



Ears Up-Part 1

Christ on Hearing God

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I remember the day I was told that I am colorblind. I was in elementary school—Bixby Elementary School in Long Beach. I was called in for some routine physical with the school nurse and she, you know, weighed me and measured me, and she had me look at the eye chart and I was reading, e.g., all those letters. And then she sat me down and said, “Come over here, son.” She opened up this book with circles—looked like paint splattered in a circle. You remember the test? And she said, “Just tell me what number you see there.” I looked there like, Are you kidding? Is this a joke? There’s no number in that circle. “Mm-hmm.” She flipped the page. “What number do you see there?” I thought this was a test like on suggestibility or something, like they’re trying to see how weak-minded I am. “There’s no number in the circle, lady. I’m sorry. Come on. This is a joke.” Well, after four or five, I realized that other people actually see numbers in the circles and I was, you know, labeled colorblind.

Now, I have been colorblind—obviously colorblind—my whole life. But when I tell people I’m colorblind, they act like I’m blind. They start holding up fingers and stuff like that. You know, “What color is the grass?” I mean, I can see color; I just can’t see all the colors that most of you can see. And you wouldn’t want me to be apparently your pilot—I’m hearing that’s sort of kind of off the chart for me there. You don’t want me to be your clerk at the paint store mixing and matching paints—good at that. If you have a hard time matching your tie to your ensemble, you don’t want to ask me. I have no idea. I’ve also learned you probably don’t want me splicing together the little wires in your network cable. They all look like the same color to me. I’ve had trouble with that. And you don’t want me picking out clothes for you. And I know that there’s plenty of things I can’t do, because I just can’t see all the colors that you see.

And I found that people have deficiencies like that not only in what they see, but also in what they hear. There are some people that apparently can’t hear what they sound like. We call them tone-deaf. Maybe you’re sitting next to one this morning—you’re just knowing something’s wrong. They’re the people you will never invite to sing in the Christmas choir. Matter of fact, you kind of distract them when the Christmas choir announcement is being made. “Look at this, the bookstore is open for... something.” You get them onto something else, because you know you don’t want that person singing. They’ll never be on stage with an instrument; you probably want to keep them away even from your stereo in your car. You just want—you know—they can’t hear things the way that most of us hear things.

Well, I’ve met some people that have, you know, perfect sight—they can see all the colors of the rainbow; they have perfect hearing, perfect pitch; they can hear harmonies, and they’re great at singing



and all of that; they can play instruments. I know people who have all of those abilities. But when I sit them down and I talk to them about their need for Christ—I talk about the lordship of Christ, the authority of Christ, about the problem of sin—and I make connections that I think should be so easy for you to see between your guilt and the shame that you have over sin and how the release of that sin is provided for you in Christ in his substitutionary death on a cross, and how his resurrection provided validation and proof for that, and Can't you see your need for us to do what he asked and put your trust in Christ and become a disciple of Christ?—they look at me like I'm speaking in Chinese. They don't get it. "I don't know why anyone would want to do that." Like, well, let's go over that again. They just don't get it. They're tone-deaf, if you will, to a problem when it comes to spiritual things.

Surely, if you have been a Christian for any time at all and have tried to share the gospel—your faith—with other people, you've come across those folks and you think, I don't understand why they don't get it. They don't even seem to see it.

Now, there are several things I won't do. I'll probably never be a commercial pilot. I won't be asked, you know, to paint artistic things, and I won't... I get there are limitations for being colorblind, and I understand that some of you, if you're tone-deaf, then you'll never have that experience of singing harmonies in a choir, or—I guess there's lots of things we don't get if we don't completely hear or completely see. But if you can't discern the spiritual things in the Bible that relate to your need before a holy God and the solution in Christ and appropriating that through faith—and if you don't get that—you can understand, if you're tone-deaf to those truths, the consequences are eternal. There's a big, big, big problem.

Jesus addresses this problem in Luke chapter 8 as we begin our series entitled "Ears Up," because when it comes down to it in this text, it's not just the parable of the sower and the seed; it's the subsequent little peric—appease, or stories that we find in this chapter that all tie together around the theme of those who can hear the truth. And by that, here's what I mean (I know that's kind of our analogy): they can perceive the truth, they can process that truth mentally, and they can appropriate it and respond to it appropriately. That is something that you'll see throughout this chapter. And we're going to take seven weeks to deal with it. But today, I just want to get started by giving the setting in verses 4 through 10. The setting of the parable—we'll read the articulation of the parable of the seed and the sower by Christ, very familiar parable—and we'll just consider some startling statements for a lot of us in verses 9 and 10 that should set the stage for the rest of our series.

So let me read this together. Hopefully you've turned to it or you pulled it up on your device. I want you to look at verses 4 through 10 as I read for you Jesus giving the parable of the sower and the seed—Luke chapter 8, is that what I said? Verses 4 through 10—here it comes.



“And when a great crowd was gathering, and people from town after town came to him”—now this is successful public speaking right here; people are coming to hear him. He’s been effective in drawing a crowd—“he said in a parable.” That word is one of the words, by the way, we point out oftentimes because the original language of the New Testament was Greek—*Koine* Greek—in the first century, and some of the words were not translated; they were transliterated, they were just slid over from Greek into English. This is one. And I usually explain some of these Greek words when they’re compound words, particularly when they’re compounds with a preposition. Prepositions give us orientation to reality. And this is one of them. “Para” is the Greek preposition “alongside of” or “next to.” The second half of this Greek word, “ballō,” is the word we get the word “ball” from, which is the verb “to throw.” So a parable is something that is thrown in alongside of something else. Well, what is it? It’s a story—an analogy, an illustration—thrown in alongside of the truth, the point, the thing you’re trying to communicate.

So “parable”—I know this is like 101 stuff, but it’s important to note because Jesus used them extensively. And most of us think he used them extensively like your preacher uses an illustration, which is, “Let me help you understand this.” Well, the startling part that we’re going to get to here in verses 9 and 10 are going to kind of blow that out of the water as we think through why he used these parables.

