

Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (NIV)

⁴**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.** ⁵Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23 (NIV)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ²Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹**Whoever has ears, let them hear.**” . . .

¹⁸“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²²The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

How well do any of us truly bear God?

This week, we turn to the word, “hear/listen.” It is fundamental to the Jewish and Christian understanding of our life in God. Please take the time page 2 text box before going on. It is the entry on “ear/hearing” from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* and is an excellent introduction to this week’s topic in this series, *Words*.

Hear, O Israel!

The OT Law consists of the teachings given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. God gave these instructions in one big gift-wrapped package. It is as if God is moving in with the Israelites and the Law is the set of house rules. Much of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are devoted to the Law. We refer to this as the “Law” because it is the customary way to translate the Hebrew word, *Torah*. “Law” is a helpful translation, but “instruction” and “teaching” get closer to its meaning.

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy lays out the heart of the Law. Verse 4, “**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.**” begins a prayer, the *Shema*, that all Jewish boys and men recited daily. When Jesus is asked for the greatest of all God’s teachings, it is here that he turns and then adds “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). God’s teachings, God’s Law, begins with our love for God. The first four of the Ten Commandments begin to flesh out this fundamental teaching – no other gods, keep the Sabbath, etc. The Law also includes many teachings about our relationships with one another, the last six of the Ten Commandments begin to flesh out these teachings about relationships – no stealing or lying, no adultery or coveting, etc.

The Law also spells out a variety of rituals and practices by which the unholy people are able to approach the Holy God. Much about these rituals is bizarre to us and the meaning is often lost. Still, even here we can see God teaching his people about living with God. They are to bring their very best to God. For example, when they offer God a gift, it is to be from their own possessions, it is to cost them something.

But it all begins with the command that Israel, God's people are to hear God and then live by what they have heard.

**EAR, HEARING
(FROM THE DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL IMAGERY)**

In the Bible the ear is synonymous with the heart and mind as an organ of cognition (Prov 2:2; Is 6:9–10), and true hearing involves listening and understanding (Job 34:16). The ear is personified as hearing and understanding (Job 13:1), seeking knowledge (Prov 18:15) and testing words (Job 12:11). To “incline” the ear is to be favorably disposed to what is heard (Jer 34:14; Ps 31:2). To have “deaf,” “heavy” or “uncircumcised” ears is to reject what is heard (Jer 6:10; Acts 7:51). “Itching” ears are only favorably disposed to what is already found agreeable (2 Tim 4:3). Idols are deaf (Deut 4:28; Rev 9:20), but God is personified as having ears (1 Sam 8:21) and hearing his people (2 Sam 22:7). Prayers and petitions to God begin with a request to God to “incline your ear” (Ps 17:6). God hears his people groaning in bondage (Ex 3:7), facing their enemies in battle (Is 37:17), crying out in barrenness (Gen 30:6) and complaining when unjustly treated (Jas 5:4). God hears the prayers of the righteous (Ps 17:1; 1 Pet 3:12) and those asking according to his will (1 Jn 5:14). Thus God always heard the prayers of Jesus (Jn 11:41–42; Heb 5:7). God also hears the arrogance of humanity (2 Kings 19:28) and its plotting (Num 12:2). His ears are hard of hearing or deaf to the prayers of sinners and those refusing to hear him (Is 59:1–2; Jn 9:31).

Unlike ancient religions that sought revelation through the eye and through visions, biblical people primarily sought revelation through the ear and hearing. Hearing symbolizes the proper response to God in the Bible. God opens the ears to hear his word (Job 36:10; Is 50:4–5), gives the ears of the prophets his revelation (Is 22:14; 50:4–5) and exhorts his people either directly or through prophets to “hear” his revelation (Deut 5:1; Jer 2:4; Rev 2:7). To faithfully hear God's voice requires personal apprehension, acceptance and obedience (Mt 7:24, 26; Lk 11:28; Jas 1:22–25). Lack of hearing is the decisive spiritual failure and rebellion against God (Is 48:8; Heb 3:7–8).

Jesus is God's incarnate Word, and thus God commands us to listen to Jesus in faith and obedience (Mt 17:5). The parable of the sower demonstrates that the efficacy of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom depends on faithful hearing. Thus Jesus' stress upon “Let anyone with ears listen!” (Mt 13:9 NRSV). To hear the words of God is to be a child of God (Jn 8:47) and a sheep hearing the voice of the Shepherd (Jn 10:3, 16, 27). Not to do so is to be spiritually hard of hearing (Mt 13:14–16) and to remain unforgiven (Jn 12:47–49). Hearing is blessing and life, and not hearing is judgment (Job 36:10–12; John 5:24).¹

1. Leland Ryken et al., [*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 223–224.

Hearing well

As brought out in the text box, hearing God is as much a part of the New Testament as the Old. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised when Jesus says time and again something like “Whoever has ears, let them hear.” We must seek to hear well and to understand so that we may grasp the nature of our salvation and this new life we have been given in Christ. To quote Paul, “How they can believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” (Romans 10:14).

