

LISTENING: A HIGH CALLING

A Meditation on Mark 4:1-25

When Calvin Coolidge returned home from church, he was asked by his wife what the minister had talked about. Coolidge replied, “Sin.” When his wife pressed him as to what the minister had said about sin, Coolidge said, “I think he was against it.” Coolidge heard the message, but did he really hear it?

Mark 4:1-25 is all about listening. Jesus begins the parable of the soils in verse three with a one word imperative: “Listen!” When the parable is over Jesus says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (vs. 9, this is repeated in vs. 23). The clear indication is that not everybody has ears to hear. The chief exhortation of the passage is given in verse 24: “Consider carefully what you hear” (NIV).

The four different soils represent four different hearts. They all heard the Word, but they did not all hear it the same way, since the condition of your heart effects your hearing. The first heart was hard, and Satan came and stole the seed. It never penetrated the surface. The second heart was shallow. Although it initially responded with joy, it didn’t last because it lacked depth. The third heart was a divided heart, which was torn between the Word and the world. The enemies of this heart include worry, wealth and pleasures that choke the Word and make it unfruitful. The fourth heart was noble and good. This was the only heart that really heard the word and accepted it, and thus bore fruit—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.

Statistically this isn’t very encouraging. Most do not respond well to the preaching of the Word of God. One out of four? I don’t think this percentage is meant to be interpreted literally, but isn’t Jesus, at least, illustrating that there will be many different responses to the Word, with many of them being unfavorable? The picture is of a farmer sowing his seed indiscriminately hoping it will land on good soil, but three-fourths of it is wasted. Ministry can be discouraging.

However, before you get too discouraged with the harsh realities of ministry, take a closer look at the fourth soil. The good soil produces a crop thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. That’s an incredible harvest! The average crop in first century Palestine was three to seven times what was sown. The astonishing yield by the fourth soil was an obvious sign of God’s blessing. In Genesis 26:12 we read, “Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, *because the LORD blessed him*” (NIV).

Furthermore, we must stress that fruitfulness is no trivial matter to God. This is true for many reasons, but ultimately because it brings Him glory. Jesus said, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn. 15:8). To be indifferent to fruit bearing is to be indifferent to the glory of God, and to be indifferent to showing that we’re true disciples of Jesus Christ.

What happens to those who don’t produce fruit? The disturbing images may keep us awake at night. John the Baptist told the rebellious Pharisees and Sadducees to “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). He went on to say, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (vs. 10). The chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus was speaking about them when He said, “Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” (Matt. 21:43).

Many think preaching is a high calling. And it most certainly is. But listening is also a high calling. Just as a preacher will be held accountable for his preaching, so a listener will be held accountable for his listening. Jesus said to His disciples, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God...*Pay attention to what you hear...*For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Mk. 4:11, 24, 25).

How should we prepare ourselves to hear God’s Word each Lord’s Day? *Pray*, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps. 119:18). *Confess your sins*. Remember, the ability to listen is directly influenced by the condition of one’s heart. “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (Jam. 1:21). *Come with a Bible and a Berean spirit*. “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11, NIV). Finally, *apply what you hear*. The message has no value, no blessing, unless it is combined with faith and obedience (Heb. 4:2; Jam. 1:22-25).

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