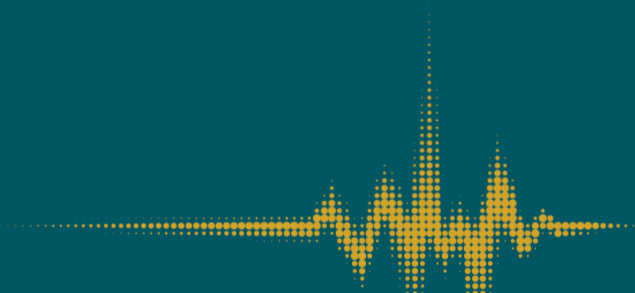


Marty  
Machowski



# Listen

10-Minute  
Family Devotions  
on the Parables

# Up

“Parents will love how *Listen Up* scatters the seed of God’s Word into the fertile soil of their children’s hearts. Through clear explanation, hands-on activities, and practical application, Marty Machowski helps families pay attention to the life-changing stories of our Master Teacher. More than a collection of teaching, these pages are nothing less than a map, pointing the way to hidden treasure. *Listen Up*—riches await!

**Champ Thornton**, Author of *The Radical Book for Kids: Exploring the Roots and Shoots of Faith*

“Biblically faithful. Gospel rich. Theologically insightful. Practical. Creative. Engaging. These are some of the words that came to mind as I read through Marty Machowski’s *Listen Up*! I learned things I didn’t know about the parables, and repeatedly found myself thinking, ‘Parents and their kids are going to benefit so much from this book!’ Marty has obviously done his homework and excels at using the whole Bible to help us understand what Jesus is saying in the parables. Best of all, he consistently points us not only to the words of Jesus, but to Jesus himself as the only Savior of the world.

**Bob Kauflin**, Director of Sovereign Grace Music

“God gifted Marty Machowski with love for the Bible and profound creativity. In *Listen Up*, he employs these gifts to share Jesus’s parables with the next generation. Children will be engaged by the fun facts and interactive activities. More importantly, they’ll learn to listen to, treasure, and build their lives on the Savior’s words.”

**Jared Kennedy**, Pastor of Families at Sojourn Community Church Midtown, Louisville, KY; coauthor of *Leadership Mosaic* and *PROOF Pirates VBS*

“If I ever had to return to my child-rearing years, I’d certainly want to take *Listen Up* with me. It is a book of family devotions, written in a lively, vivid style. It presents an accurate account of Jesus’s parables and applies them well to the lives of every participant. Machowski includes excellent suggestions for object lessons, group activities, prayer, and ‘going deeper,’ while keeping the actual meetings under ten minutes! I can’t imagine that anyone would follow the book’s directions without becoming a better disciple of Jesus.”

**John M. Frame**, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL

“Marty is a parent’s best friend when it comes to figuring out how to creatively and competently do what we really want to do, which is talk with our kids about what matters most—the word of God.”

**Nancy Guthrie**, Author of *Dinner Table Devotions and Discussion Starters*

“Marty Machowski is at it again! With *Listen Up*, Marty has put another tool in parent’s hands, helping parents to make wise use of one of Jesus’s most common teaching methods: parables. These are some of the most memorable stories in the Bible, and Marty will help you teach them to your kids in unforgettable ways.

**C. J. Mahaney**, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

“Machowski has designed yet another magnificent resource for families. In this new devotional guide he teaches parents and kids how to listen to what God says to us in the parables. The Word of God is alive! We need help to see and understand, and that is what Machowski’s devotional guides aim to do. It is wonderfully fitting for this parable genre that Machowski’s illustrations shine as brilliant aids for our apprehension of the living Word.”

**Gloria Furman**, Author of *Missional Motherhood* and *Alive in Him*

# Listen Up

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# Listen Up

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Ten-Minute Family Devotions  
on the Parables of Jesus

Marty Machowski



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## Dedication

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I dedicate this book to all Christian parents who hold a desire to pass their faith on to their children. May the grace of God strengthen you in your efforts to teach the glorious deeds of the Lord through this book. I pray the Spirit of God opens your eyes wider, to see the wonder of Christ far deeper. Then your children will observe the resulting joy, beaming upon your face and be stirred to follow in your way. Anyone can pass along information; but with the Scriptures we offer our children a far richer heritage. For the Lord you see, has risen; he is alive, and his Word is living and active. While the Bible does serve to inform, it carries with it the greater power to transform and that's what ensures our feeble efforts to disciple our children, empowered by the Spirit, will reap a harvest of righteousness.





