

Why Some Receive

Mark 4:1-25 And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. ² Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: ³ "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ "And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. ⁵ "Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ "But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. ⁷ "And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ "But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." ⁹ And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" ¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ¹¹ And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, ¹² "so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.' " ¹³ And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ "The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ "And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. ¹⁶ "These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ "and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. ¹⁸ "Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ "and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰ "But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." ²¹ Also He said to them, "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand? ²² "For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light. ²³ "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." ²⁴ Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. ²⁵ "For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

Standing where I do most Sundays, I see something that many don't get to see. I see what preachers and teachers see when they teach the Bible. As I teach the Word of God, every Sunday I see visible expressions of responses to the Word of God. I see the ones who lap up the Word, seeing right through me, to get to the truth. They drink the Word in, and refuse distractions as they hang on to the Word. I see those whose expressions show they are just waiting the time out, trying to endure the time, and wishing it would be over. I see those who stifle yawns, who look at their watches, who gaze up at the passing birds and helicopters. I see those who spend the time absorbed with their children, or others' children, grinning at them, making faces at them, playing with them. I see those who cannot keep their eyes open for more than two minutes, and settle into a comfortable snooze as soon as they hear about five consecutive sentences. I see those who cannot sleep but cannot hide their contempt and disdain for the message, whose expressions show disgust at the thought of being preached at for nearly an hour. I see those who are experiencing the Word unwrapping their very inner motives and desires, and look amazed and nervous at the same time.

And while I know some of these responses are simply responses to me as a communicator, much of these are responses to the Word of God itself. The same message, the same seed is being dispersed over a congregation, and the responses are very different.

Ministering as I have in one place for several years, I get to see something else. I see the responses to the Word of God, over the long term. I see those who seem to take the Word and plug it into their lives as soon as they have heard it. I see those who seem to be excited about applying the Word one week, but by next week things are as they were. I see those who seem to remain in exactly the same place year after year – same habits, same problems, same idols, same attitudes, and same excuses.

It's a strange thing, and an amazing thing. When you first start out in ministry, it's one of the things that surprises you the most. You come into the ministry imagining that if you preach the pure Word of God, and try to communicate it effectively, that it will produce an overwhelmingly positive response 100% of the time. But that's not the case. In fact, it was not even the case for the prince of preachers – Jesus Christ.

Jesus was explaining this very phenomenon in giving the Parable of the Sower. He was explaining why He, as the very Word of God Himself, was not unanimously welcomed and received by Israel as Messiah and Son of God. How could the winds and the waves obey His voice, but people reject Him?

This parable aimed to explain it. In this parable, there is only one kind of sower – the results can't be blamed on the sower – whether it be Christ or a faithful preacher. There is only one kind of seed – the Word of God rightly interpreted. The first-century sower would walk along, dip his hand into a satchel, and throw handfuls of seed out.

What made the difference was not the preacher, not the message, but the ground it fell on. The soils represent different kinds of hearts, different kinds of people, who respond differently to the Word.

We saw last time why most people reject the Word. Some are like hard pathways – indifferent and in rejection to the Word. They don't give it a chance, and Satan steals it before it can penetrate. Some are impulsive. A thin layer of acceptance disguises an underlying layer of rejection. They seem to be enthusiastic, but as soon as there are trials, problems, difficulties, persecutions, they drop the whole thing. Some are infested. They receive the Word, but there is no space for it among their desires for riches, and their concerns of this life, and their lust for possessions. These crowd out the Word and it can never take root. That's why most people reject.

However, out of the four, there is one kind of ground, one kind of heart that receives the seed of the Word, and allows it to grow into a good harvest.

What is the secret of the good ground? Which professing Christian would not want to be good ground for the Word? After all, we devote hours of our lives to hearing and reading it. If you are here every Sunday, that's 52 sermons in a year. Add another 52 for Wednesday Bible studies. Add another 52 for Sunday school lessons. That's 156 studies a year, not including other sermons you hear and listen to, books you read, and your own study of Scripture. With all that seed, surely we would want our hearts to be good ground for the Word? As we study the verses on the good soil, we'll learn the three secrets of the fruitful heart.

