

# They who have ears... let them hear

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[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. Well, if you've put your Bibles down, please do take them up again and turn back to Luke chapter 8. A little while ago, I was down in London for a conference and was staying, quite fortunately, it was a nice place, right next to the BBC headquarters for a couple of nights.

As you walk into Old Broadcasting House, that's the beautiful bit made from lovely old stone rather than all the steel and glass. You're greeted by a statue called the Sower. And it depicts a farmer with a pouch around his waist scattering seed. And nearby, you'll find the following engraved message. This temple of the arts and muses is dedicated to Almighty God by the first governors of Broadcasting House in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being Director General. It is their prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house, and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness. Now, that is a lovely thing to hear. It's a breath of fresh air, isn't it? To hear God's name called upon by the media and in public.

[ 1 : 29 ] But the problem with that is I think it contains a fundamental misunderstanding both of humanity and of the meaning of this parable. of humanity because the mantra seems to be that if the message is right, if the seed is good, then people are just automatically attracted to whatever is good and beautiful and right, rather than things that media have discovered people are attracted to, which is the sensational and the juicy.

They think that if the seed is right, then the people will prosper, peace will reign if the seed is good. They want so good seed because people will naturally incline their ears to whatever is good and beautiful.

But the thing is, we're not like that. We need more than a good message. You need a good message that is both heard and felt. In the parable, the seed that lands on the path is the same seed that landed in good soil.

The sower doesn't have four pouches and he's casting bad seed around three quarters of the time. Now, all the seed is good, but not all the seed grows. Well, as we consider that, today we'll look at this passage under three headings.

Sowing, growing and reaping. And as we look at sowing, what a strange method of sowing this farmer has.

[ 2 : 59 ] He scatters seed every which way. There's not an efficient way of sowing seed. And what a strange method of teaching Jesus has.

I mean, what would you have made of this story if you were there? If you're somewhere on the shore of the Lake of Galilee, or perhaps you've walked down from one of the many towns nearby. Luke tells us that people were coming from all over. A great crowd gathers around. You've heard the stories. This man can heal. This man can send demons out.

Some of the women gathered around bear testimony to that. And so you gather with everyone else to hear him. And he begins, A farmer went out to sow his seed. And what follows is a straightforward agricultural account of a sowing that mostly goes wrong.

Seed eaten by birds. Seed scorched by the sun. Seed choked by weeds. Before, a very reasonable return on the portion that happened to land on decent soil. And then he says, almost as an aside, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

[ 4 : 10 ] And apparently that's that. You'd walk away, most likely I think, With a vague impression that Jesus was encouraging perseverance.

A kind of first century motivational speech for short holders. And you'd have understood almost nothing of what had actually just happened. Because what Jesus has just done there in that

deceptively plain agricultural story, In that crowd gathered from all over, Was simultaneously extraordinarily generous.

And very severe. He's spoken in a way that will illuminate everything for some. And explain nothing to others. He's sown his word like seed indiscriminately, extravagantly, Without apparent concern for where it lands.

Knowing that for most of those listening, it will not take root. Now we'll be looking at a number of parables in this series. And this isn't the first parable Luke tells. But we've started with this one. Because it raises the question of why Jesus speaks like this. Why does Jesus teach in parables? There are several answers we might give. We might say that Jesus used them for illustrative purposes.

[ 5 : 28 ] Their allegories and illustrations. Or perhaps Jesus wanted to leave things a little bit open-ended. To give room for interpretation. So that people like myself could add or incorporate their own wisdom into his teachings.

But Jesus gives his own answer here. Quoting Isaiah. He speaks in parables. So that seeing they may not see. And hearing they may not understand.

And on the screen you'll see these two sub-points here. Jesus speaks in order to deafen. And he speaks in order to be heard. We see this elsewhere.

In the book of 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. Paul says that God sends a strong delusion to the wicked who are perishing. So that they will believe falsehood.

So that those who had not believed the truth but found pleasure in unrighteousness would be condemned. People perish because they refuse to love the truth and be saved.

[ 6 : 30 ] So God sends them a strong delusion so that they might instead believe what is false. They love lies and hate truth. So God then imposes their final judgment back through time as it were.

And then hides the truth that they have rejected from their eyes. Here we see human responsibility and divine sovereignty working completely in tandem to bring about judgment. This is a hard teaching.

Jesus speaks in parables because they blind, deafen and harden. And yet Jesus, like any sane person, also does speak in order to be understood.

If I were to walk into this room and say, Prati Afrikaans? Hable Espanol? Or Manu Oleganda? Do you speak English? That's the one. No one responded to any of them. Am I speaking when I ask that question to be understood or not to be understood?

[ 7 : 38 ] I'm speaking in a way that's unintelligible except to those who have ears to hear. But I'm speaking perfectly clear. Well, not perfectly clearly.

