

YOU HEAR GOD CORRECTLY

MATTHEW 13:1-23

A Native American – a Cherokee – was visiting and taking a walk with his friend who lived in downtown New York City. Suddenly, he said, “I hear a cricket.” “Oh, you’re nuts,” his friend replied. “No, I hear a cricket. I do! I’m sure of it.” His city friend said, “It’s noon! There are people bustling around, cars honking, taxis squealing, noise everywhere. You’re telling me you can hear a cricket?” “I’m sure I do,” said his friend. He listened attentively... walked to the corner... across the street... and looked around again. Finally on the corner he found a shrub in a large cement planter. He dug beneath the leaves and found a cricket. His city friend was astounded. But the Cherokee said, “My ears are no different than yours. It simply depends on what you are listening for. Here, let me show you.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change – quarters, dimes, nickels, pennies. He dropped them on the concrete sidewalk. Every head within a block turned. Picking up the coins, he said, “You see what I mean? It all depends on what you are listening for.”

One of Jesus’ favorite sayings was, “He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:9 NIV) Your sense of hearing may be excellent, but can you hear what God is saying? You may hear well, but do you listen well? Do you understand? This morning I’m beginning a series of messages that I’m calling “When Jesus is King: Parables About the Kingdom of God.” They’re all found in the New Testament book of Matthew. They’re all parables. They’re all about something Jesus called the Kingdom of God. What’s a parable? It’s a story about a real life situation from which you can draw a spiritual truth. One Sunday School teacher defined it as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Pretty good. One of her students got that definition a little confused and said a parable is “an earthy story with a heavy meaning.” I like that definition even better! Jesus’ primary form of public speaking was telling parables. In most cases when He was speaking to crowds, Jesus told stories – shocking stories, challenging stories, enlightening stories.

All these stories we’re going to look at have at least one thing in common. They’re all about the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven (which means the same thing) – one of Jesus’ favorite topics. What is this Kingdom? That’s what the parables will reveal to us over the next three months. But, suffice it to say today, that the Kingdom of God is primarily a spiritual realm or place where Jesus is the King. We don’t have kings in our country, but you know a lot about that concept anyway. A king is someone who governs, who controls and who usually has much more authority than a president or a prime minister. So the Kingdom of God is the realm where Jesus reigns and rules. The Kingdom of God is bigger than the universe and yet it’s small enough to fit inside your spirit and mine. Jesus’ parables are like opening the windows and doors of your soul on a warm, sunny spring day so that the light and the warm, sweet breeze of the Kingdom of God can be seen, smelt, heard, tasted and touched.

Let me show you what I mean. **READ, p. 968.** Jesus is saying that when He's King in your life, you hear God correctly. This is one of the few parables where Jesus Himself explains the meaning of the story he tells. He compares people to four different kinds of soil: hard, rocky, thorny and good soil. It's a metaphor about God's desire to have an eternal relationship with you. Jesus is the farmer or the one who sows the seed. The seed is the message of the Kingdom. The four soils represent four kinds of human responses to God and the things of God. Now, elsewhere in the Bible, the place where you and I respond to God – or don't respond to God – is often called the heart. No, not that organ beating in your chest pumping blood everywhere, but your spiritual center, your soul, the place within you that allows you to connect with God and God to connect with you. These four kinds of soil represent four kinds of human heart conditions. Jesus' point is this: the kind of heart you have this morning is revealed by your reaction to this message about the Kingdom of God. Do you get it? Really? Do you hear the words but miss the message? Do you understand? Are you listening? The first kind of heart Jesus identifies is...

THE HARD HEART

Jesus tells a story about something that everyone in that day and time would have seen often – a farmer throwing seed out onto his field. Back then, fields were divided into narrow, long strips. Between these strips were even narrower paths where the ground had become hard and compressed because of the human traffic back and forth on them. The farmer tries not to drop any seed onto those beaten down paths. Why? Because it's a waste of his precious seed. No seed was going to germinate in that hard, unyielding ground. Besides, birds would swoop down onto those paths and eat the seed almost as quickly as it was thrown out. Nevertheless, some seed accidentally fell on that hard ground.

Jesus says that the hard soil reminds Him of some people who hear His message. As they hear about God and what it means to follow Jesus, those with hard hearts remain stiff, callous and impenetrable. Any kind of positive spiritual response is impossible. And then the devil – like the birds – comes and snatches away any possibility of allowing God to enter their lives in any meaningful way. When your heart is hard, you're not receptive to the things of God. Spiritually hard hearted people live next door to you, help run the businesses where you work, attend classes with you, live in the same house with you and, perhaps, sit right next to you at church. They just don't get it. They can hear about God's love and grace numerous times, but it's like trying to plant a seed in a concrete sidewalk. Yes, their physical ears work well enough, but not their spiritual ears. They don't really hear, believe in or respond to Jesus.

