

How to Hear from God: The Deaf Heart

Parables in Mark: Part 1
Mark 4:1-15 (Matthew 13:1-19 & Luke 8:4-12) 6/24/2018

Summary: Life and joy comes from hearing from God. But to hear his voice, we must listen the right way. Jesus calls for intensive listening. Those who hadn't been listening were punished by parables, which hide the truth from those who aren't interested enough to seek it. God speaks through his Word (the Bible). Don't be a sidewalk. Satan has many ways of stealing the Word from our hearts if it doesn't sink in.

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Mark 4:1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. 2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

9 Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to listen, let him listen." 10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11 He told them, "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12 so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'" 13 Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?

14 The sower sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. Immediately Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

Introduction

When I was a teenager, back in the days before email, I remember waiting by the mailbox, hoping the mailman would bring me a letter from a friend. These days people check their voicemail, email, social media—we want to know because communication with the people we love is a huge part of life. And most of us have known the painful loneliness that can result when that mailbox stays empty and no one seems to want to talk to you. What about communication from God? Do you ever find yourself waiting by the mailbox, longing to hear from him?

Hearing from God

Psalm 28:1 ...if you remain silent, I shall be like those who have gone down to the pit.

David begins his prayer by saying, “God, if you don’t speak to me, I might as well be dead.” Why? Because communication from God is the source of life and joy. One of the most astonishing and most precious wonders of life is that God Almighty, the Creator and sustainer of all things, actually *communicates* with us. And if he stopped doing that, or if something gets in the way and cuts off that communication so you’re not receiving it, then you might as well be dead. But on the other hand, when you do receive it, it fills you with life and joy.

Isaiah 55:10 As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, 11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

What is that purpose God?

12 You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace

If you want life and peace and joy, you have to hear from God. And here’s the amazing thing: God is always willing to speak to us, which means when we are not hearing from God, it’s a listening problem. Listening to God is not an easy thing to do, and so in today’s passage, Jesus is going to teach us what kinds of things hinder our listening, and how to listen the right way so we are able to hear God’s voice in a way that brings us life and joy.

Setting

Verse 1, Mark gives us the setting.

Mark 4:1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge.

This time Jesus uses the boat as a floating pulpit. There is an area near Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that has become known as the “Bay of Parables.” And if you stand on a boat offshore in that Bay, you can effortlessly speak to several thousand people on shore and be heard.¹ This event may very well have happened in that spot.

Rule #1: Listen!

So that’s the setting. Now take a look at the first word out of Jesus’ mouth.

¹ Edwards, 126.

3 “Listen!

That's the first word of the parable and also the last word.

9 Then Jesus said, “He who has ears to listen, let him listen”

That Greek word for **listen** appears 13 times in this chapter.² And if you count other words about paying attention, there are 27 in the chapter. Look at the very next word. **3 ... Listen. Behold. Behold** means *look*. So he begins by saying, **“Listen! Look!”** He really wants us to pay attention. You don't have to be a Bible expert to figure out what this parable is about. When Jesus repeats something 27 times in one section, I think it's pretty clear what he's getting at, right? Scholars debate about the best way to describe this parable—should we call it the Parable of the Sower, or the Parable of the Soils? If we follow Jesus' emphasis, I think we would call it the parable about listening to Jesus.³ Rule #1 for hearing from God: Listen, listen, listen! Listen hard. Listen with your heart, not just your ears.

The Obscure Parable

OK, so with all that in mind, let's read this very important parable.⁴

3 ...A sower went out to sow. 4 As he was sowing, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seeds fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

So that's the parable. Then Jesus wraps it up by saying: **9 ...He who has ears to listen, let him listen.** And that's it. In v.10 he's in a different place on a different occasion. Jesus just tells this story and then walks away. No interpretation. No application. No lesson. Can you imagine if I just came in here and say, “Ok, everybody, I want you to really listen to me. Make sure you get this! This guy was out farming, and some of his crops grew, and others didn't. Goodbye,” and I walk out of here. That's essentially what Jesus did here. Why does he do that? That's what his disciples want to know, so they track him down and ask him.

