

What Happens When We Hear the Word of God?

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

By [Rev. Bryn MacPhail](#)

This seems strange for me to say, but today you have the opportunity to prove Jesus wrong. I don't mean to say that we will refute the words of Christ to show them to be false, but it sure would be nice if we could say that they don't apply to us here at St. Andrew's/Fraser.

In the text before us today, Jesus tells a parable. In this parable, seed is sown—falling on 4 different types of soil—but only one type of soil yields fruit. The analogy being that when the Word of God is proclaimed there is generally 4 types of responses. Three of the responses are negative and one is positive.

We have already heard the Word of God read. You are about to hear it proclaimed. We all have the opportunity today to respond positively to the Word of God. And if we do, we become the exception to Jesus' generalization. Jesus provides 4 typical responses to the Gospel call. And any preacher can attest to how typical these responses are. But wouldn't it be nice for us to be *atypical*? Here is our chance. Listen for the Word of God. Prepare your heart to receive it and respond.

Jesus, of course, is famous for telling parables, but the "Parable of the Sower" is actually the *first parable* in Matthew. Almost half of Matthew has gone by when we reach this first parable. In the previous chapters, Jesus preached the Gospel clearly and unequivocally to everyone. Jesus demonstrated His authority, not only through His preaching, but also by many "acts of power" and miraculous healings. The result of all of this was the gradual emergence of two groups: those interested in following Jesus and those interested in stamping out His influence.

So in order to conceal His message from the latter group, Jesus begins to teach in parables (v. 13). The "Parable of the Sower" is the first of eight parables in Matthew.

The title of this parable is somewhat misleading. The sower is not the focus of attention. It is the seed and the soils, which are the subject.

The seed is explained in verse 19 to be "the word of the kingdom". Luke says more clearly, "the seed is the word of God" (Lk. 8:11).

The soil can be said to represent a type of person, but more specifically, the soil represents the human "heart". Matthew mentions the "evil one" coming to snatch away that which has "been sown in his HEART" (v.19). Luke talks about an "honest and good HEART" receiving the seed of the Word (Lk. 8:15).

The seed is always the same. Even the soil is the same—the difference lies in the *condition* of the soil. Carrying the analogy through then, the seed is always the biblical Gospel and the soil is always the human heart. The determining factor is THE CONDITION OF THE HUMAN HEART.

Jesus, no doubt, was using imagery quite familiar to His audience. Agriculture was central to the Jewish people. Every Jew would have understood the process of sowing seed and growing crops. In those days, the sower would drape a bag of seed over his shoulder, and as he walked up and down the furrows, he would take handfuls of seed and scatter it. This seed would fall, typically, on soil of four conditions.

The first condition of the soil is the soil "beside the road" (v. 4, 19). It is important, first of all, to comprehend Palestine was covered with fields. With no fences or walls separating these fields, the only boundaries were narrow paths—dirt paths walked on by travelers. The condition of this soil would be matted down dirt. Any seed that landed on these paths would not penetrate the ground.

What a fitting analogy for hearing the Word of God! It is too often that a sermon or Scripture reading does not penetrate our heart. Sometimes that is the preacher's fault, but not always.

Here is a little test. Starting tomorrow, ask the first person from church that you talk to what today's sermon was about. You won't remember every detail, but see if you can recall the thrust of the sermon. If you can't, the reality is that either I'm a very poor communicator or even worse, the Word of God did not penetrate your heart. When this happens, Jesus says that "the evil one" will come and snatch it away (v. 19). Don't be blaming the devil though! The initial trouble is not the devil, but a HEART UNPREPARED FOR THE WORD OF GOD.

How do we prepare our hearts? *Prayer* would be a good place to start. Pray at home before church. Pray in the car or when you are walking to church. Pray that God would help you to receive and apply His Word.

The second condition of soil described is "rocky places"(v. 5, 20). This is not a reference to soil with stones in it; any farmer who cultivated a field would remove all the stones he could. In Israel, strata of limestone rock bed ran through the land. In places, the rock bed could jut so close to the surface that it would lie only inches beneath the topsoil. Seed sown here would immediately germinate, but the descending roots would quickly hit the rock and have no place to go. With

limited access to moisture, the sun would quickly scorch the plant and cause it to wither.

Another fitting analogy for hearing the Word of God. Notice that this time the seed manages to penetrate the soil. The Word of God does penetrate the heart. Jesus says that the Word is "received"—not only that—it is received "with joy" (v. 20).

This is surely something we can all relate to. We come to church, we sing praises, we are motivated by God's Word, we enjoy fellowship and we leave church with a spring in our step! We are so full of joy ... and then Monday arrives. Our boss has more work for us—much more. Our spouse says something inconsiderate to us. Our Visa bill arrives in the mail. Our bubble is quickly burst.

How many of you can relate to that? I sure can. I sometimes leave church on Sunday's thinking I'm "Super-Christian" only to find out on Monday how superficial my response to God's Word is. If daily trials and "afflictions" trip us up, it is a sure sign that we have only superficially received God's Word.

The third condition of soil described is weedy—the seed "fell among the thorns" (v. 7, 22). This soil would have the appearance of good soil. It would appear deep, rich, tilled, and fertile. The difficulty is, the soil is already taken up. Weeds, indigenous to that area, grow without any cultivation—they flourish naturally. And so when this foreign seed is planted and begins to grow, it gets "choked" out (v. 7).

The sad reality is, we who hear the Word of God, experience this too. We know what it is like to have God's Word germinating in our heart only to be later choked out. This analogy of the "weedy soil" is the most unsettling for me. As Christians, we may be able to prepare our hearts through prayer and meditation so that the Word germinates. There is a sense that we might be able to avoid having our hearts resemble a dirt path or shallow soil. But the idea of weed-infested soil, I'm afraid, is a genuine reality for most Christians.

We may have prayerfully prepared are hearts to receive the Word of God, but what we often fail to do is remove the *harmful things* within our heart. Speaking spiritually, we fail to do our weeding. We desperately want to see the Word of God take root in our lives, but at the same time, we are lackadaisical about having the sin, bitterness and anxiety removed from our hearts.

Maybe you are sitting in your pew thinking, "I've readied my heart for God's Word". "I have prepared room for Him to grow in me"—but the analogy of the thorns should make you look deeper. Sure, you welcome God's Word, but have you done your spiritual weeding?

You may say that the "thorns" can refer to a great many things, but in this passage, they clearly refer to one thing: CONCERN FOR THIS WORLD (v. 22).

You have welcomed the Word of Christ into your heart—you are concerned about your spiritual condition, but this analogy forces us to choose. What is our primary concern? Is it the things of this "world"—a career, a house, a car, a comfortable retirement? Or is our primary concern for heavenly things—following Christ regardless of the cost?

Listen to what Jesus says about the "good soil" (v. 8, 23): "This is the man who hears the word and UNDERSTANDS it" (v. 23). Yes, sometimes the Word of God is difficult to understand. But sometimes, the Word of God is difficult to understand because we haven't prepared our heart to receive it. Sometimes the Word of God is difficult to understand because we are too distracted by worldly things.

Luke qualifies for us the implication of our "understanding" when he includes that those who "understand" God's Word will "hold it fast" (Lk. 8:15). Those who truly understand God's Word will quickly realize the futility of worldly things. Those who understand God's Word spend all their energies LIVING BY IT.

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