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Luke 8:1–21

24th Message

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ARE YOU LISTENING?

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

One of my regrets of old age is that I'm musically illiterate. It's not that I lacked opportunity, for my mother was a concert cellist in a symphony orchestra. When she offered to give me piano lessons, I simply refused, preferring football to musical scales. Several years ago I was invited by my good friend John Felstiner to attend a performance by the world-renowned Emerson string quartet that was playing at Stanford. They would be performing Haydn's *Seven Last Words of our Savior on the Cross* and Mendelssohn's *String Quartet No. 6*. I arrived a bit late and took one of the remaining seats in the back row. John sat in the front row. As the quartet played, I thoroughly enjoyed the music, but was more captivated watching John. He seemed in a trance with his eyes closed taking in every note and whisper vibration, his body gently moving as if floating on air. He obviously had taken this journey before, and I could see the anticipation of each movement in his facial expressions, as if he were at last arriving to that celestial place we call home.

After the concert he ushered me backstage to meet one of the musicians before they hurried off to a reception given in their honor. Being introduced to him, I felt like a tramp in the midst of a wedding. A lifetime of refusal to train my ears could not be undone in a moment of longing.

A sensitive ear was vital to authentic spirituality in Israel. While other religions stimulated the "eyes" of their worshippers with sensual idols, Israel's God made his appeal to the "ear," as the foundational verse in Deuteronomy makes clear:

Hear O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Deut 6:4 ESV)

In Hebrew thought "to hear" means – "to listen attentively," "to pay close attention to," "to reflect on," "to meditate" and ultimately "to obey".

We are entering the final phase of Jesus' expanding ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee. In our text today the theme is all about "hearing," not just *what* we hear, but *how* we hear. The matter of hearing was becoming more critical for the disciples, as Jesus' ministry was not only bringing healing and life to those who received it, but simultaneously igniting fiery opposition by those who were threatened by his kingdom pronouncements.

In direct response to the opposition of the leadership in Israel Jesus changed his mode of teaching from open proclamation to parables – seemingly innocuous stories of village and country life to illustrate moral truths. But to the attentive listener, they contained densely packed mysteries that revealed much more than what appeared on the surface. To emphasize the absolute necessity of the disciples to listen with perfect pitch, the verb "hear" rings out eight times in our text, and leaves us with the question, "Are we *really* listening?" or more importantly, "*How* do we listen?"

Luke frames the parable and its interpretation around the theme of family, which will give us a clue as to how to apply this parable.

- a The new family expanding: the twelve and the women (1–3)
- b The parable of the sower and the call to listen (4–15)
- b' The parable of the lamp and the call to listen (16–18)
- a' The new family redefined (19–21)

I. The New Family Expands

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. (Luke 8:1–3)

God's new world is taking root and expanding throughout Northern Galilee. Luke adds a group of women who have had life-changing encounters with Jesus, liberating them from the bondages of sickness and demonic oppression. Like the sinful woman in the previous chapter, these women break with the social customs of the day and are not shy about demonstrating their gratitude and devotion to Jesus. I would describe it as nothing short of "following Jesus with absolute abandon." As John Carroll aptly observes,

While the apostles have a mission-in-waiting, these women already engage in a ministry on their own. They not only follow Jesus but also provide the resources to sustain an itinerant ministry that has no household base to assure economic viability... Whether as unmarried women or widows, or as married women operating independently of their household system, the women are present in the itinerant band of Jesus' followers, a remarkable development in a social world where location and role in the household are so determinative of identity and behavior... The resulting disruptions of existing household and family relationship will involve considerable conflict (14:26; 18:28–30; 21:16)¹

II. The Parable of the Sower

And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, "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. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Luke 8:4–8)

The parable was given to an enormous crowd that had gathered to listen to Jesus. Mark adds that Jesus delivered the parable from a boat, as a way to amplify his voice over the water in front of

the surrounding hills. Bargil Pixner writes, “The bay lies halfway between Tabgha and Capernaum. The land slopes down like a Roman theater around the bay. Even today this natural formation possesses astonishing acoustics.”² It was a very familiar agricultural scene and one that was in direct view of the hearers as they sat in this natural amphitheater on the north shores of Galilee.

