

Hearing Is a Divine Art

by A.W. Tozer

The sermon emphasizes the importance of how we hear and respond to God's word, highlighting the dangers of unresponsive hearing and the call to repentance.

Duration: 41:36

Scripture: Matthew 13:3-9, Matthew 13:18-23, Mark 4:3-9, Mark 4:13-20, Luke 8:4-10, John 21:16

Topics: "Hearing"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the use of cliches in preaching and how it can lead to a lack of meaning in the Church. He emphasizes the importance of having open hearts to receive the word of God and warns against the devil taking away the seed of the gospel. The preacher then uses an analogy of a small silver tube that represents a potential destructive weapon in the hands of nations. He highlights the hidden challenges and anxieties that come with power and riches. Finally, he refers to the parable of the sower in Luke 8, explaining the different types of soil and their significance in receiving the word of God.

Transcript

Let's look at the eighth chapter of Luke a little bit, Luke, the eighth chapter. Much people were gathered together, and they were come to him out of every city. He spake a parable, and here was the parable.

He said a sower went out to sow his seed, and as he sowed, some fell by the wayside and was trodden down. The plows of the air devoured it. The wayside was a little path, a little lane that went through the field.

It was beaten down, never was plowed. And so, of course, when the seed that fell there was trodden down by the passage of the people's feet, the birds came along and devoured it. Some fell upon a rock, and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away because it lacked moisture.

Some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. Others fell on good ground and sprang up and bear fruit a hundredfold. Then he said to them, Now whoever has ears, let him hear.

The disciples asked him, saying, Lord, what might this parable mean? He said, I'm interpolating a little here, but I think I'm giving the meaning. He said, strange that you don't know, because unto you it's given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God. But to others I speak in parables that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.

I wrote something in the Lent Witness not too long ago which I said that preacher's illustrations were given to throw light and illustrate, whereas many of the parables of Jesus were given for the purpose of obscuring truth. Presbyterians liked that all right, and they reprinted it, but some other, at least one other man, wanted to know how come. Well, it's true, isn't it? It says here, but to others I speak in parables in order that seeing they might see, and hearing they might not understand.

Deliberately, purposefully set here to shut out those who were not prepared, not ready, and would not come. But he said, nevertheless, I will explain it. He said, here it is.

The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are they that hear. They just hear.

Then comes the devil and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. Then they on the rock are they which when they hear receive the word with joy. These have no root.

For a little while they believe, and in time of temptation they fall away. Then thirdly, that which fell among thorns are they which when they've heard go forth and are choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and they bring no fruit to perfection. And fourthly, those that on the good ground are they which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it and bring forth fruit with patience.

Then he says in verse 18, Take heed therefore how ye hear. Whosoever hath to him shall be given, and whosoever hath not from him shall be taken, even that which he seemeth to have. Now when the great God would bring salvation to fallen men, he put it in the form of a message, and according to Paul over in the Corinthian epistle, he decreed that men should be saved through preaching.

That is, they should be saved through hearing that message. We call that message the gospel. And they heard a hear, and that was to begin something in their lives.

Now what there was before that, we have to leave to the theologians to quarrel about prevenient grace. That is, the grace that God brings to their heart before they hear and before they believe. Prevenient, the getting ready grace.

I don't know too much about that, and I don't think anybody else does. So when you hear anybody expostulating on that learnedly and at length, write him off, because he knows more than the Bible reveals. But there must be some preparation of God in the heart, or there would be no believing at all.

But on the other hand, there isn't enough preparation to save the man, so he has to hear something. Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word. Now shall they hear, except somebody preaches.

Now shall they preach, except they be sent. So God proceeds according to known laws. One of those laws is that men can change.

They can change. That's one of the laws of fallen life, the fallen world. Men can change.

They are not fixed. They can change. Concrete is set and cannot change.

There it is set, but the soul of a fallen man is not so set and settled. He can be changed. Now, that's one thing we've got to keep in mind.

And you who are soul winners, and are seeking earnestly, and sometimes not successfully, to win people to God, you're having a hard time with it, and little result. Don't give up, because that person can change.

He is not fixed in his lost state.

