

The Parables of Jesus  
i. How Do We Hear  
Matt 13:1-23

Jesus was a masterful teacher who captured the imagination of his hearers through the use of parables, described as stories with a sting in the tale, striking home unawares. Filled with everyday illustrations, the surface meaning hides a sucker punch. Whilst not unique to Jesus, parables in his hands have coined universal phrases like 'turning the other cheek', 'going the extra mile' and 'being a Good Samaritan' to name but a few.

Context is vital to the right understanding of a story, not least a parable. It may well have a disturbing, cutting edge especially if conflict and confrontation is in the air. In this context Jesus' enemies accuse him of being in league with Satan, and his immediate family are concerned about his mental state. So faced with direct opposition on the one hand and familiarity bordering on contempt on the other, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower.

This, the first of Jesus' parables, is well known and forms the sub-text of all his other parables. A farmer scatters seeds prior to ploughing, the usual practice in ancient Israel. Four types of soil represent the response of the listeners. A sun-baked footpath prevents the seed from germinating and Satan snatches Jesus' words from his deaf listeners. Shallow soil represents superficial listeners whose initial response flatters only to deceive. Thorny soil highlights distracted listeners whose pre-occupied lives choke spiritual growth. The good soil sees faithful listeners who truly listen, the yield being staggering, some thirty to a hundred-fold when the norm was only ten.

Astute listening to Jesus leads to remarkable results. Likewise, failure to listen leads to failure of nerve. Augustine rightly observed that someone who looks at beautiful writing in a foreign language may admire the calligraphy but cannot appreciate its meaning. Likewise, an unbeliever can admire aspects of Jesus' teaching, but cannot grasp the essential meaning. He hears but does not hear. (v13) In this regard Matthew sees the fulfilment of a prophecy from Isaiah 6, where God charges Isaiah to prophecy to recalcitrant Israel. The people kept on listening but they chose not to understand him. The more they heard the more they closed their ears to him; becoming calloused to the truth. They were quite sure that God would bless his city, his temple and his people, no matter how they lived. So when Isaiah said judgement was coming, they refused to listen. Likewise Jesus' opponents refuse to listen.

Normally a parable makes one point with the punch line exploding like a stealth bomb. But sometimes its meaning is layered like an onion as in this case. So, we need to ask ourselves what causes one's heart to become hard and deaf. Repentance is a lifestyle not a once off decision. If we are deaf to his word, we need to ask God to open our hearts to him afresh. If superficial, we need to ask him to impart intent and focus. If pre-occupied we need to ask for clarity and a clutter-free life. If fruitful we can give thanks and ask him to lead us to good places for service.

However, the question remains: what kind of soil are we? We bear fruit because of our union with Christ. Jesus put it this way: "I am the true vine... remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. I am the vine you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1,4,5) Fruit is a sign of repentance (Lk 3:7,8). It is also a sign of discipleship (John 15:5). We bear fruit when we hear God's word and the Spirit allows it to take root in us. In so doing our lives are transformed and bear more fruit than imagined or expected.

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