But let’s read the parable—the most familiar parable for most of us in the New Testament: “The sower went out to sow his seed,” verse 5. Now, by the way, barley and wheat are the common staples of the first-century farmer—put a bag over their shoulder, they would walk along, and they would take their hand and they would pull out the seed, and they would toss it into the field. Well, when you’re doing that, you can imagine—as some of you had some experience, if for nothing else, I don’t know, feeding your grass or something, I suppose—when you do that, it’s going to scatter everywhere. “He sowed, and as he sowed,” middle of verse 5, some of those seeds fell along the path. Now the path is dirt. It’s the part you walk on. It’s compacted because it is walked on. And it just sits there on the top of the dirt. It doesn’t even penetrate; it doesn’t go in. People trample it underfoot, and the birds, they say, “Great, here’s lunch,” they fly in and they devour it—they eat it up.

Verse 6: some of the seed fell on the rock. Now, not on the Rocky Mountain—I’m picturing a piece of granite coming out of the dirt; that’s not the idea—but it was the rocky soil, as we’ll see. And the soil is... I mean, it has pebbles or rocks in it. It’s the idea of very shallow soil, as we’ll understand. And you’ve got kind of a top layer of soil on some kind of hard rock that’s underneath it. So it looks good. It looks like good soil, but you throw the seed on it and it grows up because there’s some soil there and some nutrients in the soil, but it withers away because it’s not like the rest of the soil. It’s got no opportunity to get moisture in it—not the way the other soil does. So it goes away quickly.



Verse 7: some of the seed fell among the thorns. That's something you can't fully control. I mean, some of it's so small you can't even detect what's going on in the soil. But as this grows up here, the thorns grew up with it and choked it out.

"And then some fell into the good soil," the kind that he's intending to throw it into, "and it grew and yielded a hundredfold." I'm going to get the noun here—a hundredfold crop, a hundredfold of fruit. You get a lot out of that seed, and it reproduces, and it's awesome.

So you've got the path (verse 5), rock (verse 6), thorns (verse 7), good soil (verse 8). There's the story. You're familiar with it. You've been to Sunday school or whatever; you've been around. You've heard the story. There it is.

Now, bottom of verse 8: as he said these things, he called out—here it comes—"He who has ears to hear, let him hear." This is an interesting thing. He's just told a story. No big words in it, not hard to understand; you know what it is to cast seed of barley or wheat out into the field. We heard it. Yeah, but that's not—we're not talking about an auditory experience here. Obviously, we're talking about understanding the thing that's alongside the story. The story is something thrown alongside of the truth: "Let him who has ears... let him hear." Hear what? Hear the thing that I'm intending by the story. That's what I want you to hear.

"And his disciples"—"Hey, we've got a question. What do you mean by the story?" Verse 9: the disciples asked him what this parable meant. And he said, "To you"—the disciples, which, by the way, don't confuse this; this is not just the twelve apostles; the disciples were the band of people that were faithfully trusting in Christ and following him—"to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God." What are you talking about? You're keeping secrets? That's what it says. The secrets—the "mysterion" in Greek; we get the word "mystery"—but the mystery, the thing that other people don't get—you get it. It's been given to you to know those things. "But for others"—here's the disturbing part. Now read it carefully—"for others they are in parables." What they get is the stories alongside of the truth. That's all they get. "So that..."—you see the quotation there—"seeing they may not see"—this is a quotation from Isaiah 6—"seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand."



Which, by the way, Isaiah 6—real quickly here—you might remember if you know your Bible, Isaiah 6 is when Isaiah is about to go and be commissioned. In that vision he sees God high and exalted, sitting on a throne, his robe filling the temple, seraphim flying around saying, “Holy, holy, holy,” and then there was, “Who’s gonna go for us?” And Isaiah goes, “Here I am, send me.” And he says, “Great, fantastic, I’m going to send you; and when I send you, I’m going to send you to obstinate people that are not going to listen. Oh, they’ll hear you preach, but they’re not going to get it. They’re going to see you preach, but they’re not going to get it.” The ministry I don’t want to sign up for, but that’s the one Isaiah got signed up for—you’re going to preach your whole ministry here, and for the most part, people aren’t going to respond to it.

So this is the quotation. Now, I’m assuming Isaiah was trying as hard as he could to teach clearly to the people of his generation about the words and thoughts and truths of God. Here the text has Jesus telling a parable, and he’s going, “Hey, guys, I’ve got a secret for you: I’m going to tell you what the parable means, because you get to know the secrets of the kingdom. Oh, and those people, they’re not going to get it. So just like Isaiah, they’re going to hear me teach, but they’re not going to get it.” See, now, that’s not what Isaiah was doing—Isaiah was trying, and the forecast was not going to be good for preachers in this generation. You’re not going to do well. People aren’t going to crowd in to hear your sermons. Or they may hear it, but they’re not going to respond to it; they’re not going to obey the message. Jesus is purposefully obscuring the message.

Now, again, this is so radical for some who’ve never thought about it. You think Jesus tells parables because you think he wants to be a good communicator, just like my preacher—he uses illustrations so people can understand better. This is, “I’m going to use a parable and not explain it so that people can say they heard me preach; they came to hear me preach; but they didn’t get it, because I never explained it to them.” What is going on here? Glad you asked. It’s why we’re here. Got some time to talk about this.

Let’s start by just observing the distinction. The distinction would be between verse 4 and verse 9. Verse 4: great crowds. Verse 9: disciples. The big crowd gathered to hear; the disciples get to understand. Verse 10 says—here’s the word I want you to highlight, bracket, underline—“And he said, ‘It has been’”—here’s the word—“‘given to you to know the secrets of the kingdom.’” Given to you. Now, when we talk about God giving people things that, of course, the context would suggest are important things—things you need to know about the kingdom, things that will save your soul, things that will make a difference in your life a thousand years from now—that is something that we understand we want, and God gives it. We have a word for that in our theology. We describe that as something as an act of grace. God gives it to people who don’t deserve it. That’s the idea of grace.



And here, the disciples get it. And when God gives good gifts to people, one of the ways the Bible describes that is by grace. And whenever you use the word “grace,” it presupposes the people that are the recipients—they don’t deserve it. And because God is a God of grace, giving to people who don’t deserve it—like Peter, James, John, Thomas, Philip, Nathaniel, the rest of them (just to name the twelve)—but there are others there. They don’t know the names of... some I learn—Joanna and all the rest in verses 1 through 3—they are getting the information and others aren’t. That’s the kind of distinction Jesus is making here in his preaching. And I’m recognizing that he’s doing it out of grace for them—giving them something they don’t deserve.

