

One of the frustrations that every single pastor has is the different ways that people respond to the Word of God.

So, two of you come to me as your pastor for advice from scripture for some life situation, similar life situations and I give you both the same advice from scripture and that advice works for one of you but not the other. And that's frustrating... how the Word seems to affect one person but not another.

Or I have these two members who are sitting in church *every* Sunday, so they are hearing the exact same sermons, singing the exact same hymns, saying the exact same prayers. Person A is overwhelmed by that message. Their life is transformed. They start fighting against their pet sins. They start telling their friends about Jesus. They start giving more in their offerings. They are visibly growing in their love of God's word and in fruits of faith. Meanwhile, Person B, other than the fact that they sit in church on Sunday, looks no different than the rest of the world. And that frustrates pastors. Why this difference in responses to the same word?

This is not just a pastoral frustration. I'm betting some of you have experienced this frustration too. You step up to the plate and invite your neighbors to come and hear about Jesus. Neighbor A is thankful that you invited them and even if they don't come, their positive response opens the door to talking about deeper things with that neighbor. Meanwhile, Neighbor B is clearly offended, cuts short the conversation, and your interactions are awkward from that day forward. The different responses are frustrating.

Or you have two kids. You read them the same devotions, you say the same prayers, you bring them both to church every week. The Word is clearly working on kid A, but kid B, maybe they need an exorcism or something because the word doesn't seem to be doing anything for them. And that can be incredibly frustrating for a Christian parent.

Maybe the frustration you feel is internal, because the difference that you see is in you. Maybe you see a fellow member at St. Paul's who has gone through something really difficult – the loss of a job or a loved one. And yet that member seems just fine – every time you see them they are smiling, they seem to be at perfect peace with their lives, in spite of all their hardships. Meanwhile, you are still crying every night over someone who died two years ago. Why are they so strong and you so weak?

What's the reason for the difference?

Jesus told us the reason for the difference in the parable I read just a minute ago.

The difference is not in the word of God - that sometimes the word of God is powerful and effective, and other times it isn't. God's word is always effective (that's what we heard in the first lesson today). God's word always has the ability to unleash God's kingdom, his reign of power, his reign of forgiveness, his reign of transformation, his reign of peace.

So, it's never the word that is different. It's the soil that is different.

Now, sometimes when people hear this parable they think that the soil refers to different types of people. That isn't exactly right.

The seed is the word of God – a message – which means the different types of soil really refer to different types of listening, and therefore one person could really be multiple types of soil. It's entirely possible for one person to listen to God's word differently over various periods of their life, over the course of a week, or even over the course of one worship service.

Soil is listening. In this parable Jesus is giving us a warning: we need to listen well to God's word.

Jesus warns against, first of all, listening with a hard heart; Secondly, with a shallow heart; Finally, with a divided heart.

Let's look at those three warnings.

First of all Jesus warns against listening to the word with a hard heart - in other words, listening on just an intellectual basis; letting it sink into your mind only (Jesus says in verses 18-19): **Listen then to what the parable of the sower means. When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.**

The Greek word translated *understand* doesn't simply mean to grasp what it says but is a more specific word that means *to understand with appreciation*, to enjoy what it says, to apply what it says. Earlier in this chapter Jesus talks about this kind of understanding as something that takes place in your heart. You hear the word of God and you apply it to your life so it doesn't just affect your intellect, it affects your emotions as well.

Jesus warns against hearing the Word but never letting it into your heart – understanding it intellectually, but not letting it change you.

A good example of this seed in Jesus' day is the Pharisees. The problem wasn't that they didn't listen to the Word of God. They loved God's Word. They could recite vast portions of it by memory. The problem was they never took it to heart. They didn't apply it to their lives. They didn't let it transform the way they felt and thought about things. Jesus said about people like this in this very same chapter: **"In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding.'"**

Hearing but not understanding... Jesus warns against listening to the word on a purely intellectual level, where you understand what the words logically say, but you don't apply them to your heart and life.

Which begs the obvious question, does that ever describe your listening?

When the pastor talks about sin, how do you hear that? Do you just listen intellectually, "Ok he's saying gossip is a sin, lust is a sin, pride is a sin. He's saying God doesn't want people to sin." That's good, but that's purely academic. It hasn't sunk into your heart yet. What you need to hear is more than just a list of sins. You need to hear those words and then know on a deep level that *you are a sinner*. In fact you sin every day, none of you are even close to being acceptable in the sight of your God. And when you listen in that deeper way it produces a very powerful emotion we call guilt. If you are

hearing your pastor talk about sin and you do not feel guilty, you may be listening with a hard heart.

