**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**HEARING WITH EARS THAT HEAR**

**PART I**

**Luke 8:1-15**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 8. Today we continue our series in the Gospel of Luke called “Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”.

Here at Sovereign Grace Church Toronto we believe that this moment is the most important part of our service. We gather together to worship God, and hearing the Word of God preached is the climax of our worship. So far in our service today, we have largely been addressing God through prayer and praise. But now, we close our mouths and open our ears as God addresses us through his Word. We stop speaking, and we let God speak. What could be more precious than that? This truly is a holy moment.

Do you believe this? If you do, how do you know? One of the ways we can determine whether we believe it or not is by looking at what we do to prepare for the preaching moment. People prepare for important events, and the more important the event, the more important the preparation. Take a race, for example. No one participating in a competitive race just shows up and runs. If someone is about to run in the provincial finals, they train, they eat well, they stretch, because the race is important to them. But say that person made it to the Olympics. His or her preparation would go way up in intensity.

How do you prepare to hear the Word of God? We need to prepare, because hearing the Word of God is important, whether it be during the sermon on a Sunday, or during your own private devotions, or at a prayer meeting, or at your small group. We need to “stretch our spiritual muscles”, so to speak, like singing worship songs on your own, or meditating on a verse, or spending some time in private prayer.

One of the best ways to prepare for our weekly sermons is to come to our pre-service prayer meetings. Every Sunday, we spend 30 minutes praying for ourselves and for our church, asking that God would move powerfully among us as he fills us with the Spirit, strengthens our faith, and empowers us to love him and others just like Jesus does.

One of the highlights of our pre-service prayer for me is that so many people pray for me. They pray that I would preach with boldness and clarity. They pray that I would be led by the Spirit. They pray that I would be led to worship God even as I preach! These prayers are precious to me, and I long for them every Sunday.

But there’s another category of prayers that is just as precious to me. It’s the prayers that are made on behalf of all of you. It’s important to pray for the one preaching, but it’s just as important to pray for the ones listening. God calls me to preach, but he also calls all of you to hear. And if God calls you to hear, then you must prepare for it.

This is the focus of our text today. Jesus is going to teach us about the importance of hearing the Word well, because there’s a kind of *true* hearing, and there’s a kind of *false* hearing. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”, Jesus will say. We all have ears that can hear, but not all of us have ears that can hear the way Jesus wants us to hear. It is absolutely crucial to make sure that, when we hear the Word of God, our ears are truly hearing, because the difference between true and false hearing makes an eternity of difference.

The title of this message is **Hearing with Ears that Hear.** We’re going to spend two Sundays on this text, because there’s just too much to cover in one sermon. My aim for both sermons is to show you that **Careful Ear Work Comes from Careful Heart Work**

Here’s the outline for today:

1. Hearing that Brings Judgment
2. Hearing that Brings Waste
   1. Hearing without Believing
   2. Hearing without Persevering
   3. Hearing without Maturing

(1) **HEARING THAT BRINGS JUDGMENT**

Our text begins with a description of the company of people who were accompanying Jesus as he continued his mission of preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. Luke writes in verse 1 that “the twelve” were with him – that is, the twelve disciples whom he named apostles back in Chapter 6. Also with them are some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: “Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others”.

Luke’s point here is that people from all walks of life were following Jesus. Fishermen, tax collectors, demon possessed women, even the wife of a powerful member of the king’s inner circle – people everywhere were responding with faith to the ministry and message of Jesus What’s more, Luke shows us in verse 3 that every person in this great company of faith had a unique role to play. As the apostles learned how to minister and teach like Jesus, the women “provided for them out of their means”.

This truly is a beautiful picture of a community bound together by nothing more than their common faith in and love for Jesus. This bond was greater than anything that could separate them from each other, and each of them gladly fulfilled the roles that Jesus gave them. And because of their partnership and the strength of their community, they could reach more and more people with the good news of the gospel.