# Contents

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Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
For Parents	3
Week 1: Do You Have Ears to Hear?	6
Week 2: Building on the Rock	24
Week 3: A Treasure, a Pearl, and a Mustard Seed	41
Week 4: The Good Shepherd	60
Week 5: Do I Have to Forgive?	77
Week 6: Who Is My Neighbor?	96
Week 7: Teach Me to Pray	112
Week 8: Where Do You Store Your Treasure?	128
Week 9: You Are Invited to the Banquet	146
Week 10: The Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son	164
Week 11: Heaven and Hell	182
Week 12: Everybody Needs Jesus	202
Week 13: The Return of Christ	220
Conclusion	241



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This work would not be possible if it were not for the help of the scholars who have studied the parables before me and committed their knowledge to paper. I would especially like to thank Simon Kistemaker for his book: *The Parables, Understanding the Stories Jesus Told*; Gary Inrig and his book: *The Parables, Understanding What Jesus Meant*; John MacArthur and his book: *Parables, The Mysteries of God's Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told*; Klyne R. Snodgrass for his book, *Stories with Intent, A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*; and finally the great Baptist scholar and pastor Benjamin Keach for his 900-page *Exposition of the Parables and Express Similitudes of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. I recommend all of these for further study.

The greatest thanks, however, are reserved for God, without his grace and strength, writing this book would simply not be possible. It is my desire to keep my hands on the plow, not look back, and attribute every step forward to God's sustaining, and empowering grace. To God be the glory.



## Introduction

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*Listen Up* is a devotional designed to help families explore the parables of Jesus. A parable is a short story, word picture, or figure of speech. The word *parable* means “thrown beside.” Jesus shared parables alongside his sermons for two reasons—to spark the curiosity of those who wanted to learn, while often disguising the truth from the skeptics. After teaching a parable Jesus often said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15). In other words, “this is important, so you better listen up.”

Later, when Jesus was alone with his disciples, and anyone else who wanted to listen, he explained everything to them (Mark 4:34), opening their eyes and minds to the truth the parables were meant to convey. Today we have many of these explanations preserved for us in the gospels. They form the foundation for our understanding of the parables and how to interpret these stories and word pictures.

Children love stories, and the parables provide a wonderful opportunity to engage their imaginations and help them understand key biblical truths. It is interesting that one of the Bible’s most ardent supporters of teaching children predicted Jesus would one day speak in parables. His name was Asaph the Seer. More than one thousand years before Jesus walked the earth, during the reign of King David, Asaph prophesied that Jesus would one day teach with parables. This is what he said:

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!  
I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from of old,  
things that we have heard and known,*

*that our fathers have told us.  
We will not hide them from their children,  
but tell to the coming generation  
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,  
and the wonders that he has done (Psalm 78:1–4).*

As we explore the parables, let's make Asaph's passion our own. Asaph loved the Lord and all his glorious deeds. He also loved children and wanted more than anything else to pass on his love of God to the next generation.

Sing the Proverbs with the *Listen Up* companion music CD, available from Sovereign Grace Music at <http://sovereigngracemusic.org/music/albums/>

## For Parents

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Each of the thirteen weeks of this study begins with a short overview entitled, “Get Ready.” If you start your study on Sunday, you can read through the Get Ready section and then begin the activity found in the following “Get Set” section.

The Get Ready and Get Set sections will provide your family with a preview of the topic of study as well as a corresponding activity. In the Get Ready section, we present an action word of the week. This helps introduce the theme of that week’s devotions and provides a single word to help your children apply what they are learning. We’ll introduce words like believe, trust, pray, give, and treasure, for example.

There are five lessons for each week of devotions. During the week we will study the verses that set up the context, the parables themselves and any follow up teaching Jesus offered the disciples. Some of the parables are short, while others are quite long. But since parables are stories, even younger children should be able to follow along the lengthier passages. We’ve included the Bible text (English Standard Version) in the lesson so that you do not need to flip back and forth between your Bible and the devotional. In addition to the narrative parables, we also review many of the similitudes, figures of speech, and illustrations Jesus used in his teaching.

Each Bible passage is followed by a short explanation for you to read to your family. This brief commentary will help you and your children understand the key points from the Bible passage you just read. Each week we add a fun fact to break up the more serious teaching. Some of the topics, like Jesus’s teaching on heaven and hell, may be a bit sobering for your children. But we’ve not included anything your children wouldn’t read in a simple review of the gospels. It is recommended to read through the week’s devotions yourself prior to introducing them to your family. Consider using them for your personal devotions. Then you will be familiar



with the material and more prepared to shepherd your children through the study.

