

### ***Growing Ears***

In the name of him who has sown the imperishable seed of the Word of Life into our hearts, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel lesson has our Lord Jesus sitting in a boat as he tells the Parable of the Sower to a crowd of people standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It's one of his better-known parables; but it is, on the surface anyway, not very remarkable. It's nothing more than a description of the most elementary principles of agriculture. They are basic facts of nature: seeds don't sprout when they cannot penetrate the soil and so get eaten by birds, nor do they fare very well when planted in shallow, stony soil or when they have to compete with weeds for precious water, nutrients, and sunlight. They do much better when planted in rich, deep soil where measures are taken for weed control. It's common sense stuff, really; especially for people who were living as close to the land as the crowd listening to Jesus say these things. And you can imagine some guy standing in the back, some guy who was dragged there under protest by his insistently pleading wife who wanted him to come and listen to the wondrous Rabbi from Galilee who was getting such rave reviews everywhere. He stands there sullen and slouching, with his hands in his pockets. And after hearing a bit of this, he leans over to his wife and whispers angrily, "You made me miss a day of work for *this*? Some great Bible teacher he is! So far, he hasn't said anything that every five-year-old doesn't already know." And whether or not something like that was spoken by someone in the crowd, we can be absolutely certain that there were many people listening to Jesus that day who walked away understanding only the surface meaning of his words. We can be sure because Jesus concludes this simple parable with these important words: "He who has ears, let him hear."

So what? Well, perhaps you noticed that there is a break in the Gospel reading for this morning – that several verses between the Parable of the Sower and its explanation are missing. What happens in those missing verses is that Jesus concludes his discourse to the crowd, and then his disciples privately ask him the question, "Lord, why do you always speak to the people in parables?" The startling response of Jesus is essentially this: "So that they won't understand what I'm talking about." To quote him exactly, he says to his disciples, "*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven; but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ... But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.*"

I have several rows of sweet corn in my garden. It has sprouted ears, but it doesn't hear a thing – at least it's never given any indication of it. Likewise, if I had planted potatoes, they would have eyes, but they wouldn't see anything. In the same way, there are people who are spiritual vegetables. Though they have the necessary faculties to see and hear in a natural sense, they are blind and deaf to things of God. As a matter of fact, the Scriptures indicate that we were all that way initially. It's a result of being born of sinful parents into a fallen world. But for people who remain in that condition, the words of Jesus will never be properly understood. The Bible is for them a closed book and would be even if they were to memorize every word of it. The point is that if you understand anything more, if you really apprehend for yourself the spiritual significance of what Jesus says, it's not because you're some kind of theological genius, but because you have been given by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit the gift of spiritual sight and hearing. Only those who have this gift, only those who have been given the ears for it, can hear what Jesus says and understand.

This is part of the reason why it isn't much help to quote Bible passages to support your arguments when discussing some point of controversy with someone who is not a believer in Jesus. Not only do they not recognize the Scriptures as a source of authority, which is a problem to be sure; but just as importantly, they really can't grasp what is being said on a spiritual level. It stays on the surface, so to speak, like the seed that fell on the path. It doesn't penetrate the hard-packed crust. The same is true of people who accept the Scriptures as being true and authoritative, but who do not have faith in Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Among several good examples are the Jehovah's Witnesses, who though they might know very well *what* the Bible says and say that they believe it, invariably come away with meanings other than the ones God intended. This is why (if you were so inclined) you could stand there on your porch all day long discussing this Bible verse or that with a pair of Witnesses who rang your doorbell and never really get through to them. In a spiritual sense, you'd have as much success talking to corn and potatoes. It's not just that they don't get it, it's that they *can't*.

That's not to say that there's no hope for them; but rather, that to get through you have to start at the beginning. That's where the Lord gives the gift of spiritual sight and hearing through faith in Jesus, and thereby makes a person one of his disciples. How does that happen? The same way it happened to you. God gives these gifts through the Holy Spirit who works through the Word to first convict a person of sin. That's what breaks the hard crust on the surface of the soil that causes spiritual blindness and deafness, because what that crust really is, is sinful pride and smug independence. It's the "There ain't no God and I can take care of myself" of the unbeliever, and it's the "I can make God happy by what I do for him" of the cultist who imagines that he can by his own efforts earn his way into the favor of God by following the cult's prescription for success. Until that hard crust is broken, that sense of self sufficiency demolished, nothing good can grow in a person. But when the sharp and even harder Law of God cuts through that surface like a plow, sometimes assisted by the circumstances of life under the Law's curse that shake a person's self confidence and make him realize, "No, I really can't take care of myself and I am afraid of God's judgment", then a person is ready to receive the living seed of the Gospel.

That's the Word of God that proclaims how, in his infinite mercy, God sent his Son to die for the sins of the world, and how forgiveness of sins and life eternal are granted to all who put their trust in his atoning sacrifice. That Gospel message is living seed to the dead soil, and where it can take root in the cracks and fissures caused by the Law, the life of faith can begin to grow. And where there is the life of faith, there is also the ability to discern spiritually the Words of Jesus. You have a disciple of Christ – and to them it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. But again, I want to stress that this is God's work through the Word and Holy Spirit. We can put a hand to the plow by proclaiming the Law, and we can cast the living seed by sharing the Gospel; but only God can break the soil's surface and make the seed grow.