Upon the initial hearing, the story appears rather commonplace, highlighting the unavoidable threats that occur in the regular process of seasonal sowing. Who would take issue with nature’s ways, which silently grant a sower’s seed different destinies based on the condition of the soil into which they are sown? The prepositions explain the obvious:

some fell *along* the path
 some fell *on* the rock
 some fell *among* the thorns
 some fell *into* good soil

The first seed falls “alongside” the farmer’s path where it suffers violent abuse, being “trampled underfoot” and “devoured” by “the birds of the air” (i.e. wild, undomesticated birds). The second, sown on a thin layer of topsoil upon a rocky shelf, gives initial signs of promise, but quickly wilts for lack of moisture. The third, elicits more hope than the second, but sadly, its growth is cut short before it can bear fruit. It is subjected to a slow death, being choked by tenacious thorns. “These Palestine weeds” described by Darrell Bock “can grow up to six feet tall... They also take so much nourishment from the ground that nothing else can grow around them.”³

Thus far, as Carroll observes, “It is a story of repeated frustration and failure. In a world where famine is frequent and survival depends on a successful harvest, this is a bleak account indeed.”⁴ But then comes the surprising reversal, as the fourth seed is able to penetrate “into good soil” and is nurtured unto mature growth that brings forth a remarkable yield.

Jesus concludes the story with a loud cry to “he who has ears to hear, let him hear,” indicating that the truth of the parable is not immediately self-evident. It is an invitation to all to look beneath the surface of the obvious, to be attentive, reflective and open to new ways of thinking, for only then will the parable disclose its secrets that are hidden within.

III. The Purpose of Parables: To Conceal to Reveal

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’” (Luke 8:9–10)

The disciples respond to Jesus’ invitation, seeking to know the secrets contained within the parable. Before giving the interpretation, Jesus quotes a pivotal verse from the book of Deuteronomy and links it with a verse from Isaiah’s call as a prophet.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. (Deut 29:29)

Moses’ words were prophetic of a remnant of Israelites who, having experienced the torturous exile of God’s judgment, would zealously return to the Lord with their whole hearts. In response to their repentance, God promised to bring them back to their land and to circumcise their hearts in a new covenant to love God with all

their hearts and to make them prosperous in the land. The disciples are demonstrating by their open minds and searching hearts that they are indeed the first fruits of God’s renewed people – the *insiders* who are privileged to know the secrets of the kingdom. The others, who are on the *outside*, are given the secrets in parables to prevent them from “seeing and hearing” – a quote from Isaiah’s commission as a prophet in Isaiah 6:9–10.

At first glance this looks like harsh and arbitrary predestination. Why would God commission a prophet to preach for the purpose of blinding, confusing and hardening hearts? But a closer look at the historical context reveals a very different picture. After countless decades of Israel’s persistent idolatry, God’s passionate pleas to repent through his prophets had fallen on deaf ears. Given Israel’s stubborn resistance, there was only one thing left for God to do. Rikki Watts explains,

In response, he suits the punishment to the crime: they are to be as blind, as deaf, and as incapable of understanding as their idols. Having rejected Yahweh their maker, he will now confirm them in their decision by recreating them, as it were, in the image of the gods they have chosen... That this blinding and deafening is an ironic judgment upon the nation’s idolatrous condition appears confirmed when her salvation, characterized by restoration of sight, hearing, and understanding, involves a concurrent rejection of idols.⁵

Jesus’ use of Isaiah 6:9–10 is, then, not so much a matter of predestination as a judicial response to those who have already refused his message, that is the ‘outsiders,’ which both confirms them in their logic and consigns them to the consequences of their choices.⁶

The parables thus serve a dual function of hardening hearts of those who have already chosen not to listen, and at the same time revealing the mysteries of the kingdom to those on the inside. Thus, the parable was an ingenious method of disclosing a message that was extremely subversive and dangerous. The truth had to be veiled in secrecy, for if it was stated plainly, it would cause a riot.

