

Take Care How You Hear

How to Receive God's Word

Article by Marshall Segal

We fall out of Bible-reading habits a hundred ways, and all of them are deadly serious. Jesus warned us, with a story, about the perils we face.

When we hear the parable of the sower, are we quick to plant ourselves in the good soil? Do we stop to wonder whether we're the plant without roots, or the one that dries up and withers, or the one choked out by thorns? Many of us assume we're Peter, not the Pharisees, and certainly not Judas. We're more prone to assume safety, security, and blessing for ourselves. For some, the parable of the sower might inspire relief and confidence, rather than healthy fear and vigilance. *Thank God I wasn't like the others.*

But if the parable comforts us without awakening urgency and expectation, we have missed Jesus's point. He ends by saying, when he's alone with his disciples, "Take care then how you hear" ([Luke 8:18](#)). In other words, don't assume you're in good soil, but look carefully at how you receive the word of God. Relentlessly plead with God to water the seed he has given you, to send your roots ever deeper, and to protect you from the temptations and distractions around you. Plead with God to *keep* you.

With heaven and hell at stake, joy and misery in the balance, and obstacles before us and within us, we must take care how we hear the words of God.

What Are These Words?

Before we consider the kind of soil we should be, we need to know what kind of seed this is. The seed gets lost, as seeds often do, in the shuffle of Jesus's parable. But the seed, not the soil, is the real story here. Nothing comes from any soil, no matter how fertile, if a seed is never planted. And this seed is unlike any the earth has ever received.

Jesus begins by saying, "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God" ([Luke 8:11](#)). The first test of the soil in our own hearts is how those seven simple words fall on us. Why would we ever bear fruit if we don't *treasure the seed* — the very word of the one who spoke the galaxies into reality? Hearing God well in the spoken gospel and written Bible begins with the awareness that we are hearing — *really* hearing — God himself in his word ([1 Thessalonians 2:13](#)).

“All Scripture is breathed out by God” ([2 Timothy 3:16–17](#)). Every word came from the infinite wisdom and imagination of God. Every sentence, paragraph, and book was conceived by the Author of life, the Alpha and Omega, the Lord of heaven and earth. Nothing in the Bible made it into our hands without first passing through his.

Humility: Defeating the Greatest Threat

What kind of soil, then, should we hope to be for such a seed as this? What will be our posture toward God when we open his word? Three ingredients, among others, will be humility, submission, and prayer.

Humility comes first. Pride poisons the soil in our hearts like nothing else. Busyness is not the greatest threat to daily Bible reading. Self-confidence is. None of us forgets to eat for days, because everything in us tells us we need food. What does it say about our hearts when we skip the food we need the most, sometimes for days or weeks at a time? One powerful way to ignite our time alone in God’s word is to confront and kill our remaining pride. We pray with king David, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” ([Psalm 139:23–24](#)).

The seed of God’s word loves to grow in the rich soil of humility. Our Lord says, “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” ([Isaiah 66:2](#)). The man whose delight is in the law of the Lord knows he does not deserve these words — he doesn’t deserve to have them, to understand them, or to delight in them. He knows well that the having, the understanding, the enjoying, even the obeying are each their own staggering gift of grace. He prays, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” ([Psalm 119:18](#)).

Submission: Welcoming God’s Authority

Humility, then, leads to glad submission to God’s authority. If the Bible truly is the word of a sovereign, holy, and just God, how we hear can bear frightening and wonderful consequences. These are not tips for living a better, more productive, more successful life. These are not merely suggestions for improving our spiritual health. These words are the wondrous promises and unmitigated commands of a God who will and must judge sin.

These words have *authority*, an increasingly unpopular word today, at least in our society. And God’s authoritative words demand from us an even more unpopular posture: *submission*. We don’t want anyone to have full, unqualified authority over us. We want to be able to “commit” with one foot safely outside the door, in case someone, even God, asks us to do anything we don’t want to do. The Bible, however, does not give us the option to be half in — to enjoy

comfort while we sow to sin, to receive forgiveness and forgo holiness, to gain joy without suffering and sacrifice.

To ignore, neglect, minimize, or avoid the word of God is to ignore, neglect, minimize, or avoid God himself ([Deuteronomy 18:19](#)) — which is an offense greater even than theft, adultery, or murder. Disregarding what God has said is, in fact, the sin that ultimately makes every other sin so horribly wicked. To gladly submit to the Bible, however, is to gladly submit to God himself.

Prayer: Asking God for Help

Finally, then, humility and submission lead us, in prayer, to ask for God's help. The longest chapter in the Bible is an extended, even uncomfortably long, *prayer* about the *words of God*. Psalm 119 sings,

I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. ([Psalm 119:15–16](#))

If we don't know what to pray for when we read the Bible, this psalm gives us plenty of good places to start. To take care how you hear, consider seven ways you might pray, inspired by Psalm 119.

1. God, incline and enlarge my heart toward you.

Incline my heart to your testimonies. ([Psalm 119:36](#))

I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart! ([Psalm 119:32](#))

2. Help me understand what I read.

Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. ([Psalm 119:27](#))

Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments. ([Psalm 119:73](#); see also [Psalm 119:125](#), [144](#), [169](#))

3. Make me diligent to keep your words.

This blessing has fallen to me; that I have kept your precepts. ([Psalm 119:56](#))

Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart. . . . You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. ([Psalm 119:2](#), [4](#))

4. Pour your light on the path of my life.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. ([Psalm 119:105](#))

The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. ([Psalm 119:130](#))

5. Strengthen me in sorrow.

My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word! ([Psalm 119:28](#))

6. Shield me from every kind of distraction.

Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways. ([Psalm 119:37](#))

7. Keep your promises.

Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope! ([Psalm 119:116](#))

Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it. ([Psalm 119:140](#))

Come Eagerly to the Word

Jesus says, “As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience” ([Luke 8:15](#)). May God be pleased to increasingly make our souls into good soil for his word — in humility, in submission, and in prayer. He loves to give his people the faith-filled posture of the Bereans, who “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” ([Acts 17:11](#)).

John Piper says, “Every day with meekness receive the word of God. That is, every day be in the Bible. Breathe the Bible. Don’t try to hold your breath from Monday to Wednesday. Breathe every day” (“[Receive with Meekness the Implanted Word](#)”). Breathe in the wonder of having the words of God, humble yourself and gladly submit before them, and pray for greater insight and delight. Take care how you hear, and live in the pages of the Bible.