That should make us understand that that is something we ought to be grateful for. If I didn’t earn it, it’s something I can’t be proud about. Because you know what I’ve found about people that are really good at being able to match ties to outfits—now that’s probably an overstatement—but there are some people so good with colors they become interior designers. I know one—gotta be careful with this—but there’s kind of an air of superiority about those folks. They’ll walk into my office and go, “Ooh.” I’m colorblind, you know. I know. They have this sense that they can arrange things better than everyone else. And you know what? They’re right. And it’s a lot like musicians. If you notice, there’s kind of an arrogance about... not our musicians—they’re the humble musicians—but there’s... they’re kind of like, “You know, we understand this thing called music, you know, about diatonics and circle of fifths, and did you hear that he ended on the third,” and all that nonsense. And you feel like, I don’t know anything about what you’re saying. And you have this sense of arrogance.

Here’s the thing: when these things are given to you, it should replace hubris with gratitude—arrogance with humble thanksgiving.

Number one—let’s put it that way. Let’s start with that. When it comes to the idea of God giving people the understanding of his truth, we want to say we want to be grateful for the gift of hearing. And by hearing, of course, I put that in quotes so that you can understand we’re talking about—not auditory experiences—but the reception, the perception, the ingesting of the principles and truths of God, the ability to appropriate those and respond rightly to them. The perception of truth is a gift. That’s what this text says. Some—they get it—and it’s given to them by God, and they get to understand, and others don’t get it.

See, to be arrogant about your ability—let’s just talk about colors. See, some of you are colorblind. Most of you are not. You get to see all the colors, and I’m stuck not getting to see all the colors. I just have one question for you color-seers: What did you do to get your ability and privilege to see color? What did you do to get that? Because I didn’t get it. How did you get it? “Well, prenatally I was working really hard at trying to exercise my optic nerves, and the rods and cones developed in the back



of my..." No. Because I worked hard on getting my optic nerve to be... You did nothing. You are the recipient of grace, are you not? When it comes to how much you can see, I got ripped off—that's what I feel like—because I'm thinking I live in a world of color. I want to see the color. I don't get to see the color. You get to see all the color. What's with that? Do you go around, "Oh"? You did nothing. You should be grateful that when I look up at a rainbow—literally I see like a yellow streak in the sky. You see other stuff I don't get to see. Do you go around, "Look at me"? No. Why? Because you did nothing to get that. Nothing. You should be grateful, living in a world of color, that you get to see it.

And in the first century, when Christ comes on the scene—the incarnate God—and speaks truth about God and heaven and the kingdom, if you get to perceive that, the Bible makes this clear: it's a gift of grace.

If you're a note-taker, jot down these three references real quick (most of these passages I'm sure you know): James chapter 1, verse 17—James 1:17—"Every good and perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father." The Father grants good things. If you sit here today saying, "I understand the gospel; I understand what it means to be a follower of Christ; I put my faith in Christ; I felt the guilt—I get it relieved; I understand the things you just mentioned about being a participant and a citizen of the kingdom"—you know what? All I want you to recognize is that gift came from God. It was a gift. You did nothing, the Bible says, to earn it. That's what grace is all about.

Acts 17:25—quick triad of verses for you. Acts 17:25. Paul is preaching to the Athenians—they're the professors of the University of Athens, if you will, in the Areopagus—and he says this as he preached to the crowd: "God himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything else." If they have perfect pitch, he gave that to them. If they have the ability to see all the colors in the rainbow, he gave them that. God gives men life and breath, and everybody is a recipient of everything because God gives it.

One more just to round out our little triad: 1 Corinthians 4:7. "Who sees anything different in you?" If someone can look at you and see that you have this talent, this ability, this... this thing you've gotten—this privilege—he says this rhetorical question: "What do you have that you did not receive?" You got it—it was gift. God gave it to you. "And if you received it, why do you boast as if you didn't?" If it's inherent in you, why do you walk around and act like you earned this?

Now, when it comes to salvation—which begins with the understanding of the most important mystery or secret of the kingdom—that's a gift. God gives that. And that should be for us something that makes



us eternally grateful. It's why we sing songs to God, because we are grateful that he has granted us the ability to perceive it.

And if you think, "Well, Mike, you're giving us a safeguard about something I've never really even been tempted to do—I don't walk around prideful because I"... Then do more evangelism. Do more evangelism. And here's what you'll find out: if you share the gospel enough with people, you'll eventually go, I don't understand why everyone's so stupid. You're going to go, I don't know why they don't get it. I can attach these things to experience; I can see these things in nature; I understand the realities of rationally believing in a resurrect... I get it all, and why can't they get it? You're going to be tempted to say, "Well, I guess I was just more spiritually perceptive than they were. I guess I just had a softer heart toward God than they do. I guess I just somehow—I don't know—figured this out because I have an ability that other people don't have." That ability that you have that other people don't have—it came from God.

Two passages on this really quickly. I'd like you to look at 1 Corinthians chapter 2. 1 Corinthians chapter 2. I can't talk about your ability to perceive kingdom truth and not turn you to this passage. 1 Corinthians chapter 2. The Bible says, yeah, you have an ability that other people don't have, but it has been given to you specifically by the Spirit of God and his activity in your brain.

Verse 13—1 Corinthians 2:13. Now, the pronouns are important—and it is a classic hermeneutical mistake in this passage, by the way. People read the pronouns and they always want to identify themselves with Paul's first-person plural pronouns, and in this context most of it does not include the Corinthians or us. It includes him and the band of apostles, which he counts himself a part of because Christ commissioned him. So when you read this, for instance, in verse 13 of 1 Corinthians 2—"and we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but by the Spirit"—he's talking about being the recipient of the revelation of God. And if you look back up in the passage, that's clearly the point. He's received revelation, just like Jeremiah did, just like Isaiah did, just like Moses did, just like Luke did. He gets information revealed to him by the Spirit of God. And we are—in this verse, look at it—"interpreting spiritual truths." He's exposing and giving out—teaching spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. That's us. You read the first chapter of Corinthians—1 Corinthians 1; you read 1 Corinthians chapter 2—you get this information from God through the pen, or the quill, of Paul (or his amanuenses), and you get this information, you read it, and then you say, "I get it." And if you do get it—the spiritual truth—the Bible says that's because you are spiritual.