Rule #2: Ask

10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables⁵.

So Jesus gives this parable, and his disciples are sitting there saying, “Hmm, yes, yes—very good.” And then as soon as they are alone with him they say, “Hey Jesus, about that parable—that was a great

² vv.3, 9 [2x], 12 [2x], 15, 16, 18, 20, 23 [2x], 24, 33.

³ This is further emphasized in the structure of the passage. Jesus gives us the parable in vv.3-8, then the interpretation starting in v.14. But sandwiched in between the parable and the interpretation are vv.9-13—a whole paragraph about ... listening! And remember, whenever Mark sandwiches something, portion in the middle of the sandwich is the key to interpreting the whole section.

⁴ Unlike the other gospels, Mark doesn't give us very extended samples of Jesus' teaching. He only does it twice: the Olivet Discourse in ch.13 and the parables here in ch.4. So when Mark does set aside a whole chapter of his Gospel to an extended section of Jesus' teaching, you know it's especially important to Mark's purpose. That's what he does here with these four parables, and of the four, this first one is especially significant. Matthew also places this parable first in his chapter on parables. Mark devotes 20 verses to it (Matthew 23 verses).

This parable is crucially important for understanding the overall message of the book of Mark, and the whole New Testament, because this parable lays out the threats and pitfalls that will hinder the work of the Great Commission, and the keys to success in the Great Commission.

⁵ **Parables** (plural)—they want to know the meaning of the parable of the soils as well as other parables he had told.

parable and all, but, uh, we don't know what you're saying. We have no idea what you're talking about. What does that parable even mean?"

Jesus will tell them what it means, but not until v.14. Before he gives them the meaning, he wants to let them know why he is talking in parables and not telling the crowds what they mean.

The Hidden Mystery

11 He told them, “The mystery of the kingdom⁶ of God⁷ has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables.”

The parables reveal a mystery. A mystery is something that has never been revealed before, and that can only be known through divine revelation. And Jesus is saying, "The outsiders—they don't get to know the mystery of the kingdom. That's only for you insiders." The people had been waiting for hundreds of years for the Messiah to arrive and bring an end to this present, evil age and usher in the glorious kingdom of God in the age to come. But the rollout of that kingdom isn't going to be like they expected. There is some new information, never before revealed, about how this kingdom will come about. And that information is classified. It's classified, so only those with top secret security clearance get to know about it.

When the King of kings has highly classified information, how does he keep it secret? By hiding it in parables, and then explaining those parables only to those with top secret security clearance.

How to Get Security Clearance

Wow. How did they get that clearance? What did this particular group of people do to become insiders and get security clearance? Is it that the insiders have special knowledge and powers of insight that enable them to understand everything Jesus says? Not at all. The whole reason they are there asking Jesus about it is because they didn't understand. When Jesus told the parable, nobody understood—not the crowds, not the disciples, not the 12—nobody got it. So what did this group do to become insiders? The answer is in v.10.

10 ... the Twelve and the others around him (are you ready for this?) asked him about the parables.

How did they get this top-secret clearance? They asked! That's all. When they didn't understand Jesus' words, they went and asked him, "What does that mean?" That's the only difference between them and the crowd. The crowd heard the parable and said, "Huh? I don't get it," and went about their day. They were content to not understand. The insiders were the ones who said, "What? I don't get it," but they wanted to get it, and they were interested enough to go to Jesus and seek the meaning.

And we'll see that pattern as we go through the gospel.

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?⁸

Answer: the same way they understand this one—by asking Jesus. When Jesus said to them was given the mystery, that doesn't mean they had special powers of insight. It just meant they got answers because they came and asked. For example—skip ahead a few chapters to ch.7.

⁶ Jesus has been preaching the kingdom of God since ch.1, but the word "kingdom" has not been mentioned since then. This is the first time we get a taste of what the content of Jesus' preaching was like.