Or here's another example: have you ever heard your pastor preach about sin and you automatically start to think about that *other person* that really needs to hear this sermon... *those other sinners* who are guilty of this sin pastor is talking about. You think of those other people without ever asking yourself, "How am I guilty of this sin Pastor is talking about?"

That is listening with your head. You need to let the message sink into your heart. You need to listen to what Jesus' word is saying to *you*.

Conversely what about when you hear your pastor preach about forgiveness? Do you ever listen to that with just your head... you think purely about the mechanics of it all: well Jesus had to die for sin because that's how God decided it should be?

If grace is only intellectual to you, you might come to church every Sunday but it would only be because that is what you think you should do, or that is what your parents did and you just keep up the tradition. This, the person who is not listening well to the gospel, is the person who grumbles about Pastor getting a little long-winded, or about the service running over the hour mark by 15 minutes – hearing the word on Sunday morning is an intellectual exercise you do for the sake of appearances, not something that you crave and can't get enough of. But if you would listen to the gospel with your heart, you would be overwhelmed by the love of him who before the beginning of time saw you, knew you, loved you, and chose to enter into history just to rescue you.

If the seed of God's word is going to do you good, you cannot listen to it with a hard heart. It needs to penetrate to your heart and touch your emotions.

That's the first warning.

The second warning is against listening to God's word with a shallow heart, which is the exact opposite of the first warning. It is listening to God's word only emotionally and then having no desire to grow in your head-knowledge of what God's word actually says. (Verses 20-21) **The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.**

It's an easy enough comparison, right? You have a patch of ground that looks like good soil, but you don't know that there are rocks just two inches down. So you scatter seed on that ground and it starts to grow but the roots are not able to form the way they should. So, when the sun comes up and it gets hot the plants wilt and die, they can't take the heat because they never grew deep roots.

Jesus says this is what it is like for the faith of many Christians. They hear the gospel, they hear the message of forgiveness and Jesus says **they receive it with joy** – they have this powerful emotional reaction to the word of God, their faith springs up. But then they never grow in their knowledge of God's word. They never study it any more deeply. They don't really know how the kingdom of God works. They don't really know what God's plans or purposes are, and so when life gets hard, they fall away.

You see that in Jesus' ministry too. At the time of our lesson we are told that great crowds were following Jesus. He had thousands of people flocking to see and hear him at this time. Why? They received his message with joy. He was saying nice things, he was healing the sick, feeding the thousands. They received him with joy until, not long after our lesson; Jesus started to take their faith deeper into God's word.

He tells them that even if you are a Christian, you are going to suffer. In fact, because you are a Christian you will suffer even more than an unbeliever. He talks about the need, if you are going to follow him, to deny yourself, to take up crosses and carry them through life. If you want to be Christian, you better be ready to do some very hard things. He is taking them deeper into God's word, so they left. By the time Jesus dies he doesn't have thousands of followers, he has hundreds because their faith wasn't deep.

So again, this begs the question, does this ever describe your listening?

Is your faith shallow? Are you one of those who says, "Yes, God's word encourages constant contact with that word in private devotion and regular Sunday worship. But come on, what's the great harm if I miss a Sunday or two a month? I'll be fine. And who has the schedules that allow time for reading and meditating on God's word *every* day? My faith has survived just fine this long without that!"

Are you one of those who think that Bible Study is beneath you or not worth your time?

Is your attitude kind of, "Jesus loves me this I know, and this is all I really need to know"?

If it is, then your faith is shallow, and here's Jesus' warning for you: when the heat of life comes along, you are in real danger of being overwhelmed, maybe even losing your faith.

When a loved one dies a tragic death, when your health takes a turn for the worse, when your job is eliminated, you are in real danger of sinking into deep depression and maybe even losing your faith because you don't have a full understanding of God's word; because you think that the suffering you are going through is somehow abnormal and unjust when it is not. And when you are overwhelmed, or God forbid, lose your faith, it will be proof that you loved those things that you lost in the heat more than you ever loved Jesus and his Word. And why is that the case? Because you didn't let the roots of your faith penetrate deeply into Christ's grace, love, and Word. You didn't listen well. You let your faith remain shallow.