So how then does the parable draw the hearer in to listen attentively? The answer is that each parable reaches back to a familiar story or set of images in Israel’s history. Once captivated by the familiar, Jesus further develops the story and adds surprising new twists that are designed to break open and shatter Israel’s prevailing world view and replace it with a new one. In this way they articulate a new way of understanding the fulfillment of Israel’s hope in Jesus. Thus the parables were essentially secretive and subversive.⁷

Such skill in presentation is also needed today. So often when Christians encounter stiff rejection to the gospel from a colleague, professor, child or friend, we merely get defensive and repeat the same old dogma, only with a little more volume or emotion. Rather than convincing our opponents, it creates greater distance between the hearer and the message. Because truth is precious Jesus did not cast his pearls before swine. Instead he taught in parables.

IV. The Interpretation of the Parable (Luke 8:11–15)

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.” (v. 11)

The parable reveals that God’s kingdom is not coming in the way Israel had hoped, with the new king leading a violent military revolt to rid the land of Israel’s oppressors. What God is actually doing is working like a farmer, quietly and methodically sowing seed in a

field. The imagery is taken from the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 55 the prophet describes the Messianic age being birthed by God's irresistible word that will be liberally sown throughout the land issuing forth in a brand new creation. Working with Isaiah's imagery, Jesus asserts that the new age has arrived. Jesus is the faithful and methodical sower of God's word, teaching and bringing new life wherever he goes. But the parable qualifies the expectation of a universal harvest, as the seeds bear different results. Yet, the reason is not due to the nature of the seed, but rather due to the condition of the soil in present day Israel.

Which soil are you?

Soil #1: Unbelieving

"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." (v. 12)

In the first instance a cynical and unbelieving heart is fertile ground for Satan who, like a swift raven, snatches the seed off the hard ground, removing any possibility that it might take root. That violent imagery of being trampled and devoured may be a veiled reference to the reception Jesus received in his hometown of Nazareth and the more recent abuse Jesus endured at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

Religious people can be some of the most narrow minded and hardhearted people on the planet. They come to church not to listen to the word, but to critique and find fault. If we say, "I got nothing out of that sermon," we should consider that our words may in fact not be a critique on the skill of the preacher, but rather on the hardness of our hearts.

Soil #2: No Depth

"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." (v. 13)

In the second instance the seed is sown upon a thin layer of soil upon a rocky shelf. These are those who receive the word with enthusiastic joy. But sadly they never put down firm roots and quickly fall away in affliction or persecution. The fact that they fall away suggests that, despite their initial enthusiasm, they never really aligned themselves with God's purposes. I find it instructive that Jesus was never impressed with the initial responses of people. What counts are deep roots that endure.

Soil #3: Choked by Anxiety

"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." (v. 14)

In the third instance the seed is sown among the thorns. This describes those who hear and respond favorably. But sadly, though there is growth they never mature, for the "cares and riches and pleasures of life" i.e. "the drive for security apart from God and from the needs of one's neighbor"⁸ choke the life of the word. This is how Jeremiah described rebellious Israel in his own day: "For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem: 'Break up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns'" (Jer 4:3). Commenting on the definition of "care" (anxiety), Goetzmann writes,

Oppressed by the burdens laid upon him, man imagines himself delivered to a fate before which he stands powerless. By his care

man tries to protect himself as best he can from what confronts him.⁹

The word of God cannot take root and mature when sown in the field of anxiety that feeds on the lie that it is up to you to secure your own future. Peter tells us to "cast all our anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Pet 5:7). The fact that Jesus took all our anxieties upon himself is confirmed by the fact that on the cross Jesus wore a crown of thorns.