As they ministered together, Luke tells us in verse 4 that “a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him”. Jesus’ ministry was vastly increasing, and people from all over the land were flocking to see and hear him.

What would Jesus do in the face of such immense popularity? We’re all used to seeing famous people do whatever it takes to keep the crowds coming to them. For Jesus, it might take never-before-seen miracles or powerful, life-changing wisdom, but surely Jesus was capable of providing either of them easily.

That’s not what Jesus does. Rather than give them miracles, he gives them a story about a farmer. And rather than give them life-changing wisdom, he gives them a parable they’re not meant to understand.

We read the parable in verses 5-8: “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. As he said these things, he called out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”

What does this parable mean? No one seemed to know, including his disciples, which is why they ask him about it in verse 9. Jesus will tell them, but before he does, he wants to tell them why he speaks in parables in the first place. Look at verse 10: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’” What is Jesus saying here?

Jesus is quoting from an Old Testament text when he says “seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.” These words come from Isaiah 6, where God tells the prophet Isaiah that the only reason he was being sent with God’s message to God’s people was so that God’s message could be rejected. They would see the message without seeing it, and hear the message without understanding it.

God didn’t send Isaiah to call his people to repentance and faith because he knew that Israel would respond. He sent Isaiah because he knew that Israel wouldn’t respond. Isaiah was sent with a message destined to be rejected in order to show just how hardened their hearts had become towards God. Indeed, their hearts were so hardened that it would appear as if Israel wasn’t even *capable* of understanding God’s message of salvation. Isaiah would tell them about their sin, and Isaiah would call them to return to the Lord, but his words would go in one ear and out the other.

Why would God do that? Why would he send a messenger for the purpose of having his message rejected? The answer is that it was part of God’s judgment on his people. Their rejection of God’s message would seal their judgment. Their hardness of heart would be exposed, and they would become ripe for God’s punishment.

God is sovereign over all things. Nothing happens outside of his will. When God’s message is rejected, it’s not as if God’s will has failed. God’s will is done whether his message is accepted or rejected. Acceptance of the message of salvation highlights God’s mercy towards sinners. Rejection of the message of salvation highlights God’s justice against sinners. Both have a place in God’s plans.

This is a timely word for us, isn’t it? We live in a time when everything is about results. Businesses need to sell more and more products, TV shows need more and more viewers, entertainment venues need to sell more and more tickets. When they don’t, they’re seen as failing. The same kind of thinking has transferred into the church. If we don’t see *this* amount of people on a Sunday, or *that* amount of people making decisions for Christ, we’re seen as failing.

But God’s Word never fails, even if it is being rejected. God’s will is still being done in the world when people refuse to respond. When his Word is received, God pours out his mercy. And when God’s Word is rejected, he executes his justice.

Yes, churches should care about the lost being saved, and yes, we need to work hard to find ways to share the gospel winsomely and effectively. But let’s stop caring so much about the results and start caring more about being faithful. As the Apostle Paul says, one sows, the other waters, but God gives the growth.

Now let’s turn back to Jesus. Why does he quote Isaiah 6 in verse 10, “seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand”? Jesus quotes Isaiah’s mission statement because Jesus had the same mission. Many would come to reject his message as well, and when they did, God would judge them. The crowds that listened to Jesus would demonstrate the same inability to understand God’s words that Isaiah’s audience showed, because their hearts were just as hard.

This is why Jesus spoke in parables. Jesus spoke in parables that no one could understand in order to illustrate their inability to understand his message. Their failure to understand his parables was a picture of their failure to understand his message. Jesus knew that the crowds that listened to him had hearts just as hard as the crowds Isaiah spoke to. They were unwilling to receive the message, because they were unable to understand it, and in order to demonstrate their inability to understand, Jesus spoke in parables that they could not understand.

But here’s the thing about parables: they can be explained! If you don’t understand a parable, then all you have to do is go to the speaker of the parable and ask him what he meant. The same is true of Jesus’ message.

