

How to Listen to God: The Shallow & Divided Hearts

Parables in Mark: Part 2

Mark 4:16-19 (Matthew 13:20-22 & Luke 8:13-14) 7/1/2018

Summary: The shallow soil stands for people with coffee mug theology, which generates great zeal until suffering comes, and then it dies for lack of depth. We need a deep understanding of God's nature, his promises, evidences, discipline, etc. The thorny soil stands for the divided hearer, who gets choked out by the issues of this world.

Introduction.....	1
Threats to Listening	1
Don't Be a Shallow Hearer	2
Shallowness.....	3
Digest God's Word	3
Impulse Driven.....	3
Persecution.....	4
Suffering	4
Tested By Suffering	5
Four Deep Doctrines	5
God's Character	5
God's Promises	5
God's Evidences	5
God's Discipline	5
Don't Be a Divided Hearer.....	6
Choking.....	6
The Worries of this Life.....	6
Busyness	6
Money	7
Desire for Other Things	8
What Else Is There?	8
Uncontested Listening	8
Conclusion	8

Mark 4:14 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. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it become unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

Introduction

Threats to Listening

What kind of person do you have to be in order to hear from God? We are studying through the book of Mark, and last week we began ch.4, which is all about listening to God's voice. Twenty seven times in one chapter Jesus says, "Listen, listen, listen!" This is such an important study, because we all need to

hear from God on a regular basis. When God's communications to you go down inside your heart, like a seed in soil, it germinates and produces life and vitality and joy.

Jeremiah 15:16 When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight.

That's how it's supposed to work when God speaks to you, but it doesn't always work that way. There are some threats that can prevent that from happening. God's word is like a seed that lands on the soil of your heart, and that seed is vulnerable to a half dozen different threats that Jesus warns us about in this parable. Any one of those 6 threats can destroy the seed of God's word in you before it can accomplish its purpose in your life.

So is that going to happen to you? Will one of those six threats destroy the work of God's word in your life? It depends on what kind of listener you are.

Luke 8:18 Therefore consider carefully *how* you listen.

Listen the wrong way, and you won't hear from God.

So what are these six threats? The first one we already looked at last time: the devil. He steals the word right out of the hearts of unreceptive people as soon it lands there. Now, you might hear that and think, "That's not me. I'm not hard or unreceptive or uninterested in God's word. I'm very interested and receptive to it." Does that make you good soil? Let's see. Take a look at the next kind of soil.

Don't Be a Shallow Hearer

5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

When it says **rocky places**, it's not talking about soil with a bunch of stones in it like we have here in Colorado. It's talking about the many places in Israel where the limestone bedrock is just a little ways down. So the plants start to grow, the roots go down, hit bedrock, and don't have anywhere to go. And so all the life of the plant is directed upward into the plant, which makes those plants spring up faster than all the other plants.¹ So there's a lot above the surface, but not much below the surface—no roots. And that's a problem when it gets hot out.

6 when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

The superficial roots can't support the plant in the heat of the sun. So what does that part of the parable mean? Jesus gives us the interpretation in v.16.

16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Are these people receptive listeners? Yes—very receptive. They hear the gospel, they accept it, welcome it, they believe it,² they are excited about it. God's word goes inside the soil of their heart and germinates and produces a plant. It produces spiritual life—lots of it. It says they **receive it with joy**. This kind of person is especially enthusiastic about the word of God and salvation—**more** so than the average believer. Pastors see these people and say, "Why can't the rest of you be like that? Look how zealous and joyful they are." They seem like model Christians, but then look what happens.

17 ... When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

They have superficial joy, but it's not the kind of joy that can handle suffering. Why not? Were they just pretending to listen, but they weren't genuine? No, nothing in the text indicates that these people

¹ As one writer said, "The very thing that prevents deep rooting facilitates rapid shooting."

² According to Luke 8:13, these people are believers.

were phony or fake or insincere or anything like that.³ What does it say? What characteristic does Jesus point to that makes these people unable to keep on listening to God's word when suffering comes? Answer: shallowness. It's shallow soil. That's the only description Jesus gives us to explain why these people can't handle suffering. They listen, but they listen in a shallow way. The word does go down into their heart, but not very deep.

