

HOW PEOPLE RESPOND TO CHRIST

Luke 8:4-15

Whether or not a person is helped by attending church does not depend as much on the church or the preacher as it does upon himself. Christ made this quite clear in the story which He told about a farmer who went out to sow his seed.

By the parabolic method of teaching, which Christ introduced in this passage, He related interesting stories about scenes or incidents from life, with which His hearers were familiar, and placed them alongside truths which were unknown to them with a view to illustrating and explaining these great truths. To Dr. G. Campbell Morgan we are indebted for this clear and concise definition: "A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning; some familiar thing of earth is placed alongside of some mysterious thing of heaven that our understanding of the one may help us to an understanding of the other."¹

Christ spoke in parables for the purpose of securing the attention of the people who composed His audiences, of stimulating their thinking faculties, and of enabling His listeners who were responsive to the truth to understand and to remember what He was saying. Through parables Christ conveyed the truth to His true followers in such a way that they never forgot it, but, at the same time, His enemies were not able to comprehend what He was saying. In most of His parables Christ sought to convey one central idea or truth.

In this particular parable Christ employed the figure of a farmer scattering seed on the different kinds of soil by the old-fashioned method of broadcasting. The purpose of this parable was to show that the four kinds of soil typified as many kinds of hearers who are attendant upon the ministry of God's Word.

Desiring to know the significance and meaning of the parable which Christ had spoken, the disciples requested Him to interpret it for them. As was always the case, when any of His followers sought and requested instruction in spiritual matters, Christ took great delight in imparting it to them. To His faithful followers, who wanted to learn the truth, the parable made the truth plainer and more effective, but to the unreceptive and unbelieving it did not provide any illumination.

Our Lord analyzed His parable, point by point, and gave to each symbol its own significance. While He did not identify the sower, he was a type of Christ during His earthly ministry, and also of all of Christ's servants down through the centuries who have been faithful in the sowing of the good seed of the Word of God. This Word is to be sown in the hearts of men wherever they dwell, without reference to their character or condition. The Word of God has been committed to our trust in order that we may share it with all who have never received it. Truly, it is a marvelous privilege and a tremendous responsibility to be a preacher or a teacher of the Word. Let us proclaim it far and wide, doing our best to give all an opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ. We owe the Word of God to all men everywhere. It has not been given to us simply to enjoy or to hoard, but it has been committed to us for proclamation to others.

The sower is the person who scatters the seed, which is the Word of God. The soil represents human hearts. The character of the hearer determines the effect of the Word upon him. The results of the sowing of the gospel seed always and everywhere depend on the condition of the hearts of those to whom it is presented. That which one receives from the Word depends on what he first brings to the Word.

As Christ faced His audience on the seashore to whom He delivered this parable, He clearly discerned four distinct classes of hearers or kinds of soil.

I. The Wayside.

The fields in Palestine were usually without fences, so paths were frequently made across them. The pathways were trodden down solid under the feet of men and the hoofs of animals. As the sower scattered his seed some of it fell on these hard pathways. The seeds were not able to penetrate the soil, find lodgment therein, germinate, root, and grow. The fact that the seed lay on top of this hard surface was not the fault of either the sower or the seed.

In any congregation you will find a number of "wayside" people. For them every question has been settled, so they do not want to be disturbed by any fresh ideas or new growth. There are those who are self-righteous and spiritually complacent. They never realize that the sermon is for them. They are thinking of the sins of somebody else and hoping that the preacher will "pour it on 'em." We talk about "hardened sinners," but "hardened church members" are a lot harder.

The hearts of some are hardened by bitter disappointment. Maybe some prayer was not answered as they expected and they have become embittered. By habitual thinking, self-righteousness, disappointment, and in many other ways our hearts become hardened. Each refusal to heed the call or command of God adds to the hardening crust around a heart.

Since there was no loose soil to cover the seed which fell by the wayside, soon after the sower's back was turned the birds picked them up and devoured them. Therefore, the sowing was to no avail. With the world having rolled its heavy wheels over the thinking of many, their hearts are like that when they listen to the preaching of God's Word. How difficult it is to get beneath the surface of the person whose life has been a highway for every sort of thing! The wayside soil represents those who simply hear the Word, and remain utterly indifferent to it, the hard-hearted hearers upon whom no impression is made. These indifferent hearers of the gospel are characterized by an utter religious insensibility. They do not experience any anxieties of conscience, any fear of condemnation, or any desire for salvation.

There were those present that day on whom the message of Christ was utterly wasted. They may have heard it with their minds wandering fruitlessly in every direction. They heard His words but did not take them in. Their souls were impenetrable to the truth because of the traffic over them of so many different things. How fatal it is to face the appeal of the gospel repeatedly without ever taking it seriously! No wonder the Saviour sought to arrest people with the solemn warning, "Take heed how you hear." What a pity when the preached Word does not find an entrance and Satan and his emissaries steal it away, as the birds pick up the seed from the hard path! Satan snatches away the Word from the hearts of the lost, lest believing it they should be saved. Satan takes away the Word by causing forgetfulness of it, or he prevents its reception by creating prejudices against it, or by getting the mind occupied with other things. His greatest desire too is to prevent people from believing the Word, accepting Christ and being saved. He is satisfied when the lost reject Christ's offers just like a tile roof throws off hail. The fact that the seed was trodden down indicates contempt for it. They who carelessly hear the Word, in reality, despise it, and hold it in contempt. They who reject the Word, in effect, trample it under their feet.

