

Title: Understanding understanding
Text: Matthew 13.1-9; 18-23
Theme: Hearing with your heart
Series: Matthew #73
Prop Stmt: The fruit of hearing God's Word with your heart is incredible.

On Mondays, the ministry staff gathers in order to pray, evaluate, and plan. In that meeting, we evaluate the sermon. Talking in front of people is a very personal event. Crafting a sermon and delivering it is emotionally a bit like giving birth. Labor is involved and you are very attached to what you have produced. So, when someone critiques your sermon, it is like someone telling you that your kid is ugly. But, the truth is, I can always preach the Word better but I cannot preach a better Word. And while I want to do a commendable job in preaching, this is a group effort. You need to pray not only for the preacher, but you need to pray for yourself. I must work on preaching and we must work on hearing. Both are demanding, but necessary. If I am going to preach well, I must study. But if you are going to hear well, then I must, and you must pray.

Read Text:

In this text Jesus 1) tells a parable (1-9), then he 2) explains why he is teaching with parables (10-17) and then he 3) interprets the parable (18-23). We looked at his explanation last week and saw that Jesus is using parables because they are saving and judging at the same time. They are both blessing and condemnation. Whether or not the parable is received as a blessing or hardens a heart depends on the nature of the heart of the one who hears it. Those who hear the Word and reject it are responsible for their unbelief. Those who hear the Word and accept it do so because God has enabled them to hear it and believe it.

This is a difficult issue for us, particularly since our style of education tends to rely upon rewarding the student if the student can simply repeat information. We assume that if you can answer the questions correctly, then you have learned. No! True learning is not simply knowing the facts, it means knowing the facts and knowing the significance of the facts and the application of the facts. Therefore, when we gather in church, or in a Bible-study, we tend to reflect our culture and educational experience. We tend to listen with our brains, not always with our hearts. We remember information in order to repeat it if asked, but we do not naturally use the information in order to affect our core beliefs and behavior. So, just as people tend to confuse "passing a class" with learning, we tend to confuse "learning the Bible" with genuine spiritual growth. Jesus knows better. These people have heard him speak the truth, but for most of them, they did not really embrace it. They would, as we would say, "went to church." But the message did not arrest most of them.

Matthew 13 begins with Jesus leaving the house where he had been speaking and going to a place by the sea (of Galilee), where, like a teacher of his day, he sat down by the water's edge in order to teach. But because the crowds became so great, he got into a boat and went out in the water a bit so that they could see him and hear him. There is a place

on the Sea of Galilee that is called, “The cove of the parables.” It is the sight where historians say that this event took place. Not only could you fit 5000-7000 people in this area, but because of the water, which acts as a natural sound system, they could have all heard Christ speak. The area around this part of the sea is full of fields, which helps you realize why Jesus talked about water and farming in these parables. This first parable functions as the gateway for the rest. But even though we call it the parable of the sower, it really is the parable of the hearers. Jesus says that there are four types of people who hear. And he gives a warning to the first three.

I. **The Warning** (3-7; 18-22)

There is a lot of warning in this parable because this parable is an attempt to explain unbelief. And this really is an enigma. Jesus is preaching and people refuse to believe. Jesus heals. Jesus raises people from the dead. Jesus performs other miracles and still people refuse to believe. How do you make sense of this? This parable is very similar to Romans 9-11 where Paul explains the unbelief of Israel. The first three types of soil are different examples of unbelief. Listen carefully. The Bible teaches that a genuine believer is eternally secure in Christ. The Bible also teaches that a genuine believer will persevere in the faith. Therefore, the one who is eternally secure will persevere in the faith. If it is a dog, it will bark. Keep in mind that this warning is not to self-proclaimed atheists and agnostics. This is a warning to those who hear, who are curious perhaps, and are not antagonistic. They know that there is something helpful in what Jesus says. But, the warning is clear and serious: You live surrounded by influences that want to keep you from hearing and understanding the Word of God. The first type of soil could be summarized by the response of:

