

IS IT #1, #2, OR #3?
Matthew 13:18-23

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

There’s a common mantra in advertising: “KISS everything,” as in, KISS: Keep It Simple, Stupid. In other words, if you want people to understand what you’re selling, keep it really simple.

It seems strange, then, that Jesus would use parables to teach the crowd. How will they learn from them? Doesn’t this complicate understanding? The disciples even asked about this: “Why do you speak to them in parables?” (v 10).

Hearing God’s Word with understanding isn’t just a matter of “getting” the parables. Understanding God’s Word is tough anytime, and for at least three reasons. But particularly when Jesus speaks in parables, how can ANYbody hear God’s Word?

Jesus knows his audience well. There are things that are keeping them from hearing and understanding. He teaches his disciples that even though the Word of God is powerful, the hearer in his or her sinful condition has the ability to resist and misunderstand. We cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him; faith is a gift. So what keeps us from hearing?

#1, Jesus says, is the devil. He is like the birds who snatch the seed off the path. Certainly, we can agree that the devil exists, because we notice the perversion of our own thoughts even while listening

to a sermon. What are you thinking about right now? Are you thinking about what you did last night, or what you’re doing later on? Whatever it is, leave it up to the devil to shorten your attention span and introduce thoughts into your mind that have no business inside God’s house.

#2, Jesus says is your flesh. Our sinful flesh looks for the next spiritual high. As long as everything is going well, we’re all for the Word of God. But when hard times and persecution come, we’re quick to abandon it. This is like the seed that falls on the rocky soil. We avoid suffering and substitute something much easier to take.

#3, Jesus says, is the world. We have many worries and cares that steal the joy of listening to the Word. We have the challenge of boredom or monotony of work or school. We may be concerned about our income and the rising expenses of health care and other essentials.

The devil, the world, and our flesh make up the unholy trinity that keeps us from hearing. The meaning of the Third Commandment calls on hearers not to despise preaching and God’s Word. Yet when listening problems and lack of understanding happen, this is exactly what happens. Preaching and God’s Word are both despised.

But God’s Word IS heard, and WHEN it is heard—and understood—what blessings! Jesus said to the Twelve, “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what YOU see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (vv 16–17).

How does that happen? Jesus answered the disciples’ question this way: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (vv 11–13). Did you hear that? Hearing and understanding God’s Word is GIVEN; it’s a gift.

You have just been gifted. Just now. You have been given the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ. For many of you, that first happened at your Baptism. Your eyes have been opened to see that Jesus truly IS the Son of God who came to take away the sins of the world by dying for you on the cross. And you continue to hear God’s Word that kills the sinner inside and raises the new man to life—just like the seed that dies in the ground and then sprouts and

grows and eventually bears fruit. It is the listening to God's Word and its teaching that does this.

With his death on the cross, Jesus has conquered the devil, the world, and our flesh. This gives us the authority to pray, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." This evil is not just some impotent, inanimate, impersonal substance. It is the evil one, who steals the Word from our hearts, who tempts us with suffering, and then coaxes the world to follow him.

But our Lord has overcome the evil one, and in faith in his victory we may pray confidently and resist the snares and traps he sets. Our Lord has chosen you to receive this gift of faith so that you may hear and understand. This is grace and grace alone. No merit on your part has caused this. It's our Lord and his love for you.

Jesus teaches the disciples to sow the Word of God liberally. There are no places, regardless of their potential to grow, where the Word of God may not or should not be preached. The sower in the parable is spreading seed everywhere—over the path, the rocks, and the weedy areas. That's because God's grace is for everyone. Everybody who hears the words you have heard today may be certain that Jesus really has died and has risen *for them*, has forgiven *them*, has given *them* eternal salvation.

So when you have trouble listening to a sermon, don't be too quick to blame the messenger or the Word, but examine yourself. What's keeping you from hearing? Is it the devil, the world, and your flesh? #1, #2, or #3? Recognize them and put these thoughts to death in your heart. In turn, Jesus will heal you.

Every chance to hear God's Word is an opportunity not to be missed. After all, it is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:16). It does not return void. The account of God redeeming us through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection works wonders on us. "For to the one who has, more will be given" (v 12). Your hearts are filled with the Spirit of Christ. So grow and produce fruit from your renewed and cleansed hearts. Amen.