He can change. And then also, there is this law that he can learn, and that he can change by learning something, and he can learn by hearing something. And that which changes him, which he has learned, comes to him through the preaching of the scripture, particularly the gospel.

Now, that's there. That's taken for granted throughout the Bible, that the human race is a flowing, ebbing sea. It's not a solid concrete ramp.

It is a growing, expanding, changing thing, and that it'll go one way or the other, and that if it hears the wrong thing, it'll go the wrong way, and if it hears the right thing, it can go the right way. That's there in the scripture as a basic doctrine of the faith, that men can change, that they can change by learning certain truths, and those certain truths come to them as a revelation from God. Now, salvation is the divine human thing.

You can hyphenate those words, divine human, for it is that. So, redemption is a divine thing, and a divine thing only. Salvation is a divine human thing.

Now, I know that my brethren and friends would back away from me right here, but I'm preaching what I believe to be true, not what I have heard somebody believe, and therefore trying to please them. I'm not doing that, but I'm saying that redemption is a divine thing without any human admixture at all. When Jesus Christ became man and was joined to human nature by the incarnation, and went out to die on the cross, that was a divine thing without any human element in it.

He had by himself purged our sins, and he sat down on the right hand of God. It is finished, he said, and he finished it. Not Peter there in the shadows, not John there looking on pensively with tears, but he finished it.

Redemption is a divine thing. No hyphenation there. God alone saves men and saves me by redemption.

But salvation is a divine human thing. That is, if I'm going to receive the benefits of the divine redemption, there must be a human response. Now, that's so well known, and so widely believed, that I scarcely need to develop it.

Redemption is a highly spiritual and divine thing, and the working of redemption is too high for me. I cannot understand it, but our part is human and understandable. God makes salvation conditional upon our response to a message, and that message is the message of the cross, the message of redemption of a dying and risen Lord.

And our faith in God's declaration of intention, the thing God declares that he plans to do, and will do if we believe, we must have faith in that and make a response to it. Now, God is not going to do confirmatory work. Many believe that there ought to be a confirmatory work done.

Oh Lord, if you want to save me, do something unusual. One man I knew said, Oh Lord, if you were calling me, let that little bird come sit on my shoulder. Well, the birdie didn't come, and the man went his way.

That's silly. We want God to do some kind of sleight of hand in order that we might have the truth confirmed. The truth has been confirmed.

When God raised his son from the dead, and set him at his own right hand, and sent the Holy Ghost as a confirmatory witness, no further confirmation has ever been needed, and is needed today. But our eternal wheel of the world depends upon how we hear. Let he be said how you hear, because there are at least four different kinds of ears, ways of hearing.

Now, I don't think he shut it up to four ways, but he did tell us there were four different ways of hearing. I don't think for a minute that we're limited to four, because I think these are capable of subdivision, and those subdivisions capable of subdivision. Just as when our Lord taught us to pray, he said, When you pray, say, Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, and so on.

But he didn't mean that we were to pray that prayer and no other prayer, and he didn't mean that we were to begin with Our Father and end with Amen, and never pray anything outside that prayer. That was a sample prayer, and that was a comprehensive prayer, but it wasn't an exhaustive prayer. There is more to praying than that.

We know that by the fact that our Lord himself prayed otherwise, and we know that Paul prayed otherwise, and we know that Peter and the rest of them prayed otherwise, but that was a sample prayer. And so, here in this story, we don't have everything that can be said on this subject, but we have a broad outline of it, and within that broad outline we have, then, it's possible to find ourselves. Just as in the Lord's Prayer, it's possible to pray a half an hour, to talk to God for a half an hour, and still be praying within the framework of the Lord's Prayer, within the bracket of the Lord's Prayer, though not actually repeating the words of the Lord's Prayer over and over.

So he said, Now, salvation is the result, or redemption is the result of what I do, what God does, that is. And salvation is the receiving of that redemption by your response to it. And you can only respond when you hear, and you can only respond rightly if you hear rightly.

Therefore take heed how you hear, because your eternal wheel of woe depends upon your response. Therefore take heed what your response is. Look out how you hear.

