

Faithful Hearers

Luke 8:4-15 (ESV)

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of God for today is the parable of the sower and its explanation from Luke chapter 8.

Let us pray:

O Lord, implant your Word in us that, with good and honest hearts, we may keep it and bring forth the fruits of faith. Amen.

There was something special about waiting in hurried anticipation to see the fruit of your labors. Maybe you remember yourself, or you have the pleasure to see it in your own: to see children be their own sower, to see them wonder at God's creation and how he has ordered plants to grow. There was joy and excitement if your experiment succeeded, if your plant budded and grew. Maybe, there was sadness and disappointment if your plant-growing skills met their match. So we can certainly sympathize with the plight of the sower. We can rejoice when our labor produces what we hoped. We can mourn when all of our work has nothing to show for it. Yet, the Gospel for today treats a much more serious matter than whether or not our gardens succeed, or even if a farmer received a good enough crop for the year. The parable our Lord Jesus spoke to the crowds treats a matter of eternal weight and significance. It treats the salvation of human souls. The joy or pain of growing your plant only lasts for a time. The difference, in the parable of the sower, between those fields which failed to produce fruit and the one field which did, meant the difference between eternal death and eternal life. So, you should act as the disciples. When they were confronted with the mysteries of God's reign presented as a simple story of a sower, they earnestly asked Jesus, "What does this mean?" And they learned from the Lord:

GOD REQUIRES A FAITHFUL LISTENER.

If God requires you to be a faithful listener, then he needs to be speaking. That is exactly what we find in Jesus' parable. Our Lord says, "**A sower went out to sow his seed.**" The Lord does his duty day after day, covering the land with his word. Just as a farmer is diligent to cover as much of his field with crops to be grown, our God makes sure that every opportunity is taken to spread his word across creation. The word is sown here, and there, and everywhere; day in and day out. As the sower plants his seed, looking forward to the future harvest, so does the Lord. Now is the season of sowing. Now is the time for the Word of God to be placed across all creation. Then comes the

time of the harvest. Then comes the expectation of his labor. As the sower expects to find grown plants and much fruit, so God expects to find people who fear, love, and trust in him above all things. He expects to find those who believe his promise of eternal life and want to suffer all in order to keep it. He desires a people that belong to him and are devoted to him.

And that is exactly what we find in the story of the Gospel reading. There is more here than just the parable and its meaning. There are also the reactions and interactions between Jesus, his disciples, and the crowds. We find our Lord Jesus doing the same work the sower is described as doing. Jesus “**went through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.**” At a certain point even a great crowd gathered in front of him. As a warning and a direction for the crowd, our Lord Jesus presents them this parable of the four different fields. He is very willing to continue to teach them about the kingdom of God. Just as the sower delights in seeing as much produce as possible, so Jesus enjoyed the occasion for teaching this great number of people. Yet, our Lord knows there will be obstacles for some of these listeners. He knows only a few will treasure his word and hold it fast.

This is the warning our Lord teaches with his simple story. While he wants all listeners to be faithful, there are many obstacles for someone to receive God’s word. In his story of the sower, the three obstacles for a seed to produce fruit are falling upon the road, growing on a rock, and growing in the midst of thorns.

The first obstacle is the seed which fell on the road: “**And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.**” This seed was never going to find a good home on that path. There was no care taken that it should fall into a good place for the seed to grow. The seed was an afterthought. And because it was an afterthought, the birds could come and gain an easy meal. The field of the fallen on the path is the obstacle of carelessness. The person who heard the Word of God certainly had the chance to hear and to listen. Yet, he couldn’t be bothered to make sure the seed landed on good ground or not be taken away by the birds. Yes, the obstacle of carelessness is tough. One might tell himself that he did what he was supposed to. He checked off the list: go to church. Then he can wash his hands of the matter and say that he is innocent. Yet, our Lord says, “That is not enough.” Those who think and act that way have the Word of God quickly taken away from them, and they never understand it, and so have no basis for their faith. So, dear Christian, take great care not to be a forgetful listener.