A. **I’m bored.** (4, 19)

Look at verses 4 and 19. What do you see? The seed, which is the Word of God, lands on the path, which is the hard dirt. The seed does not penetrate. Although the seed lands on the dirt, there is no change. There is no response! There is no connection between the dirt and the seed. There is no reception to the seed. Jesus says that this person does not understand it. They don’t get it. That is why they are bored. They see no connection in their life to what they have just read or heard. Now, hold the phone for a second. I am not defending lazy preaching and lifeless and lousy sermons. I am saying, that if you hear the Word of God accurately and faithfully taught and you are bored, then you should be frightened because the problem is not with the seed. The problem is not that the preacher is not using enough illustrations, video clips, magic tricks or puppets. Look at the dangerous position this person is in. Verse 4 says that the birds come and take away the seed. In v.19 Jesus says that the birds are an illustration of Satan. The person who is bored by the Word of God has made himself/herself available to Satan. The second type of soil could be summarized by the response of:

B. **I’m disappointed.** (5-6, 20-21)

The second type of soil is actually a thin layer of soil that barely covers the layer of rock just beneath the surface. The initial response looks promising, but it never really takes root, so when tribulation or persecution comes about, the plant falls away. The word for that can also be translated as “stumbles.” In other words, this is describing the person who hears the gospel of Christ, and responds with enthusiasm, even joy. But then, he/she encounters opposition and realizes that this is not what I signed up for. I thought that I was supposed to get my best life now. What Jesus is saying is that opposition and persecution will reveal the authenticity of your faith. You can be amazed, impressed, even enthusiastic about Jesus, and not be a genuine a follower. Being amazed, impressed and enthusiastic is not wrong. Those are good responses, but these reactions are not guarantees that one is a genuine follower of Christ.

I think that this is a good description of Judas Iscariot. As the opposition against Christ began to pick up steam, Judas saw that the wind was blowing in an ominous direction. In fact, John says that Judas used to steal money from the moneybag. That was not an incidental comment. What goes on in the mind of someone who steals from the job, or in this case, steals from the ministry? You attempt to justify it by saying to yourself, “I’m not getting what I deserve. I am going to help myself. This Jesus thing is not turning out the way that I thought. Therefore, I have the right to withdraw my commitment. I have the right to steal. I have the right to quit. I have the right to be bitter. I have the right to have an attitude. While this soil at least for a time, looked better than the first one, the end result is the same. No harvest. This too is unbelief. The third type of soil could be summarized by the response of:

C. **I’m distracted.** (7, 22)

This describes the person who sticks around longer than the others, but over time becomes distracted by other things. There is a war that is raging for the affections of your heart. There are many things that are not necessarily evil, but they are not the best, that are seeking to rule you. For example, Jesus says that you can be distracted by concerns.

a. By concerns

Jesus is talking about the basic concerns of life. We all have them. We are all busy. We all have burdens. We all have cares. We all have challenges. We all have responsibilities. You hear it all of the time. There was a guy that I used to be close with. We were at lunch one day when he told me that he found this great deal on a boat. He thought it would be wonderful for his family. And it may have been. However, the problem with a boat or a cabin is that in many cases, you don’t own them; they own you. And if you are going to put that much money into something like that, well you feel like you need to use it, right? In his case, the only day that he and the family could seem to use it was on Sundays. And I knew where this was heading. After a summer of being gone on the boat, his kids didn’t feel like coming to church. They were bored. And he did not feel like fighting with them, so they quit. And you know what? It’s not the boat! It is the decision to allow the boat, or the job, or the sports, or the trips, or your grief, or your garden, or your to-do list or your loneliness or your depression or your concerns of life to determine what really matters,

not only in your calendar, but in the priorities of your mind. Some people become so ruled by these other things that they simply stop gathering with the body in order to hear the Word together, as we are commanded. Some still come, but their minds are so ruled by these things, that the Word that they hear is eventually choked out by those weeds of concern before it has the opportunity to bring forth a harvest.