⁷ Matthew's parallel account says Kingdom of heaven (Mt.13:11). The terms are interchangeable. Matthew, who wrote to Jews, tended to accommodate Jewish sensitivities and used euphemisms in place of the word "God."

⁸ Most of the commentators take this to mean the interpretation of this parable is needed to understand all others. It seems more likely to me that Jesus is saying that their inability to figure out that parable without his help means they wouldn't be able to interpret any parable without him.

Mark 7:14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

Again, he calls the whole crowd to listen and understand. But then he gives a parable that no one understood.

17 After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

Then he went on to explain it to them.⁹ That's how it worked. The insiders are the interested—people interested enough to pursue an answer.¹⁰

That is rule #2 on how to listen when God speaks. If you don't understand something, don't be content to just walk away puzzled. Find the answer. And we'll talk some more next time about how to do that—how to figure what a passage means when you're stumped. For today the point is simply this: anyone can be an insider and hear from God if they listen, listen, listen.

What an amazing way to guard classified information. It's so much better than the way our government does it, because with Jesus' way, there are no leaks. There are never any leaks, because the thing that keeps the outsiders from knowing it is lack of interest.

Parables as Judgment

Parables are a fascinating thing, because they are a precious treasure to the insiders, but for the outsiders they are a judgment from God. All through the Old Testament God would speak to the people in parables in contexts of judgment. And we see that here too. Just go back one page in the Gospel of Mark and you'll see it. Speaking in parables was a punishment for their sin of saying Jesus was satanic.

Mark 3:22 And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." 23 So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables

The consequence of them saying that was that the classified mystery of the kingdom is hidden from them—all they get is parables. And if all you get is parables, and no explanation of what they mean, you get nothing. That's the punishment for their refusal to listen all through the first three chapters when Jesus wasn't using parables, but was speaking plainly. They didn't listen when they had the opportunity, so now they lost the opportunity. And if you question whether this is judgment, just look at the next thing Jesus says.

11 ... to those on the outside everything is said in parables. 12 so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

What in the world does that mean? Was Jesus having a problem with getting too many people listening and understanding and repenting and being forgiven, and he said, "I've got to put a stop to this"? No.¹¹ Jesus wanted the people to understand¹²—obviously. That's why he begins the parable by saying,

⁹ We don't get every parable explained in the gospels, but the Apostles did, so all the doctrine we get from them throughout the epistles teach us the truths we need to understand all the parables.

¹⁰ Back in ch.3 Jesus said his true family—his true brothers and sisters and mothers, were the ones who did the will of God. And if that sounds out of reach, it's not. Here's the first example of it. These people were doing the will of God by catching up to Jesus and saying, "We don't understand. Would you please explain it to us?" That's the will of God. It's the will of God to simply be interested in what he has to say.

¹¹ When he spoke clearly, without parables, they concluded that he was satanic, he was insane, he was a blasphemer, they walked away puzzled—every response except for repentance. If Jesus wanted to prevent people from repenting, he didn't need parables to accomplish that.

¹² The high Calvinists will sometimes ridicule interpreters who don't take this passage at face value, suggesting that the motive must be to avoid facing the hard doctrine of divine judgment on the non-elect. However, not even the high Calvinist takes this passage and Isaiah 6 completely at face value. If they did, they would have to say that the only thing needed for the non-elect to

“Listen! Listen! Listen! Watch! Pay attention! Get this! Understand this!” He wanted them to understand and repent.

So what in the world is Jesus saying here in v.12? He’s quoting from Isaiah 6, which is a passage about God’s judgment on the nation of Israel. When God gave Isaiah his marching orders as a prophet, this is what he said:

Isaiah 6:9 He said, “**Go and tell this people: “Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ 10 Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”**¹³

That’s sarcasm.¹⁴ God is saying, “Isaiah, your job is to go out and tell these people the truth. But they are so rebellious and hard-hearted that telling them the truth is tantamount to making them blind and deaf. That’s how much they hate the truth. All you have to do to make them blind and deaf is tell them the truth, because as soon as you do that, they will stick their fingers in their ears and close their eyes and receive nothing.” It’s dripping irony and sarcasm. It’s like he’s saying, “Heaven forbid they should ever listen for once and repent.” And when God gets sarcastic like that, it’s a crushing rebuke.

