

Hearing Jesus

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Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] Let's pray one more time for his help. Father, the unfolding of your word gives light. The statutes you lay down are righteous.

They are fully trustworthy. So direct our footsteps today according to your word and make your face shine on me, your servant, as I try my best to say what you say so that we may hear as you wish us to hear.

By your spirit and for your glory we pray. Amen. I wonder if you've ever heard of this particular disease. It seems to afflict all of us at one time or another.

It's called selective hearing. My wife says I suffer from it, or at least I think that's what she said. I wasn't really paying attention. But anyway, that's what I thought, so I was shocked.

I mean, I've never heard her say it before. And it isn't true. If someone is opening a packet of twisties or cheezos, I always hear them. In fact, my kids take after me.

[1 : 08] Say, I scream and they'll hear and appear even if they're a mile away. Though they don't seem to hear the phrase, go to bed so well when they are with their toys.

Okay, so I probably shouldn't quit being a pastor for stand-up comedy anytime soon. But in all seriousness, we can all be quite selective in our hearing, can't we?

Even in a crowded room, if we put our minds to it, we can be pretty good at focusing on a particular sound or voice. At the same time, we can also be pretty good at filtering out.

So, if you're in the living room with only one friend for company, but they started talking to you while you're trying to watch an episode of your favourite TV show, chances are, you didn't hear much of what they said.

Your brain prioritised the TV over your body. In fact, right now, I wonder how many of you are currently being selective and filtering me out.

[2 : 16] Well, filtering me is probably not a big deal, but what if we're talking about the Word of God instead? You see, today's passage is all about hearing.

I wonder if you noticed that already. At least eight times in today's passage in the NIV, the word hear or hearing pops up throughout, most prominently in the explanation of the parable, but also in places like verses 18 and 21.

And indeed, in verse 18, Jesus says, consider carefully how you listen. Consider carefully how you hear.

Consider carefully if you are engaging in selective hearing. You see, the big question today is this. How's your hearing?

More specifically, how's your hearing of the Word of God? That's what is in view here, isn't it? In verse 1, we're told that Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

[3 : 28] Ever since Jesus began his ministry, he's been bringing the Word of God about the kingdom of God to us. Remember Luke chapter 4?

Back in Luke 4 verse 18, Jesus declared on the scene, the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

And then even after he performs a few miracles and people started chasing him in search of those, he said this for verse 43, I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also because that is why I was sent.

And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea. So it's no surprise to find him still preaching the Word in 8 verse 1.

[4 : 32] That's his mission. And wherever Jesus goes, he tends to attract a crowd. It's no different in verse 4. Another large crowd gathers to hear him.

And so far in Luke, the crowds have been responding well to Jesus. In 5 verse 26 and 7 verse 16, for instance, in the past weeks, they've been glorifying God whenever they witness Jesus' miraculous acts.

But not all initial responses to Jesus' words have been so positive. Back in Luke chapter 4, when Jesus speaks the Word of God from Isaiah 61 and announces himself to be its fulfillment, we find not everyone said, wow.

Instead, some said, what? Isn't this Joseph's son? They don't get it. And then when Jesus speaks the Word of God again from one and two kings, bringing to his audience's attention the way God reached out even to Gentiles during the time of Elijah and Elisha, they became furious, angry enough to want to throw him over the cliff.

And even in the last two weeks, we keep seeing negative responses to Jesus. So clearly, people do not all hear Jesus the same way.

[6 : 06] And it's still the same today. The question is, why? Why are there such contrasting responses to the preaching of God's Word?

Why is there so much rejection amidst acceptance? Well, one possibility is to say there's something wrong with the Word of God itself.

There's something defective about the seed such that it's not 100% effective all the time. Maybe it's like some of the mosquito repellent that I use, which sometimes seem to work quite well at keeping those bloodsuckers at bay, but other times seem to be totally useless.

I just get bitten anyhow. And maybe that's what the Word of God is like. When it's effective, then people respond positively to Jesus. But sometimes it doesn't work.

And therefore, people sometimes don't respond positively. That is one possible line of reasoning. The problem with that, however, is that there is absolutely nothing in this entire passage that even hints at anything wrong with the seed.

[7 : 21] Indeed, it's the opposite. In verse 8, when the seed connects with good soil, we're told it produces a bumper crop up to 100 times what was sown.

When the Word of God is on good soil, verse 15, there will be fruit. And it isn't just this passage that rules this out.