I. The Fruitful Heart is Graciously Ready for the Word

⁸ *"But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."* ⁹ *And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*

From the seed which falls on hard pathways, to the seed which falls on disguised limestone, to the seed which falls on ground hiding the seeds of thorns which will destroy it, is seed which falls on good ground. What is meant by good? Well, by comparing it to the other soils, we can simply say it does not have the problems of the other three. It is not hard. It is not shallow. It is not infested. Positively speaking, it has enough softness to receive seed, enough depth to allow roots to go down and enough space to allow it to grow without being crowded out. It is soft, deep enough and spacious enough.

Now we might make the mistake of imagining that this kind of ground just happened to be that way, by chance, by accident. Even if you have done a small amount of gardening, you will know that ground like this doesn't just happen. Leave ground in the hot sun after rain, and it bakes into a hard layer, which needs the fork and the plough to open it up again. Put your spade in the soil to the depth that a root might go, and you run into stones of various sizes, and an old tree root running across the bottom. If you want good plants, you have to get those out. And, ground left to itself sprouts weeds as surely as the sun rises and sets. You don't have to go to the nursery to buy weed seeds. They just come.

So when Jesus talks about ground that is soft, and without stones or roots hidden beneath the surface, or without thorns and weeds, you can be sure that his agriculturally-minded audience knew he was talking about ground that had been deliberately cultivated, ground that had been worked on by human hands to get it into that state.

So if human hands have to prepare the soil before it will be fruitful, whose hands must prepare the heart before it will receive the Word? God's hands. Unless God graciously ploughs it up, and weeds, and gets the heart ready, the human heart will naturally refuse the Word. Look at verse 10.

¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable.¹¹ And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, ¹² "so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.'

What was he saying? He was saying that the crowd had heard the message of Messiah. They had heard Jesus declare Himself to them without parables, in the plainest language. They had seen the miracles and had Him explain the meaning of the miracles. But after all that, most wanted to use Him - some wanted to domesticate Him, some wanted to discredit Him. Only a few wanted to follow Him. And Jesus is telling His disciples that the first reason why they can receive His message is because *it has been given to them*. God has gifted them. God has kindly refused their rejection, taken out the hardness, taken out the shallowness, taken out the thorns and prepared them for the Word.

Consider Peter's confession and what Christ said about it.

Matthew 16:16-17 ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 11:25-26 ²⁵ At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. ²⁶ "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.

God has given this gift to the disciples. He didn't give it to them because they were following Him. They were following Him because God gave them this gift. The others without this gift, would see but not understand, hear, but not perceive, and because of that, their rejection would be deepened. Why? Because they had already refused what was plain. Reject what is obvious, and the truth becomes even more obscure – it becomes even easier to reject. Receive the Word, and it becomes clearer and easier to receive the rest.

²⁵ "For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

Maybe you say, what if God does not prepare my heart? What if He leaves me to my stoniness or thorns or rejection?

We remember Robinson Crusoe as a story about a man who survived on a desert island. But the real purpose of the story was really to teach about wisdom. Crusoe is a wicked man, who rejects his upbringing, chases sin, and lands up shipwrecked. He is the picture of the hard-hearted man, the man whose soil is like the wayside ground. Even once on the island, he continues his old ways. One night he has a dream where a kind of heavenly being says to him, "Since all this has not brought you to repentance, you shall die." He is shaken by this. Crusoe writes in his journal: "In the morning I took the Bible; and beginning at the New Testament, I began seriously to read it, and imposed upon myself to read a while every morning and every night..I was earnestly begging of God to give me repentance, when it happened providentially, the very day, that, reading the Scripture, I came to these words: 'He is exalted a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance and to give remission.' I threw down the book; and with my heart as well as my hands lifted up to heaven, in a kind of ecstasy of joy, I cried out aloud, 'Jesus, thou son of David! Jesus, thou exalted Prince and Saviour! give me repentance!' This was the first time I could say, in the true sense of the words, that I prayed in all my life; for now I prayed with a sense of my condition, and a true Scripture view of hope, founded on the encouragement of the Word of God; and from this time, I may say, I began to hope that God would hear me.