b. By money

Jesus calls it the deceitfulness of riches because money makes promises that it cannot keep. There are basically two ways that money distracts us from what really matters and left unaddressed will choke out the Word. 1) The lust for money (or for more money) will choke out the Word because while the Word drives us to live for and revel in the glory of God, the lust for money drives us to live for and fantasize about the glory of us! If I only had this, then (what?) and we imagine life where either we are comfortable, or we are powerful, or we are experiencing pleasure, or we are envied. When that is going on, we are living life with ourselves at the very center of our worldview. Everything is about us. We view life through the lens of how can I get comfort, power, pleasure or envy. That becomes the lens through which I read the Bible. That becomes the filter through which I listen to the Scripture. Warning is the emphasis of the parable because so many people heard Christ speak, but did not really believe what he said. It is no different today. And we really need to take hear this. You may say, “Hey Bob, at least I come to church, that counts for something, right?” Actually, no. You must grasp the truth of the gospel for yourself. Participating in the faith of others is like trying to hitchhike to heaven. You must believe it for yourself. Jesus looks at the 3 types of people who hear but do not change as unbelievers. The world tends to look at them as hypocrites. “Hey you went to church! What happened to you?! But there is a fourth type of soil, thank God!

II. The Blessing (8, 23)

The fourth type of soil is described as the person who hears and understands it. This idea of hearing with understanding was really pressed home to me in my study of the word “understand.” I am very zealous on helping you understand what it means to understand. Understand? Jesus completes the parable in verse 8. Then in verse 9 he says, “He who has ears, let him hear.” And BAM, right here when he says that, we know that this is very important. He goes on from there in his explanation as to why he is speaking in parables, and in the interpretation of this parable to emphasize hearing and understanding. He repeatedly uses those two words. (v.13, 14, 15, 19, 23) It is very obvious that Jesus puts a great deal of emphasis upon hearing WITH understanding. And beloved, I want you and I want our church to be characterized by people whose hearts are made up of this fourth type of soil. It is not enough that you just read the Bible or sit through the sermon. The Word must be heard and understood. Therefore, I want you to understand what it means to understand. I want you to understand what Jesus meant when he said that you must hear and understand. But, understanding understanding is not merely an intellectual event. Your intellect is involved, yes, but true understanding involves a supernatural encounter with God. Let’s do a quick study of this idea of understanding from the Bible. Starting in the Old Testament we see that:

A. Understanding enables us to see God is the One who is at work.

*“Because they do not **regard** the works of the LORD or the work of his hands, he will tear them down and build them up no more.” Psalm 28.5*

Two people can look at creation or history. One concludes that everything is here by chance and that all events are merely coincidental. The other concludes that everything is here because God created it and that all events are determined by the sovereign plan of God. What is the difference? One has understanding and sees that God is the One who made everything and rules everything, and other does not. Regarding the works of the LORD means to recognize his hand in creation and in his providence to sustain it. Related to that is the idea that...

B. Understanding enables us to see the significance of God’s works.

Elihu used it this way when he asked, *“Can anyone **understand** the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of his pavilion? (Job 36.29)*

In other words, we may know that God controls the events of nature, like the weather, but understanding enables you to know that God does for a purpose. God never functions in a random manner. We do not always know the precise reason why God is doing it, but we know that He knows and there is significance to it.

C. Understanding is a gift from God.

*“**Give** your servant therefore an **understanding mind** to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil...” 1 Kings 3.9*

*“...he **gives** wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have **understanding**.” Daniel 2.21*

D. We should pray for understanding.

*“**Give me understanding**, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.” Psalm 119.34*

Therefore, understanding is *the God-given ability and passion to grasp the significance of the words and works of God in order to live according to them.*

This is exactly how Jesus is using this word and it is the idea that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 1.18-19. *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning, I will thwart.”*

This is what I desperately want you to understand. Jesus knows that he is on the earth in order to live the perfect life in our place and then die on the cross for our sins. He knows that when people think of a king and Messiah, they do not think of someone who will die. Why? They think of someone who will rescue them from their discomforts in life because they do not realize that their biggest problem is their own sin. We naturally assume that the problems in our world are outside of us. Our biggest problem (your biggest problem) is you. That is fundamentally counter-intuitive. But, this is what Jesus has been preaching all along. He then died on the cross to pay for our sins, but that only is effective for people who admit, confess and repent of their sin. That means that I have to acknowledge that I am a mess. Most people will reject that. They are too proud. They will hear this message and walk away from it. Jesus knows this. That is why, the message of the cross sounds like nonsense to most people. People without understanding scoff at the cross or they are bored by it. But those with understanding know that the blessing is clear and incredible: When you hear and love and believe and submit to and live out the Word of God, the fruit is astounding! The amount of fruit will vary, but there will be fruit.