At the end of each lesson we provide you with three questions to ask—and of course, we give you the answers too! There are a few questions where parents are encouraged to share from their lives. Kids love to hear mom and dad talk about when they were young or about a struggle they had but often we keep that history to ourselves. If you review the week prior to your family devotions, you'll be ready for these invitations for you to share from your own life.

We close each lesson with a prayer suggestion. Feel free to lead your family in this time or ask one of your children to do so.

We've also included supplemental sections for parents. Each week begins with a "Look at the Week" to give parents an overview of the lesson. This will help you better understand the context and material. Each lesson ends with a section entitled, Going Deeper, which is also designed to deepen your understanding of the topics covered in the Bible passages. Read through the lessons and use them for your own personal devotions first. Then when you review the devotions with your children, you can look for a way to share, in your own words, the information you've learned.

You can also use the introductions and Going Deeper material to challenge older children. If you have grade school children and teens, have your teenage children read these extra study sections and invite them to help you teach their younger brothers and sisters by adding to the discussion things they've learned.

One of the most common questions from parents is, "When should I do devotions with my children?" There is no correct time, but there are three favorites times that many families use. The top choice for families with children of different ages is just after dinner, before dessert. The evening meal is ideal as it already draws families together. Families with children close in age often use bedtime for devotions. If your children are early risers, holding family devotions in the morning can be a great way to start your day. Don't be

discouraged if you stop and get derailed—just try again and start from where you left off. You might find that after a week or two, your children will remind you.

Don't feel pressure to perform incredible devotions each session. We don't win our children by entertaining them, the Spirit of God wins our children for Christ as we are faithful to share the good news of Christ with them. So rather than looking to be fantastic, just look to be faithful.

### One Final Word about Asaph

Asaph faithfully passed on the glorious deeds of the Lord to his children and trusted God for the results. His children, who learned from his example, did the same. During Asaph's day, four thousand Levites were assigned to play music at the dedication of Solomon's temple and Asaph and his sons were chosen to join them. Over 400 years later, after the temple was destroyed and the foundation rebuilt, the descendants of Asaph, 148 men, were the only singers left, and they were still able to sing and play.

*And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, **and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel.** And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for this steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid (Ezra 3:10–11 bold emphasis mine).*

It is my prayer that Listen Up will help you as a parent tell the next generation the glorious deeds of the Lord. It is my desire that your children will grow up and do the same. It is my hope that your great far off grandchildren, four hundred years from today, will still be serving the Lord and point back to your faithfulness in their lives.



Week 1

# Do You Have Ears to Hear?

## Let's Look at the Week. . .

The Parable of the Sower appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels (Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8). Each of these gospels retells the parable a bit differently, so it can be helpful to read more than one gospel account to compare them. This week we will read the parable from both Matthew and Luke's gospels. Listen carefully for the differences and see what you can learn by comparing the stories.

The people Jesus taught were familiar with farmers sowing seed in fields. Farmers sowed seed by hand, casting it from a sack hung from a

strap around his neck. He would reach in, grab a handful of seed and then broadcast it over the ground. Even the most experienced farmer could not completely control where all the seeds fell.

While the people understood the images in the parable, they would not have understood the meaning behind them. That's why the disciples questioned Jesus and asked him why he taught in parables. Why not tell the people exactly what you want them to learn? You might be surprised to discover that many of the parables were designed to hide the truth, not make it clearer.

## Get Ready

The action word of the week is listen.

Listen is a word we use to encourage people to pay careful attention to their surroundings, specifically to things they might otherwise miss. If you hear rain dripping on the windowpane you might say, "Listen, I think it is raining outside. Do you hear the raindrops?"

Listen is also a word we use to encourage a person to pay attention to the instruction they hear. Teachers ask their students to listen carefully to the lessons they teach so that they can learn. Parents, ask their children to listen to their instructions, which means they want them to follow and obey what they say. If your dad says, "Listen, I want you to take out the trash to the street before it gets dark," he doesn't just want you to hear his words, he also wants you to obey his request and take out the trash. So listening is more than hearing. Listening is hearing and doing.