So far, nearly everything Luke has mentioned regarding God's Word tells us the very opposite.

Consider the healing of the centurion's servant that we looked at a few weeks ago.

Jesus' Word is so effective that all he has to do, as the Roman centurion wholeheartedly believed, was to say the Word and his servant would be healed.

He didn't even have to be physically present. That is certainly not a picture of a defective Word. Or consider what happened all the way back in Luke 1.

[8 : 29] An angel appears to Mary and tells her she will give birth to a son who will fulfill what God promised King David centuries ago, that someone from his line will rule over an eternal kingdom.

Now, how can I be sure? Mary asks. Well, the angel says, consider your cousin Elizabeth. God says, she will bear a child in her old age and you can see for yourself it will definitely happen.

For, Luke 1, verse 37, no word from God will ever fail. No word from God will ever fail.

And so it came to pass. Again, this is not a picture of a word that can sometimes be ineffective. So the word itself is not the problem.

Any negative response to God's Word is not because the word itself is somehow malfunctioning.

And I just want to say that is actually very reassuring.

[9 : 38] You see, have you ever shared the Gospel with someone in the most loving and effective way that you could? You were so sure that you were clear, you were faithful, and yet, no positive response.

Or perhaps you're someone who's been leading Bible studies, you're teaching the Sunday school, the youth group, even just your own family. You're doing it as diligently as you can, as prayerfully as you can, as skillfully as you can.

And yet, you still don't get the response you hoped for. And the temptation then is to lose confidence in God's Word. After all, it doesn't seem to be producing results.

And the moment we think God's Word is somehow defective, is the moment when we will turn away from God's Word to other strategies, to things that we think will produce better results.

Maybe we put our trust instead in some combination of good entertainment and warm hospitality. Maybe we say, oh, let's only look at those Bible verses that we deem relevant.

[10:50] Let's forget books like Ecclesiastes and Numbers, which we've already decided are obscure and boring. maybe it's by making signs and wonders the main focus and chasing them as much as possible.

But notice how in this parable Jesus tells, the farmer is said to be doing only one thing. He's sowing seed.

And he's sowing seed indiscriminately. That is, he's not saying, okay, I'll show seed here but not there. Oh, that lamb needs something else.

You know, they don't need the Word, they need something different. No, he simply sows seed as widely as possible. It goes everywhere. And that is exactly what Jesus has been doing so far in Luke's Gospel.

Hasn't he? He's been sowing the Word of God everywhere. He's travelled from town to town. He's spoken not only to men but also to women.

[12:03] Verses 1 to 3 show us that. He's proclaimed the kingdom, verse 3, to wealthy, influential people like Joanna, who's the wife of Chusa, the manager of Herod's household, so someone pretty high-ranking.

And he's proclaimed the kingdom, verse 2, to people like Mary, who must have been a total outcast while she was still demon-possessed. He's proclaimed the Word of God to Jews in their synagogues and to Gentiles outside the synagogues.

Yes, they are miracles of healing and exorcism, acting as evidence the kingdom of God is here. But it is the proclamation of the Word by which the kingdom of God advances and grows.

Jesus makes that clear. The Word of God, far from being defective, is the engine of the kingdom.

But, if the Word of God is not the issue, if there is nothing wrong with the seed, then we still haven't gotten any closer to the question.

Why are they such contrasting responses to the preaching of God's Word? Why is there so much rejection amidst acceptance?

[13:26] Well, let's look at the parable again. If the one constant in the story is the seed, what are the variable elements? the location on which the seed falls on.

In this parable, there are four such locations, each resulting in a different outcome. So, what do they represent? Well, Jesus tells us in verses 11 to 15, they each represent a different response to God's Word.

Now, notice that in each response, the person does hear. Verse 12, those along the path are the ones who hear.

Verse 13, those on the rocky path are the ones who receive the Word with joy when they hear it.

Verse 14, the seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear.

And in verse 15, those on good soil are those who hear the Word so everyone hears. Jesus is not envisioning a scenario where some people hear and others don't.

[14:42] Nor is he envisioning a scenario where some people hear bad proclamation and others hear good proclamation. No, that is not the difference. The difference is how they hear.

As one commentator says, how the Word of God is heard is the sole deciding factor whether the Word will bear fruit or not.

So how do different people hear it? Well, let's look at the first location, the one that falls along the path. Jesus says, these are the people who hear, but Satan comes and prevents the message from taking root in the person.

The seed doesn't germinate. This is the response of what I'll call Satan induced passivity. Ever experienced this before?