III. The Implication (general)

What is the implication for how we should think about the way we present the Word? We could spend five million dollars on constructing the most amazing children's center that you have ever seen in a church. We could then spend another couple of million constructing a student center and hiring a killer band and bring in rock-star status speakers and celebrity Christians. We could have quartet concerts every Thursday night, orchestral concerts for Vespers on Sunday afternoon, and reach no one with the gospel and then wonder, why are people not responding? After all, look at all that we have done to make ourselves and the message appear to be so appealing! The implication from this text is very clear. The effect of the Word does not depend on smoke machines and laser lights. It is not flash and dance and cool effects. The sower went out and sowed. He scattered the seed. We must faithfully plant the seed, which means we must keep the Bible as the focal point of our instruction and trust God to use his Word to cause life.

What is the implication for how we respond to people who fall away? There are more who hear but do not hear, than those who really hear. Many who start, do not finish. Jesus says, they never actually heard. So, how are we to relate to people like this? There are people who come, get excited, and then fall away. How are we supposed to treat them? Should we pretend that because they came for a while, made a profession of faith, even got baptized and joined the church, and then fell away, should we pretend that they are fulfilling the expectations that Jesus has for being one of his followers? No! There are people who come for a while and then join up with another local church. If it is a gospel-preaching church, then we are on the same team and we can rejoice that they are pressing on. But, if someone just fades away because of other priorities, then we need to encourage them, talk to them, even warn them if need be. That is what this text is saying. On a personal note...

IV. The Application (9)

A. Pray for insight

Since understanding is a gift from God, we must pray for it. Since understanding involves a supernatural encounter with God through his Word, we must pray when we read his word, when we teach his word, when we study his Word and when we listen to his Word.

B. Pursue insight

Be intentional about what discussing what you have heard or read. I would rather you read one verse of the Bible a week and believe it, apply it, and obey it than memorize the entire Bible and do nothing with it. I don't care how many sermons you listen to in a week. I don't care how many praise and worship songs you listen to on your phone. How are you pursuing your understanding and application of what you have already heard? That is why we have our small group ministry. I need people in my life who are going to help me pursue insight. I have put myself into a small group of other believers because this matters to me. I need this. I need to be in conversations where I am forced to think through the application of the Word of God and submit myself to it. Yes, I probably study this text more than anyone else has this week, but that does not mean that I have thought of everything in here. In fact, I can guarantee you that I have not. There are things that God reveals to you that I have not considered. While meeting in a formal small group is helpful, the only reason we have those groups is because we do not yet do this on our own on a regular basis. We seriously need to cultivate the habit of discussing the sermon after we hear it.

A couple of weeks ago I preached on the end of Matthew 12 where Jesus was talking about how the most important family he had was not his biological family but his spiritual family. So, after the service a dad talked with his son and said if someone ever took a gun and threatened to kill you unless I denied Christ, what should I do? The boy said, "You let him shoot." The dad then said that of course the reverse is true. If they ever threatened to kill me unless you denied Christ, what should you do? And said, "Let them shoot." Conversations like that are so helpful because it helps us all realize that this is not a game. This really is our life.

C. Practice insight

In other words, pray for insight, pursue your understanding of the Word and then be very careful to put it into practice. Do you realize that I fully capable of not practicing what I preach? I can become so conceited about the fact that I am the one who preaches the sermon, that I get a pass on applying the sermon. You can be conceited over the fact that you made the effort to come to church, or that you serve in the church, or that you have a title in the church. But, that does not give us a pass on hearing and submitting to God's Word. But, when we think that way, the results are devastating.

You have heard the old joke that you should never trust an electrician without eyebrows or eat at the restaurant of a skinny chef. But, while we may joke about a plumber who has a leaky faucet at home, electricians and plumbers who do not apply their trade at home

does not really bother us. But, when someone goes to church, hears the Word and does not change, we know that someone is seriously wrong. Why? What's the difference? We know that God's Word deals with ultimate issues. I must pursue insight. I must be intentional about this because applying the Bible does not happen by accident. You must plan for it. If we do not actively engage in that, then we end up sitting in judgment of the reading, or in judgment of the sermon, instead of the Word sitting in judgment of us.