And the people of Jesus’ time knew exactly what that Isaiah passage was about. They knew the Jewish history. Isaiah spent years calling the people to repentance, they rejected his message, rejected God, and invited God’s wrath on themselves, and they were destroyed by Babylon. And so Jesus is borrowing that same language from Isaiah 6 to say, “Just as the nation of Israel received devastating judgment from God for refusing to listen to his prophets in Isaiah’s time, in the same way, Israel is going to receive devastating judgment from God again for refusing to listen to me.” Israel’s rejection of Jesus was a repeat of Israel’s rejection of God back in Isaiah’s time. And if they kept it up, it would have the same result—judgment.

And that’s exactly what happened. But this time the judgment took a different form. Instead of a military defeat, this time the judgment was that Israel would be hardened against God and the gospel would go out to the Gentiles. You can read more about that in the closing paragraph of the book of Acts, where Isaiah 6 is also quoted.¹⁵

repent and be saved would be a clear presentation of the truth. A face value interpretation would say that if the non-elect heard the Word in a straightforward way, without parables, they would repent. Such a conclusion would be quite Palagian. Fallen men need far more than just a clear presentation of the truth to be born again. Apart from a special work of the Spirit, not even the clearest presentation of the truth would turn them.

¹³ Eyes that don’t see and ears that don’t hear are mentioned multiple times in the Old Testament, e.g. Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2.

¹⁴ Was Isaiah trying to prevent the people from turning back to God? Of course not. His whole ministry was an effort to call the people to return to God.

Isaiah 31:6 Return to him ... O Israelites.

Isaiah 44:22 Return to me, for I have redeemed you.

Isaiah 1:5 Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? ...10 Hear the word of the LORD ... 16 wash and make yourselves clean.

Isaiah 55:3 Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. ... 7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.
Isaiah wasn’t trying to harden the people’s hearts; he was trying to persuade them to turn back to God. And the same was true of Jesus’ preaching.

Mark 1:14 ... Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming ... 15 Repent and believe the good news!"

This interpretation is consistent with the way Matthew and Luke present the material in their parallels (Mt.13:13-16, Lk.8:10. See also Acts 28:24-28). They remove the sarcasm and state the principle more directly, placing the blame on the people’s refusal to listen.

¹⁵ That seems to be the point when Luke ends the book of Acts by quoting this same Isaiah passage and then saying the Gentiles will listen.

Acts 28:24 Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. 25 They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: 26 " 'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.' 27 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their

So it's clearly a statement about judgment, but back to the original question: why the parables? Why not just rebuke them or say nothing at all to them—why parables? Why give them the truth, but in a difficult, veiled form? Here's why: it's because by putting it in parable form, Jesus exposes what kind of heart each person has. Your reaction to parables (and other difficult passages of Scripture) exposes what kind of listener you are.

Rule #3: Hear God's Voice in the Bible

The Seed = The Word

Okay, so with all that background, let's look at Jesus' interpretation of the parable.

14 The sower sows the word.

The word is the message that Jesus was preaching—the gospel. That message has been passed down to us through the Apostles in the pages of the New Testament. This is the message Jesus preached, which he referred to before as the gospel, and here as **the word**. It is the Word of God. This is how God communicates with us. He speaks through his Word. There is nothing you can ever know about God that isn't in this book. So rule #3 for listening to God: listen to the Bible.

But it's more than just a book. It's like a live feed from heaven, where, as you read it, God will speak to you in specific, individual ways—communications from God specifically for you. That will happen only if you *listen the right way*. And his words will grow inside you like a seed.

