

Understanding the Word and Bearing Fruit

This article is based on Jesus' teaching found in Matthew, chapter 13. Before continuing, I encourage you to read this teaching for yourself and to meditate on it. Try to determine what God is saying to you and how it applies to you. Once you have done this, perhaps there are some thoughts presented in this article to help you to further understand and apply Jesus' teaching.

3 He spoke to them many things in parables, saying, "Behold, a farmer went out to sow. 4 As he sowed, some seeds fell by the roadside, and the birds came and devoured them. 5 Others fell on rocky ground, where they didn't have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of earth. 6 When the sun had risen, they were scorched. Because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among thorns. The thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Others fell on good soil and yielded fruit: some one hundred times as much, some sixty, and some thirty. 9 He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

...

18 "Hear, then, the parable of the farmer. 19 When anyone hears the word of the Kingdom and doesn't understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away that which has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown by the roadside. 20 What was sown on the rocky places, this is he who hears the word and immediately with joy receives it; 21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while. When oppression or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. 22 What was sown among the thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. 23 What was sown on the good ground, this is he who hears the word and understands it, who most certainly bears fruit and produces, some one hundred times as much, some sixty, and some thirty."
(Matt 13:3-8, 18-23)

Jesus spent a **lot** of time talking about the Kingdom. In fact, the Kingdom is the topic that Jesus talked about the most. It is unfortunate that most people who profess to follow Christ are not even aware of this.

In this passage he explains to us four possible outcomes when a person hears the "word of the Kingdom". This is not a categorization of four types of people. All of these results are possible within a single person.

Let's look at each response and spend some time thinking about each one. The goal is to use our understanding of this teaching to help us evaluate our own lives so we can work toward being as fruitful as possible.

Snatched Away

In this scenario Jesus explains that a person hears the word of the Kingdom but doesn't understand it. So, why would a person not be able to understand? Is it too complicated? Is it confusing? Is it too "deep"? No.

In another article I wrote called "***It's Not Rocket Science***" I stated that spiritual truths can be understood by anyone who would listen with the simplicity and innocence of a child. Jesus basically said, "It's not rocket science". Here are his actual words:

In that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, and said, "I thank you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in your sight." (Luke 10:21)

"Allow the little children to come to me! Don't forbid them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mark 10:14)

So if a person doesn't understand the word of the Kingdom, which Jesus says is very understandable, what is the cause of this inability to understand?

Jesus explains this in several teachings. In this same passage, we read:

**In them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says,
'By hearing you will hear,
and will in no way understand;
Seeing you will see,
and will in no way perceive;
for this people's heart has grown callous,
their ears are dull of hearing,
and they have closed their eyes;**
(Matt 13:14,15)

Jesus explains that there is a direct connection between our heart and our ability to hear and understand, see and perceive. When our heart has grown callous (hardened), then our ears and eyes are closed and there is no understanding. We have, in effect, **chosen** to not understand because we have hardened our heart.

When Jesus was asked about what the greatest command is, he responded that it was to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The scribe who asked him this question echoed (and slightly reworded) what Jesus said, to love God with all the

heart, understanding, soul and strength. Jesus responded **“You are not far from God’s Kingdom.”** (Mark 10:28-34)

Note that the heart comes first. When the heart is in the right place then understanding (the mind) follows.

In a conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus says:

“Why don’t you understand my speech? Because you can’t hear my word.

...

He who is of God hears the words of God. For this cause you don’t hear, because you are not of God.” (John 8:43,47)

Anyone who starts with a heart that loves God, will hear (and understand) the words of God. It’s not an issue of being difficult to understand, it is an issue of the condition of our heart.

What Does This Mean To Me?

If we are having trouble understanding a given teaching of Jesus, we should first examine our hearts. Perhaps we have hardened our hearts against hearing certain things that Jesus wants us to understand. We need to honestly admit whether we really **want** to hear a particular teaching that Jesus wants us to understand.

Allow me to illustrate with an example.