But for us this is past tense. We've already been blessed with the gift of spiritual sight and hearing. For most of us it happened when we were baptized and our old, sinful natures were condemned and drowned and put to death with Christ. That's what softened the soil so that we could also rise to new life with Christ as we heard the wonderful news that his death was for our sin. Then the Holy Spirit breathed into us the breath of life, and we who were formerly nothing but dead soil in the shape of infant human bodies became living beings. And perhaps there are others here who came alive in faith later in life; but either way, it was God's miraculous gift working in you that brought you to life and to the capability of understanding the words and teachings of Jesus. You have been given by God ears that can hear.

But now take let's take it a step further: I confess that I don't know a great deal about farming; but one thing I do know is that the goal of all who farm is to maximize the productivity of their soil. And so they buy the best seed, and they use the most appropriate kinds of fertilizer, and they spray for weeds and so on in order to squeeze the best possible harvest out of every acre. You all understand that. So it should come as no surprise that our heavenly Father seeks to do the same thing with you. He has given you ears to hear so that you will grow up spiritually to produce *full ears*, as it were, of the fruits of righteousness. Or to say it another way, with the gift of God to hear and understand comes the responsibility to use them for the purpose God intended. And like any other gift of God, this ability to hear can be heightened and enhanced through discipline and training, or it can be allowed to diminish through neglect and misuse. Our goal, then, is to maximize the fertility of the soil, to grow our ears for hearing so that we can grow bigger ears of fruit.

How do we do that? Well, it may be helpful to think of yourself as an acre of soil that God wants to plant – or better yet, as an entire quarter section, because then it's easier to see that within such a large area of land there's going to be several different kinds of soil present. We need to recognize in ourselves the various types of soil that Jesus talks about.

That hard-packed soil, for example – it isn't just found in unbelievers and cultists. No, because we still have the fallen nature very much present in us, we still have patches where we do not let the Word of God penetrate into our hearts. They are those places where we offer resistance to hearing, where we deliberately choose to avoid certain topics because we find them uncomfortable or too troublesome to try to understand, or where we know very well what God says about something and choose to ignore it. Such hard heartedness is nothing more than full-blown rebellion against God. It needs to be cut up and turned over by the sharp plow blade of God's Law and planted with his word of forgiveness in Christ.

And then there is the shallow, rocky soil. These are the places where the hard spots of resistance lie hidden beneath the surface. They can be, for example, secret sins that we continue to practice, but keep in the dark while pretending that everything is as it should be. They are the sorts of sins that we dearly cherish and do not want to be rid of, even though they prevent the life-giving Word from reaching down with its roots deep into the soul. As a result, they cause the life of faith to be very hypocritical and superficial. It's a faith that is only skin deep. The result is that the fruit of love for God and his people is not genuine, but only the shallow kind done for appearance sake. It's all show and no substance. And worse, because the life of faith has no deep roots, when there is trouble or a cost to bear – especially if it is on account of the Word, like happens when one is asked to take a stand for the faith in the face of adversity or persecution – well, then what little faith there is shrivels and dies in the heat. Because of this, these stubborn, stony, underground sins need to be dug out and removed too through repentance and confession.

And there are those pesky weeds – and so many different kinds of them, each with their own pernicious tricks for spreading and reproducing themselves. As someone who does a little gardening, I can say that I am absolutely amazed at how sneaky and persistent the little buggers are – and how quickly they can grow into big buggers that take over the place entirely. In the field of our lives, these weeds represent the competing interests for our attention that sap precious time and resources away from our growing in God's Word and that prevent him from developing in us the fruits of faith. And they could be anything: friends, family, entertainment, television, work, business, exercise, the internet, hobbies, sports, you name it – things that in and of themselves are very good but that can become problems if allowed to grow too large. Or, in some cases, they may be things that have no business growing in the field to begin with –

these need to be pulled out by the roots, of course. But those other things that are not inherently bad ... just as there are no fields around here entirely free of weeds, the important question is which plants have the upper hand? I've noticed that with my corn, once it reaches a certain height, it casts enough of a shadow that most weeds can't effectively compete with it. If they grow at all, they tend to be thin and scrawny. In the same way, we need to prioritize our interests and ensure that the life of faith gets the lion's share of light and nutrients so that it casts its shadow over all other aspects of our lives. That will prevent the other things from getting out of hand and taking over, and will ensure that we produce the harvest the Lord seeks.

And if by God's grace we do these things, we should have ample areas of good soil in our lives for the Word to grow in. But even here, a few precautions are in order. For example, we want to make sure that we are planting with the best seed. I make a point to try to stay on top of what is available today in the way of Christian literature and radio and so on, and I have to say that an awful lot of it promises spectacular yields – and maybe it does; but what it produces isn't fit for consumption. Only get your seed from reliable sources. The other thing to consider here is that even the best soil produces very little when it is sown with a stingy hand. To get more, you must plant more. Of course with seed in a field, there is such a thing as the point of diminishing returns, when applying more seed causes crowding that reduces the final harvest. I don't think there is such a point of diminishing returns when it comes to planting the seed of God's Word; but if there is, I can say with confidence that none of us is in any danger of reaching it soon.

My friends, our ears have been blessed with the ability to hear and to understand what God says to us. That is a great gift that grants useful productivity in this life for the kingdom of God, and eternal life in glory with him. We also have his gracious promise that to whomever has this gift, more will be given, and that he will have an abundance. So, since we have ears, let us make every effort to hear, understand, and apply what we have learned that we may grow ears of righteous fruits for him who in mercy saved us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***