

Stories That Change the World
“On hearing: the parable of the soils”

Luke 8:4-18

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on May 21, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Luke 8.
- ***“You are listening to me but you are not hearing me.”*** How many times has your spouse, parent, or teacher said that to you? In some cases, listening but not hearing can lead to disastrous consequences. One of my favourite examples of this is from the story of *Don Quixote*.
 - If you haven’t read the story it is funny and tragic. Don Quixote is a skinny fifty-year-old man. He devotes so much of his life to reading novels about ancient knights in search of adventure that he loses his mind and begins to think that he is such a knight? He finds a set of armour, mounts his scrawny horse, and in total self-deception sets out in search of adventure with his neighbour Sancho.
- The first thing they come upon is a field with thirty windmills. But Don Quixote does not see windmills. He sees giants and tells Sancho he is going to slay them. ***“What Giants?” said Sancho. “Those whom you see yonder,” answered Don Quixote, “with their long-extended arms.” “Pray look better, sir,” said Sancho; “those things yonder are no giants, but Wind-Mills, and the arms you fancy are their sails, which being whirled about by the Wind make the Mill go.”***
 - But although Don Quixote listened he did not hear what Sancho was saying. Spurring his horse and lowering his lance he charged the fearsome giants. His lance pierced through the sail of the first windmill but as the wind-mill whirled around it shattered his lance and sent Don Quixote and his horse flying into the field where he lay in great pain.
- What is tragically funny in the case of Don Quixote is tragically serious when it comes to how we hear the word of God when it is preached and taught. For we see in this parable that although many listen to the word of God they do not hear it. As a result many believe they are Christians when in fact, like Don Quixote they are self-deceived.
 - Let this shake your soul for Jesus said that on judgement day many will say to him, ***“Lord, we did this and this in your name”*** but Jesus will say, ***“Depart from me. I never knew you.”*** This should provoke you to ask, ***“How do I know if I am the real thing?”***
- According to Jesus, it all has to do with rightly hearing the word of God.
 - We see this theme of hearing in verse 8 when after speaking the parable Jesus said, ***“He who has ears, let him hear.”*** Even though anyone can listen to God’s word being preached, not all actually hear it so that it produces fruit. Jesus means for you to feel the seriousness of this and ask him how to hear rightly.
- Or look at verse 11-12. **READ 11-12 - *Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.***
 - So the farmer represents anyone who preaches God’s word and the seed represents the word of God that is spoken. That is why this parable has often been called ‘the parable of the sower.’ I find that misleading because this parable is not about the sower or about the seed. That is to say it is not firstly about preaching or about the Bible. It is about how each of the four soils receive or do not receive the sower’s seed. It is about how people’s hearts hear the word of God as it is preached.

- It is more accurate then to call it ‘the parable of the soils.’ You are meant to ask, ***“What soil am I? How do I hear the word?”*** With great urgency then Jesus is provoking us to ask, ***“How can I know if my heart is rightly hearing the word of God that I might be saved and persevere in bearing fruit?”***
- This parable is a gracious gift to us for in it Jesus administers a hearing test to all who read it. He asks us to consider four questions on how our hearts hear. These four hearing tests can be painful because we can suddenly realize that, like Don Quixote, we have been walking around in self-deception and though the word has been clearly preached to us we have listened but not heard it. This pain is good because, like Don Quixote, what we need most is to see reality as it is actually is.
 - So let’s allow Jesus to administer this hearing test that we might hear rightly, believe, produce fruit, and persevere to the end.