Jesus doesn't want that for you, so he warns against listening with a hard heart, a shallow heart, and finally the one that probably hits closest to home for most of us, Jesus warns against listening to the word with a divided heart. (Verse 22) **The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.**

Some people hear the word, the seed is planted, but there are other seeds thrown into his heart that produce something else other than fruitful plants, they produce weeds. And so you have the Christian who listens to what God's word has to say on what is needed to be happy in this life, but then he also listens to what the world says is needed to

be happy in this life (which generally involves the deceitfulness of wealth), and now you have two plants growing in your heart, two sets of conflicting priorities and worldviews that are competing for your attention – that is a divided heart.

You have a Christian who knows that he should face the week with confidence because the seed of God's word tells him that his life, his minutes are securely held in the hands of his Father in heaven, and yet he loves the humanistic viewpoint so common in our world that tells him that he is the master of his fate, he is the captain of his soul – two conflicting seeds, two conflicting worldviews – a divided heart.

You have a Christian parent who knows the Word has a lot to say about how to raise your children well, but so do modern psychologists, and much more often than they realize they directly contradict each other. Two competing philosophies and worldviews – a divided heart.

This is the Christian who seeds portions of his life to God's word, but not all of it. He picks and chooses the passages he likes and ignores the ones he doesn't.

Is this really all that big of a deal? Having both fruits of faith and thorns of unbelief? Well, you don't really need to have a green thumb to know what inevitably happens...

Say you have a garden, you notice some weeds growing in it, what happens if you don't do anything? What happens over the course of the summer? What happens over the course of a year or two?

Eventually the good seeds, the beans and the squash and the tomatoes, kill off all the weeds so that the weeds can't live anymore, right?... or the weeds and the thistles and the thorns grow so the good plants are choked out.

So it is with the Christian who is happy to listen with a divided heart. Eventually the thorns win, every time.

Jesus gives some strong warnings today - warning against listening to God's words with a hard heart, a shallow heart, or a divided heart. When we listen like that, is it any wonder that we don't experience the fullness of the kingdom in our lives, that we don't feel the presence of God, the power of God, the transformation of God, the peace of God as fully as we would like? The problem isn't with the word. Because what does Jesus promise with the last verse? The seed falling on good soil produces a crop... (Verse 23) **But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.**

If you don't have the abundance that God promises, what is the problem? The problem is not with the word of God. The problem is with us. We don't listen well.

Powerful words of warning... Fortunately, this isn't where I say "amen." There are powerful words of comfort here too.

There are some of you here now who are feeling very guilty... in fact, you should all feel guilty if you are listening to this sermon well. Is God going to give up on you?

The comfort is found in the foolishness of the sower. He is so reckless in his sowing, isn't he?

Think about it, when you are walking through a field is it really that hard to look around you and see, "Oh look, here is a hard-packed path, maybe I shouldn't waste my seed there... Oh look, here is patch of thistles; maybe I shouldn't throw seed there either."

But not this sower... No, the sower throws recklessly, hoping beyond hope that maybe, just maybe some of that seed will sink in. That is the reckless love of Christ. He doesn't give up on you, even when your hearts are hard, even when your love is shallow, even when your devotion is divided. He continues to throw the seed of his word into your very soul, like he is doing right now, hoping beyond hope that maybe *this* will be the time that one of those seeds penetrates and produces fruit. That is the reckless love of Christ.

It is the reckless love that we see most clearly on that rocky soil of Mt Calvary. There on that mountain what does the Son of God do? He takes every time you haven't listened to God's word well and he takes it in his body and he dies. Did you know that Jesus compares himself to a seed? Just like a seed dies and is buried in order to produce another plant which produces more seeds. Jesus says my death is the same. I died. I was buried in the ground to produce a harvest. So that from my seed might burst forth the fruit of the resurrection and forgiveness that he gives to you through the very word he scatters so recklessly.

Think about Jesus life. Is there ever a time when he didn't listen well? When he is a little boy, where does he love to be? In the temple, soaking in the word of God. When he is a grown man, where does he spend every single weekend? In the synagogue, even though he knows a whole lot more about God's word than any of those people who were teaching it. Jesus always listened well. And through faith in him you get to claim his obedience, his listening, as your own. The word says his obedience wraps around you, it covers over your sin like this robe covers my clothes, so that when God looks at you he sees a perfect listener because he sees Christ, your substitute.

So, if listening to this parable fills you with guilt and dread, don't forget to look at the sower... don't forget to look at the one telling the parable. Jesus, that reckless sower has saved you completely. You have nothing to fear.

So today and for the rest of your lives, make it your goal to listen well and learn well from the Sower who loves you well.

Amen.