Crusoe had a hard heart, but begged God to soften it. And in the story, God did, and he was gloriously saved.

If your heart is still hard to God, but you know it shouldn't be, your heart is shallow or infested and you know it shouldn't be, that starting place is to say, God grant me repentance. Open my heart. Pull my heart towards yours. Give me the desires I do not yet have. Plough up my heart and lead me to love what I should love. Give me an appetite for your Word. Forgive me for treating it so indifferently, so callously, so lightly. Be patient, and give me repentance.

Only God's grace can prepare a heart. The fruitful heart is graciously prepared for the Word. The second thing we learn about the good heart, the fruitful heart is this:

II. The Fruitful Heart Gladly Receives the Word

²⁰ *"But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."*

The good heart is not only prepared, it accepts the Word. The Word is properly received. Now what we have to be quick to notice is that Jesus pointed out that two of the other hearts also received the Word. The shallow soil received the Word and it grew, the thorny soil received the Word and it grew. In other words, what is needed is more than simply a reception, it is a particular *kind* of reception.

It's not simply listening that counts as receiving. It's not simply agreeing that counts as reception. Plenty of people listen to sermons without hostile rejection, but the Word does not bear fruit. What does the Bible consider to be a proper reception of the Word? Let me show you from some other Scriptures three marks of a right reception of the Word.

a) Readiness

Acts 17:11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

These Bereans were actually Jewish unbelievers, who were unlike their counterparts in Thessalonica who persecuted Paul. These Berean Jews had an attitude towards the Word that the Bible describes as noble, fair-minded. What made them noble and fair-minded?

It says they received the Word with readiness. The word *readiness* in the original means eagerness. It is translated *zeal* when used in 2 Cor 9:2. It speaks of a strong desire, a hunger, a longing for the Word. These were people who loved God, and loved His will, so they loved His Word. So much so, that what did it motivate them to do? Once they had heard Paul, they went and searched the Scriptures daily to find out of these things were so.

Peter captures the image for us when he writes:

“1 Peter 2:2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.

An infant craves that milk, and cries when she can't have it. This was the attitude of Job, when he said:

“Job 23:12 Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food. “

It was the attitude of David, when He wrote:

Psalms 119:103 How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth!

And it was the attitude of Jesus, when He told Satan:

Matthew 4:4 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'

b) Reverence.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 ¶ For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

The Thessalonian believers received the Word in a particular way. They welcomed the Word as the Word of God, and not man. Some people will listen more carefully to Oprah; to a secular psychologist speak on parenting; to a seminar on business management; to a political speech than to God.

These Thessalonians were confronted with Paul who, by other information we have in Scripture, was not a very compelling speaker and was not very impressive to look at. But they got past all that to regard a sermon from Scripture as the very word of God.

How would you act if Jesus Himself were here to preach? Would you pick at your nails and look out the door? Would you stare at other believers and think about them? Would your mind wonder about the coming week?

For the ground of your heart to be right, you need to regard the Word of God with the utmost reverence. When God speaks, there is no error. When God speaks, there is nothing false. When God

speaks, everything He says will be relevant, true, necessary, eternal and for your good.

Isaiah 66:2 But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word.

c) Meekness

James 1:21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

James tells us that the way to receive the Word is to repent and confess all known sin in your life and then receive that seed with a heart of meekness. What is meekness? Meekness is power under control, it is gentleness and in the context, it refers to a humbled response to hearing God convict us.

Meekness is being in the dentist's chair. And as he begins picking and pulling, he hits something which sends a pain signal into the depths of your mouth. He is causing you severe pain – but you take it! Why? Because he does it for your good, and meekness makes you lie in that chair until it is over.