Now, that sounds mystical and weird and all that—no, it's not. It just means that you, as a person, have had the Spirit of God indwell your life. The Spirit who reveals truth to Paul and to Peter and to John and put those things there in print (or, in the first century, as they proclaimed it and taught it as



prophets)—you receive that information and you get it; you understand it; you have the gift of hearing because you’re spiritual. If you’re not a Christian, you’re not spiritual. You are the verse 14 “natural person.” You don’t have the Spirit. Verse 14: “And the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him.” So why, when you share the gospel with a non-Christian, are you talking about what you learned in church unless you focus on things that non-Christians can relate to? If you really talk about the core issues—“I don’t... I think that’s stupid. I don’t get it. It’s foolish and it’s folly.” “And he is not”—here’s something to underline—“not able to understand them.” Why? “Because those things,” he says, “are spiritually discerned”—*anakrinetai*—another one with a preposition, compound with a preposition. *Ana-krinō*: to decide, discern, to judge. They’re not able to take these things up into their thinking, into their rational minds, because they don’t have the Spirit of God.

The Spirit reveals truth to the apostles and prophets. They teach it or write it down. We read it and we get it. Now, we don’t get it all—we don’t get it all right off the bat. Some things are hard to understand, as Peter says—but we get it. And when we get it and we understand kingdom secrets and truths, if you will, the Bible says it’s because you have the Spirit of God and you’re able to take them up. Now, there’s a play on words in verse 15 which—because I gave you the word *anakrinō*—maybe you catch here in verse 15: “The spiritual person *krinei* [judges] all things.” He’s able to take things up, to rationalize, to figure those things out. And the “all,” of course, is limited by the context—you don’t understand all things. But you understand all the things in the context of this discussion, which is the spiritual things in the Bible—the things that relate to our salvation and our relationship to God. He says you “judge all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.” Now, that is variously understood, but I think the context and the play on words doesn’t mean—obviously we’re not judged; non-Christians judge us, even Christians judge us, even rightfully so against a benchmark of Scripture. What kind of judgment are we talking about? We’re talking about the ability to understand. And what’s the point here? We have the ability to understand the truth of God, and we judge all those things. The non-Christian—which is most people (which I understand is hyperbolic language here), but the “no one,” everyone else out there, because they’re the majority—they don’t get us. They can’t. And they don’t get us because they don’t get the message. They think we’re foolish, following foolish information. They don’t have the Spirit of God; they don’t get it. And he quotes Isaiah 40: “Who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” No one does. “But we”—I think we’re back now to the apostles and prophets—“we have the mind of Christ.” They, through revelation, receive truth; they pass it on to people like us—Christians—and we get it because we have the Spirit. Non-Christians don’t get it because they don’t have the Spirit.

The Spirit is the gift of God. It is the ultimate gift of God that the Gospels talk about, that Jesus preached about all the time. We pray, as we seek in our salvation in that moment of conversion—we pray for God’s Spirit; we pray for conversion; we pray to be indwelt by the Spirit. When that happens, our minds are open to the truth. The Bible illustrates it not only with auditory experiences and sensory auditory experiences, but even visual ones. We have no time for this, but 2 Corinthians chapter 4—the analogy flips to the visual. It’s like people who don’t understand the gospel have a veil over their



eyes—they're blinded. But when the Spirit of God comes, the veil is lifted and they see the glory of Christ. Non-Christians—we think, "Oh, interesting moral teacher," all that. But when we have the Spirit of God, we see it; we get it. And that's a gift. It's a gift from God. No boasting.

We don't have time for this either, but we're so close to it. Look across the page at verse 26—or scroll up to verse 26 of chapter 1. 1 Corinthians 1:26. He says it isn't because you were the smart people: "Consider your calling, brothers." Think about the group of Christians you're with. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards—not just the philosophers and the deep thinkers that got saved. We got a few of those, but it's not that God's looking for the smartest people and they get it because they're smart—not powerful, not of noble birth. "But God chose what is foolish..." Right across the board, you look at it—who knows? people from all walks of life. It's not because they're the smartest. He chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. What's the difference between the wise and the foolish from God's perspective? The Spirit of God—the ability to understand the need for Christ, the ability to grow in Christ and appropriate the principles or secrets of the kingdom. Look at the purpose clause after all this long list: the weak of the world to shame the strong; verse 28, the low and the despised, the things that are not to shame the things that are. He says, "So that"—verse 29—"no human being might boast in the presence of God."

And again, all I've got to tell you is if none of this is really hitting you with conviction because "I don't really feel superior," you're not doing enough evangelism. I'm telling you: do evangelism because we're supposed to. But when you do it, you start to say, When I sit around with my home fellowship group—with really converted people—they understand stuff that my coworkers just do not get. And you start to realize there's like a real giftedness about understanding spiritual truths in the Bible. And you will be tempted to be arrogant. And all I'm saying is: remember these principles.

Now, let me give you the antidote—the solution—which is: all of this is a gift from God. That's the next verse, verse 30: "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God..." It wasn't until he put you in Christ, until he gave you the Spirit and endowed you to understand these spiritual truths. It's a gift.

Now, this is important because it's the statement of truth in our text—important for us to recognize it as the baseline. It's like the old hymn says—to go back to flip the analogy to the visual experience—"I once was blind, but now I see." There is something that happens in a population of completely blind people—or, in our analogy, in completely deaf people—or, in the analogy of Ephesians 2, in completely dead people. And God—verse 4 of Ephesians 2—because of his great love with which he loved us, he made us alive in Christ. He reached out and he gave us these things. Now, that's the teaching of the Bible.



