

April 3: Matthew 11-15 Devotional

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15, 13:9).

Matthew 11-15: Jesus' words puzzle his casual listeners, anger his enemies, and feed his committed followers.

It struck me on reading Matthew 11-15 as a block that the theme that makes these five chapters cohere is the theme of “hearing” and “understanding.” Central to the passage, the opening parable in Matthew 13—a parable about a sower (farmer), his seed, and some soils—is (non-coincidentally) a parable about hearing and understanding Jesus' words.

Matthew 11 opens with John the Baptist, Jesus' friend and relative, imprisoned. John subsequently loses his head in chapter fourteen, and Jesus' words on the subject of John and his status and situation I still find mysterious and unexplained. In the midst of his speaking in riddles in Matthew 11, Jesus interjects the statement, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15).

In Matthew 12 and 15, Jesus' words (as usual) upset some scribes and Pharisees and, by the end of Matthew 13, offend the locals where he grew up. But Matthew 14 and 15 record Jesus' words healing, rescuing, and feeding the hurting and the hungry.

Matthew 13 and the parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils hold the secret that reveals the basis for the differences in the varied reactions to Jesus' words. The key words are “hear” and “understand.” The disciples' reaction to this parable demonstrates in real time what draws the dividing lines between the soils that didn't produce any real growth and the good soil. The good soil produced the growth of not only the hearing but the understanding of the “word of the kingdom” (13:19, 23). And Jesus informed his disciples that they were among those who responded like good soil (13:11).

How did the disciples become “good soil”? By Jesus explaining his words to them (13:11-23). It was that simple. The disciples wanted to understand. They came to Jesus to ask him what he meant. And Jesus taught them personally what his words meant.

It's easy to walk away from the mysterious (and what many find offensive) teachings of Jesus with anger and even enmity. The Bible has many accusers today who don't “hear” or “understand.” Becoming “good soil” takes work. It takes some digging and cultivating and fertilizing. And it's a growing process. We can approach the Bible with hostility which will block any proper understanding of it. Or we can start with the open mind of wanting to hear and understand. Then, we can go to the Author to ask him what he meant by what he said.

In many ways and in many places, I still find the Bible a hard book to understand. But now I find the work it takes to grow my understanding an exciting process. The passages I understand the least are the passages where there's the most to be learned. And when the light switch flips and things that were once puzzling begin to make sense, the realization that Jesus himself, through his indwelling Spirit, is still in the business of opening blind eyes and unstopping deaf ears (Matt. 11:5) is enormously exciting.