

“Prayer Can Change Your Life: God Wants to Talk to You”
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Grace and peace...There’s an old story about a pastor who gets to heaven and is quite happy with his mansion...until he sees the bigger mansion of a taxi cab driver...he asks St. Peter why this taxi cab driver received a larger mansion in heaven after all of the pastor’s faithful years of service. Peter responds, “well, pastor, while you preached many people fell asleep, but when he drove, people prayed!” In the next four weeks we’re going to do a series called, “Prayer Can Change Your Life.” (We were going to call it “Can You Hear Me Now?” and have it sponsored by Verizon, but we thought that might be over the top). In this series we’re going to look at how you know God is talking to you? How do you hear God? How do you tune into God? How do you know when it’s the pizza you ate late night talking to you? The fact is you could go out and buy the finest radio around. A Bose wave radio. But if you don’t tune it in you’re still not going to receive anything. The point is God has already given you the capacity to hear Him. The Bible says you were made in His image. That’s what makes human beings different from animals. Animals don’t pray, don’t communicate with God, and can’t hear from God. But you can because you’re made in God’s image. All the equipment that you already need to hear God you’re got. You just have to learn how to tune it in. That’s what we’re going to do in this series. All of you are too young to remember this but back in the 70s there was a fad called CB radio. People were putting these things in their cars. They were saying things like “10-4 good buddy... Put the pedal to the metal... County Mounty ...The Smoky in the Oakie...” One of the phrases was “Got your ears on?” That meant “Are you tuned in?” That phrase wasn’t original with CB radio. Actually Jesus said it 2000 years ago. **Luke 8:8 Jesus says “He who has ears to hear let him hear.”** What’s He talking about? He’s talking about if you’ve got the equipment you need to tune it in. “You got the equipment. I’ve already given you the ability to hear Me. But you need to tune into Me.”

The Parable of the Sower and of the Four Soils we read in today’s gospel... What’s He talking about? Jesus says this farmer goes out to sow seed. He’s not planting one seed at a time. He’s broadcasting. He says it falls on different types of soil and depending on the type of soil it falls on it gets a different response. Fortunately later in this same chapter Jesus explains the story and tells us the meaning of all the parts. He says this: The farmer represents God. And the seed represents God wanting to talk to you – God’s word to you. The soil represents four different attitudes that you can have toward hearing from God. Four different responses – four different heart or mind responses.

1. If you want to hear God speak **you must first cultivate an open mind**. What does that mean? It means you’ve got to be receptive. The number one barrier to hearing God speak is resistance. “I don’t believe God can speak.” **So many people are even closed** to the possibility that God might speak to them. If you don’t think God can or will speak to you, guess what. He won’t. It is amazing to me how many people in this world think they are open-minded but they’re not...especially when it comes to God. They’ve been brainwashed by society.

This is what Jesus talked about in the first kind of soil – the footpath soil. Luke 8:5 He says this “*A farmer went out to sow his seed and as he was scattering the seed some fell along the path [he’s talking about the footpath on the farm] and it was trampled on and the birds of the air ate it up.*” On a farm between the rows of vegetables in a garden there are footpaths. You’ve seen these. There are footpaths that the workers walk on when they’re picking the strawberries or whatever. As workers would walk down this pathway many, many times it becomes trampled down. And if some of that seed lands on the hard compacted soil of the footpath there’s no way it’s going to sprout. Jesus gives us the meaning of this down in verse 12. He says “*Those along the footpath are the ones who hear. And then the devil comes along and takes away the word from their heart so that they cannot believe and be saved.*”

There are two characteristics of a footpath. It’s hardened and it’s narrow. Do you know any minds like that? They’re very, very closed to even the possibility of God in their life. The seed God can never get through to talk to them. The point is sometimes we don’t even give God a chance. Our minds are made up. So this first kind of

soil represents a closed mind. The hard soil represents a closed mind. What causes us to have a closed mind? Three major mental blocks that keep people from hearing God:

One is pride. I say, "I can handle this myself. I don't need anybody else. I certainly don't need God. I can figure it all out. I don't need His help so why even pray." Pride causes me to close my mind to God.

Second – fear. A lot of people are closed to God because they're afraid of what He might say. What if God asks me to do something I don't want to do? What if He asks me to do something that's too hard? What if He tells me something I don't like? So out of fear I shut my mind down.