It may be a bit hard, particularly because when we flip it around and we look at the rest of what's said in our passage in Luke 8—and I invite you back to Luke 8 now; it's printed in your worksheet—and you think about all these poor people in the big crowd: they're not given the gift of hearing. Oh man. And that's not fair. What's the deal? I'm an Orange County parent; I try to be fair with my kids. They get all the same privileges, all the same opportunities. I give them all the same because I love them and I'm not going to favor one over the other. And clearly this is a passage about favoring a group of people over the other. I don't like this. Well, you may not like it, but God's not an Orange County parent—have I preached that enough from this platform? God does not treat everyone equally. “Oh—heresy!” Not heresy. Read the Bible. Read this passage. Some get granted the gift of hearing—perceiving the truth and responding to it—and others don't.

“Well, that doesn't seem right.” You've got to understand the baseline. The baseline is a world of dead people. Why are we dead? Well, if you're really theological, Romans 5 says we're dead because we inherit the problem of Adam. And that's an issue and everybody's born with it. And that's really sad. But there's more in the Bible than just our inherent depravity because we are born of Adam. There's more in the Bible about how we compound the problem—being children of Adam—where we now do the same things that Adam did, which makes, by the way, it a lot harder for us.

Now, I'm speaking on the other side of the coin because this is a paradox—or the biblical word is an antinomy—two truths in conflict, and it makes our minds hurt. I get that. But all life and hearing is a gift of God. And yet even in the parable itself, in verses 5 through 8, we've got path, rock, thorns, and then good soil. It almost seems like the difference isn't the penetration of the seed or any kind of act of the sower, but the receptivity of the soil itself. Now, why is a soil harder than others? Why is a soil more thorny than others? Why has a soil got more rock in it than others? What's with that? It seems like the problem was with the soil itself, and all soils are not equal. Because you're painting a picture of grace, that everyone's dead in their transgressions and has to be made alive in Christ; everyone's deaf and can't understand the truth and God has to grant hearing; everyone's blind in their depravity and has to have sight given to them. That seems like everyone's equal. And the passage is about people not being equal. You follow that? Hard lives—path, thorns, rock—and then the good soil.

Now, there's truth to this—God's sovereignty and human responsibility laid side by side in the Scripture. And the Scripture makes clear that sinful choices certainly do affect people's receptivity to the truth. In other words, if you want to look for hardness of heart—pardon the pun here—or hardness of hearing, then you can look in the Bible and find when people make sinful, willful, rebellious choices, they become more hardened against God; they become more hardened against the voice of God; they become more resistant to the truth. And that is true. So let's state that without any consternation over the seeming conflict.



Number two—let’s understand sin’s impairment. Because if you ask the question, “Why is one heart harder than another?” you’re going to look in the Bible and say, “Oh, well, I can see why. It’s because of their willful, rebellious, sinful choices.” And there’s truth to that. So let’s explore that truth a little bit—and not forgetting where we’ve been, because I can talk out of apparently two sides of my mouth and we can just go on about... but let me keep bringing in the other side.

And I’ll do that by giving an example from Romans 9. If you’re, you know, a Sunday school graduate, you know Romans 9 brings this problem to bear—especially when we start thinking, Why does one person have spiritual hearing and one doesn’t? Why does one have spiritual sight and one doesn’t? Why do you get to see all the colors and I don’t? Why are some people completely blind when they’re born? “That doesn’t seem fair.” And one of the responses in this rhetorical discussion Paul is having in Romans 9 is: “Is God unjust?” Clearly he’s not fair—“Is he unjust?” And his response is an illustration from Jeremiah’s teaching, which is, “Should the pot answer back to the potter, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” And I’m going to say every day, “Yeah, that’s what we’re doing.” But he says, “No, the potter—the one who crafted it—has all the rights over the clay.”

And the illustration that is given in close proximity to that statement—just next door—is this: Pharaoh. And he says, you know, Pharaoh—God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he had a purpose. He might display his glory. I’m going to tie all this together. Now follow me on this. Pharaoh becomes the illustration—along with Esau—but let’s talk about Pharaoh because it’s the closest to that statement. And you say, “Well, there it is—hardened his heart. Sounds a lot like Luke 8—he’s going to tell a parable and obscure the truth and not explain it to people.” It’s... he’s making people... it’s making it more difficult for people to respond to the truth. Well—hardened his heart.

Now, if you would listen to an example like Pharaoh and you don’t explain the whole context—Paul’s obviously assuming you know the context—you know the story. And if you do know the story, like most people in the church of Rome did, they had read the book of Exodus like you have. And when you read the book of Exodus—there’s a lot of talk about the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart, am I right? Read it all the time. You read the DBR with us—you read it: wow—hard, hard, hard, hard, harder. And it talks a lot about who hardens his heart. Romans 9 just highlights this side of it: God hardened his heart. But if you read Exodus, what do you find? “Pharaoh hardened his heart. Pharaoh hardened his heart. Oh—God hardened his heart. Pharaoh hardened his heart. Pharaoh hard—God hardened his heart. God hardened his heart.” Wow. It talks a lot about his hard heart, and it attributes it to Pharaoh and attributes it to God.



Follow this now: when I think about why in the world God would harden Pharaoh's heart, I would see that, by necessity, God hardens Pharaoh's heart. Because what is God doing in the book of Exodus, particularly right in front of Pharaoh's nose? Well, it starts with the ten plagues, does it not? He calls in his magicians to try and replicate the things and they can't do it. And I'm thinking, wow—you know that what's happening here is supernatural. You are seeing the signs from God. Any idiot in your kingdom should recognize you're dealing with the true and living God here. Any stooge can figure this out. Baseline: Pharaoh—hard heart. Pharaoh—willfully sinning against God. God steps in and wants to declare his mighty power and his glory (to quote Romans 9) to the people of Israel, out of that would come—as Hebrews 2 says—the writing of Scripture (in that case, the first five books of the Bible), and all of the church would be built on that. And you have here God shouting his glory in a supernatural way to put his imprimatur on the Scripture, to show that the revelation through Moses was from God. He's shouting through Moses with supernatural bells and whistles. And so God—picture this (this is my analogy here)—puts his fingers in Pharaoh's ears so that he doesn't hear it.

Wait a minute—seems like God is keeping Pharaoh from believing the truth. Of course. Pharaoh—with a hard heart, that's the baseline—who had willfully hardened his heart—God sticks his finger in Pharaoh's ears and says, "I'm going to shout now my glory through miraculous signs, and I don't want you to respond to it." Why? Because God takes the hardened heart (talk about a path that's been worn down), and he makes sure that the truth that anyone should be able to understand—he obscures Pharaoh's heart from receiving that.