What causes a hard heart? The Bible says it's a sinful mindset about God and life that you refuse to reject. You know God is alive and that you'll answer to Him one day. But you resist Him. You reject His control of your life. And the more you reject the truth, the harder you get. Here's how the Bible describes this

condition, “Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him.” (Ephesians 4:18 NLT) The things of God start to revolt you. You can’t stand to hear Christian music on the radio. You scoff at prayer. You think the Bible is just an old book full of fables. Followers of Jesus bore, anger and irritate you. You write them all off as hypocrites. Church is something to be avoided at all costs and endured as a mindless ritual if you have to go. I read about one man who said, “I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for sinners. But I guess I just don’t want to give Him my life. I want to make my own decisions.” He’s honest enough, but he just articulated a hard heart. Jesus said, “The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don’t understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts.” (Matthew 13:19 NLT) What’s your heart like today? Is it soft towards the things of God or is it hard? He who has ears, let him hear. When Jesus is King, you hear God correctly. The second kind of heart Jesus identifies is...

THE SHALLOW HEART

This farmer in Jesus’ story throws some of his seed onto shallow soil. What makes it shallow? The ground in Israel often has slabs of limestone just a few inches under the surface of the soil. There’s enough topsoil for a seed to germinate. In fact, the underlying rock absorbs the sun’s heat and the seed will often germinate more quickly than seed in other parts of the field. But here’s the catch. There isn’t enough depth of soil there for the roots to develop and so the plant never fully develops. The soil is shallow.

Jesus compares that shallow soil to people who hear His message, get all excited and enthused, but then drop away and lose interest as quickly as they show interest in Him. They have shallow hearts. People with shallow hearts hear about Jesus ever so gladly. They like the parts about God blessing them, God solving their problems and God giving them an eternal home in heaven. They hear what they want to hear. As a pastor, I’ve seen many people like this at church. They may even make a profession of faith, get baptized and join the church. Everything is sweetness and light for awhile. But then some kind of difficulty shows up in that person’s life. The devil makes sure of that, doesn’t he?! Loss of a job. Illness. Marriage problems. Rebellious kids. Financial issues. As quickly as they embrace Jesus, they fall away from Him.

When I was growing up, I’d hear a lot about “backsliding.” It simply refers to the all too common practice of sliding back into whatever kind of life you were living before you became a follower of Jesus. Here’s a question I’ve often pondered but never been able to answer: are people with shallow hearts really, truly born again? Do they really know Jesus? Will they go to heaven when they die? I’m more than happy to let God answer those questions. But here’s what I do know. They have shallow hearts and their faith doesn’t last. They blame it on life’s

problems; they blame it on Christians who turn out to be imperfect human beings; they blame it on churches who don't have their act together. But the real problem is inside of them. They just have shallow hearts.

By the way, the opposite of a shallow heart is a deep one. That's the kind of person who holds onto God and perseveres right in the midst of whatever the devil and this world throws at him or her. Deep hearted people just plain hang in there with God come what may without getting bitter, sour and resentful. When you have a shallow heart, you can get off to a great start with God, but you don't last. How did Jesus put it? "The seed cast in the gravel—this is the person who hears and instantly responds with enthusiasm. But there is no soil of character, and so when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it." (Matthew 13:20-21 MSG) What's your heart like today? Is it deep towards the things of God or is it shallow? He who has ears, let him hear. When Jesus is King, you hear God correctly. The third kind of heart Jesus identifies is...

THE STRANGLED HEART

Some of this seed fell onto soil that was infested with other kinds of seeds – thorn seeds and weed seeds. During the winter months, the thorns and weeds would die off and the field would look clean enough. But when spring came, those dormant thorn and weed seeds would come to life and little thorn bushes would dot the landscape. If the farmer dropped seeds into the same area where the thorns or weeds sprang up, the good grain had little chance of becoming a healthy plant. The thorn or weed plant was usually stronger and would choke out the grain as it tried to grow and ripen.

There are a group of people who respond to Jesus and a positive kind of spirituality begins to appear in their lives. But then other things begin to crowd out and choke off that fledgling spiritual life. Like what? Jesus calls them life's concerns and worries, a desire for material wealth and a prevailing pursuit of good times as the greatest goal in life. Folk with this kind of response to Jesus end up with strangled hearts. Jesus said, "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." (Matthew 6:33 NLT) Jesus says that the secret to real success in life is to become increasingly God-centered and less self-centered. These folk start to follow Jesus, but then they get strangled and choked off by values and priorities in life that have never really changed.