TEST #1 – A HARD HEART

- In test #1 Jesus calls us to ask ourselves this question: **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** do I hear with a hard heart?
 - Farmers in Palestine easily understood this parable but it will take a bit of work for 21st century urban people.
- When a farmer went out to sow his seed he would carry a bag of seed and as he walked he would take out handfuls and throw it in wide arcs. Now in ancient Israel fields were not separated by fences but simply by footpaths in the dirt. With animals and people walking on them the soil would of course become like virtual cement. Inevitably some of the farmer’s seed would land on these paths. Not being able to get in to the hard packed soil to germinate the seed would be trampled on and eaten by the birds. And so Jesus says in verse 5. ***READ 5 - A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.***
 - Jesus interprets this in verse 11 like this: ***READ 11 - Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.***
- So clearly this refers to people whose hearts are so resistant to the gospel that when it is preached to them it cannot penetrate but just bounces off because their hearts are like hard packed dirt. Before they even get to their car after church the message is gone. When you try to speak God’s word to them they laugh at it. It is like trying to plant a seed in the middle of Pandora Street.
 - One commentator says, ***“The great irony of this type of hearer is that they tend to think of themselves as strong people: self-made; not subject to the weak thinking of others; self-determining; independent, etc.”***¹
 - In reality they are victims and prisoners for as II Corinthians 4:4 says, ***“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”***
- This parable is such an encouragement in evangelism because you notice that the effectiveness of the seed does not depend on the sower. Your job as a Christian is simply to sow the seed. It is not your job to get results. When people do not receive your words well do not be discouraged and think you have done a bad job. Oh let me free you of that burden. The fault does not lie with the sower or with the seed, it lies with person and their hard heart.
 - So the first test is to ask yourself, ***“Do I hear with a hard heart?”*** He who has ears to

¹ Terry Johnson, *The Parables of Jesus*, 47

hear, let him hear.

TEST #2 – A SHALLOW HEART

- In test #2 Jesus calls us to ask ourselves this question: **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** do I hear with a shallow heart? **READ 6** - *And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.*
 - In Israel there are a lot of places where there is a shallow layer of soil but underneath there is only bedrock. Because the temperature of such soil is warmer than normal the seed would get off to a great start, quickly germinating and sprouting, but then because the roots could not grow deep to find moisture the plant would die.
 - Jesus gives the meaning of this in verse 13. **READ 13** - *And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.*
- So these are people who hear the message and quickly embrace it. Notice the enthusiasm they have as they ‘receive it with joy.’ They want to get baptized and serve and sing in the church. But then a trial comes into their life and they are gone.
 - I will never forget in Grade 9 or so taking my friend Shane to hear a famous Christian comedian. The comedian did his thing, presented the gospel and then called for anyone who wanted to receive Christ to come down to the front. With no prompting from me, Shane went from the balcony all the way down.
 - On the hour-long ride home we talked with great joy about Jesus, the gospel, and what it means to be a Christian. But in the weeks and years that followed I never heard anything about Jesus again from Shane.
- Now all of this raises that thorny question of can a Christian lose their salvation? Some Christians say ‘yes’. This is called the ‘Arminian’ position. Other Christians say that a true Christian cannot lose their salvation. This is called the ‘Calvinist’ position.
 - Craig Blomberg reminds us that in such a debate we often lose sight of the fact that both Calvinists and Arminians agree that people can appear to be Christians for some time but then turn their backs on him. Judas is the prime example of that. The debate is about what is proved when such people leave. Arminians say such people were true Christians who lost their salvation. Calvinists say they were never true Christians at all.
 - I take the Calvinist position, particularly because I John 2:19 which says, *“they went out from us [out of the church fellowship] but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belongs to us.”* In other words, those who leave prove that they were never truly believers in the first place.
- This should shake you up because this is a test for all who profess to be Christians. They sing and shout with joy but when a trial comes they turn their backs on Jesus. They thought Jesus would make them wealthy but they lost their job, that He would fix their marriage but now they are divorced, that He would heal their sickness but now they are dying, that He would give them friends but now their family and friends reject them because of Jesus. These are all the people who say, *“I tried Jesus but he did not work for me.”*
 - But as Alistair Begg says, *“The fact is that they made an emotional response based on what they thought they could get from Jesus.”* The fact is their true God was health, wealth, happiness, and feeling included and when Jesus did not bow to their gods they rejected Him.