Now, how does that work here? Well, in our passage, it's the same way. Now, I'm making an assumption here based on the whole of Scripture, and that is that the people in the crowd—unlike the disciples—had absolutely worn down in their lives the kind of receptivity of the gospel that we would expect from someone, I suppose, who's endowed by the Spirit and moving toward God. Instead, they're rebelling against God. To put it in terms of Romans 1: they've seen these things with conscience and creation, among other things, and they've hardened their hearts against it. They've continued to refuse the truth. And so, as Romans 1 puts it, God turns them over to that. The problem is he's declaring his glory in the third rash of miraculous signs in the Bible. Most miracles take place during Christ's and the apostles' ministry; a lot through Moses; some through Elijah and Elisha; and a few sprinkled in between; but then the concentration of them in Christ. Any student should be able to figure out that Jesus is the living God. But taking hard hearts in the crowd, he puts his fingers in their ears by telling them the message of the kingdom in parables and refusing to interpret it for them.

Now, sidebar: some of you view God—as so often in the streets of modern Christianity people do—as a God who sits on the sidelines begging for everyone to become a Christian. And he cannot get people under his lordship because people refuse to come to him. In other words, as I've often put it, the will of God is subservient to the will of man. That's why he sits on the sidelines begging for people to come, and they won't come because they won't come—he's powerless. Now, if that's your view of God, this



passage makes no sense. Because if he wants people saved, shouldn't he be interpreting every single illustration and every parable and doing all that he can? Well, here's my contention and always has been from this platform: God's will is not subservient to man's will; man's will is subservient to God's will.

And the problem is, if you're the living God—the incarnate Christ—and you're teaching the truth, people are going to respond. It's God speaking to his creatures. It's akin to—let me give you this illustration (it's not an illustration; it's a future fact)—it's akin to when the Great White Throne Judgment takes place in the book of Revelation. God is going to call people to the throne to be judged by him. “Hey, everybody—dead people—bring them all in.” Well, you know what, if I'm a non-Christian at that point, I'm going to say, “I don't want to go. I don't want to go. I'm not going. I'm not going.” Well, am I going to go? “Oh, I can't—I can't force you.” Well, of course he can. God can speak a word to his creatures and they obey him. The unmitigated power and authority of Christ. He's speaking to these people—he's much better than your preacher, as you know. Your preacher tries hard to explain... “My preacher's not very good; I don't understand what he said.” Jesus—if he were to come here and preach this morning—every single thing you'd understand, because your Creator is speaking to the creature. Of course he's good at that. If he wants you to do something, he's going to say it, and your will is going to break and bend and you're gonna do it. So he purposefully mitigates the truth. He purposely obscures the truth to those that will not—and don't want to—respond to the truth. They're coming for the goodies.

And if you want a pattern and a paradigm of this in the Gospels—I know we're going a few layers deep here—look for the times Jesus hides himself. John loves that phrase: “he hid himself.” Or I think about John—we read one today in our daily Bible reading—John 12. John 6 is another. John 9, I think, is another—where you see Jesus, who does a sign (interesting—and every student should be able to figure out that we're dealing with God who breaks natural law at this point). But when they see the signs, they come rushing in—in one passage, they want to make him king—and he says, “I'm out of here,” and he withdraws to a lonely place by himself. “If he wants everybody saved, man, do the magic show and let everybody see it.” But he doesn't. Why? Because he purposefully obscures his ministry.

Here's the deal: the whole incarnate first coming of Christ was a mitigated, hidden ministry, was it not? Think about it. There was a time when Jesus said, “Hey, Peter, James, and John—come up to this mountain. I'm going to show you something.” And it's called the Mount of Transfiguration—remember that? He goes... I don't know—I'm picturing him like Superman or something—but he shows them his glory. And Moses and Elijah show up, and then it's like, whoa, that guy's... Peter's on his face. “We've got to build a worship center here.” Now, I'm thinking, if I'm Peter and you're Christ and you want to win the world to yourself—come down the mountain. Let's do that in every village. But he doesn't. He shows up with sandals and brown eyes and looks like some itinerant rabbi teaching the truth. But he recognizes were he in unmitigated form revealing his glory and dispensing his



wisdom, every single person would respond. Right? But you've got hard hearts that don't want to respond, and he in his sovereignty decides to obscure the truth to certain people—putting his (here's the way I like to put it) fingers in their ears so that they don't hear the truth. So they'll be always hearing—they'll know Christ, they'll see Christ, they'll listen to a sermon—but they don't get it.

One more sidebar here in this—I know some of you don't like that: “Oh, that's the Calvinist...” Whatever your thing is on this—listen. Here's the deal: I've got no problem with you having a conversation in your car on the way home and restating this truth differently. And you may, before you even get to where you're going, say, “I like the way I just put it better than the preacher did this morning.” Fantastic. You can restate the truth in a way that you want to and do it in a better way. But a better way doesn't mean that you feel better about it or that you make it sound better to you, okay? The goal of the preacher isn't to tell you things that are just affirming what you already believe. The only way you can come away with a better statement of the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility is for you to synthesize the biblical data better than me, okay?

Because I know how it goes with preachers. Preachers usually are only as good as their last sermon. Or, as I like to put it—ask my wife; I say this a lot—I'm a great preacher and I'm a wonderful pastor as long as I agree with people. And then it's like, “Don't like that guy so much anymore.” See, my job is to help you encounter the biblical data—all of the biblical data—and come to conclusions about that biblical data that we'll call truth. My job is to get you to see that. And while you can cherry-pick or tiptoe around passages of Scripture like this one and come away and say in your car, “I like the way I said it better than the pastor did. I like the way I have my view on this truth better than the pastor's,” all I'm telling you is this: it's got to be a better synthesis and consolidation of the biblical data. That's the only way you can affirm this as better. Because all that really matters is whether we accurately reflect the truth.