The third one is bitterness....resentment. You're going to be hurt in life...sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. That's a fact of life. You're going to be hurt. What you do with that hurt makes the difference. All of a sudden you're blaming God for the person who hurt you. Whenever you hold on to a hurt, your heart grows hard and cold. You become defensive and even God's love can't get through to you. First as your pastor, I'm sorry. I'm sorry you hurt. And God is too. I would say, don't turn from Him. Turn to Him. The second thing I would say is, never let somebody else's sin keep you from God. The first step is you've got to open your mind. You've got a closed mind if you're not listening you're not ever going to hear God. First you cultivate an open mind, second if you want to hear God speak to you...

2. **You've got to allocate time to listen.** Cultivate an open mind and allocate time to listen. That means you've got to slow down. You've got to make time to be quiet. The first barrier to hearing God speak is resistance. But the second barrier to hearing God speak is hurry. Are any of you familiar with this word? Hurry. When we live hurried lives God gets shuffled to the sidelines of our lives.

Here's the second kind of soil that Jesus talks about. Luke 8:6 He says "*Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. This seed began to grow but it soon withered and died for lack of moisture.*" In Israel much of the country is a thin layer of topsoil over a bedrock of limestone. It's not a really fertile country. It's not like America where we have really deep topsoil in a lot of our areas. So you plant something on this rocky soil and the seed sprouts. But it can't get deep roots so it withers and dies. Verse 13: "*The rocky soil represents those who hear the message with joy but like young plants in such soil their roots don't go very deep. They believe for a while but they wilt when the hot winds of testing blow.*" Jesus says the second kind of soil, **the shallow soil represents a superficial mind.** Sometimes we react superficially to God's word. We get excited. We react emotionally. We're moved impulsively. But we don't let God's word sink into the bedrock of our personality. So there's no real change.

I wish I had a count for all the times people have been inspired by a service and have come and shared that with me...but then they never get connected and never become fruitful in their walk of faith...it's again the seed being planted, but it's just not the right soil for it to grow...Notice in the verse it says "*They received the word with joy.*" They're going, "Wow! That was a great service. That was good." But you walk out the door and you forget it immediately. The United States Air Force did a study and discovered that we forget 95% of everything we hear within 72 hours. As a pastor that is an incredibly depressing statistic. I prepare a message only to know that by Wednesday you've forgotten it all! That's why we have these notes...because we want it to last a little bit longer than 72 hours. Notice it says that these people have shallow roots, "*Like young plants in such soil their roots don't go very deep.*" They're superficial people. They believe for a while. How do you grow beyond superficiality? How do you get spiritual depth in your life?

There are two very practical ways. **One, schedule a daily time with God.** It can be ten minutes, fifteen minutes...call it a quiet time. In a quiet time you sit down, you read the Bible for a little bit, you talk to God for a little bit in prayer. You sit and be quiet and you listen to God and say, "God, is there anything You want to say to me through Your word or anything?" Maybe you review your notes from the weekend. Maybe you journal a little

bit. You can vary it. But you just have to make time to listen to God. And then you read His word and you do that on a daily basis.

The 2nd thing is **join a weekly small group**. Some of you are going through a tough time right now. You're going through a financial crisis or a health crisis or you're going through relational crisis. You especially need to be in a small group. Because if you listen to the Lord, He'll bring you through it. If you want to hear God's voice you have to cultivate an open mind. You have to allocate time to listen.

3. **You must eliminate the distractions.** You can't hear God when your mind is crowded with other thoughts, with worries and concerns and anxieties. When your **mind is pre-occupied** with your plans, your to do list, what you've got to do next, what you haven't done yet, what you should have done but didn't do. You can't hear God when your mind is filled with your dreams, your plans, your ambitions, your activities. When your mind is filled with television, radio, with the Internet, with your palm pilot, with your cell phone. You're not going to hear God.

This is the third kind of soil. Jesus calls it the soil with weeds. In Luke 8:7 He says *"Other seed fell in the weeds and the weeds grew with it and strangled it."* Notice in this soil the seed does get to sprout and it actually starts growing. But after a while it gets choked by the weeds so it never bears fruit. In verse 14 He tells us the meaning of this *"The seed that fell among the weeds stands for those who hear but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries and riches and pleasures and they don't mature."* The first barrier to hearing God is resistance. The second is hurry. The third is busyness.