I used to own and train horses. I learned about and adopted a method called “Natural Horsemanship”. I had great success using that method. It focused on understanding and relating to horses in their own language. It engendered trust in the relationship. Many other methods utilize fear and domination, which I rejected.

One evening at a party I was talking with a person who had been working with horses “all her life” (over 40 years). She used the “fear and domination” approach (like a majority of others in the horse industry). And she was always getting hurt by her horses. Her horses would “blow up” because they were afraid of her. I explained to her about Natural Horsemanship and she really seemed interested thinking that might be a better way. But, when I encouraged her to try it she chose not to. Her reason was that she would have to start all over. Essentially, she would have to admit that she had been on the wrong path all those years, humble herself and start over. I also suspected that she was afraid of losing credibility and her horse-related friendships if she took a different approach.

Similarly, we may encounter a teaching of Jesus that would require us to “start over” and to admit that we had been wrong for such a long time. If we are not willing to do this, we have hardened our hearts and simply aren’t willing to listen and understand.

We must soften and open our hearts in order to see and hear and understand the truth. And we must be willing to make whatever changes are needed if we want to understand Jesus' teachings and follow them.

In his explanation of the parable Jesus said that **“the evil one comes and snatches away that which has been sown in his heart”**. This doesn't mean that Satan is responsible for our lack of understanding. **WE** are responsible for our lack of understanding. Remember, the seed couldn't take root because of the hardened ground (heart). We made that choice.

So, how is Satan involved? I'm really not sure. I know that Satan tries to influence us to the point where we harden our hearts and refuse to understand the words of the Kingdom. Once **we have chosen** to harden our hearts, the seed has no chance of taking root, so it is taken away.

No Root

In the second scenario, the seed immediately sprouts. Jesus explains that there wasn't much soil and the seed really couldn't take root. So when the normal pressures of life come it withers up.

There are many who are struggling in life and when they hear the good news of the Kingdom they immediately receive it “with joy”. It's not wrong to accept Jesus' good news as a solution to the troubles of life. However, if you don't till up the soil and give the words of the Kingdom good soil to grow in then the seed will die.

We have all seen countless examples of “conversions” to Jesus which soon die out. There was no good soil there for the seed to flourish. Far too often is heard the “come to Jesus” approach that offers salvation and solutions to life's problems. What is not very often heard is the **whole** message that Jesus taught:

repent (change your thinking) and believe the good news (Mark 1:15)

It's not just about “receiving” the message. When we just receive the message and think that's all we need to do, the focus is on what “we get”. When we do that, there is no soil for the seed to grow in. We have to change our entire way of thinking (repent) in order to provide good soil. Life is not about us, it's about God. When our focus is on ourselves, we are ignoring Jesus' teaching:

He who seeks his life will lose it; and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.
(Matt 10:39)

Jesus says **“When oppression or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.”** “Oppression” and “persecution” should not necessarily be taken to refer to people who oppress or persecute you because of your beliefs, although that is certainly possible. Jesus talked about something as natural as the sun

coming up and “scorching” the plant. The sun is not evil, it is a natural and good thing. The sun gives life to plants. But, if the plant is not rooted it withers. We have all kinds of things in our lives that are good and necessary. Earning a living, raising children, etc. are pressures that should be good for us. However, if we’re not rooted in Jesus’ teachings they can “scorch” us and we will wither.

What Does This Mean To Me?

If the short-term joy we experienced at our “conversion” quickly fades away, we should reexamine ourselves. Did we “come to Jesus” because we wanted to get something out of it? Was it all about us? If so, the soil in which the seed was sown is rocky and shallow. It can’t sustain growth.

Jesus tells us:

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it. (Mark 8:35)

We should not make the mistake of trying to “add” Jesus our life. That doesn’t work. That is like trying to add a coat of paint to a house that is dilapidated and falling down. We have to lose our life (start over) in order to save it. We can’t just perform cosmetic changes.