Now, notice here, he said, I'm warning you, be careful how you hear, because there are at least four different kinds of hearers. He said there are the hearers that are like a willside, that is, they're like a little path through a field. The field has been plowed, but the path has been gone around, and it's been beaten down over the years, never plowed, left just to lie there.

It gets rained on, and then sunbaked, and then rained on again, and beaten down by the feet of thousands of people. And there you have a wayside. That is, not a paved road, but a beaten down highway side.

And he said some people, our Lord was not like a lot of these theologians today. Dr. Barnhouse went over to Germany, and he went to see Karl Barth. Not that he was a follower of Barth, but he knew Barth was an important voice, so he went to see him.

They were talking it over, and he said, Dr. Barth, you're so hard to understand. He said your writings are so difficult, so hard to understand. He said, did you never read that the Lord said, feed my sheep? He didn't say feed my giraffes.

He said, you put it way up there where only a giraffe can get it. Well, our Lord was feeding sheep, and sheep reached down to get their food. So it was so simple here.

He said, now you listen to me. He said, remember, this is simple, almost childlike, but heaven or hell may depend upon this. He said, I've seen how some of you listen to me, and you're like a wayside, like a path.

And when my words fall on your ears, words that could save you, they fall and lie there. A thing comes of it because it's hard, it doesn't sink in. Then I haven't got my back turned until the devil comes and takes away the word out of your heart, and then you don't believe, and you're not safe.

I don't know but what great many of us in a land like this have become wayside hearers. We hear, but we don't hear with any response at all. I suppose that there's hardly, let's illustrate, let me see, how can we do it? I suppose there's hardly a word in modern politics that means less than the word freedom, say.

Freedom, freedom, everybody wants freedom. And the word peace, peace, everybody wants peace, peace, peace. There is no peace.

It's a sour joke down the states that a scoundrelly politician will grab the star-spangled banner and fling it across his shoulder and start to hurry. And he can talk for three quarters of an hour and never say one lonely thing. It's an art, it's a gift brother, it's a gift.

Not everybody has it, so not everybody gets elected. But the ability to talk in cliches. I won't talk about Canadians because they're mad about the Americans at the moment, and so let's keep friends about it, and be good friends even if the politicians are glaring at each other over the fence.

But I say about Americans, they'll talk about our founding fathers, and freedom, and liberty, and our way of life, and all that. They can talk that right on for three quarters of an hour, not say one lonely thing, because they're using cliches that have no meaning. And I believe that in the church of Christ, that's the reason that the churches have to put on shows to get anybody to come out.

It's because they have beaten down, they've been beaten down into hard highways, waysides, and the word of God falls on them, but it falls on hard hearts, and they can't and they won't change. The devil takes the seed before Monday morning, if there's any seed given. So he said, now take heed how you hear.

Watch this, because it's possible to hear the good gospel of Christ, possible to hear men talk about Jesus dying and rising, and all of these beautiful words that mean nothing because they have become conventional expressions, religious expressions. And he said, I've noticed also that some of you are like seed that falls on the rocks. Now that's not, don't think of a huge rock, think of the little flat rocks that are in fields.

My father used to take a stone boat. Some of you old farmers ought to stone boat in, and we'd take those out of there. But many of them didn't, and evidently they didn't there.

And when the seed went over on a rock, it had no soil, and yet there it lay. It was warm, and maybe a little rain fell, and so it began to sprout immediately. It says, they take up the word of God with joy.

I'm always suspicious of the man who's too easily converted. Hear me, I'm always suspicious of the man that gets converted too easily. If he's too easily converted, chances are he'll just be, is easily unconverted.

So they received the word of God with joy, but they haven't any root. You can't make a root on a rock, they haven't any root. And as soon as the sun comes up, they die.

That's temptation. Said with joy, these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation they fall away because they have no root. And he says there's a third.

These are they that fall among thorns. They are the ones that go forth, they hear and go forth, and then are choked. How are they choked? They're choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and so they never bring any fruit to perfection.

Dear God, I wonder if we're awake to this. Here are the thorns of Toronto, the thorns of modern 20th century, the thorns of living in a world like this. What are those thorns? Cares, oh the cares of life, the cares and the riches.

