

Understanding Jesus

Careful or Careless?

Luke 8:4-21

The first sermon I preached here at Faith was on July 17, 1988. We were meeting in a rented building that didn't have air conditioning. It was hot and I was nervous. Unfortunately I was wearing grey slacks, a dress shirt, and a tie. I started sweating before I even got up to preach. I never stopped sweating. I sweated through the knees on my grey slacks; there was sweat dripping off my tie. I can still remember the look on people's faces; they were just hoping I would live through that sermon. That sort of typified my goal for preaching the first few years: I wanted to survive until noon on Sundays.

The next few years my goal was to preach good sermons. . . maybe even a great sermon every now and then. And then a few years later, it occurred to me that the goal of my preaching should be for others to **hear the voice of God**. When I/we teach on Sunday mornings, we actually hope that God speaks to you through his Word.

So that's **MY** goal for preaching. But that doesn't guarantee that you will hear the voice of God. As you know, it's possible for two people to hear the same message and have very different responses. One person says, "As I listened to the message, God spoke to me this morning. He showed me something about my life I never understood before. And with God's help, I'm going to do something different as a result." The other person yawns and says, "Do the Chiefs kick off at noon or 2:30?"

It turns out that it not only matters how I preach; it matters just as much, if not more, **how you listen**. . . how you **hear** the Word of God. That's true here on Sunday mornings; it's also true when you read the Scriptures privately and individually, when you discuss the Scriptures in groups, and when you talk about it with friends.

That's what today's passage is all about: hearing the word of God. In several different ways Jesus is asking us, "**Are you careful or are you careless?**" in terms of how we hear God's word? If you are careful to hear God's word, you care what he says, what he thinks, what he wants. If somebody doesn't care what you say, they don't care about you. Jesus is telling us to be careful to hear God's word.

This implies that we are responsible for how we listen. We each need to "own" how we hear the word of God. This is true whether you've been a follower of Christ for a long time or whether you're considering all of this for the first time.

Luke 8:4-21 has four distinct paragraphs. First, Jesus tells the parable of the four soils to a large crowd. Second, he explains the parable of the four soils to his disciples privately. Third, he tells a parable about putting a lamp on a stand (not under a jar or under the bed). Fourth, Jesus talks about who comprises his true family. What is common to all four paragraphs is the issue, "**Are you careful or careless when you hear the word of God.**" This is the fifth sermon in our series "Understanding Jesus"

from Luke 7 & 8. Unless we're careful to hear the word of God we'll never understand who Jesus is and how he's at work in our lives.

Notice the context of Jesus' teaching in verse 4:

4 And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable,

Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the four soils. The parable, which is a story with a point, was about a farmer who threw out seeds that landed on four different types of soil. Three out four soils didn't produce a crop. If you're a farmer, that's a complete fail. But one type of soil yielded a huge crop. After telling this story, he challenged his hearers by saying:

8 . . . As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Not all of them could really hear what he was saying. But some **did** have "ears to hear"; some **were** teachable and receptive. To them, Jesus said, "Hear."

We see in verse 9 that his disciples didn't understand the meaning of the parable. And so they asked Jesus to explain. That's what disciples do. If you're really a disciple of Jesus and you don't understand something, you don't shrug your shoulders and say, "Whatever. . ." You ask and seek and knock.

9 And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, 10 he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'

Jesus tells his disciples that they were being given insights that others didn't get, namely, "the secrets [mysteries] of the kingdom of God." We think of a mystery (like a murder mystery) as something we can figure out if we think about it long enough. But the "mysteries of the kingdom" refers to things that were hidden and unknown, things that had to be revealed to be understood. Because they were his disciples, Jesus would explain to them the meaning of the parable which would give them insight into how God was establishing his kingdom on earth.

But others got parables because they were like the people of Israel in Isaiah's day eight centuries earlier. They had eyes and ears but they were unteachable, so they didn't hear and see what God wanted from them. It's not that they were begging God to teach them and he wouldn't; it's that God had been speaking every way imaginable but they weren't interested. That was true in Jesus' day as well.

In our day we don't have to decide who gets parables and who gets insider information. The mysteries of the kingdom are now an "open secret." The New Testament explains clearly how God is establishing his kingdom through Jesus who died for our sins and was raised from the dead.

Beginning in verse 11 Jesus explains the parable of the four soils.

11 Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.

The seed is the word of God - which is first and foremost the good news (or gospel) about Jesus; but the word of God is also the Scriptures more generally. Just as the seed is the same for all four soils, the word of God is the same for everybody who hears. There aren't different messages for different groups of people. What is different is the way people hear or don't hear the message.

See if any of these four soils describes you. *Don't be afraid to be honest* with yourself (and with God really). *Be afraid of not hearing the word of God and missing out on a relationship with him.* The first response to the gospel is described in verse 12:

12 The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

Jesus is describing what happens in the unseen spiritual world. Just like a bird might grab a seed and carry it away, "the devil comes and takes the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved." The devil is an incredibly intelligent, powerful spiritual being who hates God; his main objective is to keep people from knowing and loving God.

The fact that the devil takes away the word from their heart doesn't mean that the person has no responsibility for their unbelief. From a human point of view, this person just isn't interested in the gospel. Maybe it sounds too simplistic or too specific or just ludicrous that the death on a cross of someone who lived 2,000 years ago would have anything to do with their sins. Whatever the case, they unknowingly cooperate with the devil in rejecting the gospel. Maybe you are this soil . . . you've never given the gospel a fair hearing. If so, it's not too late.