The second obstacle is the seed growing upon the rock: “**And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture**”. This seed finds a home for at least a little while. It had enough of a place to grow, if the conditions were perfect. Yet, the moment this plant on the rock met the long days under the sun, then there was not enough moisture to sustain it. Without a good, deep root, the plant withered into destruction. Our Lord says these are the listeners who do receive the Word of God, but only for a time. They receive the Word of God with joy, yet the

feelings don't continue. This is the obstacle of testing. One might realize that he just doesn't have the same desires to read or listen to God's word anymore. Sure, it was great at the beginning. His heart was confident and enthusiastic for listening to the sermon or reading his bible at home, but it just doesn't feel that way anymore. Now it's a hassle to wake up early on a Sunday or to go through his daily devotions. Then he might have to face difficulty for holding on to the Word of God. Whether it's social expectations, familial obligations, or the fact that receiving the Word might need just that extra bit of effort, something gets in the way of holding on to the Word. Our Lord Jesus says, "It's not just enough that you loved God's word at the beginning, you must remain in it until the end." So, dear Christian, take great care not to be a fickle listener.

The last obstacle is the seed which grows in the midst of thorns: "**And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it**". This seed lands in good enough soil to grow. There was nothing to keep it from sprouting, like the well-trodden path or the birds scavenging for food. There was nothing to keep it from growing, like the lack of moisture. This seed was denied its fruit by what surrounded it. These thorns which choked out the seed were the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life. Because of these thorns, which compete with the seed when growing, the plant was never able to grow up and mature to the point of bearing fruit. This is the obstacle of priorities. One might know the importance of delighting in God's word. One might think he has made it a priority in his own life. One might truly wish to do God's will and listen faithfully. But, if you observe him, every other care and concern of this life takes priority over treasuring the Word of God. Every other care and concern is dealt with first, and then maybe later learning and understanding God's Word. Our Lord Jesus says, "God's word needs to take the priority. Other cares and concerns always come second." So, dear Christian, take great care not to be a fleshly listener.

So, what does a faithful listener look like? Our Lord says, "**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**". They who bear fruit and yield a hundredfold-produce are the ones who hold fast, they cling dearly, to the Word of God. They earnestly desire to understand and to believe Scripture. They last through the seasons of joy and of testing. They are able to make listening and understanding God's Word the priority in their lives. We have a simple example of this in the Gospel reading, of those who hold fast to God's Word. Even though many people were listening to our Lord Jesus, not all wanted to seek and inquire what this word of the kingdom meant. Even though a great crowd listened to his illustration of the sower, only his few disciples came up to Jesus and asked, "What does this mean?" Only a few treasured that Word of Jesus and wanted to apply it to their lives and learn from it.

How do you make sure that you have an honest and good heart, that you hold fast to God's Word? This is a lifelong struggle as a child of God, as you face the battle between the flesh and the Spirit, as you seek to do God's good will. First, pray before and after you listen to God's Word. Before you read or listen to Scripture, pray that God

might open up your hearts and mind for understanding. After you have finished, ask that you might keep dearly this Word you have heard and might seek to believe what is taught and do what is commanded of you. If you would like some guidance on what to pray, open up your hymnal, and you can find prayers for what to say both before and after service. Second, make every opportunity to prepare and reflect on what you hear on Sunday morning. Repetition is the mother of learning. Sometimes it's hard to be able to reflect and learn when you only listen to a Bible text once in the week. Try to find some time before Sunday to read and think about the upcoming bible texts and then take some time after Sunday morning to read again and reflect. St. John's offers an opportunity every Wednesday evening to hear the upcoming Gospel text with a sermon explaining its meaning and significance. Keep your bulletin after the service so you and your family have a reference and can open up your Bible at home, re-reading the Bible texts and talking about what they mean. In this way, you can start to think about and understand God's Word throughout the whole week.

There are abundant promises to those who cling and delight in God's Word. The Scriptures give life to those who seek it. They are more valuable than gold, the finest of gold. They are a solid rock and foundation for all who stand on them. They uplift the down-trodden soul and give joy to those who are hurting. They impart wisdom and understanding to the simple, greater than any teacher could. They are your inheritance and wealth. They are beautiful and a delight to the heart. They shine forth the beams of God's grace and favor. And they are always there, ready for you. Pick up and read. Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.