Perhaps you've once invited an unbelieving friend to come to some Christian meeting, maybe even this Sunday service, in the hope that they'll hear the good news of Jesus there. And as the meeting progressed, you got more and more excited.

[15:54] The speaker has brought his A-game. You've never heard the gospel spelled out so powerfully and so clearly in your life. You felt like the speaker has been very winsome.

He's been amazing at answering all potential objections. So you're getting excited. But then as you turn to your friend and you ask him how he finds the meeting, he says, very good.

The speaker is wearing a nice shirt. Oh, yeah, his voice sounds like our brother Elvin Yeo there. You know, he's very nice to hear. It's as if he has heard nothing of the message. The words might have reached his ear, but they didn't penetrate any further. He did not hold onto any of the words. They bounce off him instead as Satan blows it away. So the word does not take root. There is no faith. Hence, there is no salvation. In Luke's gospel, this has been what the Pharisees have been like, haven't they?
[17 : 01] So far, they haven't absorbed anything Jesus has said. Then there's a second location, the one that falls on the rock.

Now, in this case, there seems to be initial enthusiasm. Jesus here is talking about people who, when they hear the word of God, get all excited and respond positively with great joy and excitement. They join the church. They buy a Bible. They attend a prayer group. They tell everybody about their conversion. But the moment testing arrives, the truth is revealed. the word never really took root after all. When faced with sustained persecution, they show their true colors. In some ways, the crowds of Luke will be like that. Many enjoy the show, but in the end, they have no staying power. By the end of Luke's gospel, they are not there at the foot of the cross.
[18 : 11] And then there's the third location, the one that falls among thorns. The idea here is this. Now, why do we sow seed?

So that a plant might grow up from it and bear fruit. But in this case, the seed never achieves its purpose. But the reason for that this time isn't sustained persecution, but what I'll call superficial preoccupations. The people hear the word, they nod their heads along to it, but it isn't long before preoccupations about how the kids are doing, or how one's bank balance is doing, or which holiday destination should be next on the bucket list, overwhelms everything else. And here is the thing. Did you notice that phrase in verse 14, as they go on their way, these superficial preoccupations don't suddenly appear. They creep up on you. As the years go by, as they go on their way, these thorns slowly take over, so that you find yourself listening less and less to Luke, and Paul, and the other Bible writers, and more and more to Warren Buffett, and Seth Gordon, or whoever your favourite guru is.
[19 : 47] In Luke's gospel, they might be exemplified by the rich young ruler, whom we'll meet later on in Luke chapter 18. Here is a guy who seems genuinely interested in following Jesus, but in the end, cash, not Christ, turns out to be his king.

But there is a fourth location, the good soil, and this is what I'll simply call fruitful listening. And we'll consider what this looks like in more detail a little later on. But just in case you're feeling discouraged by how many people in Luke seem to turn out badly so far, well, there are plenty of people as well who turn out to be good soil. Think of the people you've encountered so far, even over the last few chapters. There is Peter and his fellow fishermen leaving behind their nets upon hearing the call of Jesus. There is Levi, the tax collector, who does the same. There is the leper and the friends of the paralytic. There is the sinful women that we heard about last week.
[21 : 01] And over the next few weeks, we'll meet a few more like them. So what is Jesus' point? Well, Jesus is showing us what happens whenever the word of God goes out.

He's explaining that as the gospel of the kingdom reaches out to everyone, everywhere, it never simply comes as mere information. Rather, whenever we hear God's word, we always respond in some way. Even a shrug of indifference is a response. So that means, every time we hear God's word, our spiritual condition is revealed. For how we hear God's word exposes our spiritual condition. How we hear God's word exposes our spiritual condition. And if we are hearing like those of the first three locations, we are in a bad way, spiritually speaking.
[22 : 10] God's teaching. But that is not all. You see, Jesus is so smart, he doesn't just make his point by the content of his teaching.

Have you ever wondered, why did Jesus have to tell us a parable? After all, Jesus could have taught us verses 11 to 15 directly, couldn't he?

He could have just said, oh, by the way, just so you know, people will respond to me in four ways. Number one is this way, number two is this way, number three, number four this way. But he doesn't.

Instead, he teaches us via a parable. Why? Answer.

Because the very form of a parable teaches us as well. You see, we all think we know what a parable is.