Young couple, their eyes all aglow, they're going to get married. First couple that ever got married, to look at them you'd think, and it's going to be wonderful. Heaven is going to come down their souls to greet and glory, crown their mercy seat, and from there on it won't be anything but just glow, just glow.

They look at each other across the table and glow. It'll be glow, glow, all the time glow. After a while Bill started coming in, and after a while he comes home and finds her knitting.

Then after a while, the little thing she knit for her arrives with a pretty little body and a mouth that could wake the dead. Anytime in the night, anytime, if she's been reading the wrong book, she puts him on a four-hour schedule. A four-hour schedule means that dad gets up every four hours and cares, cares.

And they find out that all that glow and that glory and that romantic beauty, it may still be there, but it's harder to find now. He hadn't time looking for it, baby's crying. Cares of this life, cares.

Young fella says, I can just get that job, I've made it. And he gets the job, and after he's settled down to the job, he finds that there are a thousand things that he didn't know was in that job. Little nasty things to beat him down and worry him, and send him to bed at night full of cares and anxieties, and get him up in the morning tired and tense and full of anxieties to go off on his work full of anxieties.

Cares and riches. And if we listen to all four parties here, and both two parties down across the border, any one of them will bring in the millennium. Utopia.

Any one of them, all you have to do, you know, is to give them a glass of water in an audience, and he'll lean back and give you the millennium right there. Well, then suppose we did get rich. Suppose everybody did get rich, huh? It says riches.

They're choked by riches. You know, you can get your spiritual life choked more on ten thousand a year than you used to be able to do on five thousand a year. You can get your spiritual life choked more on fifteen thousand a year than you can on ten, and more on twenty than you can on fifteen.

I get around some of these conventions and summer camps, and I see some of the middle-aged fellows. They never put their shirt tails in. They always let them hang, you know.

They're always flowers and birds and all these, these shirts. They just hang, and they appear, and they come, and they sit and say amen and listen, and they go row a while, and they fish a while, and they lie around on the sand a while, and then they eat, and they lie around some more. They're there.

They're there because they have the money to get there, and they're never any good because they're always on their way somewhere from somewhere else. I used to tell them down in Chicago, in the summer

you go to Canada to fish, in the winter you go to Florida to fish. You only do that when you got money, you know.

Fellow doesn't have the money, he just stays and sweats. Get out in the summertime and puts on an extra coat in the Florida. Cares of this life and riches and the pleasures of this life, the pleasures of this life.

Our Lord is talking here. He's talking. He says, I've noticed that some of you are like patches of thorns, and the seed filters down in among those thorns, and roots in and starts to grow, and then the thorns, because they were there first, they take precedence over the new seed, and pretty soon there isn't anything but the perfection.

And I think he smiled and said, but I have noticed also that some falls on good ground, and those that are good ground, they in an honest and good heart hear the word and keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience. Notice he said with patience, bring forth fruit with patience. We want our Christianity to go up like a skyrocket.

We want them to go up like a missile. Countdown and away we go, with a burst of steam and smoke and a roar, and somebody's converted. The Lord says you've got to be patient if you're going to keep your soul.

So you see, there are different kinds of hearers, and everything depends on what kind of hearers we are. The old Jews were faithless hearers. They heard the word, but they did nothing about it.

Israel heard the gospel, Paul said, in Romans, but they did not believe the gospel. It's possible to hear it and not to believe it. And there are the dull hearers.

Dull hearers, I don't know, I think we might as well be honest about it, we preachers, and admit that we make them dull sometimes. We say the same thing in the same way, the same old clichés and the same old conventional speech, until people get very, very dull of hearing. The dullness primarily is a result of a failure to obey the truth.

If I get truth and don't obey it, the second time that I go in for truth I don't get as much, and the third time I get less than I did the second, and the fourth time I get less than I did the third, and so on. The law of diminishing returns takes over, and even though I'm hearing truth, I'm not getting very much out of it. And of course, there are always the critical hearers, the ones that depend more upon the grammar of the preacher on his delivery, or his poor delivery, or good delivery.

And then there are the forgetful hearers that James tells us about, that they hear the word and it's like looking in a mirror and forgetting what kind of man he was. It doesn't say what kind of woman she was, because women don't forget what they look like, but men do. They'll look in the glass, and then when they walk away they forget what they look like.