Jesus wants us to think of the truth of his Word as being like a seed. Why a seed? Because seeds are where the life of the plant comes from. You can have the most fertile soil in existence, but if there is no seed, there will be no life. The soil represents the human heart. No human heart can produce any life. No human heart can generate any fruit or harvest. The only thing a human heart can do is be a place where the seed of God's Word does its thing. But all the life come from the seed.

But it's *potential* life, right? That's another reason seeds make a great metaphor for the Word. There is potential, but in order for that potential to be realized, it has to be placed in good soil. If you put some seed on the sidewalk, they might as well be rocks—they will never grow.

So seeds are sources of potential life. Vast, waving fields of grain lie latent in the seed, if it is placed in good soil. But not all soil is good.

Rule #4: Don't Be a Sidewalk

The Path

4 As he was sowing, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Birds like seeds. If you put a seed on the sidewalk, you don't get a harvest; you just attract birds. What does that part mean? What do the birds represent?

15 Some people¹⁶ are like seed along the path,¹⁷ where the word is sown. Immediately Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' 28 "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

If that seems anti-Semitic, then we would have to say that Isaiah and the other prophets were also anti-Semitic.

¹⁶ Some commentators have argued that the interpretation of this parable did not really come from Jesus, but was added later by the church. One reason they give is that the metaphor changes slightly. First the seed is the word, and then, starting in v.14, the seeds are identified with the people. The argument fails because if we assume Jesus would never make such an adjustment in a

The birds in the story represent Satan. Whenever God's Word is preached, that instantly starts some spiritual warfare. When you try to encourage a friend using the Bible, or someone tries to encourage you with the Scriptures, the devil **immediately** springs into action. When you read the Bible, Satan jumps in right away and tries to take that seed out of your heart before it can penetrate.

And some people have hearts like sidewalks when it comes to receiving truth from God's Word. It just lands and lies on the surface, and it's easy pickings for Satan to take it away. They hear a point in a sermon and think, "Hmm, interesting," and that's the last they ever think about it. They listen with their ears, but not their heart. They have excellent hearing in their ears, but their hearts are deaf.

Why is it hard to focus on preaching? Because a very powerful being is working hard to confuse you.

Satan's Methods

How does he do that? How does Satan manage to pluck the truth of God's Word out of your heart like a bird grabbing a seed?

Confusion

His favorite way is through confusion. If he can keep you from understanding it,¹⁸ then he knows it will never sink into your heart. This is why it's so important for us preachers to be clear. There's nothing worse than a preacher who is trying to show off how many seminary words he knows. So everyone goes away thinking, "Man, that guy is brilliant." "What was his sermon about?" "I have no idea, but he sure is brilliant." That's worthless preaching. So it's important for us preachers to be clear, however, that's not the point Jesus is making here. He doesn't say one word in this parable about how the sower should sow. All of the focus is on the listener. The reason the seed doesn't penetrate the hard soil is not because of the sower or the seed. It's not the preacher or the message; it's because of the soil—the condition of the hearer's heart.

Dull Hearing

You very frequently hear people complain about dull preachers. But Jesus never warned us, "Watch out for dull preaching!" Many times, however, he warned us about dull listening. How many times have people driven away from a church complaining about how the preaching was bad, not realizing that God is displeased with them because their listening was bad.

The seed is only safe when it is buried in the soil of your heart because Satan can't get to it there. But if it just lies on the surface, Satan can take it away. So Satan will put confusing thoughts in your mind. Or he will bring up distractions so that you miss key parts of it. You're trying to listen to the sermon, and right at a crucial part of the message you're thinking, *What is that humming sound? Is that the air conditioning? Hmm, didn't the piano used to be in the front of the room? Why is it back there now? Oh look, someone got up and is walking across the room. I'd better watch. Oh no, I just remembered I forgot to pay that bill. Is there a spot on the preacher's tie?* Why is all that going through your mind? Spiritual warfare. Satan is right here, right now, in this room, hard at work. This is where he works, because he

parable, then why would Mark? R.T. France explains that the change is merely the natural results of explaining a symbolic story. The alternative would be to say something like, "The fate of the seed sown in rocky soil represents what happens to the word when it is preached among people who..." The way Jesus said it is less logically tight, but makes the point clear enough to those who are not disposed to quibble (p.203).

