



The Hazards of Hearing God's Word

Luke Series #23

Luke 8:1-21

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Having prayed to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, let us open God's Word expectantly. Let's worship God as we read the living Word of Christ. Luke 8:1-21:

¹ Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

⁴ And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, ⁵ "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶ And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸ And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

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

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

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."

Thanks be to God for His living Word. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing in God's sight.

I trust you saw the main theme of this section as it is repeated three times. Jesus is concerned with how we are hearing His Word. This theme occurs in these places:

- verse eight: "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*"
- verse 18: "*Take care then how you hear...*"
- verse 21: "*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.*"

This is about hearing God's Word profitably and rightly and really receiving it. Jesus says these words with seriousness, unlike most preachers in our day. Great crowds are gathering around Him. Most preachers would be elated at the sight and tempted to tone down the message a bit just to make sure the crowds keep coming. But Jesus looks at these crowds and knows that as His Word goes out, many who are hearing with their physical ears are not receiving His Word with their hearts and will fall away. There is a sobriety and solemnity to what Jesus is saying. He is telling His disciples that as His Word goes out and is sown broadly in the world, there will be a variety of responses to it. It will not be met with overwhelming acceptance by all. A lot is at stake in how we hear the Word, including:

1. Eternal life (verse 12)
2. Our spiritual prosperity and vitality (verse 18)
3. Our relationship with Jesus (verse 21)

This is a warning from Jesus. I think if we heard the tone of this parable rightly, we would be tempted to put signs in front of the church or write on the top of our bulletin: "Warning! Hearing God's Word may be hazardous to your spiritual health." Take heed how you hear. Don't be thinking about how someone else is responding or how they need to hear this message. Jesus says to look at yourself and take heed that you are hearing the Word of God profitably.

If you read this parable in Mark 4:24, you will see how Jesus has a slightly different exhortation. There He says, "*Pay attention to what you hear...*" In other words, be sure what you are hearing is Biblical, true to Scripture, consistent to God's testimony in His Word. Don't listen to preaching and teaching that is not in tune with Holy Scripture.

As I think about our church tradition and background, I think most of us are more in tune with that exhortation. We're more careful about what we hear and have noses to sniff out heresy. We should make

sure those who are preaching and teaching the Word of God are faithful to Scripture. We are careful about what we hear and should remain so. However, Jesus is speaking of something about which we might not be as careful: how we hear. Ask yourself, “Do I examine myself as much as I examine the teaching? Do I sit through a sermon and evaluate the sermon or do I sit under the Word and let it evaluate me? Am I one who digests God’s Word and finds nourishment and transformation or am I a sermon connoisseur? Do I taste test God’s Word? Am I content with knowing what I like and don’t like without ever inwardly digesting and being transformed by it?”

Are you hearing the Word profitably in your personal devotions, Bible studies and classes, under the preaching of God’s Word? Are you following Jesus’ instruction: “...*hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience*” (Luke 8:15)? Is God’s Word bringing forth fruit in your life for God’s glory? That’s what Jesus wants us to think about as we hear this parable.

The seed being sown is the Word of God, the Sower is Christ and His messengers who sow the Word and the soils are the hearts of people. Jesus deals with four types of soils or heart conditions in this parable.

I think there is a common misapplication of this parable in which we grade ourselves based upon how we hear the Word of God. We think there are basically three passing grades, with the first getting an ‘F’ and the last and best an ‘A.’ But sometimes we look at the two middle examples and think of them in this way: The third soil—thorny ground—gets at least a ‘C’ because it is still taking in some of the Word. The second soil—stony ground—might get a ‘D’ because the Word sank in a little bit. These are not good grades, but at least they are not flunking.

That is a total misinterpretation of this passage. If we listen to Jesus rightly, we hear Him say that there is only one commendable soil which gets a passing grade. It is the fourth soil, where the Word is received and held onto in an honest and good heart and persevering fruit is borne. That is the only kind of heart that truly receives God’s Word and only God can give someone that kind of heart. Jesus is telling us if we are going to receive the Word appropriately, we need God to give us a new heart that receives God’s Word with meekness.

So take heed. You are here and have ears. But do you really hear God’s Word? You have ears on the outside but are the ears of your heart receiving the Word? We are going to look at three hazards of hearing God’s Word followed by a great hope which stands out in this passage. There are many hazards involved in hearing the Word of God but Jesus holds out an invincible hope for us.