But James said that. I didn't think of that. James thought of it and said it.

Forgetful hearers. God help us, brethren, help us. Thousands of people in church tonight that are more concerned over whether Russia or Canada won the hockey game today than what the preachers say.

And on the way home they'll not discuss God, and they'll not discuss salvation, and they'll not discuss heaven and hell. They'll not discuss God's relation to them, nor their relation to Christ. They'll discuss whether the Canadian trailblazers, or whatever they call them, won or whether Russia won.

Now, I'm not against hockey. I never saw a game, but I wouldn't mind looking if I had time. I'm not against it.

I'm just saying that there are some things that ought to take immediate priority and keep that priority, so nothing matters but God. Nothing matters but my relation to God. And yet there are thousands of people who will hear the gospel in gospel churches this night, but they're forgetful hearers and neglectful hearers and dull hearers, and they're not going to do anything about it.

And I read also those trembling hearers in the scriptures who trembled and ran in and said, what shall I do to be saved? And those blessed submissive hearers, they heard the gospel, Cornelius's household. He said, we're here before you. Do you know what God wants to say to us? So they submitted themselves.

Ah, how precious is this little time of probation, dear brothers and sisters. How very wonderful is this little time of probation that you and I have. In the meantime, that mighty dynamic we call redemption, that tremendous, awesome, awful, glorious thing that has saved millions and is saving more and will save more until the Lord returns and judgment strikes.

That glorious redemption is still operative in the world, still operative. Out there is a little silver affair. It looks like a huge tube of some sort.

You look at it, you pass it by, nobody thinks anything of it. They pick it up with a crane. It isn't very heavy, reasonably heavy, enough men could lift it, but at the same time they pick it up with a crane.

And then the day comes, I pray, to God above that it'll never come, but the day comes when the great nations confront each other without mercy. One of them will drop that little thing in a city the size of Toronto. They would probably, if they could pinpoint it, pick out to, say, Yonge and Boer, or maybe a little further north.

There it was, a little thing they'd pick up with a crane. Didn't amount to very much. You'd pass it by and not know it was there.

But when it goes off, everything's a cinder from the lakefront to Willowdale. They call that a hydrogen bomb. There is in the gospel of Jesus Christ infinite, limitless power, not to destroy but to save.

He said, The Son of Man has not come to destroy men's lives, the Son of Man has come to save men's lives. And there's as much power in a gospel message as there is in a hydrogen bomb, only it works backwards. It works to save and to redeem and to purify, whereas the other works to destroy and to kill.

It all depends on what you're going to do with it. How precious is your little time, and how long, long, long the future will be, and how vital it will be. Have you ever stopped to think? Have you ever considered? Have you ever let yourself think? And say to yourself, I wish, I wish that I could know, I wish about the future, about tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day.

The man said, What are you going to do? He said, I'm going to graduate from such and such a university next spring. Then what are you going to do? He said, I'm going to go into business. Then what? Well, he said, I expect to make good in that business.

What after that? Well, he said, I expect to become president of my company. What after that? I expect to have some estates, perhaps one here in Canada when it's summer. I expect to have another when it's

cold.

I expect to... What do you expect to do? I expect to have a family. But after that? Well, I suppose I'll grow old like other people. After that? Well, I expect to die.

After that? He said, I don't get so personal. I don't know. What after that? That's it.

What after that? God help us, every one of us, all of us, we Christians, and we unsaved, the unsaved. How precious is your little time of probation that you have now, and how long the future is going to be. How sensitive, even though I've been saved many long, long years, I sometimes think to die, to go out with my sensitive, sentient being, capable of feeling the most exquisite, awful anguish, and to go out from this world, to be laid away in my physical body, but to go out from this world into darkness, to be denied entrance into the presence of God, to be sent out to spend a long eternity with the Judases, and the Sauls, and the Hitlers, and the Jack the Rippers, and the Bluebeards.

You say, ah, but then I'm not that kind of man. No, but there's only one hell. There's only one hell.

Though you might have been as moral as could be, still if I die, if I do, we die without Christ. We die and take out our sensitive, conscious, intelligent being into the world beyond. Thank God for the gospel.