In other words, by speaking in parables, Jesus was saying that, if you find yourself unable and unwilling to respond to what Jesus was claiming about who he was and what he came to do, then the answer isn’t to turn to some other authority like science, or philosophy, or feelings. The answer is to turn to Jesus. Jesus can help you understand and receive his message, just as he can help you understand and receive his parables. This is why he tells his disciples in verse 10, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God”. Jesus gives understanding to those who listen to him, obey him, trust him, and follow him despite their lack of understanding.

Jesus is both the source of faith and the object of faith. He gives us faith so that we can put our faith in him. Therefore, if you want to receive God’s Word rather than reject it, then you need to start with Jesus. Jesus is the foundation upon which we can know the secrets of the kingdom of God. If we turn to him, he will free us from the ignorance of our sin and the hardness of our hearts, and we will finally be able to understand and receive God’s call to return to him.

But if we do not turn to Christ, then God’s message of salvation *for* you will become a message of judgment *against* you. You will ever be seeing but not seeing, and hearing but not understanding, and God will punish you for it.

(2) **HEARING THAT BRINGS WASTE**

We’ve seen why Jesus speaks in parables, and now we need to look at the parable itself, which has much more to say about what it means to truly hear. This leads to our second point: hearing that brings waste.

Let me begin by giving you an overview of the parable. The purpose of the parable is to warn us about the kinds of factors that keep us from truly hearing. They’re the things that close our ears to the word of God so that its effect on us is wasted. Of course, we know that the word of God is never wasted, because even when it’s rejected, God’s purpose is still being fulfilled. But God’s desire in sending out his word is to draw us back to himself, change us, and fulfill us. When his word doesn’t accomplish these things, then it is, in a sense, wasted.

In the parable, there is a sower, there are seeds, and there are different kinds of soil. What are these things? Jesus explains in verse 11 that the seed being sown is “the word of God”. Since Jesus is the one who brings the word of God, he is the sower in the parable. We know that the sower will come to include every Christian who shares the word of God with others, including me, and including you, but the immediate focus of the parable is on Jesus himself.

Next, we have the soil. There are different kinds of soil, and each stands for different kinds of human hearts. We see that in verse 12, where Jesus says that the seeds sown along the path are snatched away when “the devil comes and takes away the word from their *hearts*”. We also see it in verse 15, where Jesus says that the good soil stands for the “honest and good *heart*” that holds fast to the word.

In summary, we can put it like this: just as a sower sows seed into the soil, Jesus sows the word of God into our hearts.

Now we get to the focus of the parable: the factors that keep the seed of the word of God from planting itself deep into the soil of our hearts. These are the birds, the rock under the soil, and the weeds. In these three things, we see three different factors that lead to three different kinds of wasteful hearing, because they prevent the word from producing fruit in our lives. Let’s go over them one by one.

1. **Hearing without Believing**

The first kind of wasteful hearing is hearing without believing. In verse 5, Jesus says this is the seed that “fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.” What are the birds? Jesus tells us in verse 12: “The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”

Like a bird that swoops down to eat up seeds before they can sink into the soil, the devil snatches away the seed of the word of God so that people never respond to it with faith.

I wonder, are you aware that whenever the word of God is taught, the devil is present as well? He is here right now seeking to snatch away the word of God from your hearts so that you will not believe. He does that by making you forget it. He does that by making you doubt it. He does that by making you reject it.

The teaching and preaching of the Word of God is the focal point of spiritual warfare. The Word is what God has given us to battle the devil. We saw Jesus use the Word of God just like this when he battled Satan in the wilderness back in Luke 4. Jesus responded to every one of Satan’s temptations with Scripture. Similarly, in the book of Ephesians, Paul calls the Word of God “the sword of the Spirit”. God has given us the truth of his Word to wield against the lies of the devil. This is why Satan does whatever is in his power to keep the Word out of our hearts. He wants to disarm us, leaving us vulnerable to his attacks.

