

Ev221 Sharing Your Spiritual Journey

Lesson Ev221-16 Spiritual Encounters: Realistic about Results

When it comes to evangelism perhaps one of the most important stories in the gospel is Jesus' Parable of the Sower. He describes what happens when you try to share the Word of God with unbelievers. "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever who has ears to hear, let them hear" (Mark 4:3-9).

Jesus was telling a story about the simplest of farming activities, the sowing of seed in a field. From this he explains the harvest one can expect from this sowing of seed. That relates directly to what we can expect from our evangelism efforts. Soul winning is a matter of the sowing of the Word of God in the minds and hearts of people. The lesson is clear: The condition of the soil determines the kind of harvest the farmer gets. Likewise, the condition of the human heart determines the results when it comes to witnessing. The seed the farmer is sowing stands for the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From Jesus' teaching we see there are four conditions of the heart that we encounter when sharing the gospel. They are the hardened heart, the shallow heart, the heart of mixture, and the good and noble heart. An explanation of each of these follows:

1. The hardened heart is a heart that is not open to the Word of God. Like the birds that come along and snatch away the seed on the path, Satan comes. He takes away the Word that was sown in them. Perhaps their hearts are hardened due to a life of sin. Or, having heard the Word continually, they have hardened their hearts to the truth of the gospel. Maybe the enemy distracts them from hearing or just causes them to forget. Whatever the reason, they do not hear but reject the gospel. Have you seen this response in people you have tried to share the gospel with in the past?

2. The second kind of heart is the shallow heart. Soil is not deep on top of rocks. Seeds may germinate and grow, but the roots are shallow. The seedlings quickly wither in the sun. How often do we see people who have received the gospel with much rejoicing? Perhaps they respond to a public invitation at a worship service or evangelistic meeting. They appear genuinely repentant and willing to serve the Lord, and then you never see them again!

Why is that? Jesus says this is likely due to "trouble or persecution because of the word." Their confession of faith in Jesus Christ results in resistance and persecution from the culture around them. Their world promotes the flesh and the devil, anything but God. Faith involves believing in the invisible (Jesus) and the impossible (the Resurrection). It means suffering and opposition. Jesus implies that many are not able to make that commitment and quickly fall away.

3. The third kind of heart is the heart of mixture, where other plants like thorns are already growing. The seed started to grow, but the stronger thorns choked the tiny plants. Some people accept Christ and begin to attend church. They seem to have all the marks of a Christian and talk like a Christian, but do not have spiritual growth in their lives. This is the heart of mixture—committed to the idea of serving Christ, but distracted from true devotion to Christ. The “worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things” come in and choke the Word. Many people say they want to follow Christ, but their pursuit of material gain hinders their relationship with Jesus. In another passage Jesus taught that a person “cannot serve both God and money” (Matt 6:24).

4. Finally, the fourth condition of the heart is the good soil. The seed grows and produces a crop. This represents the Christian whose response to the Word results in a bountiful harvest of spiritual fruit in their lives. As Luke reports the story, the good soil stands for “those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (Luke 8:15). This is the response we all want to see—open receptivity that results in many others also responding to the gospel.

This raises a question for those who are leaders in the church: Which of the conditions of the heart should we focus our primary attention on? Can we tell from the outside, what kind of soil is in the heart of a person? Often we tend to focus on those that are most resistant or those who commit their life and fall away. Or sometimes we put much of our energy into those in our group who seem to be struggling. But the parable implies that most of our focus should be on those who receive the gospel readily. They will likely yield the most fruit for the kingdom. Why do we spend so much time trying to draw those who are not receptive to the gospel? Rather, we need to focus our efforts on those who are most receptive. The soil of the good and noble hearts will yield 30, 60 and a hundredfold for the kingdom’s sake.

In the Parable of the Sower, the response is not certain. We need to be realistic regarding our expectations of who will receive our efforts at sowing the word of God. It’s not that 25% will be hardened to the gospel and 25% won’t be able to withstand the persecution. He just says some will be this way or that way. We cannot control the condition of the hearts of the hearers, but we can be faithful in sowing the seed—the Word of God. We must leave it up to him to do his work in hearts.

While we can’t control the openness of our audience, we can pray fervently for God to break up the hardened ground of their hearts. We can also pray that God will “send out workers into his harvest field.” Pray that they will listen and that the seed sown will bear fruit in their lives. We learned the importance of prayer in ‘standing against’ the principalities and powers, the spiritual forces of evil in this dark world. We can pray that God would direct our path to persons of peace in our communities. We desire to see fruitfulness in our efforts at sowing his seed among those who do not yet follow Christ.

This story is **important** as it shows us that Jesus teaches us what kind of results to expect in evangelism. There are likely to be at least four varied responses to the Word of God in the lives of people. We cannot control the outcome, but we can be faithful to sow the seed regularly to hearts of unbelievers.

The **main truth** is that the condition of the human heart determines the fruitfulness of the harvest. The bearing of fruit does not fail due to the seed or sower. The Word of God is true and as you witness in the power of the Holy Spirit, you can leave the results with him.

Review Questions

1. Name at least three of the four conditions of the human heart that Jesus tells us we can expect when sowing the seed of the word of God. [Pause 5 seconds.]
 - A. If you said, “The hardened heart, the shallow heart, the heart of mixture, and the good and noble heart,” you would be correct.

2. According to the lesson, what does Jesus tell us about how many people will have a hardened, shallow, mixed, or good and noble heart? [Pause]
 - A. If you said, “It is not a matter of a certain number, just that some will respond these ways,” you are right.

3. If we can’t control the openness of human hearts to God’s Word, what can we do to encourage them to receive the Word in their lives? [Pause]
 - A. If you answered, “By praying that God would break up the hardness of their hearts and send Christian workers across their path,” you answered correctly.

Your **assignment** is to listen to the lesson as many times as you need, to be able to tell the parable in your own words. How can a better understanding of the Parable of the Sower help us be more realistic about our efforts in evangelism? Reflect on the four conditions of the human heart that Jesus talked about in that parable. Can you remember instances in your own life where people have responded to God’s Word in different ways? What do you think you would do differently now in sharing with people, based on what you have learned?