The Thorny Threat

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you." But he answered them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." (Luke 8:19–21)

Mark tells us that when Jesus' family saw how Jesus' reputation was drawing such huge crowds, they felt he "had lost his mind" and came to Capernaum to "take custody of him". Luke notes that they stand outside, perhaps symbolic that they will not cross the threshold to stand with him. Their desire is to bring him home to return to his proper place within the old family structure.

Luke's placement of this incident is not without significance. Coming right after the parable of the sower suggests that one of the threats to God's seed taking root is our family of origin. Our family may be morally upright, neat and clean with roles clearly defined by tradition or culture, but like thorns they choke out the life of the new age by defining us along traditional family lines.

The physical family is still very important in the kingdom of God, especially in this age when the family is disintegrating and doing irreparable damage to children. But the point of our text is that a healthy family sees itself as a temporary nurturing ground where children are prepared to launch out into the full freedom of adult life, taking their place within the larger body of Christ and the world. And it is in that larger context that full maturity, service and discipleship happens.

Soil #4: The Good and Beautiful Soil

"As for that in the good (*kalos*) soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest (*kalos*) and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." (v. 15)

The repeated failure and deepening disappointment serve to heighten our joy and delight when we finally come to the good soil. In his interpretation of the "good" soil, Jesus uses the adjective *kalos*, which means not only "good," but also "beautiful" or "noble," suggesting that the soul has become a garden of enduring beauty. What makes it so beautiful is that the word has not only taken root, it has grown unencumbered by threatening thorns so that it is able to mature and reproduce with a bountiful crop.

The reality is that God's word is not only received and implanted in the heart, but it is "held fast" (*katechō*), a term which means "to keep in one's memory, to retain it faithfully, keep in one's possession." If we treasure the word, we will hide it in our heart until the very DNA of the word transforms our affections to love God and our neighbor with our whole heart reproducing itself one hundred fold. (see Prov. 2:1–5)

In contrast to the other hearers, "the good hearers welcome the word *immediately*, so that Satan cannot snatch it away. They welcome it *deeply*, so that persecutions cannot induce them to apostatize. They welcome it *exclusively*, so that other concerns do not stifle it...And its

abundance... of a hundredfold more than cancels out the threefold failure of the seeds that fell on bad soil.”¹⁰

V. An Invitation and a Warning

“No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.” (Luke 8:16–18)

Jesus concludes with an invitation and a warning. No one really knows “how” you are listening to God’s word, for it takes place in secret. However you can be sure that whatever choices you make in the privacy of your heart will eventually be made public in your behavior. The disciples are blessed today because they took time to ask Jesus the secret contained in the parable. But our souls are like living gardens that need constant cultivation and nourishment of God’s word lest they die. Faith is not a static reality.

Inside the practice field of the Stanford football team there is a large banner that reads: “You are either getting better or you are getting worse, you never stay the same.”

Are you listening? If you are, then every encounter with the word should bear the everlasting fruit of *faith* and *faithfulness*. We are not up here giving information for the curious, but implanting the word in your hearts to implement a decision.

What does that decision look like? In our text it is the women whose faith evidenced itself in leaving everything to follow Jesus, contributing their hard-earned resources to the kingdom, and in the end they will prove faithful in the midst of persecution as they cling to Jesus at the foot of the cross, while the disciples deny him and flee in fear. And for Mary Magdalene, she will ultimately become an apostle to the apostles, being the first faithful witness of the resurrection.

One day we are going to be able to go back stage to meet the composer of the world’s greatest symphony that’s been making its world tour for 2000 years. Remember, a lifetime of refusal to train your ears to listen cannot be undone in a moment of longing. May God grant us the grace to break the fallow ground of our hearts today.

1. John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 182.
2. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin publishers, 1992), 41.
3. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1:1:1–9:50* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 725.
4. Carroll, *Luke*, 185.
5. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 191–192.
6. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus*, 208.
7. This paragraph is adapted from N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 174–192.
8. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 328.
9. Jürgen, Goetzmann, “*Care, Anxiety*,” NIDNTT 1:276–279
10. Robert Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 207.

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