Jesus gives us another analogy to help us understand what is needed to prevent us from “withering”:

Everyone who comes to me, and hears my words, and does them, I will show you who he is like. He is like a man building a house, who dug and went deep, and laid a foundation on the rock. When a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it was founded on the rock. (Luke 6: 47,48)

Are we guilty of hearing but not really doing what Jesus tells us? It is not enough to just “hear” his words, we have to **put them into practice**. In practicing what he tells us we are breaking up the soil and providing a rich environment for the seed to flourish.

Choked Out

In the third scenario the word of the Kingdom takes root and grows but it doesn’t produce any fruit. Jesus explains that **“the cares of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.”**

I believe that this is the place that most Christians are living. I’m not saying this to be judgmental; I’m saying this because this is where I was most of my life and I can now see it more clearly in others’ lives.

We recognize that we have “cares” in this age. We have to eat, have shelter, provide for our families, etc. These are not bad things, they are just reality. But, it’s far too easy to “meet a need” far beyond what the need really is.

For example, we recognize that we need a roof over our heads. And, we also decide that it is wiser to own a house rather than renting one. So, we pursue that. So far, so good. But, do we end up with a 3000 square foot house and a mortgage to which we are enslaved?

Or, perhaps decide that we we need a cell phone. That’s not a bad decision. But, do we end up enslaved to that cell phone? Must it be a constant interruption to our lives? Do we bury our faces in our cell phone when we are around other people to whom we should be paying attention? If a new model comes out do we have to spend more money to upgrade to the latest?

Jesus tells us that when we seek first God’s Kingdom and His righteousness everything else will fall into place (Matt 6:33). He also warns us about how deceitful “riches” can be. We really think we need them. But, the things that we own can end up owning us. When this happens, we end up being fruitless.

When we allow our spiritual lives to be choked out, many people try to remedy this by “going to church”. They sit and listen to a sermon (someone else telling us what they think God wants us to know) and they engage in worship (led by someone else). We leave the “service” thinking that we have had our spiritual boost for the week and then we go back to living our “choked out”, worldly lives.

What Does This Mean To Me?

Every person has to decide for themselves what things are “choking out” their fruitfulness in the Kingdom. We should be very intentional about the things we allow into our lives by asking the question “Is this thing going to help or hinder my ability to bear fruit?”.

Are we not bearing fruit because we just don’t have the time to focus on Jesus’ teachings and put them into practice? If so, we need to remove the things that are choking out our spiritual fruitfulness.

It is ludicrous to hope that we can make spiritual progress in the Kingdom when we really have allowed the things of this world to choke us out.

Bearing Fruit

In the last scenario Jesus describes what he desires for our lives. Good soil is required. Hearing and understanding are necessary. Bearing fruit is the desired result.

Let's ask a hard and honest question: Do we **really** desire what God desires for us?

Jesus tells us that we must prioritize - seeking the Kingdom **first** above all other things. (Matt 6:33)

He teaches:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. (Matt 5:6)

Do we **really** hunger and thirst for righteousness?

He also says:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (Matt 5:8)

("pure" does not mean sinless; it means focused, single-minded)

Are we **really** focused on seeing God?

What Does This Mean To Me?

My wife cultivates a huge garden. She knows all about how good soil produces healthy plants and how weeds, lack of nutrients and water, competition from other plants, etc. can choke out the ability of a plant to produce fruit. (Personally, I think that everyone should have a garden of some sort. I think it puts us more in touch with our Creator and it brings many of his teachings to life.)

In a very real sense, we are all spiritual gardeners. The word of the Kingdom is trying to take root in us and produce fruit. However, we must do our part:

- 1) soften our hearts and be willing to listen to and act on what Jesus says
- 2) provide the seed with good soil in which to grow
- 3) remove the things in our lives that are choking out the ability of the seed to produce fruit

Jesus said:

I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

When we hear, understand and follow Jesus' teachings we will experience abundant life. This is what he created us for, what he desires for us.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the Bible come from the World English Bible translation (<https://worldenglishbible.org>).