[23 : 12] Whenever I go to a Bible study where a parable is being studied, I hear the same thing said almost every time. Oh, parables are like mini stories. They are illustrations. Oh, and you know, Jesus caught in parables because he wanted to make things as simple as possible for his hearer to understand.

And ironically, because we have that assumption, we actually fail to hear Jesus properly. We fail to listen to what he really says in these verses because that is not the reason Jesus gives for teaching parables.

Look again at verse 10. Do you see?

Jesus says to some, he speaks in parables not to reveal but to conceal. So what in the world is Jesus getting at?

Well, let's think about what's going on here. You see, imagine you're in the crowd. You're listening to Jesus speak but when Jesus opens his mouth, he simply talks about some farmer throwing seeds.

[24 : 44] and you go, eh? You see, so often we think that that parable is so simple and obvious. But the only reason we think that is because we have already read verses 11 to 15.

We have the answer sheet, so to speak. And when you have the answer sheet, well, of course everything is easy to understand. But remember, by the end of verse 8, the crowd doesn't have the answer sheet.

All they hear is Jesus talking about farming. And just because the audience is familiar with farming practices doesn't mean they understand what Jesus means.

We mustn't confuse familiarity with understanding. And we know the people don't understand because verse 9, the disciples have to ask Jesus what the parable means.

They seek understanding. And how do they get it? Only when they come to Jesus. They need him to explain it.

[25 : 54] When Jesus says, verse 8, whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. the disciples know that Jesus must have a deeper meaning to what he says.

And to find out, they have to go to him. To truly hear Jesus, they must be humble and teachable and ready to receive from Jesus.

And Jesus says, because you guys come to me, you will get the meaning. Because you trust me, you will get understanding. The secret of God's kingdom will be given to you as a gift from me.

But what about those that refuse to come to Jesus? Well, the effect of the parable on them is to confirm their unbelief. And that is why in verse 10, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 verse 9.

In Isaiah's day, Israel had become totally corrupt. Isaiah 6 tells us that Israel is blind and deaf, exactly like the idols they worship.

[27 : 13] And so God says that when Isaiah preaches, all it will do is to further confirm Israel is truly deaf, spiritually speaking.

They won't get what Isaiah is saying. They'll reject him and therefore their spiritual blindness is all but proven. And what was true in Isaiah's day is also true in Jesus' day.

When Jesus speaks in parables, those who refuse Jesus won't get it. What the parable does then is to act as a work of judgment.

against them. If you don't care about the word of God, if you harden yourself against it, Jesus will say, okay, if that's what you want, you won't be able to understand because you have already decided to refuse to understand.

So in other words, how we hear God's word exposes our spiritual condition. do you see, even the form of Jesus' teaching makes the point.

[28 : 30] If you hear the parable, having already decided you want to approach Jesus, then you wouldn't get him and his kingdom. And so today, Jesus wants to know, how's your hearing?

How's your listening of the word of God? What are they showing about you today? Right now, are you truly listening?

And to press the point home, Jesus goes on to talk about lamps and lights in verses 16 to 17. Think about it, Jesus says, when you light an oil lamp, you put it on a stand so that everyone can enjoy the light.

Hiding it under a bed defeats the purpose. So, what is this lamp stand? It is the word of God that reveals the kingdom of God.

It is the words of Jesus. It's what he's been preaching. And sure, right now in Luke 8, it's not immediately obvious how Jesus will bring about God's kingdom.

[29 : 40] But verse 17, nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. In other words, if you keep humbly paying attention to Jesus' words, you'll get it.

You'll realise God's kingdom comes through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, that he is saviour and lord. And Jesus wants the light of the gospel to shine forth and not be hidden.

But to see this light in this passage, it's not so much your eyes but your ears that need to be open. And so verse 18, consider how you listen.

So how should you listen? Well, come back with me to verse 15 and let's consider what fruitful listening looks like. You see, what do fruitful listeners do?

They hear the word, yes, but not only do they do that, verse 15, they retain it. The ESV translation says they hold fast to it, which is a really good way of putting it.

[30 : 59] They don't just listen once. The idea here is of ongoing listening. People who are good swell are those who keep listening to Jesus.

Not just once, not just twice, but with perseverance perseverance for a lifetime. Is that you?

This week, I heard someone observe that the scriptures often compare a healthy spiritual life to a tree. But have you ever stared at a tree? Nothing changes quickly.

Most of the time, you can't even discern its growth. There's nothing stunning about it. And actually, that's often what listening to Jesus is like.