My Luganda is over a decade old now. But fairly clearly. And in fact, Jesus speaks so as to reveal unfathomable truths to those who are listening.

If you read on in Luke, we'll see in verse 17 that he will make manifest. He will clearly reveal things that are hidden. And one of those hidden things that we'll see as we go through Luke via the parables is that the Savior had to die in order to carry out his work.

Jesus is a Savior, but only to those who hear. Jesus is a Savior who must die. We couldn't have possibly discovered those things. They've been revealed to us.

And so, as Jesus sows, he sifts between his hearers, speaking in parables as a preliminary act of judgment to reveal and to hide.

[ 8 : 46 ] And these things happen simultaneously because, like 2 Thessalonians told us, some who hear the truth will instantly hate it. And that is why, throughout all the Gospels, you'll so often see that Jesus saves his hardest teachings for his biggest crowds.

Crowds are very curious, odd things. Easy to steer, easy to manipulate. One that comes to mind for me is in John chapter 6, which we'll see in the next series, I imagine.

And his followers come en masse wanting to crown Jesus king. And he says to them, eat my flesh, drink my blood. Those who would march to crown him, he tells, must rather exult in his death.

And they desert him there and then. Jesus could have whipped up this large crowd desperate for an event. He could have done a couple of miracles, maybe some healings to get people on side, maybe something a bit more showy, and then let's go march on the Roman garrison.

Crowd euphoria is a strange, shallow, and fleeting phenomenon. I mean, just think of all the various protests and marches we've seen over the past few years. Jesus wants no part in that kind of

behavior.

[10:07] And so he speaks in parables, so that seeing people might not see, and hearing they might not understand. Do you see what he's doing?

Jesus knows that not everyone who's following him is actually following him. So where you or I might enjoy the attention and pander to the crowd, Jesus instead delivers a truly hard teaching, because those who can't accept Jesus' hardest teachings can't accept Jesus.

He has no desire to take advantage of frenzy. He's not interested in people who are just coming along for the ride. He wants honest hearers, so he sits. He tells a frankly, a little dull, agricultural story.

People have come from miles and miles around, gathered from town after town, Luke says. And Jesus goes, a man went out to sow his seed. Is he even taking his following seriously?

All these people are in front of him. Imagine, this is perhaps a little silly, but imagine if at this year's International Climate Conference in Turkey, Keir Starmer stood up to represent the UK's position and told this story.

[11:28] A young Swede went out to reduce the world's CO2 emissions. Some ignored her. Some were excited by her message. But as the financial repercussions came in, they quickly gave up.

Others resolved to bring down their emissions, but could not give up their annual lads' flight to Magaluf or the dual-exhaust frat boy cars. Others kept going and managed to reduce their carbon footprint.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Well, people, for a start, would be very perplexed, and I imagine quite furious, would they not? This is just trite waffle.

Surely they want their problems, the problems that they've all gathered for, dealt with. That's not what they've come for. And that is precisely why Jesus speaks in parables, to reveal what people have come for.

Whether they've come to him for him, or whether to cure this or that ill, or help with this particular big issue that they have, whether that's Roman occupation or disease or whatever it is.

[12:41] Why are you here today? Do you always come? Is that why? Do you feel you ought to? Is it to take your mind off trouble at home? Maybe you're lonely.

This is an attractive solution. Listen, all of these things are valid in part, certainly. But Jesus loves you, and he longs to feed you. But are you hungry for him?

Or do you just want him to make your various problems go away? He's whittling down the crowd to those who are interested in him, to those who are hungry for his words of eternal life.

So now let's get on to the four heroes of the word, who, between them, will represent the different purposes of Jesus speaking in parables. You'll see on the screen the list of different heroes.

I've called them the dispossessed, the discouraged, the distracted, and the disciplined. And each of these, by the way, can represent two states, both the immediate and the eventual.

[13:46] That is to say, if you recognize yourself in any of the initial three groups, that doesn't mean that that is your destination or your destiny. In fact, that's the precise point of the parable.

If you look down to verse 18, Jesus says a few verses on, watch how you hear. This is a warning. There are perhaps people here right now who are receiving this message, and it's just going in one ear out the other.

There are perhaps people sitting here who are beginning to truly hear, for the first time, what the Savior is saying. Well, let's come firstly, rather soberly, to the dispossessed.

That is, those who hear the word and the devil immediately snatches it away from them. Those who've heard the gospel and it's done zilch for them, not affected them in any way. Now, maybe you have friends who've responded like this.

Perhaps you've taken, I've had this experience many times, where you've taken someone to an evangelistic talk, and the speaker's given what you thought was a brilliant, clear, attractive, persuasive gospel message.

[14:53] And when you turn to your friend to try and talk to them about it at the end, you say, what do you think? And they say, yeah, he seems nice. Well, I'm sure he is, but that's not really why I brought you here, to hear a nice man speak.

