

2: THE LISTENER

Identifying the Hearer

Through parables, Jesus sought to convey heavenly truths in a way that would separate those who were *truly* listening from those who *professed* to hear. He encountered many who claimed to *understand His words* (Matthew 13:23) while they neglected them, to *accept them* (Mark 4:20) while they refused to heed them, and to *keep them* (Luke 8:15) while they failed to remember them. What distinguished the hearers from one another was not whether they heard His Words, but whether they responded to what was spoken.

Although Jesus is not among us in flesh and blood (John 1:14), the very words spoken to His generation have been penned on the pages of Scripture. And like His contemporaries, we must decide how important His utterances are to us. If we truly desire to hear His voice above all others, we will seek His written instruction before all else. If we are truly listening, we will be *“faithful to it and persevere in looking into it, being not a heedless listener who forgets, but an active doer [who obeys]”* (James 1:25, AMP).

Do you agree with this statement: The degree of importance that we place upon the Word reveals how important it is to us to hear from God? Why or why not? _____

THE SOIL

Read Luke 8:5-8, 11-15.

The same seed is cast upon four soil types. The Seed is the Word of God, sown by the Orator of Truth. The soil represents the manner in which the Word is received, thus identifying the heart of the hearer. The fruit is the external evidence of the effect of the Word of God in the hearer's heart.

If, like the hearers, you were identified by the effect of the Word of God upon your heart and mind, how would you describe yourself? _____

TRODDEN SEED

God speaks, and of the wayside soil He says, *“It was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it... Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the Word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved”* (Luke 8:5, 12).

The wayside hearer has heard the Word in the *past* (Matthew 13:19) and he is hearing the Word at *present* (Mark 4:15). He is represented by the soil “alongside the road”ⁱ where the ground is hard and unplowed. Having been trampled, the seed that is found there lies loosely on the surface causing it to be easily devoured.

What does this reveal about the wayside hearer’s responsiveness to the Truth? _____

The wayside hearer is an example of the individual who hears but will not receive; one who hears but will not heed. He is unresponsive, unmoved, detached, and disinterested in the Word; he lacks enthusiasm and concern for its contents, and so he treats it with carelessness and disregard.

How can you judge whether you have placed importance or value on the Seed that is sown in your heart? _____

The seed finds its place alongside the road not only because it has been treated with carelessness and neglect, but because it has been trampled. The word “*trampled*” in verse 5, lends itself to two ideas: The first is rejecting the Word, and the second is an openness to outside influences.

What is the difference between *neglecting* God’s Word and *rejecting* God’s Word? _____

What evidence supports the fact that the Word never reaches the wayside hearer’s heart? How is he like the man who gives attention to the Word but fails to apply its principles? (See James 1:22.)

The Message states James 1:22 this way: “*Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!*” Likewise, Ezekiel 33:31 says, “*So My people come pretending to be sincere and sit before You. They listen to Your words, but they have no intention of doing what You say*” (NLT). The Amplified Bible describes the wayside hearer by stating, “*[they] will not devote themselves to me*” (Luke 8:12).

Whether an individual neglects God’s Word by giving little attention to it, or rejects it by failing to heed it, the outcome is the same. What becomes of the seed sown in the wayside hearer’s heart? (v.12) _____

If the soil is highly traveled, the wayside hearer is also a great company-keeper, which means that he is open to, and possibly swayed by, the ideas and doctrines of every passerby. How does this work against his reception of the seed while aiding the *"birds of the air"* (Luke 8:5)? _____

Fundamentally, the wayside hearer's actions reveal that he believes he is able to navigate life and make decisions without God's input.

Can you find yourself in the description of the wayside hearer? Are you negligent, inattentive, uninterested, unwilling to do what God instructs, stubborn, concerned more with others' opinions than God's opinions? Do you apply its contents, or is it simply head-knowledge?

TEMPORARY SEED

God speaks, and of the stony soil He says, *"Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture... But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away"* (Luke 8:6, 13).

On the surface, the stony soil shows promise. It readily receives the seed and sprouts begin to emerge. But the soil is not what it appears. It is a shallow soil, lacking *"depth of earth"* (Mark 4:5), resting on a shelf of a rock. Because of this, the seed is not able to put down deep roots which are necessary for growth and survival, anchorage and support. It seems all is well until the heat of the sun begins to beat down and the shallow soil begins to warm up. Combined with the heat of the underlying rock, and the soils inability to retain moisture, the seedling quickly withers.

The stony soil represents the hearer who eagerly receives the Word, and for a time is excited and enthusiastic, but lacks deep affections and commitment.