Hazard #1 – A Hardened Heart

This hazard is found in Luke 8:5. *“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.”* Jesus explains this parable in verse 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.”*

The hardened heart is hazardous. Jesus compares this type of heart to a well-trodden path—like a street busy with traffic where cars are rushing by hour after hour. There is never a moment of rest for this heart. God's Word passes over it and the seed is sown often but the heart has been impenetrable to the seed. The heart has never been plowed nor had furrows opened in it for the seed of God's Word to sink in and start to bear fruit. Jesus is saying, “Beware, because the devil is always happy to cooperate with our hardened hearts and snatch away the Word of God so we will not hear and be saved” (verse 12). This is the devil's objective.

There is a troubling implication in this parable: Sometimes the hearts that have heard the Word the most are the most hardened to it. The seed keeps falling but never sinks in or makes a lasting impression upon the mind. Jesus is saying that is due to the punctuality of Satan. You and I may be late to church but Satan is always on time. He is always ready to search the congregation for hard ground and to snatch the seed up as it falls on a hardened heart.

As soon as you leave this room, the devil is going to sound a ‘supersonic bird call’ to his infernal birds and make them ready to come to snatch up the good seed of the Word of God. This may come in the form of ungodly companions or influences you allow into your life. As soon as you hear God's Word, these influences are ready to dissuade you from it, get you thinking about something else and make you cynical toward it. J.C. Ryle says:

Nowhere perhaps is the devil so active as in a congregation of gospel-hearers. Nowhere does he labor so hard to stop the progress of that which is good, and to prevent men and women being saved. From him come wandering thoughts and roving imaginations, listless minds and dull memories, sleepy eyes and fidgety nerves, weary ears and distracted attention... Let us beware of the devil. We shall always find him at church [wherever the Word is preached].

Now I know some of us struggle with sleepiness because we've worked hard all week and this may be the only time we get to sit and rest. Others may use medications that cause drowsiness. I don't want you to think, “Oh no. If I fell asleep in church last week the pastor is so mad at me and going to condemn me.” I read a story in Kent Hughes ‘Preaching the Word’ series about an elder who fell asleep in

church and his wife nudged him in the middle of the sermon. He stood up immediately and pronounced the benediction in the middle of the service. I can sympathize with that.

Jesus is talking about one who is wide awake under the ministry of the Word but their heart is so hard that it never sinks in. The devil is very active to make sure that heart will not receive the Word.

Hazard #2 – A Superficial Heart

Here we find the opposite of the first heart. This is a person who receives the Word immediately with gladness, joy and enthusiasm. Look at Luke 8:6, “*And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.*” Jesus explains this parable in verse 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.*”

I think Jesus has in mind the person who might get excited about a new preacher, drink it in and have an emotional response. Maybe you hear the words, tears come to your eyes and you accept it. However, you have only been gripped by emotion. It hasn't gotten to the level of will where it changes the way you think, your affections and conduct.

Or perhaps you have a merely intellectual response and believe because it ‘makes sense’ to you. But it hasn't transformed you. I think of those who—like me—grew up in a Christian home and heard the gospel when they were children. The gospel is often presented like this: “There is heaven and hell. Jesus Christ died on the cross to save you from your sins so you could go to heaven, not hell. Little boy, where do you want to go when you die?” The response is often: “I don't want to go to hell so it makes sense to believe in Jesus.” It is logical. But that person can very well grow up and never bear fruit or continue in the faith.

Jesus is saying to not be content with a superficial acceptance of these words. You need to question if you are continuing in the Word and have a lasting response. Psalm 1 contains a description against which we can test ourselves: the man who meditates on God's Word day and night. He becomes like a tree whose roots go down deep and bears fruit that does not wither. When the storms of life come against that tree, it stands firm. It is not like a sapling which is blown over easily.

Ask yourself: Do I have an appetite for the Word of God that goes beyond Sunday mornings? If you are really hearing the Word, you desire it throughout the week and long for the milk and meat of God's Word. It's not a temporary, hour-a-week thing. Beware of just being inspired or thrilled by God's Word. If it is not crushing, convicting and demanding change of you, it is probably not really being heard by you.

Look at what the prophet Jeremiah says. “*Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?*” (Jeremiah 23:29). God's Word doesn't just come to inspire and

thrill us—offering froth and foam. It doesn't come merely to tantalize our palate or provide a feast or music for our ears. It is a hammer that comes to bruise and crush us. You know the Word of God is sinking into your life when it wounds you and causes you to cry, "Great Physician, would You heal me?" You know it is sinking in when it breaks you and causes you to humble yourself under His mighty hand, purifies your heart like fire and starts to change your appetites and enliven your affections for God, convicts you of selfishness and lack of love. It moves you out of self-absorption to serve your neighbor with no reference to what you are getting in return. Then you know the Word of God is taking root in your life.