Busyness. You can get so distracted and so busy you don't have time to hear God. A lot of people confuse activity with productivity. They're not the same. The Bible says these people are choked. Today we'd say in common terms, "They're stressed out...hit their limit...at the end of their rope." Jesus says the distractions are like weeds that grow up in your life and choke out the ability for you to hear God. Actually it even gives us three very common weeds that tend to choke God out of your life.

He says first is worry. You can be so busy with the problems and pressures of daily living you forget God. The word "worry" can mean "pulled in different directions." I forget God because I'm too filled with anxiety.

Then He said riches. You can be so busy making money you forget God. You put in a full day's work. You come home wasted and tired and your head hits the pillow and you go to sleep. You get up the next morning and you do it again. You don't have any time for God. You can't hear God.

Then He says pleasure can distract you. What's wrong with pleasure? Nothing. God created it. God gave you your five senses which gives you your ability to experience pleasure. So there's nothing wrong with pleasure except when you're so busy pursuing fun you forget God. And there's no place in your life.

These are just three weeds. There are lots of different kinds of weeds. A weed is anything you allow to take first place in your life instead of God. It could be a very good thing. But if you don't have time to hear God it is a weed. Let me ask you a very profound question. How much effort does it take to grow weeds? None. Weeds are a sign of neglect. It takes no effort at all. I use to be pretty good at growing them in our garden at home. I was a professional weed farmer. I did not have to do anything. Roses? You've got to cultivate those things, water and put fertilizer on them and prune them and pamper them. A weed? You ignore it and watch it grow! Whenever you neglect time with God and a daily quiet time, whenever you neglect your small group, guess what? Weeds are going to grow in your life.

In the Old Testament there was this guy named Elijah. One time he wanted to hear God speak. He goes up on this mountain and says, "God, I want to hear from You." So God puts on this incredible show. First God sends a huge wind. It comes roaring through the canyon. But God wasn't in the wind. Then He sends an earthquake. And the whole mountain starts rumbling. Elijah's very impressed but it says God wasn't in the earthquake. Then

He sent a roaring fire, a forest fire, down the mountain. But it says God wasn't in the fire. Then it says, God spoke to Elijah in a whisper – in a still small voice. It says *“There was a sound of the gentle whisper.”* You know what's the problem with a whisper? You have to be quiet to hear it. It's the only way you're going to hear a whisper. Want to hear something shocking? God has been whispering to you all week. People can't handle silence. Yet it is in quietness that God says, “Hey! I'm talking to you.”

4. **Listen for his Word.** I cultivate an open mind, I allocate time to listen, I eliminate the distractions, and I listen with whatever He says. This is what the Bible calls the good soil. Verse 15 *“The seed that fell in the good soil stands for those who hear the message and retain it in a good and obedient heart and they persist until they bear fruit.”* Notice four marks of good soil: first, they hear it. That means they retain it. Then, they remember it. Then they obey it. Then they persist in it until they bear fruit.

How do you bear fruit? One way is pass it on. It means we **have a willing mind**...are willing to do what God ask us...to share what we've heard with others... Did you know that God expects you to pass on everything you learn? This is the good soil we call this a willing mind. “God, I'm willing to do whatever You ask me to.

Let me just share with you what one of our small groups is committed to doing right now with prayer. They have committed to encouraging each other as women to rise earlier than their families each day for daily prayer...so at 5:30 a.m. this group of seven women is up praying for their families, praying for their church, for each other, so that they do not miss out on the opportunity each day to do this. It takes discipline and it takes courage, but it is making a difference in each of their lives – and you can see the spiritual growth happening in this group.

Small group leaders, let me encourage you to take up a challenge during this six week sermon series...to ask your group to spend at least 15 minutes a day in daily quiet time...away from the hurry, away from the distractions...so that we can again here God speaking to us, and become the fruit bearing organism that God wants us to be as a church...Let's take inventory for just a moment...where do you find yourself in this story? 1) Hardened, closed off maybe by pride, fear or bitterness through difficulties in this life...and prayer just seems too difficult or not possible or powerful? 2) Hurried – hearing things on a surface level, but it's just not getting deep enough? 3) Harried – Busy, Distracted...by worries, riches, or pleasures? This is the opportunity to open your hearts to a time of connecting with God through prayer...we invite during this next six weeks to re-connect with God...