Yes, they were brilliant, but did you hear the gospel? Did you catch that? No, because the seed was stolen. And listen, I'm going to keep adding this caveat as we go through, but hear me say it now.

There are initial reactions, and there are final reactions. If you're son, daughter, father, mother, sister, friend, whoever, if they respond like that, then keep sowing.

I used to work alongside Christians Against Poverty when I was over in Cote Bridge, and at one point I was sent for a training conference, and a few minutes after I arrived, someone put their hand on my shoulder and said my name.

And it was a guy who I'd known for one week, about a decade before, on a Christian camp. He'd been brought along by a friend, and had been, frankly, disruptive, arrogant, and cynical during the Bible studies, and left decidedly not a Christian.

[16:00] He then went to university. People sowed over that same ground, and the devil did not steal away the word. And I spent two days then being taught by this young man who is now heading up a branch of an evangelistic organization.

This parable is not given to create an air of inevitability about evangelism. We just need to spout out the gospel that everyone wants, see how they react, and then we know what soil they are.

No. The image that comes to my mind is Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Where the squirrels are sorting through the nuts, and Veruca Salt is declared to be a bad nut and thrown away. No, that's not at all what's going on here.

Each time you hear God's word is not a final judgment. But God's word always does sift, cuts, challenges. This parable isn't really about how to do evangelism, though there's plenty to be gleaned from that perspective.

It's about listeners, about hearers, about us guys here week in, week out at church. The devil steals it away from these guys.

[17:07] Why? So that they may not believe and be saved. But Jesus says, watch how you hear. Grasp the seed that is sown, and you will indeed be saved.

Well, next we have the discouraged. Those who truly heard the good news and recognized that it was beautiful. That the trials and sorrows of life were too much, and they abandoned their gladness in the gospel, switching it for despair.

And here we have to add another caveat. Jesus' message is not that we are passive in this, and that we just kind of wait to find out what soil we are.

The message is not that if you find yourself suffering, oh no, you must therefore be rocky ground.

No, not at all. Watch how you hear, says Jesus. When you experience trials and pain and suffering, watch how you hear.

Don't be rocky ground. There's nothing inevitable about it. When life overwhelms, come closer to Jesus so that you can hear what he's saying.

[18:17] Wasn't it wonderful to hear such a powerful example of that from Hajin earlier in the service? Isn't that an encouragement? Press in towards God when life seems overwhelming.

Grasp the seed. It will not be robbed from you. Do not see your suffering. Just count yourself rocky. Take it in. Watch how you listen. The gospel is a balm for sadness.

So hear it. Let's move on. This third one is a common soil, especially for the younger Christian.

Well, the roots can go down in this soil.

Roots for the gospel and roots for absolutely everything else. Enthusiasm is rife. Enthusiasm is rife, but there's always something that can give some more instant joy or some extra excitement.

These are the distracted. Before long, your love for Jesus is competing with all manner of other desires. And again, this isn't about circumstance or personality type.

[19:21] This doesn't mean if you're an endogram type 7 or ESTP. I don't really speak the language. Whatever it is. Then you're weedy soil. What does it mean? It means take care how you hear.

It's not a parable about some who hear and some who don't. It's a parable about four groups of people, all of whom hear, but only some of whom keep listening.

What is it, by the way, that sets this fourth group aside from the others, the disciples? What makes them so special? Is it that they are just particularly intelligent, particularly holy, particularly wise?

I think the key to this is in verse 9. This isn't the privileged elite who are able to figure it out. Look at verse 9.

His disciples asked him what this parable meant. These are the people who stay close to Jesus, who have an abiding hunger to keep listening.

[ 20 : 26 ] They go to the source and they ask him for truth. Yes, Jesus speaks in parables, so those who are at bad soil will not understand. But he speaks with the full intention of being understood.

Just like a school teacher might sometimes lower their voice and speak very softly, very quietly, in order to keep the attention of the class.

Those who want to hear will lean forward and, as a result, be more attentive, more engaged. But just as there will be some who lean in, there will be plenty who just lean back and decide they can't be bothered.

The teacher's voice will drone on within range of hearing, but out of range of caring. It is so easy to hear and yet not to hear.

And the purpose of the parables is to sift. Jesus' teaching is itself an act of judgment, whereby we find ourselves either hardened to the gospel or drawn to the gospel.

[ 21 : 28 ] He sifts his followers by telling these parables. And so, as we look at our fourth group, the disciples, helpfully enacted by the disciples, what sets them apart?

It's not that they could understand what Jesus meant on their own. If you struggle to understand this parable, that doesn't mean you're bad soil. No, they weren't set apart by their inherent understanding.

The opposite is true. They have no idea what it means. So, if you're reading God's word and you don't know what he's saying and you can't make head or tail of it, just press in.