But Satan is trying to do much more than keep you out of the fight. He’s trying to keep you out of God’s kingdom completely. Jesus tells us in verse 12 that the reason why the devil takes the Word from people’s hearts is “so that they may not believe and be saved.” Saved from what? Saved from God’s wrath against your sin! Satan labours to snatch the seed of the Word from your heart so that you will fall under God’s eternal punishment, just like he has. He wants you to stop following God and to start following him, first in this life, and then for an eternity in hell.

We may not have many worldly enemies, but we do have a spiritual enemy. He is wiser than you, stronger than you, and harder working than you. He is the father of lies and the master of deception, and he will use every ounce of his strength and skill to keep you from believing the Word of God.

We need to fight back. James 4:7 says, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” But how? How do we resist the devil? This is a big topic, one that we just studied last year in our Ephesians series on spiritual warfare. I encourage you to look back to those messages.

Our text, however, gives us one, simple way to fight the devil: hold on to the seed of the Word! Don’t let him snatch the seed away from your heart. Be the good soil Jesus speaks about in verse 15 that “holds fast” to the Word. Cling to it, hold on to it tightly, and do not let the enemy take it away.

This is why it’s so important to read the Scriptures every day, and to sit under the preaching of the Word every Sunday. We need to study the Word, memorize the Word, recite the Word, pray the Word, and sing the Word. We need to saturate our lives with the Word so that the light of its truth will cast away the darkness of Satan’s lies.

There will be times when Satan’s attacks relent, and following Christ seems easy. Don’t let him fool you. The devil is merely circling around in the sky, waiting for the soil of your heart to loosen its grasp on the Word so that he can swoop in and snatch it away. Scripture warns us in 1 Peter 5:8-9:

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith…”

The greatest war we will ever fight in this life is the fight for our faith. We know that if we truly believe in Christ, we will never stop believing, because what God has begun in us, he will finish. True, born-again believers can know that they will not be defeated in the fight for faith. But though our war is won, we still must fight. Our enemy may be defeated, but he is still in his death throes, and he will use every last breath to take as many people to hell with him. Resist him, firm in your faith, as you hold firmly to the seed of the Word.

1. **Hearing without Persevering**

The second kind of wasteful hearing is hearing without persevering. Jesus says in verse 6 that some of the seed “fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.” Unlike the first group, here we see the Word actually implanting itself into a person’s heart and growing. Indeed, Jesus says in verse 13 that the people in this category “hear the word” and “receive it with joy”.

Wouldn’t you love to see that? There is nothing more precious in this life than to see the lost rejoice after hearing the good news of the gospel. But there may be more to this picture than meets the eye. Under the surface, if you dig down just a little, you may find a massive problem. The plant has no root. We all know what happens to plants that have no roots. At the first sign of harsh weather, or lack of rain, or animals digging around for food, plants with no roots fall away and die.

Why is that? You may think that it’s because the seed of the Word of God wasn’t being fed. Jesus does say in verse 6 that the plant “withered away, because it had no moisture”. At first glance, it appears that the person wasn’t receiving the nourishment of the Word, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, or fellowship. That’s one explanation, but I don’t think it’s what Jesus is saying here.

In fact, when Jesus explains this category of people, he doesn’t mention lack of nourishment at all. Look at verse 13: “And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.” Jesus doesn’t emphasize the lack of moisture. Instead, he emphasizes the fact that the seed fell on the rock.

In other words, the plant had no moisture not because it wasn’t getting any rain, but because the rain had nowhere to go. Rain needs to sink deep into the ground to water a plant, but if the plant is growing on top of a rock, the rain will either evaporate or run off.

The problem with this group of people isn’t that the seed of the Word isn’t being fed. The problem is that the seed is falling on rock-hard hearts. A person with a hardened heart won’t grow closer to God even if they faithfully go to church and read their Bibles every day. They may initially respond with joy to the good news of the gospel, but they don’t really believe. They don’t really want God. They may want his benefits, but they don’t want him. Such people have no roots, and they will not endure in the day of testing.