Shallowness

All their energy goes to outward responses, and not enough to inward growth. They are busy expressing their faith, but don't do much to strengthen their faith.

Being a Christian is like being a plant; you've got to go down before you can go up. You have to let the word send roots down deep into your soul, otherwise you'll never make it through suffering. You'll be the greatest Christian around right up until things get really painful, and the heat of that suffering will dry you up like a dead leaf.

Suffering is like the heat of the sun. And hearing God speak to you is like refreshing, life-giving water that comes up through the roots. If your roots aren't deep enough, you don't have that life line from God when the suffering gets really hot.

So, how do you listen to God's voice? We learned last week from the hard soil that we need to listen *eagerly*. Now we learn that we also need to listen *deeply*. Listen eagerly, and listen deeply.

Digest God's Word

How deep is your soil? The writer of the book of Hebrews used a little different metaphor. He rebuked his readers because they were so immature in their faith that they could only handle milk, not solid food. It's like they have a case of spiritual Crohn's disease. People with Crohn's very often look like anorexics—like they are starving to death. No matter how much food they eat, they can't gain any weight because their body can't digest the food. It just passes through them. Many Christians have spiritual Crohn's. The word goes into them, but they never think through it deeply enough to digest it. Give those people a sermon with complex ideas and in-depth doctrine and it gives them a headache. So they go find a church where the sermons don't require any real thinking. Everything is light and fluffy and positive and encouraging, so if you ask them what they learned in church last week, their answer will fit on a coffee mug.

Shallow people never get past coffee mug theology. Everything they know about God can go on a mug, or bumper sticker or a T-shirt. I can do all things through Christ! Jesus is the Way! Love your neighbor. Judge not lest you be judged. Cleanliness is next to godliness (that one's not really in the Bible, but it can go on a coffee mug). People like this—the deepest they ever go in their theology is when they put the whole Footprints in the Sand poem on a bookmark.

All that stuff is great when life is smooth. But then when your Christian faith starts to really cost you, clichés won't get you very far. You need to go deep.

Impulse Driven

And that will keep you from being an impulse driven person. One thing Jesus points out about these people is the quickness of both their conversion and their falling away. They immediately respond with joy, and when trouble comes they immediately fall away. They were more charmed by the gospel than changed. These people tend to live mostly on feeling rather than on conviction. They are the kind who go

³ Don't try to figure out if these are genuine believers. If you do that, you'll miss the point. Very often pastors will point to the lack of fruit bearing as an argument to prove none of the first three soils are genuinely converted. The result is they make the warnings obsolete for people who know they are genuinely converted. If the threats in the parable only affect phony believers, true believers need not beware of them.

through life making most of their decisions based on how they feel. So in moments of a spiritual high, they seem like they love God more than anyone, because they are so happy and easily moved to tears by some testimony or blessing from God. But when things get painful, they jump ship. Why? Because it doesn't feel good, and for them, feelings are king.

A kid goes to youth group, and the speaker is funny and the games are fun and the pizza is free and he's thinking, *This is fun. I like this.* "You like this?" "Yeah!" "Do you like Jesus?" "Uh, yeah!" "Oh good, you want to accept him?" "Sure!" But when they get back to school their friends say, "Hey, are you like a Jesus freak now?" "What? No. I don't even know those people." Shallow faith is very often more energetic than deep faith, because emotions tend to be more boisterous than conviction. But just like with plants, quick maturity means a short life once that sun starts beating down. This is why revivals so often have very short-lived results. Lots of emotional conversions, lots of shallow soils.

Persecution

This is a big deal because every Christian is going to encounter some form of trouble or persecution because of the gospel. Jesus promised that.