Describe the shallow heart. _____

According to Matthew 13:21, what tries the stony hearer's faith in addition to temptation? _____

When faced with difficulties intended to increase his faith, why do his beliefs wane? _____

Based on what occurs, it is likely that he never *fully* trusts the Lord; he does not love Him with *all* of his heart, mind, soul and strength.

What might his initial enthusiasm have been based upon? _____

What limitations has the hearer placed on his commitment to Christ? _____

How can preconceived ideas and expectations (what we thought would happen, or what we think ought to happen) cause us to distrust Christ and draw back? _____

It seems that the stony hearer's enthusiasm is based upon the benefits he receives. When this hearer approaches the Word, he gladly receives all it has to say about salvation, privileges, rewards, etc., but he disregards or misapplies what is said about the costs of following Jesus. His hearing is selective. As long as the demands are not too costly, he will gladly follow.

What proves his true beliefs about the Word, the reality of his convictions, and the sincerity of his faith? _____

The stony hearer typifies the individual who accepts the Word when all is fair and denounces it when there is a sacrificial price to be paid, as if to say, "This is not what I signed up for." "This is too hard." "It requires too much of me." And as a result, he "*begins to distrust and desert Him Whom he ought to trust and obey*" (Matt 13:21, AMP); to "*withdraw and stand aloof*" (Luke 8:13, AMP).

Can you find yourself in the description of the stony hearer? Are you afraid to fully trust Jesus Christ? To fully love Him? Are you unwilling or afraid to commit to Him? Do you have preconceived ideas or expectations of how things ought to happen? Is your hearing selective? Is your commitment to God and His Word based on what you will receive in this life? Have you placed limitations upon your obedience? Are you unwilling to make sacrifices to follow Him? Are you afraid of what He will require of you? Are you afraid of giving Him control?

STRANGLER SEED

God speaks, and of the thorny soil He says, "*And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it... Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity*" (Luke 8:7, 14).

What indicates this hearer's acceptance, understanding, and retention of God's Word? What is his error? _____

The thorny soil is a crowded soil. Describe the crowded heart. _____

What do the thorns represent? _____

The thorny soil represents the heart that is occupied with many competing cares, desires, and pleasures. He has many loves to draw away his attention, occupy his interests, and consume his time.

Can a man live solely for God while his heart is occupied with other things? _____

Cares are anxious, unrelaxing attentions to the business of this present life. Matthew 6 tells us that the world is preoccupied with basic needs—drinks, food, clothing. But even legitimate needs are not to consume our attention, leaving dregs for spiritual things.

The word "*cares*" comes from a root word that means "drawn in two different directions; to be distracted". This means that the hearer lacks singleness of focus. While he is preoccupied with life, he's inattentive to the things of God, which prevents the Word from having its intended effect.

In short, "*the love and desire for riches*" is the pursuit of materialism. It is a craving for more than one presently has and the drive to obtain it. "*The pleasures of life*" are the things of the world that one believes will bring joy and satisfaction.

Can the Word and the "*cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things*" grow harmoniously side-by-side? Why or why not? (Consider 1 John 2:15-16.) _____

The error of the thorny hearer is not the pre-existence of the thorns; it is the continued nurturing of the thorns as if they will pose no harm to the plant or its fruit production. What will result if a man fails to remove the contending thorns from the soil? _____

Why do many deem the thorns a trivial matter? _____

do the thorns prevent full surrender? _____

Because he hears the Word, agrees with it, and even applies portions of it, the thorny hearer believes his choices to be inconsequential. What he fails to realize is that the thorns will ultimately crowd out the Word and prevent its fruit from maturing. This is because the man who loves this world will never fully surrender. He may agree with the Bible in verse and principle, but his affections will prevent him from carrying them out. His priorities will dictate how he responds to God's instruction.

Maybe the thorny hearer doesn't believe that Christ is worth abandoning everything for. Perhaps he is convinced that contentment cannot be found in Christ alone. Maybe he doesn't believe that future rewards are worth the present sacrifice. Whatever the reason, if he fails to call thorns "*thorns*", if he refuses to remove them and acknowledge that they will harm him, the Word will never yield what it ought to yield in his life.

Of what benefit is unripe fruit? _____

Can you find yourself in the description of the thorny hearer? Is your heart preoccupied? Are your affections divided? Are you distracted? Inattentive? Do you devote the remainder of your attention, interests and time to His Word? Do you love the offerings of this world? Is your pursuit of them keeping you from carrying out God's instructions? Are the things of this earth keeping you from full surrender?