You see, what God starts with when he gets us at salvation looks very little like Jesus Christ. He has to do a lot of chipping and working with us to get us to look like Him. It is as if a sculptor receives a sculpture of a penguin, and is instructed to make it into a fairy princess. Well, there will be a lot of chipping away.

As God does that with us, it tends to hurt. Who likes to hear they are not what they ought to be, week after week? Who likes to hear that huge changes are still needed, even after a week of trying hard? Let's just turn on Joel Osteen and hear that we are great just as we are.

So what is needed is meekness. It is the attitude that says, "Yes, Lord, chip away. Search me, bring out of my heart what will frighten me, and then clean me, transform me, change me." You see, the temptation of our hearts is to get angry with the Word, and by implication with the one who preached the Word. But what does James say about the wrath of man in verse 20? It does not produce God's righteousness.

This is how the fruitful heart receives the Word. Not simply hearing. Not simply enduring the sermon. Not simply being quiet and letting the preacher finish. No, any heart can do that. Good soil receives the Word with readiness, with reverence, and with meekness.

This is what sets the fruitful heart apart from the others. It is graciously prepared. It gladly receives. But then there is something else it does.

III. The Fruitful Heart Responds to the Word

Mark 4:8 ⁸ "But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

Mark 4:20 ²⁰ "But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

In this parable, not only is the soil prepared, not only does the soil receive the seed, but something happens to it. A response occurs: The soil brings forth fruit in different degrees – showing that even

among the those with good hearts, there will be variations in giftedness and ability and opportunity. But the point is, the good heart does more than provide a cosy home for the seed. The good heart causes the seed to grow. In other words, the good heart does not merely hear the Word, it obeys the Word. It responds submissively to the Word.

Look at the next verses for proof of this.

Mark 4:20-25 ²¹ Also He said to them, "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand? ²² "For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light. ²³ "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." ²⁴ Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. ²⁵ "For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

Jesus says to the disciples, this word which seems to be hidden to the crowds has now been given to you. What are you supposed to do with it? You are supposed to use it and teach it and make it known. If you love and respond to the Word, then more of the Word will be poured into your life. The Bible is fuel for spiritual athletes, not stamps for the albums of collectors. The Bible is not something we smile at and add to our collection; it is something we go out and apply. Wisdom is all about knowledge that is applied to life.

James 1:22-25 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

The responsive heart is not merely interested in the diagnosis, it is interested in the cure. Don't just tell me what is wrong, tell me how to put it right. The responsive heart is not merely interested in receiving an exercise routine, it is interested in exercising. The responsive heart is not satisfied to just look at pictures of destinations, it sets out to go there.

A responsive heart has not fallen in love with knowledge alone. It has not fallen in love with the process of instruction. James tells us to do so is self-deception. Some people think they are fit because they bought a book on exercise. Some people feel prettier because they bought a bigger mirror. Some people think they are funnier because they bought a book of jokes. James says this is self-deception. To accept the theory as being equivalent to the practise is to deceive yourself. The pattern of the Bible is hear and obey.

John 13:17 "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

Here is why only one out of the four kinds of hearts received Jesus as Messiah. They had been graciously prepared to receive the Word. When it came, they received it with hungry zeal, believing it to be God's Word, and willing to let it shape them, even if it hurt. And they took that Word and began applying it, responding. This is the good soil.

The truth is, most hearts are a mixture. The question is, which of the four occupies most of the ground in your heart? Which is your heart most like? Because what kind of heart you have explains how 52 sermons a year affect you. It explains how the experience of hearing or reading the Word feels to you.

Begin her: Ask God to open your heart, to unite it and incline it to Himself, give it an appetite for

His Word. Then come to the Word, expecting that it will be food, not from a man, but from God. Open your mouth wide, come with an appetite. Some of it will be harder to chew and swallow than other parts, but don't get angry, don't spit it out. And then get up, ready to exercise, ready to use and apply what you hear.

If you do this, the harvest from your heart will be great. All those sermons, all those studies, all those books will produce results – sweet, enjoyable results – for God, for others, and for yourself.