It is not a shallow, superficial thing. It is a terrible thing to receive God's Word enthusiastically for a little while, then reject it. Often those who have tasted of the goodness of God's Word, then spit it out are the people who become the most vehement against Christ. An old German preacher named Helmut Thielicke said, "The anti-Christian is always a half-Christian gone mad." The one who has sort of been in but then rejected it often becomes vehemently opposed to it. Beware of a superficial acceptance of the Word.

Hazard #3 – A Divided, Distracted Heart

Look at Luke 8:7, "*And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it [the Word] and choked it.*" Jesus explains what this means in verse 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.*"

The thorny ground says, "Yes, I've got room for the seed of God's Word in my life but I've also got a lot of other rubbish that I'm not willing to root out." The thorny soil in the heart is that in which something besides the good seed of God's Word springs up. It is not usually intellectual doubts that form these weeds but what Jesus calls the "*...cares and riches and pleasures of life...*" (verse 14). Jesus is saying, "The man whose heart is thorny has some definite things with which he is not willing to part. He says, 'Give me the Word,' but throughout the rest of the week the energies of the soil of his heart go to the production of weeds."

It is hard to have riches—a lot of possessions—and also have a heart possessed by the Word of God. The only way you can live with riches and have your heart completely captivated by the Word is to live a life of ongoing repentance and say with the hymn writer:

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always:

Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

(From Be Thou My Vision, Words by Dallan Forgaill, 8th century)

You Lord, are my inheritance and the One for Whom I am living, not these riches.

Jesus says the pleasures of life can become like weeds choking out the Word. I think one of the greatest subtleties that we Christians have to be very vigilant about in our day is the temptation to use our freedom in Christ as a cover-up for evil when it comes to our choices of entertainment for our minds and hearts. Think about it. Let's say on Saturday night we spend a couple of hours filling up our hearts and minds with silly, trivial, sexually-suggestive, self-absorbed, popularity-hungry shows that unbelievers watch. When we come into church on Sunday morning, are we going to have ravenous appetites for God's Word? If our hunger for the Word and passion for worship are anemic, we need to check for weeds. What are we allowing to grow in our hearts that choke out the good seed of God's Word? If we are loving and feeding on the worldly pleasures of this life, we're not likely to be hungry for God's Word.

Jesus says cares—anxieties, worries, disappointments—can be weeds as well. I need to ask myself if I am more concerned about God fixing my problems than about my life coming under the authority of His Word. If so, I need to repent of placing my agenda ahead of the agenda of God's Word and say, "God, I don't know if You are going to do anything about this area of disappointment and grief in my life. But I know Your Word is sufficient. If I have Your Word, I have the greatest treasure and I want my life to be recalibrated around it. I will make it my first priority and trust You to take care of these cares and worries." Beware of having a heart that is divided and distracted—having weeds choke out the Word of God.

This is a serious and sobering passage and I have tried not to mute the seriousness of it.

The Hope of Hearing the Gospel

But there is great hope in this passage. Look at Luke 8:8. "*And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. As he said these things, he called out, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'*" Look at verse 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.'*"

What is the hope in this passage? The hope is in Jesus saying that in spite of all the hazards, God will make sure His Word bears fruit in the world. In spite of the hardness of human hearts, the superficiality of many people's response and all the weeds which threaten to choke out God's Word, Jesus is confident none of this will stop the Kingdom of Christ from growing and expanding in the world. Jesus says, "My Word will triumph over all those obstacles and bear fruit a hundredfold" (verse 8). It's going to

be fruitful and multiply. Count on the gospel increasing in the world. You will find proof of this in the refrain that constantly pops up in the book of Acts. “The Word of God continued to increase...and multiply” (Acts 6:7). Jesus is saying to His disciples, “Follow Me on My mission.” What is He doing? Luke 8:1 tells us He is going “...*through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.*” Jesus is saying, “Follow Me, disciples. I’m not thwarted or daunted by the negative responses of so many. I’m going to keep sowing the gospel of the Kingdom—confident that it will bear fruit.” That is our hope.

The hope for you personally is that Jesus can give you a new heart, responsive and receptive to the Word of God. Only God can give that kind of heart but He is in the business of doing that. In the New Covenant, He promises to take away your heart of stone and give you a tender heart that bears fruit by the Word of God living in your life. Jesus says God had done this for His disciples. Look at Luke 8:10. “*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God...*” God has opened your eyes and given you a heart to believe. This evening, our guest missionary is going to preach from Acts about Lydia—a woman whose heart was opened to receive the Word of God. God does that today and can do it for you.

