

September 18, 2022

TAKE CARE HOW YOU HEAR

Luke 8:1-21

(2 of 11 in a series through Luke 7-15)

Have you ever received a party invitation with a threat? You know, one of those invitations that says, “We’d be honored to have you at our guest as we celebrate together, and if you don’t, then there’ll be punishment.” Of course not. No one sends party invitations with threats. They’re just invitations. Party invitations don’t come with the weightiest of words. You can feel free to respond by saying, “Oh, so sorry. I wish we could make it but we can’t.” If the invitation is through Facebook—if I understand it correctly—you can just check the box that says you’re not coming. It’s simple. No thanks. You can even feel free to ignore it altogether, perhaps give the impression that you just missed the note or it got lost in the mail. Party invitations don’t come with threats because, well, they’re just party invitations.

And there can be a temptation in the world to view the words of Scripture with the weight of a party invitation—something to be easily accepted or rejected. The Bible has stories and teachings, so one might think, and you can feel free to draw from them and cite them. But you don’t have to feel any pressing burden to respond to the Bible. Ignore it altogether if you don’t think you need it. But that’s not how the Bible presents itself to us, is it? The Bible actually does come with threats if its words aren’t heeded. Psalm 2:12 tells us, “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.” John 3:36 holds out the promise of eternal life for those who believe in the Son, but it also reminds us that if we do not believe in the Son, we shouldn’t comfort ourselves with the idea that we’re standing in some neutral space and are okay. We need to see that if we don’t believe, we’re under the wrath of God that will manifest itself in merciless judgment on that final day when the Son returns. The Word of God is nothing to be trifled with. It is to be obeyed, and if we do, then the blessings are beyond what we can imagine. But if we don’t obey the Word, then we put ourselves in a very dangerous place. Therefore, we need to be careful how we hear—that is, what we do—as we hear the Word of God. And one of the clearest places in Scripture that we see the call to be careful with what we do as we hear the Word of God is in Luke 8:1-21.

The text begins with Luke mentioning in verses 1-3 that Jesus went about proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (something we looked at thoroughly when we looked at Luke 4:14-44¹) while having with him the twelve as well as some women. Specifically Luke mentions Mary Magdalene (whom he had delivered from seven demons which he had caused to go out of her), Joanna, wife of Chuza (who was Herod’s household manager), and a woman named Susanna among many others. And these ladies provided for Jesus and the twelve, so it seems, out of their means. This both reminds us that Jesus had followers from many diverse backgrounds and

¹ You can find audio, video, and a manuscript of the sermon at: <https://cccjackson.org/sermons/luke-4-14-44-jesus-begins-his-public-ministry>.

that the greatest thing we can do with our resources is pour them into the work of Christ—which is now carried out through his church. Then, after this introduction of Jesus’ followers, Luke focuses us on the topic he wants us to see. I mentioned last week that Luke’s arranges his gospel not strictly chronologically but around themes, and the theme that he wants us to see in these teachings of Jesus and events in his life all revolved around the theme of hearing and obeying God’s Word. Here’s what we see in these verses.

If we hear and do not obey God’s Word, our hearts can be hardened

In other words, it’s not safe for us to not obey Jesus’ words. Let me show you this in the text. In verses 4-8 Jesus gives a parable. He pictures a man sowing seed, and as the man sows seed, he’s just tossing it out on the ground indiscriminately. He’s not necessarily paying attention to where all the seed is going. So some fell along the path where there was no soil, and some of that got trampled while birds came and ate the rest. Some fell on the rock, probably meaning a place where there was limestone or some other rocky element just below the soil. Consequently, though it might germinate and begin to grow, it would quickly wither away because it wouldn’t be able to establish roots and as soon as it went any time without water, it would wither and die. Other seed fell among thorns so that even though the seed would germinate and begin to grow, it was always competing with these aggressive and abrasive thorns for nutrients and the like, and so it too would eventually die. But—thankfully for the sower—some of the seed fell on good soil and yielded a fantastic crop of a hundred fold. Then, Jesus ended that parable by saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 8). In other words, this is an important teaching that needs to be heard and understood.

Now, what I’m about to tell you about this parable might be hard for us to accept because we’re so familiar with it. All of us who have read this section of Scripture are no doubt aware of verses 11-15 where Jesus explains the parable. You may well have even listened to me explain the parable, thinking to yourself, “Ah, yes, this is that parable about the Word of God being spread and received in various ways,” and that’s exactly right. Again, we’ll see that in verses 11-15. Moreover, this may lead you to think something like, “Isn’t Jesus such a good storyteller? He picks such good, practical illustrations that people would have been familiar with so that they can all understand the point he’s making in such an easy-to-understand kind of way. We need more pastors who understand this and use common, every day, easily understood stories like Jesus did.” But—and here’s the part that can be hard for us to accept—Jesus didn’t tell this parable in order that it might be easily understood. In fact, he didn’t share this parable in order that it might be understood at all. Rather, he shared it in order to conceal the truth of what he was teaching from everyone who wasn’t privy to hear his explanation (which he provides in verses 11-15).²

² Dale Ralph Davis does a good job of noting that we often think of Jesus’ parables in a different way than the Bible teaches us that they function: *Luke 1-13* (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2021), 135-37.