¹⁷ Mark tells us that the disciples were on the path (same word) when they demonstrated their failure to understand the mystery that Jesus revealed to them about his death and resurrection by quarreling about who was the greatest (9:33–34) and who would get to sit on his right and left in his glory (10:32–41).

¹⁸ Matthew makes this explicit. **Matthew 13:19** When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

knows if these truths from God's Word sink into your heart, it will really, really mess up his efforts long term.

Focus on Others

Another way Satan does this is by keeping your focus on others, instead of your own heart. You're thinking, *I sure wish my son were here for this sermon. He really needs to hear this.* People who are teachers really have a problem with this. "Oh, that was a good point. I'll jot it down so I can use it in my Bible study." You're so concerned about everyone else getting it that you don't take the time to think through how it applies in your own life.

Defensiveness

Another way is through defensiveness. There's something convicting in the sermon—something that, if you gave it serious thought, would expose some sin in your heart. So your inner lawyer chimes in and starts justifying the way you are. So all your mental energy is focused on defending yourself against the conviction rather than submitting to it and repenting and changing.

Antagonism

Another tool is antagonism. *I don't like that preacher. He did this or that or he didn't talk to me or whatever, therefore I'm not going to listen to him.*

Familiarity

Another way Satan does this is through familiarity. You've heard a passage of Scripture so many times that you think, "Oh, I already know all about that," and your heart stops listening. It's kind of like the noise of your refrigerator, or some background noise that your brain eventually tunes out so you don't even hear it anymore. When we do that, it's our very familiarity with the truth that robs the truth of its penetrating power because we won't attend to it and give it serious thought because we think we already know all there is to know about it (which is never the case).

You can really see this at Christmas time. You walk through a store and they are playing Joy to the World—which has some of the most glorious truths imaginable in it. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare Him room, and Heaven and nature sing. He rules the world with truth and grace!" Those are some of the most glorious truths in the universe, and while that's playing over the speakers in Wal Mart we are wandering around saying, "Where is the toilet paper?" We are spiritually hard of hearing!

When Satan removes the seed from your heart, it remains in your mind. So from now on, whenever you hear that principle, you say, "Oh yeah, I know that," but it's not in your heart. The power of the seed has been removed from the center of who you are so it no longer has the position to change you.

Apathy

Another way is through apathy. The Word doesn't sink in to some people's hearts because they just don't care. They aren't interested in being changed by God's Word, they are happy to just stay the way they are. They listen to preaching because they want to be intrigued and amused, but not to be changed. They are like the people who listened to Ezekiel's preaching.

Ezekiel 33:30 "...your countrymen are ... saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' 31 My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. ... 32 Indeed, to them you are nothing

more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

Inaction

And that brings us to the last one I thought of: inaction. You hear the Word, but you don't put it into practice. James says that every time we do that, we deceive ourselves. It actually does damage to your mind every time you hear the Word but don't put it into practice.

James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Jesus said that those who listen to the Word but don't put it into practice are like a foolish man who builds his house on the sand, and when the storms come, their life falls apart with a great crash (Mt.7:26-27). When you don't put something into action, it remains vulnerable—right up there on the surface. When you put it into practice, that pulls it down into the soil of your heart, and Satan can't access it there. It's out of his reach.

Conclusion: Plow Your Heart

So rule #4 on listening to God: Don't be a sidewalk. What could be more devastating than allowing your heart to become hardened? People who do that become gospel-proof. And our only hope, when that happens to us, is to do what God called the people to do in Jeremiah's time.

Jeremiah 4:3 This is what the LORD says....: "Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns. ... 8 put on sackcloth, lament and wail."

1 "...return to me," declares the LORD"

Plow up your heart through repentance, make it soft, so that when God speaks to you, your heart can take it in and be filled with life and joy.