It wasn't enough for them to be amongst the masses and just go, I heard Jesus speak and it was amazing. No, they wanted meat. They wanted understanding. The disciples came out of the crowd and thought, I want to know what God's actually saying to me here.

I want to dwell on his teaching. I want to think about it. I want to know what it means. This parable is about whenever the word of God is spoken or read. It refers directly to us in this room.

[ 22 : 36 ] Some who may be hearing not at all. Some who perhaps couldn't listen beyond the revelation that Jesus is actively hiding his message from some people. There's an obvious danger when we come to God's word that we will fail to hear the living God speak and merely have an encounter with our own thoughts and desires as they just bounce off the page back at us.

Perhaps an agenda that we find ourselves projecting onto every passage of scripture. I know how easily done that is. And I think for many, this is why personal Bible reading can become dull and lifeless.

You see, my anxieties and desires, so relevant though they are, just as Jesus cares deeply for them, they are not nearly so important and interesting as what the living God has to say to me.

Oh, he has a balm for all troubles and wisdom for all situations. But if we make our current issues the central point of what Jesus is saying, then the word will not take root.

Ask him what he is saying. It's only when we listen carefully to God's word that we are addressed by the living God. For what God said then in the Bible, he continues to say by his Holy Spirit through the scriptures now.

[ 24 : 05 ] There is no substitute for hearing the living God address us through his living and active word. C.S. Lewis in his book, *Miracles*, has this wonderful passage where he describes the feeling of realizing the nature of God's word.

He says, Look out, we cry, it's alive. And therefore it is this very point at which so many draw back, he says.

I would have done so myself if I could and then proceeded no further with Christianity. An impersonal God? Well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness inside our own heads, better still.

A formless life force surging through us, a vast power into which we can tap, best of all. But God himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the fishing line, perhaps approaching us at infinite speed.

The hunter, king, husband, that is quite another matter. There comes a moment, he continues, where the children who've been playing at burglars hush suddenly.

[ 25 : 25 ] Was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really have found him. We never meant it to come to that.

Worse still, supposing he has found us. Well that is what his word does. His word is alive and his word binds us. It is living and active.

And that is how his true disciples react, even when understanding is lacking. In John 6, which I mentioned earlier, many of Jesus' followers leave him because of that hard teaching.

But his disciples, what do they say? Well where would we go? We can't leave you. You have the words of life. Or here, lacking understanding, they go to him.

Where else would you go? What does this parable mean, they ask? What a wonderful childlike question. By asking it, we're saying, Jesus, you're the Lord.

[ 26 : 30 ] You are saying something important to us. You are speaking to us in this room. You're speaking to us as I read my Bible. As I listen to the preaching at church.

As I engage in small group. But what are you saying, Lord? What is it? What does it mean? Tell me, Lord, what are you like? Lord, what have you done in Christ?

What are you going to do in Christ? Tell me how I should think and live at work, at home, the whole of life. Tell me, Lord, your words are life.

What do they mean? Because the point of the parable is that people would understand. Like the teacher who spoke with a quiet voice so that students would lean in and pay attention, the parable will cause those who do not listen not to understand.

But to those who do, great, unfathomable mysteries will be unraveled. To the one who has, more will be given, Jesus says. The great mysteries of the universe, things that angels long to hear, says Paul.

[ 27 : 43 ] Keep on hearing. We will hear about them. And so, having seen this time of sowing and this time of growing, let's come now very quickly to our final point, to the time of reaping.

I dabbled with the idea of calling at the time of hoeing to complete the rhyme pattern. But of course, that meaning is not quite in line because Christ's followers are not merely dug up, are they? They visibly grow before they are harvested.

Yet the depth and quality of that growth will only be fully realized at the final phase. The final judgment, the time of reaping. When the Messiah will return at the end of the ages to harvest an astonishing hundredfold return.

The multitude of those gathered in from every tribe and tongue and nation will be too great for anyone to number. Revelation 22, John records this.

He says, Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.

[ 28 : 59 ] And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him.

They will see his face. His name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun.

Maybe you've been waiting for the right moment or the right words or to learn a better method of telling the gospel. Well, there are ways that we can help, but there is no better method.

There's only the seed of the gospel. Scatter it. Tell the gospel. Tell it to yourself. Tell it to those you love who don't know God and to those who do. When we speak the words of Jesus, we're not sowing, he is.

His word is living and active and the crop he yields from that seed will be great. Lord God, your word has gone out and you have promised that it will not return empty.

[ 30 : 36 ] Lord, when your word confuses us, help us to have the humility to ask what it means. Like the disciples. When life confounds us, help us to press in.

When distractions tug at our sleeve and beckon us away from the path of righteousness, help us to press on towards the goal. To that great gathering of multitudes.

May we be counted among them, Lord, as the whole earth sings, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

Amen.