Jesus tells a lot of parables, some long, some short. Some plain in meaning and others obscure. Regardless, we are called to truly hear and understand. One difficulty many Christians have with the parables is that we are unable to see connections to the Old Testament that would have been plain for Jesus, his disciples, and the crowds, as with the parable of the sower (Matthew 13 above). They knew all about sowers and seeds. Hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah had promised that God's word would go forth like sprouting seed, returning full and accomplishing God's purposes (Isaiah 55:8-11). By Jesus' day, "sowing" was a stock metaphor for teaching and preaching, as was "harvest" for the climactic ingathering of God's people at the coming of God's kingdom.

So, when Jesus started talking about a sower, the crowds would have expected some upbeat story about the sprouting of God's word. But what a surprise awaited them! The sower (God) spreads his seed (God's word – Jesus' proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom) -- but some seed does *not* bear fruit! Some seed falls on inhospitable ground and is lost. The crowds listening to Jesus must have wondered who it was that would not participate in God's harvest on that long-anticipated Day of the Lord. Could it be some of them, some of Israel, God's chosen people? Could it be that God would not simply affirm Israel as she stood? This parable certainly would have gotten the crowd going.

Still, even as Jesus' listeners puzzled over who Jesus meant by the unfruitful seed, they would have understood that God's purposes wouldn't be thwarted. In the parable, even though some seed is lost, God still reaps a bountiful, even miraculous, harvest. In first-century Palestine, the typical return on seed was about sevenfold. Here, the seed returns a harvest of sixty, even a hundredfold. In his paraphrase, *The Message*, Peterson gets it right when he renders the parable's last verse as a "harvest beyond his [the sower's] wildest dreams." No matter the reception given Jesus' proclamation, God's kingdom *would* come.¹ Further, the size of the harvest seems to imply that lots of unexpected people would be part of the harvest. Could the harvest even include Gentiles?! , . . . And what does Jesus say at the of the parable? "Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Jesus Provides an Interpretation of the Parable

Jesus sometimes provides an interpretation of a parable he told. Here, Jesus explains to his disciples that there are those who will not understand the announced coming of God's kingdom and thus be lost (those represented by the path). Others will hear the word and receive it joyfully but only superficially, falling away at the first sign of trouble (the rocky ground). Still others, burdened by the "cares of the world" and the "lure of wealth," will simply ignore the coming of God's kingdom and be lost (the ground among the thorn bushes). But, there will be those who will hear Jesus' word and understand it, bearing fruit and yielding an unimaginable harvest for God. They are the good soil. Jesus challenges his disciples to consider what sort of soil they provide for God's word. Genuine hearing leads to understanding and that leads to right action.

More than just hearing

In the explanation to his disciples, Jesus emphasizes that hearing God's word must lead to understanding. Douglas Hare² notes that here too, Jesus' words must be heard in the

¹Here is how this works. Jesus is the Messiah, which means that he is the anointed one of God, the returning king who ushered in God's kingdom. Many of Jesus' parables begin with "the kingdom of God (or heaven) is like this . . ." Christians proclaim that Jesus' inauguration of God's kingdom 2,000 years ago was genuine, even though God's kingdom has not yet been realized in all its fullness. The final consummation of God's kingdom will come in the future. If this seems a little confusing, you are not alone! Nonetheless, there is an "already/not yet" reality to God's kingdom and we are called to make the "not yet" dimension a present reality, every day and in every way.

² from Douglas Hare's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew in the *Interpretation* commentary series, 1993.

context of the OT. *Understanding* implies acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. In Psalm 119:34, we read, "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart." This understanding is not some sort of intellectual agreement with Jesus' words, but rather, a 100% moral commitment of one's whole being. In his interpretation of this parable, Jesus reminds his disciples that true discipleship is an absolute claim on our lives. True disciples are called to understanding, to perseverance in the face of persecution or temptation, and to living a life that bears fruit, the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). This is the stuff of "good soil."

Finally, does it surprise you that God's seed *needs* good soil? Here is yet another reminder that God does not wave a magic wand over his creation in order to restore it. You'd think that God's seed would be like tv's "miracle seed" that grows on concrete. Instead, God has chosen to work in, through, and *with* his people to accomplish God's purposes. We get used to the idea that God desires our love, as surprising as that is, but *needing* us to get done what God wants to get done. That's another story. . . . Could there be a higher calling in all the cosmos for any of us? What an endlessly amazing and surprising God we worship.

As Jesus might have said, "Can you hear me now!"

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Tuesday is July 4th. This class not meet again until August 1.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Current series: *Ten Bible Passages I wish Christians Knew . . . Well*

This week – Hosea 2 and Isaiah 53

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.