

"HE WHO HAS EARS . . ."

by Walton Weaver

The ear represents the faculty of understanding. Jesus sometimes used the proverbial expression, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," to appeal to His listeners to use their gift of understanding to carefully weigh his teaching and receive it (Matt. 11:15; 13:9; Rev. 2:7). Just as men may see but not see, so they may also hear but not hear. To hear is one thing, but to hear with understanding is quite another.

On one occasion the disciples asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matt. 13:10). Jesus told them they were able to hear the things He was speaking concerning the kingdom (Matt. 13:16), but others were not able to hear (Matt. 13:13-15). "Therefore," He said, "I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt. 12:13). The question is not so much whether people are hearing what God is saying to them through Scripture as it is, are they *really hearing* what He is saying? One may hear but not hear.

There is a heavy load in the form of an awesome responsibility placed upon the one who teaches the word of God, and for this reason James says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (Jas. 3:1). He does not mean to discourage one from becoming a teacher. Paul instructed Timothy to entrust the things he had heard from Paul "to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). After a reasonable amount of time all Christians should progress in knowledge and discernment so that they are able to teach others the gospel (Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 3). The reason Christians do not grow into teachers is often due to the fact that they "have become dull of hearing" (Heb. 5:11). They hear but they do not hear.

The burden of divine accountability finally rests upon the one who hears. The teacher must be faithful to the word of God and he must teach the truth in the proper spirit and with the right motivation, but it is the responsibility of the hearer to hear what is taught. It is for this reason that Jesus sometimes reminded his hearers, "Therefore take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him" (Lk. 8:18). Mark's account says, "Take care *what* you hear" (Mk. 4:24). The more one hears the word of God while neglecting it, or while failing to do it, the less interest he has in it and the less able he becomes to understand it. The same principle applies when one fails to improve what *has* been received (Lk. 19:26).

To illustrate His point Jesus told the parable of the soils. The parable describes different kinds of persons to whom the word of God is taught. Jesus had a thorough knowledge of the human heart. In this parable the soils into which the good seed was sown represents four kinds of hearers, each determined by the different kinds of hearts represented by the soils. In effect Jesus shows us four ways that men receive His message.

The "Don't Bother Me, I'm Busy" Hearer

There are those hearers who simply cannot hear. They have cold and hard hearts. This kind of hearer is represented by the roadway, the wayside soil, which has been trampled and packed down so that it is so hard that the seed cannot penetrate it. This kind of hearer has been hardened by the things of the world. His thoughts, interests and ambitions are all occupied. He has no time to hear with understanding. These hearers only give a surface hearing to the gospel message. There is not sufficient interest on their part to give it the careful consideration it deserves. It cannot be understood because it is never seriously considered.

Why is this? Worldly interests have trodden them down until they are incapable of receiving spiritual things. Just as the birds of the air come along and take away the seed lying on the roadway, so the most insignificant things can take away this person's attention from God and His message. Any impression made is quickly rubbed out. You've heard the expression, "You might as well talk to a brick wall as to him," haven't you? This is the kind of person the wayside soil represents. You can talk to him about his business, sports, politics. But he doesn't have time to hear the truth of the gospel.

The "Hip-Hip-Hurrah For Jesus" Attitude

The "rocky places" hearer is the hearer who can get excited when the gospel is heard ("immediately receives it with joy," Matt. 13:20), but in the face of affliction and persecution the excitement quickly leaves after the message has been heard. These are people who are easily stirred emotionally. It is as though the intellect is completely by-passed. "These people get 'religion' the same way a person gets sickness during an epidemic. Any prevalent enthusiasm causes them great joy, a much speedier and boisterous type than those whose Christian experience is deep and genuine. They have sentimental fervor and, therefore, an instant response, but their zeal soon flags. Their emotional excitability and inconsiderate compulsiveness produce a melancholy conclusion. Religious movements of this type have produced many converts but few stable Christians, many blossoms but little fruit coming to maturity" (Fred M. Wood).

The problem Jesus is dealing with here is a surface hearing of the message. Some people want to find Jesus, feel Jesus, be moved, and be in love with Jesus, but they do not want to be growing, maturing and developing in character, nor do they want to become more and more like Jesus. There is no root. Their's is a "feel good" religion without the conviction and commitment essential to carry through when sacrifice or suffering are required in order for one to be faithful, or when it comes to doing the work Jesus has called upon His followers to do. This person may become "offended" at those who urge him to live right. In such a case, who is responsible for his leaving? The teacher or the one taught? In this parable Jesus places the responsibility on the one who hears.

The "I Love Jesus, But The World More" Attitude

The soil where seed fell "among thorns" represents the person who wants the best of both worlds. The only thing we are told is that he "hears the word" (Matt. 13:22). Nothing

is said about him understanding it, or receiving it with joy, as in the first two examples, but it is clear that the impression made upon him when he hears the word of God is real, even though it is later destroyed. This person wants all the comforts, joys and hope of Christ, but, like Demas, "having loved this present world" (1 Tim. 4:10), he also wants what the affairs of this life have to offer him, in addition to riches. It is for this reason that he becomes ensnared with the love of riches and pleasure. The possibilities of a good harvest were initially all present, but he becomes disloyal and is turned aside in pursuit of "things". He tries to serve both God and mammon.

It is harmful to be anxious about the affairs of this life; sometimes it is even worse than thinking that material things bring security. Riches and pleasure are so deceitful. One does not have to be rich to lose his soul because of riches; he only needs to "desire to be rich" (1 Tim. 6:9). This is enough to absorb all of his energies and time so that he neglects the things that are needful for growth and the bearing of fruit in the kingdom of God.

The "I'm Willing To Grow" Attitude

This is the only hearer of the four represented in the parable that bears fruit. There seems to be a gradual ascent in the quality of hearers as Jesus moves from the first through the third kinds of soil. The first was unreachable, the second was shallow, but the third one had possibilities of a good harvest. It proves out however that even this hearer lacks the depth necessary to be loyal to the Lord. Only the fourth hearer has the proper soil (heart) for the bringing forth of fruit to God's glory. The key to this man's growth is the seed which is the word of God (Lk. 8:11), but even the word of God cannot bear fruit unless it is implanted into "good soil" (Matt. 13:23), or "an honest and good heart" (Lk. 8:15).

One cannot come to know the truth unless he "is willing to do His will" (Jno. 7:17). This requires a "good and honest heart." Even the "common people" came to understand God's will in Jesus' day (Mk. 12:37), while the learned and elite turned away. The difference was a difference in attitude. The one loved to hear the things Jesus was teaching, the other had their love directed toward themselves (Mk. 12:38-40).

"He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt. 13:9).