

# **LISTENING AND HEARING**

[NCTM study]

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**STUDY ONE:** Mark 4: 1-20

## **ARE YOU LISTENING?**

This study is an overview of a well-known parable told by Jesus. Such accounts are called parables of the kingdom. Parables are part of ancient literature including the O.T., but the ones by Jesus are unique. They are a form of speech meant to express or illustrate a point by the originator, but they are not meant to convey information in an attractive manner. They have a variety of functions and often are meant to shake their audience, to wake them out of spiritual stupor, so that they see things from a different viewpoint. True parables are based on everyday life and therefore from the world in which Jesus lived so as to relate a spiritual truth. Most of the parables are in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, whereas Mark contains six. The disciples did not always understand the parables of Jesus, so he gave an interpretation of some of them. Sometimes they remained perplexed for it was not until the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost that they realised that Jesus was Messiah.

The account we are studying seems to have been hidden in its meaning, but the background in 3: 22 and the account to that continues to verse 30 sheds light on the opposition to Jesus by the teachers of the law. The parables are not necessarily meant to bring light and salvation. Mark 4: 12 contains the point of consequence; eg. Matthew 13: 13 & 14-17 and Isaiah 6: 9-10. These parables may harden the unbeliever as Isaiah prophesied regarding preaching the Word of God. Anyone who fails to understand the identity of Jesus Christ, who He is as God's Son come in flesh to die and rise, will fail to understand His parables; Mark 4: 11.

The gospels are not biographies and this one, by Mark, is understood as an interpretation of Peter's account. It reads as a rapid, strongly descriptive action account with the stories linked by key words; eg. The word *immediately* is used 37 times.

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**Are you listening?** --- Smorgasbord compared with a formal meal. --- Smorgasbord theologies of take your pick to suit your taste have left the impression that we command Christ; that we decide what we want to believe as Christians; whereas He commands us. He is the authority in the midst of confusion. He is the King of the Kingdom of God who has broken into the world. --- He makes claims upon our lives and insists on obedience for He is Lord as well as King.

Jesus begins a sustained period of teaching and stresses through the story of the sower the critical issue of carefully listening. His words sketch the character of lives into which the seed of His word is sown. – Here is a parable which is truth in pictorial form. To those who have ears to hear the truth is plain. To those who are not people of faith, the truth is hidden within the parable. --- His Word is DYNAMIC & DISCERNING.

**Verse 1** describes the scene by the lake but the chapter begins with the significant word, *again*, that suggests another episode in His teaching. Being in the boat served as a vantage point from which to teach and *sitting* was the normal position for a teacher. **Verse 2**, *He taught them many things by parables*, and this segment is one such occasion of instruction and here He called for attentive listening. **Are you listening?** The large crowd would immediately relate to his description of the farmer; **Verse 3** *Listen ...* etc.

### 1. HARD.

**Verse 4**. ---The path was exposed to traffic. People and animals walked there, for it was like our footpath; and became hard like concrete; so the seed could not penetrate. Jesus is not referring to those who never hear His word, but to people who do hear. The hard heart belongs to the person whose heart cannot be penetrated because it is exposed to a variety of traffic and the mind and attitude sets like concrete. The picture of the birds eating the seed is not referring to a lack of understanding, but the work of other forces that destroy the divine seed and prevent it germinating; Satan takes away the Word because of our hardness; **verse 15**.

The religious leaders and Pharisees! -- Religious, ho hum!! The position of the footpath in this parable is significant. It is not on the farmer's path for sowing, but the place for spectators. The seed was sown in broadcast

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fashion, and sowing proceeded ploughing. If the ploughing was delayed, the consequences described here occurred.

Some of us may be like that; spectators who have withdrawn from the reception of God's word. We may attend church and study groups, be prepared to observe and comment, but not receive and participate. Occasionally the seed of the Word falls upon your life but Satan is quick to snatch it away and you let him. In every one of us there are thought forces that seek to dominate and make a claim on our lives. We frequently face the danger of accepting saint anaesthesia!!