This week we will begin our study of the parables. Our book is called *Listen Up* because it is important to both hear the words that Jesus taught and then apply them to your life by following what they

say. A lot of people heard what Jesus taught—they could repeat back to you what they heard. But not everyone was truly listening. So, as we begin our study, make sure you open your ears and listen carefully.

## Get Set

### Exploring the Four Soils

(The purpose of this activity is to observe the differences between the four types of soil.)

You can find the four soil types described in the Parable of the Sower in nearly every neighborhood. Weather permitting, after completing today's lesson take your children on a hunt for the four types of soil described in today's parable. Otherwise, simply collect the following supplies and continue with the activity.

Supplies:

- ▶ 3 plastic cups
- ▶ A handful of rocks or gravel
- ▶ A dozen plastic forks
- ▶ A handful of soft fertile potting soil
- ▶ A piece of modeling dough flattened into a pancake and allowed to dry

Discuss the four types of soil with your children as you experiment with these concepts and materials.

**Path**—Show your children the dried out dough. Tell them to pretend their index finger is a root popping out of a sprouting seed. Can they get their root into the soil? (No, they cannot.) Why not? (The soil is too hard to allow the root to find a footing.)

**Rocky Soil**—Fill a cup with gravel. Ask your children to pretend their in-

dex finger is a root going down into the rocks. Describe what it feels like to go down into the rocks. (It is difficult and hurts a bit.) What does the parable say is going to happen when the sun comes out? (The plant will shrivel up.)

**Weedy Soil**—Fill a cup with potting soil and then push several forks down into the soil. Ask your children to try and push their index fingers down into the cup. How easy is it to push your finger down into the soil? (It is difficult because the forks [weeds] are in the way.) What does the parable say happens to the seeds that do sprout in the weedy soil? (The weeds choke them out.) Discuss the likelihood of the weeds stealing the sunlight from the tiny growing plants.

**Fertile soil**—Fill a cup with fresh potting soil (slightly damp). Have your children push their index finger down into the soil. What does the fertile soil feel like? (It is very soft and it is easy to push your finger down.) If your finger was the root of a sprouting seed, do you think the plant would grow healthy in this soil? (Yes, the fertile soil is free of weeds and rocks and is very soft, making it easy for the young roots to take hold.)

## Listen Up

Read Matthew 13:1–9:

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”*

## Think about It

Imagine a young boy going out to play after church on Sunday, still wearing a pair of brand new dress shoes. As he races through the kitchen, his mom catches him by the arm, looks him in the eye, and says, “Don’t get your new shoes muddy, stay on the driveway, the yard is a mess.” Even though the boy heard his mother’s words, he must now decide if he will listen to them. Remember, his mom caught him speeding through the kitchen. He seems rather intent on playing outside with his brother.

Ten minutes later, while playing catch on the driveway, an errant pass lands in the middle of the muddy lawn. Now what will the boy do? He might think, “I’ll just tiptoe out on the grass to get the ball. After all, he reasons, *I’m not playing on the grass, just retrieving my ball.* Soon the ball is in the grass again and off he goes after it. By the third time, he forgets to tiptoe and after retrieving about ten

balls, notices that his brand new shoes are covered in mud. While he heard his mother's words, he didn't listen (follow) her teaching.

When Jesus finished telling the parable of the sower he said, "He who has ears, let him hear." Well of course everyone he spoke to had ears. They heard his words, but could they put his words into practice? With some parables, the meaning was easy to understand. But this parable was different. It was hard to figure out what Jesus was trying to teach. Why did he tell a story about a farmer casting his seed on different kinds of soil? What the people didn't realize was that this parable carried a hidden message. Jesus used a kind of secret code. If you didn't know what the objects in the parable represented, there was no way of understanding the parable or putting it into practice.

The people of Jesus heard what he said and they even understood that seeds sown among rocks, thorns, or along the path would not do well. They all had experience pulling weeds, and tossing rocks out of their gardens. They knew farmers had to plow up hard ground. But because they didn't know what these things represented, they must have wondered, "Why are you telling this to us Jesus? What is the purpose of your story?"

Imagine if the mom in our story told her son a parable instead of simply telling him not to dirty his shoes. "There once was a baker that dropped a fresh loaf of bread on the dirty floor. If you have ears listen up." If she didn't explain the meaning of the parable, the boy would never understand that she was trying to tell him not to dirty his shoes. The only way for the boy to understand she was talking about shoes, not bread would be for him to ask for an explanation.