Mark 13:13 All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

2 Timothy 3:12 ...everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted

If you are following Christ, you will be a countercultural human being. Your life will offend certain people, and they will react. They might mock you, they might pressure you, they might look down on you, they might fire you, they might threaten to hurt you. How will you respond? Timidity? Compromise? Falling away altogether? Or courage, perseverance, and strong, unflinching, unwavering faith? It all depends on your depth. How deep do the roots of God's word reach into your heart? And how deep do the roots of your faith reach into fellowship with God?⁴

Suffering

And sometimes it's not **persecution**; it's just **trouble** in general. In v.17 Jesus says it could be either **persecution** or **trouble**. That would include any kind of hardship that results from following Christ. Obeying Christ can be very painful at times in this fallen world. It might mean saying goodbye to your family like it did for the Disciples. Or staying in a really hard marriage that you wish you could be free from. Or passing up a chance to make up really big money because it would require some ethical compromise. Every time your flesh wants one thing but the word of God says, "No, you can't do that," then following the Christ hurts. It might be something as simple as humbling yourself and apologizing to someone you hurt, admitting you were wrong. It might be helping someone in need or spending time in prayer when you don't feel like it, or stepping way out of your comfort zone and doing something you're totally intimidated to do in order to share the gospel with someone. What are you going to do in those times? It depends on whether you are shallow or deep.

One reason why shallow people dry up when suffering comes is because, since they are driven by feelings rather than conviction, those feelings—especially feelings like anger or self-pity, make it impossible for them to enjoy the goodness of God. Something really painful happens—a loved one dies, a relationship falls apart, a major health problem, loss of a career; and it becomes a drag on your faith. And anger starts to form in your heart. Maybe you're angry at God, or at people, or maybe you're not angry at anyone in particular, you're just mad that the thing happened. Either that, or you drop into self-pity. Either one of those—anger or self-pity, will make it impossible for you to enjoy the kindness of God. And

⁴ Jesus first says the seed is the Word, then, in the interpretation, it sounds more like the people are the seeds. That looseness of analogy is why I describe the roots in these two different ways (the word's roots into the heart and the heart's roots into God).

without that fellowship with God, the heat of suffering will burn the life out of you, your relationship with God will dry up, and your faith will wither.

Tested By Suffering

This is why Scripture says over and over and over that suffering tests and refines faith like fire tests and refines gold. Someone says, “Wow, that was a powerful sermon.” We’ll see. We won’t really know how powerful it was in your heart until you hit some suffering. That’s when we find out.

Four Deep Doctrines

Let me give you an example of some doctrines that, if you don’t have a deep understanding, you’ll be vulnerable to suffering.

God’s Character

Start with the nature of God. Very often, Christians who can’t handle suffering are people have a shallow understanding of God’s love. They think *If God loves me, he won’t let painful things happen to me*. Then painful things happen, so they doubt God’s love. Or they doubt his power. *He means well, but he must not be able to handle this situation*. Or they have a shallow understanding of God’s sovereignty. They think, *Oh, maybe God can’t intervene here because he’s hogtied by human free will*. A shallow understanding of God’s nature will make it impossible to endure suffering with joy.

God’s Promises

Other times the problem lies with a shallow understanding of God’s promises. One of the most devastating things that can happen to your faith is when you think the Bible promises something it doesn’t promise. You think the Bible promises physical healing if you have faith, you trust God, but you don’t get healed. You think the Bible promises that people in the church won’t hurt you. Then they hurt you. You think the Bible promises you wealth and prosperity, and you lose all your money. When you become convinced that the Bible promises something, then you live your life banking on that promise, and it doesn’t happen, you think, *What else am I wrong about?* And suddenly you have no confidence in anything. You start questioning everything you’ve ever believed. If you’re going to have deep roots, you need to have a clear, thorough, accurate understanding of what God promises and what he doesn’t promise.

God’s Evidences

Another area we need to go deep in order to make it through suffering is with the evidences for the faith. One reason so many young people leave the church after they graduate high school is they don’t have a firm grasp on the proofs of Christianity. A kid becomes a Christian because his emotions were stirred up at a camp one summer, and all he has is coffee mug, bumper sticker, youth group theology; how is his faith going to stand up against the onslaught of atheistic arguments from professors in college? Jesus gave us evidences and many convincing proofs, he referred to those many times, and he wants us to have a deep enough understanding of them that our faith is not vulnerable to destruction at the hands of the critics.

God’s Discipline

People can’t handle suffering when they have a shallow knowledge of God’s nature, of God’s promises, of God’s proofs, and one more—they don’t have a deep understanding of what the Bible teaches about suffering. So maybe they interpret suffering to mean God is angry with them, like Job’s

friends. Or they fail to appreciate how much suffering benefits them—purifying their faith, increasing their perseverance, giving them humility, joining them with Christ in his sufferings, training for righteousness, etc. Or they don't know what Scripture teaches about how to find comfort and strength from God in a time of suffering.