If you are an interested spectator, but have been determined to keep away from God speaking to your heart, then let His love break that barrier down. Change the determination of resistance into the determination of willingness to hear as never before. Let Him bring you from the sidelines into the area of His love and His purpose for your life.

## 2. SHALLOW.

**Verses 5 & 6.** The sun burnt the plants. The roots couldn't grow deep because of the small amount of soil. The first picture was stubborn resistance to the Word of God, the second is a superficial reception. In the first instance the seed could not get in; in the second it could not get down.

There can be an outward response to the Word with plenty of enthusiasm; then **verse 16**. This can describe the person who is involved in church work and demonstrates keenness, noise and activity, but it is all a cover up for a heart of stone just beneath the surface. Note **verse 17**.

Outwardly we say 'great service', 'tremendous message', 'thrilling music', 'exciting meeting', but beneath the surface we state, 'It's not going to affect me'. Shallow soil may not give that impression initially. It does not matter what the veneer is if it covers a stony heart. Unfortunately we can live our whole life at this level, going through the motions, deceiving and being deceived. Superficial Christianity becomes second nature for we know the churchy language, but never face the cost of discipleship. We may be ready for spiritual picnics, but ideas of pressing towards maturity in Christ are resisted.

### 3. MIXED.

**Verse 7** reveals that this seed does obtain a deep hold, but its enemies win. The seed goes in, goes down, but has no room. The rival crop of thorns was left undisturbed and became dominant. The good seed was strangled and the result was a wilderness.

This illustrates any life that begins with promise but does not last; **verses 18 & 19**. Like an overgrown garden, such a wilderness was not the result of cultivation, but neglect and concern focused on other matters; John 15: 4 & 5. When we get around TUIT.

Is your life in the wilderness? The Word of God comes to you but is choked through neglect, through giving priority to other matters that may be significant, but demand too much attention. There are always other things that cry out for our attention and some of them are urgent but not important; HARD, SHALLOW, MIXED.

### 4. OPEN

**Verse 8** shows that here the soil can get in, get down and find room. Luke, in his story, adds the thought of *persist* or *persevere*, 8: 15, until they bear fruit. The same sun that scorched the plants in shallow soil, ripens the grain in deep soil; **verse 20**. The impossible can come true for the Word is the same seed throughout the story.

An old story records the Company joke that was tried on every new engineer since the electric light was barely a gleam in Edison's brain. The novice engineer would be assigned the "impossible" task of frosting electric light bulbs on the inside. A new engineer at General Electric, Marvin Pipkin, was put through the usual routine. Not being aware it was a joke, he discovered a way, not only to frost bulbs on the inside, but also to etch the glass with soft, grounded pits to give the bulbs added strength, and effected a maximum diffusion of light.

Fortunately, no wise guy told the new employee that he had been assigned the impossible, so he went ahead and accomplished it (Executives Digest).

Some folk are weary and worn out with pressure, with daily events that severely test their faith. Family concerns that appear too much to handle. Work with people whose personalities grate on them. If we are open to

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His Word, receptive, eager, obedient, then listen to His voice and obey; *He/she who has ears to hear, let him/her hear*, **verse 9**. Therefore the responsibility to hear and understand is ours and we cannot blame anyone else for our lack of receiving and growing.

But notice that **verse 11** reminds us that the parables make clear and also conceal. Perception is God's gift to us. *The secret of the kingdom of God* is not revealed by our response but by revelation, and that is why it is a 'mystery'.

Wherever the seed is sown, that signifies that the Kingdom comes. Jesus describes four kinds of soil and four kinds of hearing. We need to beware of superficial hearing. The crowd would have understood the farming story but not the spiritual significance unless they heard in the Spirit. The teaching of Jesus is directed towards the spirit not the intellect.

**Verse 13** shows that the disciples should have understood this parable without needing an explanation. In **verse 14** the Word (logos) is the gospel and the sower is Christ. This is not a self help lesson, for through His death and resurrection Jesus has prepared the way for us to receive the seed, for it to grow and flourish. Responsibility to hear and accept the Word as the Spirit ministers rests upon us; receive it now.