When Jesus said, he who has ears, let him hear, he was challenging his audience to discover the meaning of his words. In a sense, Jesus is saying, "there is something very important in what I just said. You better figure out what it is." Jesus's little saying did the trick. The disciples came to him asking, "What does this parable mean?" Later this week we will study the explanation Jesus gave them so that we can understand the hidden message of the parable.

## Talk about It

- ▶ Can you remember a time your mom or dad gave you an instruction but you forgot what they said and didn't follow it? (*Parents, help your children remember the times they didn't brush their teeth when you told them or forgot to put their clothes away, or something similar.*)
- ▶ Why did Jesus say, "He who has ears, let him hear?" (*Jesus was emphasizing the importance of his teaching and reminding them to listen and understand its meaning.*)
- ▶ What do you think the Parable of the Sower means? (*Allow your children to guess, but hold off until our third lesson to tell them if they are correct. If they give the correct interpretation, ask them how they knew it. Since this is a popular parable, many children learn about it in Sunday school and have already heard Jesus's explanation.*)

## Pray about It

Pray to Jesus and ask for the Holy Spirit's help to understand and follow his teaching.

## Going Deeper

The parables force people to either come to Jesus with their questions or ignore him all together. Parables help expose whether or not we want to know Jesus better.

Jesus often spoke to two different audiences at the same time. The first group was comprised of those whom he called—the disciples, or those drawn by the Father. They loved to be around Jesus and listen to his teaching. The other audience included religious rulers who were jealous of Jesus and didn't like him at all.

We want our children to see the difference between these two audi-

ences and encourage them to be listeners and followers of Jesus.

Shortly before he went to the cross Jesus taught the disciples about the Holy Spirit he would soon send. He said, "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

The Holy Spirit is still in the business of helping us understand the teaching of Jesus and reminding us of what we've learned. Whenever we read the Bible we can pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand much like the disciples asked Jesus to explain his teaching.



## Listen Up

Read Matthew 13:10–13:

*Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”*

## Think about It

Some parables are easy to understand. The parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders that we will study next week is like that. But many of the other parables Jesus taught are difficult to discern. Unless you know what the characters and objects represent, you won't understand the true meaning. For example, if I told you the seed in the parable stood for a football, the sower a quarterback, and the weeds represented the opposing football team's linebackers, you would come up with an entirely different interpretation for the parable than the one Jesus gave to his disciples.

The disciples asked Jesus why he taught using parables since the people could not understand the meaning. Why not just teach the people what you want them to learn? Jesus gives a surprising answer. He didn't want them to understand! By disguising truth in parables, Jesus hid it from those who were mocking him and rejecting his teaching. So many of the parables are like a secret code. If you don't have the decoder (know what the parts stand for) many of the parables don't make sense. In order to understand, people needed to seek Jesus for answers. But those who didn't care for Jesus, left confused, thinking he was crazy.

So you see, the parables themselves show us whether or not we want to know Jesus better. Some people say the Bible is confusing and it's too hard to understand. But if you listen carefully to what you read and look for the passages where Jesus explains his teaching, the Bible is fairly easy to understand, and very helpful.

### **Talk about It**

▶ Why did Jesus teach in parables? *(Jesus taught in parables so that people would seek him for understanding. Parables encouraged the practice of asking questions and waiting for answers. We can all have that same type of relationship with Jesus today.)*

▶ If Jesus were here right now, what questions would you have for him? *(Parents, you can use this question to help your children become active listeners. As they listen carefully, they may think of additional questions in need of answers.)*

▶ What information do you need to understand the meaning behind a parable? *(You need to know what the people or things in the parable represent.)*

▶ What are the secrets of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus hid from the religious rulers by teaching in parables? *(The gospel message is the secret of the kingdom. Jesus came as the promised Messiah who would die on the cross to take away the sins of the people of God and restore their relationship to God. The Pharisees and other religious rulers refused to believe he was the Messiah and they sure did not want to give up their power to a new king.)*

### **Pray about It**

Thank God for showing us the secrets of the kingdom in the Bible. We are able to read the parables and understand them through the teachings of Jesus.

## Going Deeper

The Pharisees and other religious rulers often came to trap Jesus, not to learn (Mark 12:13 and Luke 20:20). By teaching with parables, the truth of the gospel remained hidden from them. But for those who wanted to learn, Jesus was glad to explain the hidden meaning. The Scriptures tell us Jesus explained everything to his disciples. There is only one Pharisee, Nicodemus, who came back privately to ask Jesus more, his story is found in the third chapter of John.

