enough of Jesus. It isn't even safe for Jesus to stand with them on the shore. Jesus' handlers put Him out into a boat and the front row of listeners is actually standing with soaking wet sandals and robes as the momentum of the crowd pressed them further and further out into the water.

And the very first thing Jesus warns about is *indifference* to His words. Does this make any sense? Look at the crowd Matthew paints. They're dying to hear His words. They can't get enough of His words. And Jesus opens up His whole discourse on listening habits of the people warning of *unresponsiveness*. What's going on here?

Could it be that Jesus is exposing something - a kind of *non-listening heart* - that religious people like I - people who are still *gathering around the Word* - often don't carefully monitor or admit. Is Jesus trying to lay bare how easy and common it is for me to be in *self-denial* about areas of my life where I don't *receive* what the Word says?

That does seem to be the point of this first heart-soil listed in Jesus' parable. Somehow, in some way, the seed of the Word is still being tossed all over that wayside path - "*A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path....*"(3b-4a). These *pathway listeners* are still getting seed. They've not sent the sower, whoever that is - preacher, teacher, book, DVD, - whatever - they've not sent the sower packing.

Of course a parable is still just a parable. The soil can't help its condition. But the human heart can. The human heart is *involved* in its own unresponsiveness. So the red flag is hoisted by Jesus. This really *happens* to people *while* they continue to gather around the Word itself.

So remember this first point. Hard-heartedness can grow in Word-hearing people like cholesterol grows in their arteries. Hard-heartedness is what happens when we're *not* thinking about it happening. *Repentance* takes mental work. *Unresponsiveness* doesn't.

2) **JESUS EXPLAINS WHY HEARTS - EVEN OUTWARDLY RELIGIOUS HEARTS - CAN SO EASILY BECOME UNRESPONSIVE WHEN GOD'S WORD CONVICTS**

First on the list. That's where Jesus places this inward condition of a hard, unresponsive heart. Which is surprising when we consider the Word of God is "*....living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword....*"(Hebrews 4:12). So how can it be that my heart can shut it out like a dull butter knife?

Jesus gives the explanation in *two parts*. The first has to do with the *hearers' listening habits*. The second has to do with the *work of Satan*.

First, the listener's habits. At whatever point I don't yield to the Word sown, I lose the capacity to respond fruitfully to it in the future. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah:

Matthew 13:11-15 - "And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. [12] For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. [13] This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. [14] Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: 'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. [15] For *this people's heart has grown dull*, and with *their ears they can barely hear*, and *their eyes they have closed*, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and *I would heal them*.'"

Notice that phrase in **verse 15** - "*....this people's heart has grown dull....*" There's the problem. The *Word* is sharp, but their hearts are *dull*. But the problem isn't that God wouldn't bless and heal. The prophet couldn't be clearer - "*....For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.*"

So their ears "*....can barely hear.*" They hadn't planned on that happening. It was the *result* of something else they *chose* to do. The prophet says they *chose* to *close their eyes* - "*....their eyes they have closed*"(15). God tried to *show* them the truth in His Word and they made conscious choice not to *look at it*. They didn't *deny* it. They simply chose not to *fix their attention* on it. That's where they exercised their will. But after that point of rebellion the *results* of that choice were out of their hands. Their hearts *grew* dull. And their *ears* grew increasingly deaf.

O how important this is. At whatever point I choose not to respond to what God says in His Word I become ignorant to the light He would

give the rest of my life. The heart **grows** dull. It doesn't just **turn** dull instantly. It's a process one can easily ignore happening in one's life.

Remember where we are. I said there were two ways God's **sharp** Word becomes **dull** in our hearts. We've just been considering the first - the **response of the listener**. At whatever point I choose not to **see** what God is saying in terms of my ongoing life of repentance and submission my ears grow dull to whatever else God may have revealed to me next. Hearts **grow** dull gradually when this goes unchecked in my soul.

The **second** factor in my heart growing dull in spite of the sharpness of God's Word is the **activity of Satan**. God's sharp Word becomes dull in my heart because whenever I don't like what His Word reveals there is someone there to help me form arguments against listening to the Holy Spirit:

Matthew 13:18-19 - "Hear then the parable of the sower: [19] When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path."

Here is the explanation of a **second** factor in unresponsiveness to something from God's Word calling for my ongoing repentance. My **untuning** my heart to the Word is always quickly aided by other spiritual forces. It will **seem** like just you are involved, but that is only the **appearance** of things. Jesus says **Satan** causes your excuses for non-listening to feel inwardly compelling to you.

Please note. When Jesus says the Word lands on the hard heart and the hearer doesn't "**understand it**"(13:19), He doesn't mean the hearer is **mentally deficient**. And He doesn't mean the Word is just too hard for this person to figure out. Remember the way Jesus quotes Isaiah's words - "**....their eyes they have closed**"(13:15). When Jesus says the hard-hearted listener doesn't **understand** the Word, He means he doesn't understand **what's at stake now that the Word has been sown in his heart**. He means this rebellious listener is acting like a fool. He means this listener thinks there is less at stake than there actually is. He doesn't understand the battle he is in.

The teaching of the early church is packed with the same warning they first heard from the lips of Jesus - **Hebrews 3:13** - "**But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.**" Consider that the stated purpose of the meetings of the early church were not only to listen to the Word. They were also meetings specifically ordered to **warn against hard, unresponsive hearts** - "**....that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin**"(13).

So we gather today to hear. Yes. But we also gather to make sure we aren't in the early phases of **not hearing**. We meet together so we can talk to each other and pray for each other and exhort each other not to allow a hard, unresponsive attitude to form at **any** point where the Word might speak to our hearts. Because we've been warned in advance about the "**deceitfulness of sin**"(13). And we've already been specifically told by our Lord that Satan goes to church every Sunday to watch for God's Word bouncing off an unrepentant heart. He'll snatch it away before it gets a second chance at sprouting. So go deep with God's Word the first time you hear it.