Most of the time when we read the scriptures and we ponder what God is saying, nothing spectacular seems to be happening. But if we are deeply rooted in Jesus and his word, there will be slow and steady growth.

[32 : 07] You'll be like a tree that will last, even if we don't feel like it. Or even when we feel like we are being pruned as God is cutting the bad parts out, sometimes it feels like we're shrinking.

But that's actually the word of God bearing fruit in us. And let's be clear, fruitful listening is not just about hearing, but acting on what you hear.

That's the point of verses 19 to 21. As Jesus speaks, he's made aware that his family members can't reach him because the crowd is too big. But Jesus uses this as a further teaching opportunity. Who are those that belong to Jesus? Verse 21, it is those who hear God's word and put it into practice.

When you not only hear the word, but you do what it says, you belong to God's family. You don't have to go through Mary to get close to Jesus.

[33 : 14] And when we listen to Jesus, it will have a compounding effect. Look again at verse 18. Whoever has will be given more.

Fruitful listening and living leads to more fruitful listening and living. Exercise those muscles and they will be readier for a marathon.

But eat junk food and be sedentary all day and even the muscles you think you will have will be taken away. And that's exactly what happened with the first three locations, isn't it?

They failed to hear with true spiritual ears and a humble heart and so the word of God is taken away. So as you come to hear the word of God this morning, consider carefully how you listen.

Let verses 11 to 15 act as a mirror. Are you aware that you are not putting deep roots right now in Jesus' words? Right now perhaps you know that God's word will say to you that you need to count the cost of living for Jesus but you don't want to hear that.

[34 : 30] So you keep away from God's word. But if you stay away from God's word you are not going to be able to continue indefinitely in the Christian life. Your desire for an easy life will ironically keep you away from the fruitful life.

When the testing comes you have nothing. So if that's you then take care how you listen. Or perhaps you need to ask yourself is something squeezing out my ability to listen to Jesus?

That something is not necessarily a bad thing. life's worries, riches, and pleasures are not necessarily bad things in themselves. They just form part of our world. But could they be choking you in such a way that you're not bearing fruit?

Could even good things be choking you? Later on this morning I'm going to be preaching Deuteronomy 8 at another church. And in Deuteronomy 8, God warns against the danger of the good times.

He says it's possible to be in the promised land and enjoy all its wealth and prosperity and forget the God who redeemed you and provided you with all this.

[35 : 46] Good gifts from God can choke you too. So consider carefully how you listen. what can you do to really truly hear Jesus?

Perhaps for some of you that might mean reprioritizing Bible studies. You need to block out Friday nights or whatever time it is to gather with your brothers and sisters in Christ around God's word. For some of you it might mean not just listening but doing. Perhaps God's word has been saying to you that you need to apologize and confess a wrongdoing and you've been resisting.

It's time to do it. Perhaps God's word has been saying to you that you need to let go of a relationship and you've been resisting. It's time to do it.

Perhaps God's word has been saying to you that you need to be more sacrificial and you've been resisting. It's time to do it. That's what every member of Jesus' family does.

[36 : 55] They listen they put it into practice. And as we end let me just say one more thing. When I was at Bible college one of my housemates was someone who used to work for cochlear.

cochlear implant is a cochlear implant is a small electronic device that can help a person who is profoundly deaf or severely hard of hearing to hear by representing sounds electronically in their environment.

And if you go on YouTube, you can find many videos of someone receiving a cochlear implant and hearing for the first time. I thought of showing you one but decided not to because of time.

But almost invariably, they are overcome with tears of joy as they hear their husband or their mummy or their daddy, say to them for the first time, I love you.

And when you hear Jesus truly over a lifetime, that is what you will hear. That is what you will experience.

[38 : 14] That is the secret of the kingdom of God. God. So if you don't remember anything else from the last 40 minutes, remember that.

And if the last 40 minutes have come across as too complicated, that is my fault as a communicator, not the fault of God's word. But as we end, let me try to give you today's sermon in a sentence.

So just remember this. Consider carefully how you listen to the word of God because how you listen exposes your true spiritual condition.

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Let's pray. Father, I pray and trust that your spirit is working in us right now.

I pray that there will be many, many among us who are the fourth location, who are people of good soil, who want to hear the word, who want to retain it, who want to persevere in it, and who knows that they have to be humble to come before you to receive that gift.

[39 : 34] But it is a gift you've given us, Lord, and so we receive it gratefully. Please help us to continue to consider carefully how we listen, to hear your word, to put it into practice.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.