- What is really scary is that you often cannot know such shallow rooted people until a big storm comes.
- Stormy trials blast away false believers but they perfect true believers as James says, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*
 - True faith endures to the end. So look at your life. Do you hear with a shallow heart? He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

TEST #3 – A STRANGLED HEART

- In test #3 Jesus calls us to ask ourselves this question: **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** do I hear with a strangled heart? Look at verse 7. **READ 7** - *And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it.* So the plant is competing with the weeds for nutrients in the soil and as it grows it is strangled by the weeds not able to grow tall and strong. Jesus gives us the meaning in verse 14. **READ 14** - *And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.* I am going to be honest with you. To me, this is the most frightening soil of the first three. Why? Because these people are the most self-deceived and so this could easily be me.
 - You see, I am 100% sure I am not the first soil for I do not resist the gospel. Such people are easy to spot. The second group of people is not so easy to identify but after being a Christian for 37 years and having experienced some degree of trials I am pretty sure I am not the second soil though I heed it carefully. But this last test shakes me to my core because this could easily be me, a plant that grows but is choked back and does not mature.
 - I am not even sure if these people are Christians who just do not mature or if in the end their lack of fruitfulness reveals they were not real at all. It is simply too hard to know. But I do know these people do not ever consciously reject Jesus but Jesus is crowded out of their lives by other things. They are more preoccupied with other things which end up choking their spiritual maturity – they never seem to grow, never impact anyone else’s life for Jesus, are Christians for 40 years and yet new Christians grow right past them. Why? What strangles them from growing?
- Jesus mentions three things. **READ 14** - *as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.* Oh search your heart and see if you are being strangled by any of these things. First, the cares of life can strangle you.
 - This just has to do with everyday living. These people begin well focusing on their spiritual life but then school, family, jobs, and paying bills, begin to take their time up so none is left for seeking God and serving others. These things are not bad at all but if they are not kept in right perspective they can, like a weed, crawl all over you and squeeze the spiritual life out of you.
- Second, riches can strangle you. Oh, what a word to an educated, white collar, urban church. Most of you will make significant amounts of money. Oh make sure Jesus is your master and not money for as Jesus said, *“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”*

- Is it not clear that our love of money is choking out Jesus when those who profess to be Christians in Canada give an estimated 5% of their income to charities? Now that is far better than those who profess to have no religion.
 - Wealth is a gift of God but do not let it strangle you.
- Third, pleasure can strangle you.
 - Do we dare think we do not have such weeds crawling around our ankles when we live in an age that enjoys more pleasure than ever before? I have seen this happen so many times in people's lives. Do you wonder why your spiritual life lacks vitality?
 - It is not that we turn away from Jesus, it is simply that we become so preoccupied with vacations, weekend getaways, kids sports, and hiking, and camping that we only have time to come to church 3 out of 8 Sundays. We devote so much time to video games, social media, and binging on Netflix shows that there simply is not time to read the Bible, study the Bible, memorize it, and fill it. We are so busy enjoying good things that we simply do not have time for personal prayer, for corporate prayer, or for reading Christian books that will grow our faith. We spend so much money on more gadgets, better toys, nicer stuff, that have little left to alleviate poverty or give to the church to see the mission of God go forward in Victoria.
 - And I trust you do not hear me speaking down to you. I weep that I am just as caught up in all of this. It is a continual fight. Heather and I are continually re-examining our time, our priorities, how we spend our money. It is just too easy to give ourselves to enjoying life instead of sacrificial service, radical generosity, and an all out pursuit of God through his word and through his church.
 - Oh Lord have mercy on us. We pray with the psalmist, ***"Unite my heart to fear your name."*** What is the Spirit speaking to you right now? Where are the weeds wrapped around your throat? Where are they cutting off the spiritual oxygen? What steps do you need to take to rip those weeds from your throat. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