Thank God for the voice. I said, now take heed how you hear. There's a voice, a life-giving voice sounding in the gospel.

Take heed how you hear. Hear it right now. Everything depends upon how you hear, said Jesus our friend.

Thank God, he said. Take heed how you hear, because the voice is sounded. It's sounding.

You're hearing it. God help us. What do we do? You that are not saved, you that are half saved, you that are allowing the cares of this life to go up like thorns around you, God help you.

Take heed how you hear. We're going to sing in a moment. We're going to sing again that number, the old Terce Deegan number, God calling yet shall I not hear, pleasure shall I still hold dear.

But before we sing, we want to pray. Let's pray. Oh, our kind father, we thank thee thou hast not left us.

In our sins thou hast thought of a way for us. Thou hast planted in Christ Jesus thy son, our Lord. Thou hast worked it out by blood and tears and groans and death and the miracle of resurrection and the wonder of ascension to the right hand of the throne.

Thou hast sent the Holy Ghost to say everywhere throughout the world, ye that believe on him shall not perish. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Oh, we thank thee, heavenly Father.

Time is running out, and it's later than we know, and then thou hast warned us gently and carefully to be careful what we do with this message. Be careful lest we take too much for granted, to be careful lest the devil get the seed, lest the cares of life take the seed, lest we be Christians only in name and have a name that we live but be dead. My God, it would be better that we should perish from the naked slopes of the Baleen Valley and from the rich precincts of Toronto.

Better that we should die pagans cutting off the necks of chickens, to try to appease some bestial God, than to die Canadians and Americans and Englishmen and Scotsmen who heard from their childhood this

wondrous message, but have let it go. Oh God, what do we say to thee in that time? What answer can we have from the Baleen naked, savage men smeared with pig grease and clay, and stand up and say we never heard it? But who here can say it? Oh God, we've heard it, and we've heard it, and we've heard it until we're bored with it. God, forgive us.

Give us a new something, a new baptism of interest, a new afflatus of fresh interest in the things of the gospel. Oh God, we pray that thou would help the friends here tonight. Lord, we pray for those who are well saved, that they might become so keenly concerned for others that aren't saved, that they would continue to work for their salvation, hard and struggle and pray and labor until one by one they're gathered in.

Grant, we pray our God, that there may be a harvest of souls at Avenue Road. We're overdue, Lord, it's long overdue, but God, we're not giving up. We expect to see it.

We expect to see it farther. We expect thee to give us a harvest. We expect to see young people and brought in and older people.

We expect to see the new faces and hear new voices and see the travail of thy soul, O Lord. We expect this, because thou art God and because Jesus Christ thy Son said, if we wanted anything, ask in his name and you'll give it to us. Because that's why the gospel is being preached, that's why we're here, so expect to see it, God.

We don't believe that thou dost speak to men vainly or say anything to anybody carelessly. We believe that when thou dost make a promise, that promise is as good as gold. So we're expecting, Father, we're expecting thee to do it.

O Lord, round the margins, our relatives, our friends, our neighbors, people all around here that are not here tonight, but they can be here and they can be brought in and they can be one. We pray to you, O God, fall on the churches, fall on this church, fall on our people. We pray with a new affluence of love for men, that we may not depend on the word from the pulpit only, but that we might supplement that word with earnest soul winning efforts.

Now, come on us, Father, we're looking for help, O God. Once more, we remind thee that we have for this church a vision of a strong Bible-based, morally right, solid, vigorous, active, loving church that the people will feel when they come in here that surely the Lord's in this place of a truth. The Lord may be slow, but we believe it'll come.

Now, as I said first, the little sprout and then the stalk and then the ear and then the full corn in the ear. So put us through those stages fast, Lord, because we need the corn and we need it fast. We need it soon.

Pray, God, meet us for trusting thee. We pray thee for any tonight that are not committed, but the Holy Ghost has found them somewhere. They're among the rocks or on the wayside or among the thorns.

The Spirit of God has found them. We pray thee that they might come out from there and be good ground and receive the truth into honest hearts and bring forth truth with patience unto perfection. We ask this in Christ's name.

Now, let's sing this number, please.

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