So I don't know why I needed that sidebar other than to say, I know a lot of people don't like this tension of truth between God choosing and electing and bringing to himself certain people because of his grace, and other people refusing him. The bottom line, though, is God is not unjust. The amazing thing, as I often say, is not that everyone can't get saved; the amazing thing is that anyone gets saved. That's the whole point. He graciously grants the gift of hearing—perceiving the truth—to some and not others.

Here we go back to our passage with no time left—Luke 8. Sin does impair hearing, I understand that; the Bible affirms that. But I just want to focus in—you can see we only have a half a verse left, bottom of verse 8. The only thing I haven't really included in this message—let's include it now. “He said—as he said these things he called out—‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’” That's what we call in



grammar the force of a verb—it's an imperative. That means it's a commandment. If you've got ears, let them hear. The one who has ears—hear. Tell these people to hear.

Okay. Now, it's kind of weird, isn't it? Because if I have the perception and the ability to hear, I'm thinking you don't need to tell me to hear. It's like you've got rods and cones and receptors in the rear of your eyeballs that work and mine don't. And so it's not like I'm sitting next to my nurse at Bixby Elementary School who opens the color-blindness test and says—"Ishi... here's"—that's the word I'm looking for—it's called the Ishihara colorblind test—the spattered dots of paint. It's not like she opens it and says, "Here—give me the number," and I go, "I can't see an image." She goes, "Oh, you know what? Start to see color. See color." "I can't." And she gets the next kid in there, opens it up, and says, "See color. Now's the time to see color." "I can't see color." Either you can see color or you can't see color. She doesn't have to tell the kid to see color. She just says, "Can you see it or can you not see it?" That's all that she can do.

So if the point is, "I give some the ability to hear, and other people I don't," and you say, "Well, then there would be no command needed." It's like Jesus when he says this about his sheep: "I'm the shepherd; these are my sheep; they hear my voice and they follow me." Well, if they hear your voice and follow you—and that's the gift you grant them—then you'd never say, "Hey, listen to me. Ears up. Listen here." You'd never have to say that because they've got the ability and they do it. But that's not what we learn in the Bible.

One more seemingly paradoxical truth—the truth in tension I'd like you to get: if you understand biblical truth—if you can perceive, understand, appropriate, apply biblical truth—that's a gift from God. It does not exclude, though, what the Bible repeatedly tells us, and that is: when you encounter the truth of God, you've got to work to get it. You have to be diligent to get it. You have to apply yourself to get it. You have to roll up your arms and dig into that truth and get it.

Number three—work to hear well. You have to work at it. "Wait a minute, you said it's a gift to understand." It's a gift. But the Bible keeps telling you things like this: 2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 15. 2 Timothy 2:15. The first word—the Greek sense is *spoudazō*, and I only say that because it's been so variously translated. The old translation—remember the King James—said, "Study to show yourself approved unto God," remember that? Our translations will say, "Do your best." *Spoudazō* is the word—to show energy, to apply yourself, to make this... it's this kind of "get going and do it; work at it." Do your best. Exert your effort. Be diligent. Endeavor "to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker"—just to kind of merge analogies here—that's the word for a guy in a field who's going out and sowing seed or barley, or reaping or plowing the field. It's the day laborer in the heat of the day



with sweat coming off of his forehead—be the worker who applies himself—“a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”

That’s consistent throughout the Bible. Cross-reference for that you might want to put down: Proverbs chapter 2, verses 1 through 15. Proverbs 2:1–15. That’s where the great lines come as it relates to my responsibility like this: “Make your ear attentive to wisdom; incline your heart to understanding; call out for it; raise your voice for it; seek it like it’s silver and search it out like it’s a hidden treasure,” and on it goes.

“Well, if I have the gift of hearing, then I’ve got the gift of hearing—man, it’s not hard for me to seek out; I just look and I see it. My sheep—they hear my voice and they follow me.” Yeah. But here’s the thing that we’re not saying in that simple summation of how it works: there’s a lot of work involved in this. You put yourself to the task of learning. I’ll give you an example: the most concentrated place in all of the Bible—most frequency to the phrase so repeatedly given in the Bible, “Let him who has ears to hear...”—comes in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Revelation 2 and 3, as you know, are seven letters—I call them postcards because they’re really short—to the seven churches of Asia Minor. He ends every one of those postcards—Christ does—with, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” To the churches. “Oh, these are your people—your people you’re telling, ‘Listen up—hey, you’ve got to hear me now.’” What’s the deal? Your sheep hear your voice and they follow you. How well were they following Christ? Well, five out of seven—not very good. And even the two that we talk about—Smyrna and Philadelphia—in the list that we say, “Well, God didn’t rebuke them.” He didn’t rebuke them, but one he said, “You’re about to enter a time of suffering,” and to Philadelphia he said, “There’s a wide door of open ministry here for you and you’re about to go through it.” And both of them imply your need: “And you had better come through this suffering well; and if you do, I’ll reward you.” “This open door—it’s going to be tough. Trust me. Be confident. Be bold. Be courageous. Walk through that door and you’ll be rewarded.”

The others are very clear: “You left your first love” (Ephesus). Remember the list—Pergamum, we’ve got doctrinal compromise; Thyatira, there’s sexual immorality in your church and people aren’t taking it seriously; Sardis, you’re weak, you’re lazy—(Mike Fabarez paraphrase, right)—“your works are waning.” Laodicea—you know Laodicea—what was their problem? Lukewarm—fence-sitters; one foot in the world, one foot in the church. “Man, it’s not even... your name...”—I mean, resolve this. Every single one of them ends this way: “Let him who has an ear to hear hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

By the way—again, too complicated, perhaps—but the paradigm of this is great. “Let the one who doesn’t hear hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Can you see the chain here? God—Christ, to be



specific—is giving revelation to John. John is writing it down and, specifically, it says entrusting it to the messenger of the church in Ephesus (which most commentators would say is the preacher of the church). And the preacher of the church is giving out information to the church. And the Bible says, “Listen to what the Spirit says.” What does that mean—go listen to a tree? Put my head against the ground—“I’m hearing the Spirit.” No—listen to the preached word. Or, if you’re—as we all are, I trust—literate and have printed Bibles—we can now hear the Word of God as we study it, as we memorize it, as we read through it. And I’m going to hear what the Spirit says; I’m going to have ears up to hear the Spirit. How do you do that? You listen to the preached word in your church; you pick up your Bible between Sundays like a good Berean and you examine the Scriptures daily to see if what (I hope) the preacher—like Timothy, who was instructed to be a good student of the Word—is dispensing to you, making sure that all that consolidation of biblical data is accurate. And you spend time and you listen well. Because you’ve gotten that divine revelation exported—deposited—to you. A lot of work—seven times in two chapters: work to hear well.