TEST #4 – A RECEPTIVE HEART

- In test #4 Jesus calls us to ask ourselves this question: **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** do I hear with a receptive heart? **READ 8** - *And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.* And then look at verse 15. **READ 15** - *As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.*
 - Jesus' disciples would have been shocked and staggered to hear Jesus' conclusion because an average crop had about an 8-fold yield with an abundant harvest being up to a 15-fold yield. This is a 100 fold yield is simply staggering. But should this surprise us?
 - When the word of God finds a heart that it can grow in, the word does its work. Nothing can stop it. The person is changed, their roots grow deep, and fruit comes out of their life.
- There is fruit in their attitudes. Everyone around them enjoys the taste of their love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. They love God, love the word, and love worshipping. There is also action fruit. Although far from perfect their heart is good – they battle against sin and demonstrate love in action to others. They persevere and bear fruit.
 - Oh this is the person I want to be. I want to be one whose heart is continually receiving the word of God. I want my life to count. I want to bear fruit.

- How do you know if your faith is real? The proof of real saving faith is that it perseveres and bears fruit. John 15:8 says that we *show ourselves* to be Jesus' disciples by bearing much fruit. Or in John 8 Jesus said, ***"If you continue in my word then you are really my disciples."***
 - He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

WHICH SOIL AM I?

- This parable then is meant to challenge you to ask, ***"which soil am I?"*** This can be painful to realize but it is right here that the gospel speaks to your need. Are you a hard heart that does not want to hear? Then Jesus says, ***"I was buried in the earth but broke forth that I might break up your hard heart."*** Are you a shallow heart that superficially receives the word but you collapse under trial? Then Jesus says, ***"I was barricaded behind a rock when the buried me but I burst forth in victory. Come to me and I will give you my victory."***
 - Are you too busy and preoccupied with life that thorns and thistle strangle out your maturity? Then Jesus says, ***"I was pierced with a crown of thorns but now wear the crown of the universe. Yield all to me and you will share in my glory."*** Are you the good soil? Then thank God for his grace toward you and pursue Him with all your might.
 - Do you see how the gospel is such good news? The message of the gospel is that God can and will do for you what you cannot do for yourself. You cannot change your heart but Jesus can. Call upon him to do this.
- Although you cannot change your heart you can prepare it for God to change.
 - All of this assumes that you are placing yourself in the place where you constantly have the seeds of the word falling on your heart. Is your life filled with the Bible? Do you read it? Do you seek out Christian teaching and preaching where you are being taught the Bible?
 - If you read the biographies of the great Christians of history or speak with mature believer you will find one thing to be true of them: they are always placing themselves under the Bible. They love to read it. They love to hear it preached. Is that true of you?

"THIS BOOK IS SO PRECIOUS TO ME"

- This past week I had the joy of hearing Cliff Padgett's life story. He is a few months shy of his 100th birthday. He wanted to record it in order to tell people of what God has done in his life. You can get a CD copy at the info desk or you can listen on the webpage.
 - I won't give away all the story but here is what I was struck by. Cliff's story has a lot of difficulties in it. He experienced many heartaches such as losing his father at 18 years old and losing his adult son Murray to cancer. He had many dreams of what he could do for Jesus but many doors were shut and many of his dreams went unfulfilled.
 - Yet despite all of this his love for Jesus is so deep. As he tells his story, the whole thing is filled with God and his grace. He weeps when talks of how gracious God has been to him and how glorious God is.
- So here is a man who has had a difficult life. Yet he has persevered. What is his secret? If you listen carefully you will hear it all through his story. It is that he filled his life with scripture. Since his early twenties he devoted himself to knowing the Bible. He speaks with great joy about hearing the preaching of T.T. Shields and being taught about his Saviour at Bible College.
 - When I first sent to see him a few months ago he picked up his bible and he said, ***"This book is so precious to me."***
 - What will enable you to persevere? What will cause your life to be fruitful? A life that is filled with Scripture, that delights to have it preached and taught to you. Which soil are you? He who has ears to hear, let him hear.