That's exactly what he says in verses 9-10. There, we read, "And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God [as he was about to explain it to them], but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'"

Now, as Jesus says that (i.e. "seeing they may not see . . ."), he's drawing from Isaiah 6:9-10. We all love the story of Isaiah 6. Isaiah sees the Lord and is immediately convicted of his sin because he knows that he is an unclean man in the presence of a holy God. And so he says, "Woe is me!" recognizing his right condemnation before God, and yet the Lord provides atonement for him, having an angel take a burning coal from the altar—on which sacrifices would have been made (signaling the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus himself)—and touch it to Isaiah's lips at which point the Lord declares, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (v. 7). It's a glorious moment. And then it's only made more glorious as the Lord asks whom will he send and who will go for him, and Isaiah responds, "Here I am! Send me" (v. 8). As I mentioned, it's so beautiful and glorious.

But we sometimes end our telling of the story there, forgetting what the Lord gave Isaiah as his message to herald. Perhaps that's intentional on our part because we'd like to forget what Isaiah was told to say. But just to refresh our minds, the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (vv. 9-10). Now, that's painful to hear, isn't it? Isaiah was to speak a message that would blind their eyes, shut their ears, and dull their hearts as they are headed toward great judgment.

The message is so painful that Isaiah's response is to ask how long he has to do this. And the Lord makes clear that he has to preach this hardening message until God's judgment falls completely on Judah, who was in great rebellion against the Lord. In other words, Isaiah's preaching would be a message of judicial hardening. What I mean is that he'd preach, but as the people heard Isaiah's preaching their hearts would only grow more hardened to the Lord and his message, and that was God's purpose because he was judging them through Isaiah's preaching. That's what we mean by "judicial." The preaching was an act of judgment whereby the people were hardened in their rejection of and disobedience to the Lord and his Word.

This is precisely why Jesus says that he speaks in parables. It's not because he likes to use the familiar scenes of the day to tell sweet stories that communicate difficult truths so that they can be easily understood. It is, Jesus says, "*so that* seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand." It is an act of judicial hardening of their hearts, just like Isaiah did years earlier. Right before this section, we were told of the Pharisees that they "rejected the purpose of God," and now they are bearing the judgment of God as he hardens their hearts so that they simply will not see or understand what Jesus is saying or who he is.

Jesus' words are weighty, and we must hear them with a heart to obey what he says. If we fail to, our rejection of his Word may ultimately lead us down a road where our hearts are so

hardened that we simply cannot hear and cannot see. Those who do not obey what they hear in the Scripture can have their hearts hardened as an act of divine judgment. So, the first note we have our hearing God's Word is a warning. Second, Jesus wants us to see that the Word of God will have a varied reception.

The Word of God will have a varied reception among those who hear it

As Jesus explains the parable in verses 11-15, he explains that the seed in the parable is the Word of God being spread among people, and as the people hear, they have varied responses. Some will hear the Word and like the seed that fell on the path, the enemy will quickly snatch it away before it sinks into their hearts. Others will hear the Word and receive it with joy. They'll be those who are baptized and everything seems great for a little while, but then—just like the seed on the rocky soil—they won't really have roots. And so, when a time of testing and trial comes along, they'll fall away and show themselves not to be followers of Christ.

Surely we've seen both this before. Sadly, even in our own church's history we've seen this. We've baptized people who are professing faith, and everything seems great. We celebrate. Life seems good. And then the person goes through a time of testing, and suddenly they pull away. We don't see them. We pursue them. And eventually they've walked away. What happened? What happened is exactly what Jesus said will happen on occasion as some hear the Word of God. People will give the appearance of faith and life only to show themselves never really to have allowed the Word to take root in their lives.

Then Jesus says that others will be like the seed that fell among the thorns. They'll hear the Word, give evidence of receiving it and having life, and they'll even begin bearing what looks like lasting fruit. Again, we'll baptize them and celebrate. They may well walk with us for a while. But eventually the cares of this world and the riches and pleasure of life will pull at them, and they'll show that they want these things more than they want to follow Christ, and so their faith will be choked out, as it were.

And we've also seen this, haven't we? The person who ends up simply chasing after immorality instead of holiness and walks away from Christ is an example of this. The person who gets busy with travel sports or pursuing riches so that eventually the church and their commitment to Christ fades into the background is an example of this.