Don't Be a Divided Hearer

Okay, so we've seen the hard ground and the shallow soil, let's move on to the third kind of listener.

18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it become unfruitful.

The thorns make the plant **become unfruitful**, implying that the plant was previously fruitful before the thorns came along.⁵ These are the people who are vulnerable to the last three threats. The first threat to the work of God's word in our hearts is Satan. And that hard soil folks are the ones who are vulnerable to that. The next two threats are trouble and persecution, and the shallow people are susceptible to those. Now the last three threats: **the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things.**

Choking

All three of those threats work the same way. They choke the word out. The first threat (Satan) takes the word out of your heart, so you don't even understand it. The next two (trouble and persecution) burn out the work of the truth in your heart, so you doubt it. But these three threats don't take it away and they don't make you doubt the truth; they operate a different way. They take up a huge space in your thinking so that there isn't much room left for the truths of Scripture. They take up a lot of your emotions, a lot of your time and attention, a lot of your energy—they just use up all your internal resources so there isn't much left for God. Let's take them one at a time.

The Worries of this Life

The first one is **the worries of this life**. Other versions translate it, **the cares of this life**. How many cares and concerns do you have in your life? Sometimes it seems like that just about all there is to life—it's just one giant mass of cares. We're worried about our relationships, family, daily chores, taking care of all our stuff, cleaning all our stuff, insuring all our stuff, health issues, shopping, finances, vacation plans, personal goals, worrying about Donald Trump and Robert Muller and the Supreme Court and Congress and traffic on I-25, getting your hair to look good in the morning, and on and on and on. People in school have a whole other list of cares. People have cares at work, cares about their kids. You could easily spend every waking hour thinking about the cares of this life. In fact, most people do. But if you do, that will choke out the work of God's word in your life.

Busyness

In the Screwtape Letters, the demon who is trying to bring down a Christian is told: "keep your subject busy." Satan knows that he doesn't have to make you angry at God or rebellious or anything like that. If he can just keep you busy enough, the things of God will be choked out.

And this can be so subtle, because the weeds that choke out the word can be such innocent things in themselves. Some parents put their kids in 3 different sports, and commit to never miss a game. That

⁵ Luke's parallel says their fruit doesn't make it to maturity (Lk.8:14).

seems like it's good for the kid, right? You're giving them opportunities. You're not like those bad fathers in the movies who never go to their kids' games. It seems so innocent, but you end up creating a schedule that runs the whole family so ragged that no one has more than 10 seconds to think ponder spiritual things.

I wonder if this is one reason why Jesus would often disappear and get alone for extended periods to pray. One of the reasons retreats and camps and mission trips are so impactful is they force you to clear your schedule. And so for a week or a weekend or whatever, the worries and pressures of life are set aside, and you can think about spiritual things, take a walk in the woods, have spiritual conversations with people, etc. Persecution has brought down its thousands, but the cares of this life its tens of thousands. Business probably destroys more Christians than bullets.

Money

The next one Jesus mentions is **the deceitfulness of wealth**. How does wealth deceive you? And how does that deceit choke out God's word in your heart?

Money lies to two different kinds of people. It lies to people who have it, and it lies to people who don't have it. The lie it tells people who don't have it is this: "If you just get some money, you'll be happy." And the lie it tells people who have it is this: "If you just get some more money, then you'll be happy."

Every human being is born with a powerful, unstoppable, unrelenting drive to attain happiness. (And when I say "happiness" I mean that in the broadest sense—a feeling of joy, fulfillment, meaning, hope, pleasure, satisfaction, delight—all of that.) The drive to attain all that is why we do everything we do. Everything we ever do, we do it either because we think it will make us happy now, or it will make us happy later. But everything we do is a striving for some kind of happiness.

And money lies to us by promising us happiness and fulfillment and satisfaction if we just get enough of it. And how much is enough? Just a little more than what you have. Young people think, *Man, if I could just get my head above water so I could pay my rent each month, I'd be happy*. When they get to that point, it's, *If I just had enough to get a decent car that doesn't break down...* and then *If I could just save up enough to put a down payment on a house...* and then *If we could just move to a better neighborhood and go on some nice vacations...* and eventually *I just need to find a way to have enough to retire*. There are multi-millionaires who are not happy in life but who are still falling for the lie. They still think that if they had more, they would be happy.