The second response:

13 And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.

This person "believes for a while" and has an initial "joy" over the gospel. But there's a type of believing that's not true saving faith. When a time of testing comes (suffering, disappointments, etc.), this person gives up their faith. Throughout the New Testament, it is those who "persevere to the end" who are saved. Maybe you once received God's word with joy; you were eager to learn. But it's been a long time since you've really listened to God's word. If so, it's not too late.

The third response:

14 And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

Think of a care or burden that you're carrying right now - a relationship that's strained, uncertainty about the future, etc. That burden can either drive you toward God and his word, or it can consume you and crowd out God and his word. Riches and pleasures can either be enjoyed in appropriate ways; or they can become idols that replace God. This might be you: there's just no space in your mind and heart to hear God's word/voice; it's choked out by cares and riches and pleasures. If so, it's not too late.

The fourth response:

15 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.

This person has an honest and good heart; this person sincerely wants to hear God's voice. So when they hear the word, they hold onto it. They think about it and talk about it and treasure it in their hearts. Notice that they "bear fruit with patience." Farmers and gardeners don't expect to plant seeds one day and have a crop the next day or the next week. This person also understands that fruitfulness takes time.

Every single one of us can be this fourth soil IF AND ONLY IF we are careful to hear God's word.

My experience with hearing the word of God. I grew up going to church, but I didn't grow up hearing God's word. I had a superstitious attitude toward the Bible. A Sunday school teacher told us that if you have a stack of books and one of them is a Bible, the Bible better be on top. [What does that even mean?] Somehow I knew that I was supposed to read the Bible. My first year and a half in college, I was "running with the pack" - doing what everybody else was doing (partying, etc.). No matter what I'd been doing, I would come home at night and read a couple verses from the Bible. I had no idea what it meant and as far as I can tell, it did me absolutely no good.

When I was a sophomore in college I started hanging out with some guys who were serious about Jesus. I fell in love with Jesus through their lives. They explained how Jesus had died for my sins, and by believing I could have my sins forgiven. I put my faith in Christ and the biggest difference in my life was how I experienced the word of God. The Scriptures became nourishing and life-giving. Instead of being something I felt obligated to read, the word of God became something I couldn't get enough of. Trust me, my heart isn't perfectly good soil; there have been seasons where the word of God has largely been choked out or crowded out of my heart. But over the past 40+ years I've seen the word of God bear good fruit in my life.

This is the common experience of people who are careful to hear: they trust in Jesus and God begins writing his word on their hearts. When we hear God's word and hold it close, we have a deep, internal desire to live it out.

The last two paragraphs of today's passage reinforce the importance of being **careful how we hear God's word**. In verses 16-18 Jesus says that *those who are careful to hear receive more and more spiritual light/truth*.

16 "No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light.

If I came to your house I wouldn't find lamps in closets and under bed; you've got lamps on tables and hanging from the ceiling. Why? So you can see things - where to walk, where to sit, what you're eating, where you left your keys, etc. In the same way, Jesus came teaching the word of God so that people would see things, things that were previously hidden.

17 For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.

The mysteries of the kingdom that Jesus mentioned earlier (see verse 10) are now open secrets that are described in the New Testament.

But notice in verse 18 that a response is necessary: hearing (and believing).

18 Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."

If you're **careful to hear** the message about Jesus and believe it, your sins will be forgiven and you will begin a relationship with God himself. As you keep on hearing the word of God, you will be given more and more spiritual insight. Like good soil, you will bear more and more spiritual fruit. You will become more and more like Jesus himself and you will have more and more spiritual/personal influence in the lives of others (family, friends, coworkers, etc.). *If you are careful to hear, you receive more and more spiritual light/truth*.

If you're **careless about hearing** the message of Jesus, you will experience great loss. Jesus says that "even what you **think** you have" will be taken away. You'll be like the second and third soils which never produced a crop. *If you are careless in hearing, even the spiritual light you think you have will be lost*.

In verses 19-21 Jesus says that *those who are careful to hear become his family*.

19 Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. 20 And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you." 21 But he answered them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

Notice again how Jesus is still talking about **being careful to hear the word of God**; he hasn't changed topics. When you hear the word of God and commit yourself to do it

(i.e., live it out), you become family with Jesus. You have the closest possible relationship with him because you share his commitment to the word of God. Jesus said things like, “man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Mathew 4:4), and “My food is to do the will of [God]” (John 4:34).

You really cannot overstate the value of hearing God’s word. Over time it will change the way you think and feel and act.

An assignment that might be helpful in “Careful to Hear”: (for everybody in every spiritual condition . . . some of you will find this easy and others very difficult.

Have a conversation about “hearing God’s word” with someone you trust - family member, roommate, or friend; if you don’t know anyone who’d have this conversation with you, let us know and we’ll put you in touch with someone. Talk about your experience with hearing the gospel and the word of God in general.

- * ***What type of soil characterizes you right now? If it’s one of the first three, why is that the case?*** Be honest; there’s too much at stake to do anything else. Are you being careful or careless? If careless, what is keeping you from hearing God’s word? Sometimes naming what’s keeping you from hearing the word can break it’s power in your life.
- * ***What’s a simple plan for being more careful to hear God’s word?*** In every area of our lives that really matters, we make a plan and try to carry it out. You go to school to prepare for a career; you take music lessons; you join a gym or get a trainer to get in shape. If you really want to hear God’s word, you need to make a simple plan.
 - * Help each other identify and time and a place when you can hear God’s word each day or each week. . . the challenges of your schedule and your life
 - * The plan will be different for different people.

Are you careful or careless when it comes to the message about Jesus and God’s word?