Finally, then, Jesus tells us that there will be others who hear the word, receive it, persevere in faith, and bear fruit. They'll be true believers. But what we see is that the gospel will have a varied response. Therefore, when we share the gospel, someone professes faith, we pour into them, and they ultimately walk away, it doesn't mean we've done something wrong, necessarily. Jesus told us this would happen.

But I do think this should serve as a warning to us if we're among those who have heard the word, professed our faith in Christ, have given evidence of fruit—maybe even over years—but are now feeling the pull of the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life pulling at us. Maybe we're

going through a time of testing and instead of driving us to greater commitment to walking with the Lord and his people, we're finding our commitment waning. These times are not small matters. Pay attention what you're doing with God's Word. Are you hearing but not obeying? You may well show yourself to be one who never has really taken in his Word and allowed it to root deep in your heart and give you life. The response to God's Word will be varied, so let's make sure we're not a picture of any of the seeds other than the one that landed in good, fertile soil. Third, Jesus gives us a personal warning, namely, that you and I are responsible for what we hear.

You and I are responsible for what we hear

After explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus shares another parable of sorts, saying, "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. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. 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 he has will be taken away" (vv. 16-18).

The imagery Jesus uses is clear enough. It makes sense to us that you don't light a lamp only to cover up the light it gives off. That would be senseless. But clearly Jesus isn't simply warning us not to throw blankets over our lamps if we're ever tempted to do such a foolish thing. No, he's clearly talking about something else with this imagery. And he tells us what he's talking about when he says, "Take care then how you hear."

The lamp and the light it gives off then represents God's Word, and Jesus is telling us to be careful with what we hear. If we hear God's Word and ignore it or refuse to obey it, we're like those who are given light from a lamp but then proceed to put a jar over it or put it under our bed. We have been given a great gift only to cast it aside. And Jesus tells us that what we do with his Word will be exposed. Our response will be known. And if we're given the light of God's revelation that we see in the Scripture and act on it by obeying it, then the Lord will enable us to grow in more knowledge and understanding of God's Word. We'll find that obeying what we clearly see in God's Word is the path to gaining more understanding so that we might gain more. However, if we refuse to obey the light we see in his Word, then we'll find that even the knowledge we have will grow darker. We'll not see or understand as clearly.

No doubt we've seen both. Starting with the negative example, surely we know people who have heard God's Word but then began not to obey it, and we've watched their judgment and discernment on so many matters begin to darken so that they understand less and less. While, by the same token, hopefully we've seen ourselves obey what we know and have seen ourselves grow in understanding God's Word more and more. Thus, we learn that the greatest way to grow in knowledge and understanding of God's Word is simply to obey what little we know. Obey and you'll grow in knowledge and understanding, then obey that, and you'll grow again, and so on and so forth. This is our path. And so, we must—to use Jesus' words—take care how

we hear. Make sure we're obeying God's Word. And then, let me end with one final note: those who hear God's Word and obey it are Jesus' family.

Those who hear God's Word and obey it are Jesus' family

The section ends in a way we might not anticipate, and yet it makes perfect sense why Luke puts this story here. Jesus' mother and brothers come to see him, but they can't reach him because of the crowd. Therefore, people pass along word to him, saying, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you" (v. 20). And instead of Jesus answering with something like, "Oh, tell them I'll be right there," or the like, he answers, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (v. 21).

Here he not only sends the note that we've heard already, namely, that we need to be people who hear God's Word and do it as well but also that as we do so, Jesus sees us as his family. That is, those who hear the command of Scripture to repent and believe in Jesus, who lived, died, and was raised for us are made children of God, and by being children of God we become family—both with Jesus and one another.

Now, as a church, we use this imagery a lot. We refer to ourselves as a family, look at each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, fathers and mothers in the faith, and so on and so forth. But this idea didn't originate with us. None of us gathered in a back room and said, "You know what would make the church feel more intimate, if we thought of each other as family." No, this is Jesus' idea. We're merely mimicking how he taught us to think of ourselves and one another—as Jesus family—and thus, family to one another as well. And that's the blessing of hearing and obeying God's Word.

Brothers and sisters, the Word of God is not like a party invitation which we can throw in the disposal if we like and remain unaffected. It comes to us with weight and responsibility. So, are you obeying it? If not, you may show yourself to be one who has never really had the seed of the gospel take root in your heart. Your rejection of God's Word and the obedience it calls you to right now may be hardening your heart to the degree that repenting will simply not be within reach again. Be careful, then, how you hear. The understanding you have may well be taken away if you refuse to accept and act on it in obedience. And yet, if you will, you'll not only be on a path to growing in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, but you'll show yourself to be part of the family of Christ. Let us then shown our obedience to his Word now as we come to the table. Amen.