Wealth deceives with the lie that money will solve your problems. Wealth deceives you by using all the goodies of this world to lure you into a trap.

1 Timothy 6:9 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Of all these six threats, love of money is probably the most lethal. It is absolutely deadly. When Paul says it plunges men into **destruction**—that's stalking about going to hell. Greedy people who seek their happiness in wealth will not go to heaven.

Mark 10:23 Jesus ... said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

This is why it's so important to steer clear of the prosperity preachers. If you turn on your TV and hear some guy with 3 private jets preaching about how Jesus wants you to be rich and to have all the goodies of this world—turn the channel. That message is the deceitfulness of wealth that will destroy you.

Desire for Other Things

Okay, one last threat. One more danger that can choke out the work of God's word in your heart. It's right there in v.19—the **desires for other things**. What kinds of things do people desire besides money and possessions? Love and acceptance. The desire for love and acceptance can choke out the word in your heart. The desire for friends. The desire for power and influence. Respect. Success. Fun. Prestige. Control. Good health. A husband, a wife, kids. A different husband, a different wife, no kids. Pleasure. There's no end to the list. Any desire you have that's not a desire for God can choke out the word in your heart.

I've seen people who are clearly believers, they love God's word, they believe the gospel, and they endure suffering and continue to glorify God. They aren't hard ground, and they aren't shallow soil at all. They were fruit-bearing Christians. But then desires took hold in their hearts. For one it was money. He wanted the church to pay him a salary so he could do ministry full time. Another woman wanted a position of leadership, so she could be involved in decision making and be at the center of the action. Another guy wanted us to give him a class to teach. Someone else wanted us to sponsor his effort to plant a church. And each one, when they didn't get what they wanted, became hostile toward the church, and ended up destroying it. Their desires took over and spiritual fruit disappeared from their lives.

Human beings are not driven by instinct like animals are. We are driven by purpose and desires. The object of your strongest desires will drive your life. The various desires in your heart are engaged in a struggle for existence that ends with the survival of the fittest. The strongest desires will win.

What Else Is There?

Now, at this point I wonder if the disciples were sitting there thinking, *Wait a minute—what else is there?* Take away my desire for wealth and my concern about the cares of life and my desires for other things—what does that leave? What else is there? Take away the routines of life, take away money, and take away everything else I desire in this world—what's left? All that leaves is undisputed, unchallenged, uncontested, singular delight in God alone.

Uncontested Listening

If the hardened path stands for the one upon whom the Gospel takes no hold, and the shallow soil, stands for the one of whom it only takes a superficial hold, the thorny-ground stands for the one of whom the Gospel takes a contested hold. The people who are vulnerable to these last three threats (the cares of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things) are people who want to love God and love the world at the same time. They are trying to serve two masters. They want the best of both worlds.

But people who think they have the best of both worlds really only have one world. People who are serving both God and money are really only serving money. And that will become clear when they have to make a choice. Like the rich young ruler in ch.10, when Jesus told him to give away all his money, he went away sad. When forced to choose between Christ and his money, he chose the money. Or Demas, who was a fellow worker with the Apostle Paul at one point. But at the end of Paul's life Paul wrote to Timothy and said:

2 Timothy 4:10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me

Every one of us has to choose: the word or the world—you can't have both

Conclusion

I told you that this passage is all about how to listen to God, but so far it's really been all about how not to listen. Don't be a casual hearer with low interest, or Satan will come take the word right out of your

heart. Don't be a shallow hearer with coffee mug theology, otherwise you won't make it through suffering. And don't be a divided or distracted hearer, or you'll get choked out by the things in this world. But all that is a lot easier said than done, right? It's easy for me to just stand up here and say, "Don't get distracted by the worries of this life," or "increase your interest in Scripture" or "go deep so you can handle suffering," but what practical steps will help you avoid all those pitfalls? That's where we'll plan to pick it up next time. We've been warned about the wrong way, now Jesus is going to teach us the right way to listen to God so that his word will bring a harvest of righteousness in your life and give you life, and joy, and productivity, and every other purpose God intended.