Wayside hearers are those who hear the message of Christ but do not admit His words. What a pity when the preached Word does not find an entrance and Satan and his emissaries steal it away, as the birds pick up the seed from the solid ground. Satan's greatest desire is to prevent people from believing the Word of God, accepting Christ, and being saved.

II. The Stony.

Much of the land in Palestine was and is extremely rocky. The seed which fell on rock which was covered with a thin layer of earth sprouted quickly, but, due to the shallowness of the soil, the sprout soon withered under the heat of the sun. Likewise, shallow hearers listen to the Word of God with joy, are carried away with emotional enthusiasm, allow their feelings to gush, get very enthusiastic and excited about their religion, but do not have any staying power. They are impulsive, emotional, and unstable.

Christ said that there are many "stony soil" people in their religious lives. Many make a quick response to the appeals of Christ. They dash forward during an invitation song and say gushingly, "Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest." Their interest is easily enlisted; their feelings are touched quickly. They become eager enthusiasts, but they are as quick to quit as they are to start. They are shallow and superficial. They seek to live in the realm of their emotions instead of their convictions. They listen to the voice of inclination rather than to the voice of duty. They are enthusiastic but shallow. They quickly become interested in almost any new fad or cause. When the newness is worn off, they take up something else. When the preacher says something that applies to their misconduct, they quit the church. When it is popular to be religious, they declare their faith, but, when criticism comes and pressure is brought to bear, they surrender it without a struggle.

Shallow, superficial, and emotional hearers are easily excited, but are always fickle. Shallow ponds are easily stirred, but the great depths of the ocean are never moved easily. Those who are moved quickly and easily usually retreat just as rapidly from any stand they may take.

III. The Thorny.

Some seed fell "among thorns." The seeds of thorns, briars, and thistles lurked within the unclean soil. The seed easily penetrated this soil. It soon germinated and came up. The thorns came up also, drew the moisture and fertility from the soil, and absorbed them, shut out the light and the air, and ultimately suffocated the grain and prevented a harvest from the seed that had been sown.

The thorny-ground hearers are those who allow the affairs of this world to interfere with the growing of the proper crops. The thorns represent anxious care about the affairs of this present life. To these things the thorny-ground hearer gives unrelaxing attention; and, by them, he is absorbed and engrossed. Spiritual fruitfulness is prevented by the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life.

A man is often present at a worship service, but only in body. His mind is in his office, at his business, or in a place of amusement. He is planning, plotting, or playing, but he is not giving any heed to the Word that is being proclaimed, for his heart is far away. He does not care to have the precious seed enter his heart. Regardless of whether the preacher is presenting the matter of heaven or hell, life or death, love or hate, things that have to do with the present life or the one to come, this type of hearer is impervious, so the seed of the Word cannot enter. He is not gospel-hardened, but he is sin-hardened. Anything becomes a thorn if it dwarfs or crowds out something better.

IV. The Good.

The good soil was well broken up; it had good depth and moisture; it was cleansed of thorns and thistles; it was thoroughly prepared, and it brought forth fruit in varied

quantities. It was not hard as a footpath, so the seed entered; it was not shallow so the seed germinated and took root; it was not preoccupied, so the seed germinated, took root, sprang up and brought forth fruit in various degrees of fruitfulness, some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some one-hundred-fold.

The harvest came from the good soil. Only in the case of the good soil did the seed bear fruit. The heart of the fruitful Christian is not hardened by resistance, is not shallow, is not divided between love for God and love for the world, but it receives and cherishes the Word and brings forth fruit with patience. The measure of the fruitfulness which God's Word brings forth in the lives of His children is determined by their willingness to receive it and to permit it to work in their lives. The heart which is good soil is one which believes what God says, accepts God's will, walks in His ways, endures affliction for His sake, and awaits His recompense.

Some hearers were more fruitful than others, not because they had a greater capacity, but, because they gave hospitality to the message. There are certain qualities in fruitful hearers which should be cultivated by those of us who are God's children.

1. Attention.

The good hearer stirs himself up to listen. He trains himself to follow the speaker. He leaves other things behind. He has an open mind. He is an eager seeker after truth. When he hears the truth he does not let it go in one ear and out the other. He resolves to make the most of it.

2. Meditation.

Meditation is to hearing what digestion is to eating: it assimilates what we hear for our edification and growth in grace. But, alas! meditation as a Christian exercise is rapidly disappearing from among us.

3. Obedience.

The fruitful hearer accepts the Word which he hears, appropriates it, and appreciates it. As one puts his faith into practice it becomes fuller and richer.

4. Fruitfulness.

The honest hearer will bring forth fruit in the form of an unselfish and gentle disposition of good works, and of a useful Christian life.

I can hold a grain of corn in my hand and then place it in the ground. Soon the life in that seed bursts forth and a green shoot appears. Gradually the stalk grows and at the proper time the ear of corn develops. Then comes the harvest.

Far more wonderful is how the Word of God takes lodgment in some hearts. It grows and gradually takes possession of our desires, emotions, thoughts, and actions. And little by little our lives become happy, fruitful, and Christlike. What a joyous privilege!

Our task as Christians is to listen to what God says, obey Him, sow the seed of the Word of God in good soil, leaving the results with Him Who thoroughly understands the secrets of growth. If we are faithful in sowing the proper seed, we can be assured of a good harvest, for His Word shall not return unto Him void. Every person must take heed as to how he hears the Word of God, and how he responds thereto, for it is a certainty that he must render an account for his response to Christ.

Christ strongly emphasized that the manner in which His hearers reacted or responded to His Word was of tremendous importance. He made it clear that only those who responded in the proper manner could rightfully expect to receive additional spiritual blessings. Your response to the teachings of Christ will determine your happiness and your usefulness in life.