If you are finding your heart has been hard, stony and not receptive to the ministry of the Word, God is present. The devil is active but God is more powerful than the devil. God can take away your stony heart and give you a heart which receives the Word of God. Cry out to Him for that. That is the hope within this passage.

Take Heed How You Hear the Word

As God transforms the soil of our hearts and makes us tender and receptive to the Word, we will bear good fruit that will remain. So take heed how you hear. You have heard the truth of God’s Word, now what are you going to do with it? A huge test of how you are hearing is what you do with the Word.

Let’s end with three words of application from Luke 8:16-21:

1. If you have heard God’s Word, you can’t hide it. Verse 16 says, “*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 you take a candle, light it with fire and stick under your bed, what will happen to your bed? It will light on fire. You cannot cover it up. Here Jesus says God’s Word is like a lamp. When it is lit and ablaze in your life, you can’t hide it. You will be like Jeremiah, who said:

*If I say, “I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,”
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.*

(Jeremiah 20:9)

Jesus is saying, "If you have really received the gospel and are hearing God's Word, you won't be able to keep it hidden. If you can keep it hidden, it's probably not really there."

2. If you have heard it, you can't escape or evade it. Look at verse 17: "*For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.*" God's Word is going out for salvation and judgment. It is reading and reviewing the thoughts and intentions of our hearts even as we review it. On judgment day, God will hold us accountable for every Word we have ever heard. God's Word is never static or ignorable—able to be pushed to the margins ultimately. It is always alive, dynamic and demands a response. Someday, those at the judgment who rejected the Word of Christ are going to hear God say, "But you knew. I told you. You were there and heard. Every Word of God that you pushed to the margins will be brought into the light." So Jesus gives the warning to be careful how you hear. Test yourself to see if you are responding to this message as if it is the living Word of God that will judge you one day, because it will. It is ultimately not ignorable.
3. When the Word of God is received with faith, it continues to grow, multiply and bear fruit. Look at the good news in verse 18: "*...for to the one who has, more will be given...*" If you hear God's Word with an honest and good heart, you desire it more and more. The more you feed on the Word, the more fruit will be borne in your life. In John 15:7-8, Jesus said, "*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*" Jesus is saying the same thing. When the Word of God is active in your life, it will bear much fruit. More and more fruit will be borne as the Word of God penetrates our lives.

On the other hand, if you don't use the Word or act on it, even what you think you have will be taken away from you (verse 18). That is a sobering warning. If you don't use it, you lose it and the longer you listen to the Word without being transformed by it, the greater will be the spiritual impoverishment in the end. Seed will be snatched, trials will take away the good seed of the Word and the worries, riches and pleasures of this life will dominate like weeds choking out the Word.

How are you hearing it? Can you hide it? If you are hearing it, you can't hide it. Are you responding to it? You will never be able to escape it ultimately. Are you using it and acting upon it? God didn't give us His Word just so we could admire and talk about it but so that—as it sinks into our lives by His grace—we can be transformed by it and act on it.

Jesus says at the end of this passage that the greatest fruit borne in the lives of those who really hear His Word is their closeness to Him. They get to know Him and have a relationship with Him. Look at the last thing Jesus says in this passage. As the crowds press in to hear Him, His mother and brothers are standing outside knocking on the door because they want to see Him. Jesus says, "*My mother and my brothers [those who are My family and close to Me] are those who hear the word of God and do it.*" That

is the value Jesus places on hearing His Word. He reserves the closest companionship and relationship for those who not only hear His Word but also do it. That is a relationship we don't want to miss but instead cultivate in order to grow closer and closer.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, Your Word is life, power, sharp, living, active and penetrating. Your Word will judge us one day. More importantly, Your Word brings salvation to us. We pray that You would give us hearts which meekly receive Your Word. Thank You that this is a gift from You and You are active and present to do it today. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that You offer a relationship of nearness to all who hear and do Your Word. We want to know, be close to and experience oneness with You.

I pray we would take heed how we hear. The devil will have the birds of prey prowling and flying over our heads. I pray we wouldn't passively dismiss You and Your Words but that throughout this week You would speak, Oh Lord.

Take Your truth, plant it deep in us;
Shape and fashion us in Your likeness,
That the light of Christ might be seen today
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith [so that You would shine through
us and draw others to Yourself through our witness].
Words of power that can never fail -
Let their truth prevail over unbelief!

(From Speak, Oh Lord by Keith Getty)

We believe, Lord. Help our unbelief, we pray. Amen.

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