MULTIPLIED SEED

God speaks, and of the good soil He says, "*But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold... But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience*" (Luke 8:8, 15).

What sets the good soil apart from the wayside soil, the stony soil, and the thorny soil? _____

The good soil is well cultivated. What effort, time and attention, is given to its care? _____

Is the good soil without hardness, stones, or thorns? Explain. (See Proverbs 20:9, Ecclesiastes 7:20, James 3:2, and 1 John 1:8.) _____

When these things come into his view, how does he treat them? (Matthew 5:29-30) _____

How is the effect of the Word of God evident? _____

The good soil represents the individual who readily accepts the Word. He recognizes his need for it and his dependence upon it (Luke 18:9-14); its instruction is welcomed and received. He is continually breaking up the fallow ground of his heart (Hebrews 4:12). The sun causes his roots to grow deeper; to cling tighter to God's promises. He does not look lightly on sin or worldly engrossments. When they come into his view, he does not manage, foster, or nurture them; he seeks to uproot them from his heart (Matthew 5:29-30). As the Word increases in his heart, sin appears with less occurrence.

When God speaks, how does the good hearer respond? _____

Luke 8 and its parallel passages use three words to describe the good hearer's reception of the Word: he "*understands, accepts, and keeps*" it.

The word for "*understand*" (Matthew 13:23) means "to put together; mentally comprehend"ⁱⁱ; "realize to the point of insight"ⁱⁱⁱ. It entails "collecting the pieces of a puzzle and putting them together; reasoning things out and making sense of them"^{iv}. It's a verb that necessitates action on the part of the listener. The good hearer does not simply read the Bible, he seeks to understand what it is says and how he is to apply it to his life.

The word "*accepts*" (Mark 4:20) means "to receive or admit with approval"^v; to "take up, take upon one's self; to admit, not to reject"^{vi}. Not only does the hearer acknowledge and accept what he has heard as true, he treats it as an obligation, a commitment, a responsibility. He takes it upon himself to carry it out.

The word "*keep*" (Luke 8:15) means "to hold firmly, hold fast"^{vii}; "keep in memory, possess, retain"^{viii}. The good hearer is not a forgetful hearer. He is attentive, paying close attention to the things he has read and heard, turning them over and over in his mind until they conform his way of thinking.

Why must we share the good hearer's approach toward the Word in order to hear God's voice with clarity? _____

The good hearer is also identified as one “with a noble and good heart” (Luke 8:15). “Noble” is also translated “honest” (NASB). It speaks of an “attitude of which is right towards God”^{ix}. A “good” heart is “one that, instead of working ill to a neighbor, acts beneficially towards him”^x.

Read Matthew 22:36-40. How are the two greatest commands working themselves out in the good hearer’s life? _____

Finally, the text tells us that good hearer “bears fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15). He understands that fruit bearing is accomplished by concerted effort. What connection is there between fruit bearing and one’s treatment of the Word? _____

Let’s summarize the description of the good hearer. He needs the Word—he does not neglect it. His heart is open to receive instruction—he does not reject it. He is willing to do what God instructs. He seeks the Word before the counsel of men. He does not treat the Word as head-knowledge, but heart-knowledge. He fully trusts and is fully committed to the Lord no matter what occurs. He has counted the cost and is willing to sacrifice the present for what’s to come. The good hearer sees the thorns for what they are and makes every effort to remove them. He is not preoccupied or distracted, his heart divided by the world’s allurements, but is focused and intentional, seeking the kingdom before all else. He loves the Lord with all of his heart, mind, soul and strength, and he is willing to do whatever it takes it takes to bring glory to God.

Can you find yourself in the description of the good hearer?

ⁱ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A.R. & Brown, D. (1997). A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments (Mk 2:12-4:25). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

ⁱⁱ Strong, J., S.T.D., LL.D. (2009). Vol. 1: A Concise Dictionary of Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible. (69). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

ⁱⁱⁱ Swanson, J. (1997). Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Sematic Domains: Greek (New Testament) (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

^{iv} Zodhiates, Spiros. (1992). The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament. (G4920). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

^v Vine, W.E., Unger, M.F., & White, W. (1996). Vol. 2: Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words. (511). Nashville, TN: T. Nelson.

^{vi} Strong, J. (1996). The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order. (electronic ed.). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

^{vii} Vine, W.E., Unger, M.F., & White, W. (306).

^{viii} Strong, J., S.T.D., LL.D. (41).

^{ix} Vine, W.E., Unger, M.F., & White, W. (274).

^x Ibid.