Personally, I believe this might well be the largest of the four groups Jesus identifies in His parable. As a pastor, I see so many people who fit this description. These are good people, moral people, family-oriented people – folk who, by in large, respect spiritual and religious stuff. But tending to life's problems, getting ahead financially, trying hard to find some fun and satisfaction in life are just more important on a daily basis than pursuing closeness with God.

In my experience, the devil does two things to folk in this group that are highly effective. First, he gets them to fill up their lives with good things so they don't have time for the best things. They're out doing activities with and for their kids to the point of exhaustion, or they're doing extra work on the side to pay for wants not needs, or they're out pursuing some leisure or recreational activity. These are all good activities in and of themselves, but they demand such a lion's share of people's discretionary time that there's nothing left for the best things – the God stuff, the Kingdom stuff, the eternal stuff. Don't allow the good things in life to become the enemy of the best things– it's one of the devil's favorite tactics.

Here's what else the devil does to strangle your heart. He gets you to focus on the urgent rather than the important. Have you noticed that the most urgent things in life are rarely important while the important things in life rarely appear to be urgent? It will never seem urgent to pursue God, to seek His Kingdom, to just walk across the room to share Jesus with someone or to find a way to serve the poor. But all those things are of ultimate importance. It may seem urgent to expose your kid to every sport ever created by the time he or she reaches the age of 10 or work 10-15 more hours a week to fund your lifestyle choices or invest hours and energy in some hobby, but what is the long term importance? Folk with strangled hearts get so busy doing the good, urgent things in life that the best, important things of God get crowded out over and over again. Someone made this perceptive comment, "Christianity is fighting a losing battle in so many of our lives, not because we're bad, but because we're too busy with our briefcase of second-rate stuff."

Hear what Jesus says, "The seed cast in the weeds is the person who hears the kingdom news, but weeds of worry and illusions about getting more and wanting everything under the sun strangle what was heard, and nothing comes of it." (Matthew 13:22 MSG) What's your heart like today? Is it a strangled heart that's been choked out by what this world considers important or do you have a wide heart through which God can pour Himself regularly and often? He who has ears, let him hear. When Jesus is King, you hear God correctly. The fourth kind of heart Jesus identifies is...

THE FRUITFUL HEART

The farmer in Jesus' story dropped his seed into some soil that was clean, deep, and well-prepared. The grain grew up strong and tall. It was eventually harvested and fed the farmer and his family. Jesus compares that good, fruitful soil to those people who hear the good news of God's love and grace and respond to it in the right way. They hear God correctly. They understand. They get it. What they hear, they put into action. Their response to this message about the Kingdom shows up in their everyday, walk around lives.

Let me describe these fruitfully-hearted people a bit more. Instead of being carelessly indifferent to God, they give Him careful attention in every area of their

lives. “What would Jesus do?” isn’t just a cute bumper sticker or wrist band for these folk. They really do want to know what Jesus would do and they’ll do it! Instead of an unstable, “I’ll live for God today but maybe not tomorrow” attitude, they keep growing in the things of God steadily. Instead of being strangled by the weeds and thorns of life’s busy and urgent demands, they properly nurture a relationship with Jesus and find ways to serve Him each day. They produce a spiritual harvest of Kingdom stuff. Other people around them find Jesus as Savior, or have their hearts comforted or have their physical needs met.

Fruitfully-hearted people: are they perfect? No. Are they sinless? No. Are they great Bible scholars? Very few of them. Do they have “Rev.” in front of their names? Very few of them. These are simply ordinary people who make God the center and first priority in their lives consistently. Jesus says of them, “The seed cast on good earth is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.” (Matthew 13:23 MSG) Is that what your heart is like today? He who has ears, let him hear. When Jesus is King, you hear God correctly.

Baseball season has started! Back on June 22, 2002, the scheduled game between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Chicago Cubs at Wrigley Field was cancelled because of an eerie discovery. One of the Card’s pitchers was found dead in a Chicago hotel room. Thirty-three year old Darryl Kile had been a major league pitching sensation for 12 years and had appeared in three All-Star games. At the time, Kile was the Card’s best pitcher – their ace. At a recent team physical, the 6’5” athlete seemed in excellent health. When the medical examiners conducted an autopsy later that day, they discovered that Darryl Kile had died from a massive heart attack. His main coronary artery was 90% blocked. He appeared to be healthy, but his heart was seriously diseased.

Jesus reminds us that a person’s appearance and behavior can be misleading. You can look impressive on the outside, but your heart can be far from God. What kind of a heart do you have? Jesus says you’ve got one of four today – a hard heart, a shallow heart, a strangled heart or a fruitful heart. When Jesus is King, you hear God correctly. He who has ears, let him hear.