I suppose with the proliferation of YouTube and even just watching the news, you’ve probably seen one of those videos of the little kid that gets the coch—well, the implant in his head, that wires into his ear so he can hear—sends waves through his brain. It’s amazing to watch. I mean, it’s emotional almost to watch. You see these kids—I saw one recently—Mom had the camera, the phone, whatever it was, and Dad was sitting there and the doctor was there, and they were about to turn it on. He’d come out of surgery, had the implant in his head behind his ear and the earpiece and the wire into his head. And so they’re going to turn it on and he’s going to hear his dad for the first time. And the doctor, you know, motions to the dad, and the dad—the kid’s name is Cody or whatever—“Hey, Cody, it’s your dad.” And if you’ve seen those videos, their eyes light up. You know, it’s just great to watch—here’s a kid hearing his father’s voice for the first time. Whoa. And he’s like thrilled. He’s looking around—Does everyone else hear that? That’s amazing—I’m hearing for the first time. What a great picture—emotional to watch those things.

Without throwing my kids under the bus, having two teenage boys—I sometimes say things to them and it’s like they’re deaf. And it’s amazing how that works. “Hey, get up and take the trash out. Come on—help us with the groceries in the car. Come on.” It’s like... Now I know it’s a tender moment and we all celebrate that, but I wonder—Cody, about 10 or 11 years from now—how that’s going to work. I want Dad to post Cody’s response to “Take the trash out” when he’s 16. I’ll bet—even though he has experienced deafness for a number of years, then experienced the miracle of being able to hear his dad’s voice, and everybody celebrates and cheers and he’s like, “Amazing”—I wonder if he won’t get like most teenage boys, filtering out the things they don’t want to hear. Because if I said, “I’ve got a chocolate cake—anybody want a piece?”—yeah. “Found a \$100 bill over here—Is this anybody’s?”—they hear every syllable of that sentence. But if I say, “Help me with the groceries,” it’s like I’ve just spoken to them in another language. And again, I’m exaggerating—my kids are, of course, fantastic—but you understand what I’m saying.



All I'm telling you is you've experienced a number of years as a non-Christian. Remember when you got converted to Christ? There was a day you understood it. There was a day you were granted the gift of hearing, when all this coalesced in your mind. You saw Christ. You saw your guilt. You saw your sin. You saw the finished work of Christ. You saw the evidence of the resurrection. You got it all. And you go, "Yes!" And you heard the voice, and like that little kid on that video, your eyes popped open with joy—like, Does anyone else hear this? This is amazing. But like those seven churches—five of them, in particular—maybe you've become like that teenage kid that filters out what he doesn't want to hear. Not only is it the preacher (right?)—and I know you'd never treat God like you treat the preacher, I hope—but sometimes God's Word is only as good as when it's telling me what I want to hear. The tough truths—sometimes we don't want to hear those. This series is all about getting our ears perked up to hear the voice of God—in the written Word—as we read it, study it, and hear it preached. I want you to have the ears—you've been granted the ears—and I want us to hear the command and the emphasis of Christ: if you've got the ears, we need to hear. That'll be our focus for the next six weeks.

Pray with me, please. Why don't you stand and we'll let you go a little bit early—a little bit early—a little bit early. Let's pray.

God, we know there are grateful hearts in the room. I know there are, and I'm grateful for the ability to read your Word and understand it. Of course there are some things in it hard to understand—as Peter said of Paul's writing—and as Deuteronomy 29 says, there are secret things we'll never know, at least not in this life. And so we recognize that some things are difficult in the Word of God. But the perspicuity of Scripture—the clarity of Scripture—leads us to affirm that there are many things we get that are crystal clear. We read about these things and our spirit connects with them because we have the endowment of God's Spirit in our lives.

And God, we don't want ever to be arrogant or prideful about that. We want to be humbly grateful for it. We want to understand, God, that that gift is not something that happens without the need for us to apply ourselves to hear better. So let us be sensitive to your voice. As we open your Bible, I pray we would every day, like those Bereans, examine it daily. And that may be the upshot of the sermon for a lot of people—just need to get in the Word more often. But ultimately, God, what we want is a heart that's attuned—whether it's for chocolate cake or a task that you've called us to do—that whatever, whether it's an easy-to-obey command or whether it's a difficult one, we want to be responsive. So let us have those ears up, as we said.

Thanks so much, God, for your Word. As we dismiss now to go look at those tables and see what's going on in our church and the needs that we have—because we're willing to step out of our comfort zone here to expand and multiply and start a whole new church up the freeway—we want to see every



post manned, and we pray that you would provoke and stir and motivate the hearts to be involved in the ministries that you want them to be involved in.

So we pray—even speaking the message of truth to people who have hardened hearts, and sometimes even in the ministry of Christ, you stuck your fingers proverbially in their ears and made sure they didn't hear—it was because they had chosen their path to rebel against you; the hardening effects of sin had already impaired their hearing; you just weren't going to... you were going to give them over to their own chosen path. Just like that passage in Romans 1—people refuse to recognize and honor you as God, and because of that you turn them over to a debased mind.

So God, I pray you might work among us by your perfect grace to waken more people up to the truth of the gospel. Use us to do that. I know we're not going to have 100% success. We'll talk to a lot of people about Christ; they won't get it; they'll think it's stupid; it'll be folly to them. But God, we pray you grant your Spirit—because we know these truths are spiritually discerned—and we pray that you would grant us to have the opportunity to be messengers of the truth where we would see people respond to Christ, as it says with another metaphor in 2 Corinthians 4: the veil will come off their eyes and they'll see the glory of Christ.

So give us perception of the truth, God—not only here as Christians who sometimes filter out what we don't want to hear you say, but especially as we do our work of evangelism in this community. Make us successful at this, I pray, as you open up more and more ears and eyes graciously by your Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen. Amen.