Testing *will* come, whether in the form of persecution, or illness, or cultural pressure, or family conflict, or death. The faith of those who have no roots will not endure, because their hearts are still hardened.

What hope do we have? For who can change their heart? None of us can. It’s impossible. But what is impossible for man is not impossible for God. God is in the business of changing hearts. That’s what he does. In Ezekiel 36:26 he says,

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

This is exactly what we need. We need our rock-hard hearts to be replaced with fleshy hearts, hearts that are alive and beating and ready to respond to God’s message of salvation. This is what God does for us when we turn to Jesus. Jesus is the foundation of faith. When we turn to him, he doesn’t just explain the secrets of the Kingdom of God to us. He gives us a new heart so that we can not only understand those secrets, but love them.

This is ultimately what Jesus came into the world to do. He came to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Everything he did, he did as the representative of those who trust him. The Bible speaks of us being united to Christ through faith. When Jesus died on the cross, he also put our hearts of stone to death through our union to Christ through faith. And when Jesus rose from the dead, he gave us a new heart of flesh through our union to Christ through faith.

All of us need a new heart. The question is, do you want one? If you do, then come to Christ with faith, and he will take your heart of stone away and give you a heart of flesh.

1. **Hearing without Maturing**

There’s one more kind of wasteful hearing, and that’s hearing without maturing. Jesus speaks about this in verse 7: “And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it.”

Anyone with a yard can relate to this. I hate weeds. My backyard is full of giant, spiky monstrosities. I take great delight in using my weed wacker to tear them to shreds. But as bad as weeds can be, they don’t even compare to the Palestinian weeds that Jesus would have been talking about. One commentator writes that Palestinian weeds can grow up to six feet tall and often bud with red, blue, and yellow flowers. They are so big, and require so much nourishment, that nothing else can grow around them.

Here’s the thing about weeds that we often forget. Weeds aren’t bad in themselves. They’re plants, just like anything else that’s growing in your yard. We don’t hate weeds because they’re evil. Indeed, they can be quite pretty. But we still hate them. Why? Because they keep the things we want to grow from growing.

The same is true here. In verse 14, Jesus says that the weeds that choke out the seed of the Word are the “cares and riches and pleasures of life”. They’re things like planning for the future. Paying the bills. Furnishing your home. Getting a promotion. Vacations. Eating out. These are all good things that can become bad things, not because they are bad in themselves, but because they keep the best thing from growing.

Like weeds that slowly kill off other plants, the “cares and riches and pleasures of life” have the potential to kill off the work of the Word in our hearts. How does this happen? There’s only one way for weeds to grow, and it’s the same way that the seed of the Word grows: by feeding off the soil of your heart.

God made us to enjoy the good things that he has created. He even made us to love them. But when we love them too much, they take up too much room in our hearts, leaving no room for him. They become weeds that choke out the true source of life – the Word of God – leaving you fruitless and lifeless.

This is the last of the types of hearing that bring waste, and it is perhaps the most prevalent in our culture. We live in a land of prosperity, abundance, and comfort. They are blessings that we ought to give thanks to God for every day. But if we value these blessings too highly, they can very easily become curses.

There’s room in our hearts for the good things in this life, but if they start taking up more room than God, they’re going to take his place altogether. We need to cut them back, keeping them on the outer fringes of our hearts, so that the center is reserved for God, and God alone.

**CONCLUSION**

Next Sunday we’re going to get more practical and talk about what the kinds of things God wants us to do in order to truly hear. For today, I conclude by asking you this: do you have ears that truly hear? Or does the Word of God go in one ear, and out the other?

If you feel that you do not yet truly hear, then the next question is this: do you want to hear? Do you want to hear with ears of faith, or do you want to remain in ignorance? If ignorance, then God’s judgment is upon you, and will be upon you for eternity if you do not one day turn to Jesus. But if you want hears to ear with faith, then turn to Jesus now, and He will take your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.