Given the many prophecies describing the coming Messiah, the Pharisees should have recognized

Jesus was the promised one. Jesus was a descendant (long far off grandson) of King David, and just as the prophets foretold was born of a virgin in the Bethlehem the City of David. Others called him the Messiah and believed him to be the one who would deliver Israel, but the Pharisees were jealous and refused to believe. Even worse, they spoke against him. Because of their unbelief, Jesus hid the secret message of the gospel from them by speaking in parables. Yet he was glad to explain the parables to anyone who wanted to listen—anyone who had ears to hear.

## Day Three

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### Listen Up

Read Matthew 13:16–23:

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.*

*“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word,*

*immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”*

## **Think about It**

In our last devotion, we learned that Jesus spoke in parables to hide the truth of his teaching from the religious leaders who mocked and rejected him. But, he also spoke in parables to encourage others to come to him with their questions and begin a relationship with Jesus. In today’s Bible passage we see Jesus give the secret code, which helped explain the meaning of the parable to his closest followers and anyone else who wanted to learn. Matthew, who wrote the gospel we read from today, would have been there with the disciples, listening to Jesus explain the parable’s meaning.

Jesus wanted the disciples to realize how important the parables were and how blessed they were to understand their meaning. The great saints of old like King David and the prophets such as Isaiah, and Jeremiah longed to hear the promised Messiah speak these truths, but they all died before Jesus was born. Each of the disciples on the other hand were handpicked by Jesus to know him, follow him, and sit under his teaching. They soon became his friends.

As we read Jesus’s explanation of the Parable of the Four Soils, we too are blessed like the disciples, for we get to hear the same truth they heard, the message the kings and prophets of old longed to hear. The kings and prophets of old knew God promised to send a deliverer, but they didn’t know who he was. We get to look back at the story and meet Jesus for ourselves. We know he is the promised deliverer and we know the end of the story—Jesus died to take away our sin and rose on the third day to new life. But here is the important question: Will we listen to what we read and follow Jesus?

Will our hearts be like fertile soil for his message? Will we believe in Jesus and give him our whole lives?

Remember, only one of the four soils is good soil—representing the one who hears the message and holds on to it and follows it for life. Every person who reads the parable and its true meaning has a choice to make—that is, which soil will they be? How will they respond to the words of life the prophets longed to hear?

### **Talk about It**

- ▶ Explain the meaning of the parable of the sower in your own words. (*Parents, review the parable going through each of the four soils and Jesus’s explanation. See if your children can remember the meaning.*)
- ▶ Which soil do you want to describe your life? (*Of course the correct answer is the fertile soil. Help your children think of a few good reasons they should want to be like the fertile soil.*)
- ▶ None of our lives are free of weeds and rocks. How then can the seed of the gospel grow in such imperfect soil? (*Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to help us much like he helped the disciples while he was on earth. While we do have weeds and rocks, the Holy Spirit helps to pluck the weeds and remove the rocks of sin so that the gospel sprouts and grows in our hearts. It is never too late to turn from our sin (repent) and place our trust in Jesus (believe). God is willing to give anyone who calls upon his name a fresh start and a heart that’s soft to hear the gospel.*)

### **Pray about It**

Ask God to send his Spirit to help you trust the teachings of Jesus and to be like fertile soil.



## Fun Fact

# SEED DRILLS

Jesus used a number of farming illustrations, but many of these agricultural techniques have changed in the last 2000 years, particularly in the United States. Few families grow their own food and even the way we farm today is not the same. Take the Parable of the Sower, the way we sow seeds today is very different. Did you ever notice how evenly spaced the rows of crops are planted today? That's because modern day farmers use sowing machines called seed drills to plant their seeds. When you sow seeds by hand, casting them across the soil, the sprouting crops are not even, and some patches of your field may not have any plants at all. A seed drill machine uses a row of equally spaced tubes that press into the soil and drop a seed down into the ground. They only drive the seed drill along the fertile soil, so that no seeds are lost to the thorn bushes at the side of the field. Once the seeds are covered, the birds can't see them to snatch them away and when they sprout, you get nice evenly spaced green rows in your field. Consider doing a quick Internet search for the following subjects: farming methods, seed drill photo, and sowing seeds in Africa.

## Going Deeper

When Jesus began his ministry he announced to those he taught, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The instructions to repent and believe form the two basic steps all our children must take to become believers. Neither one by itself is sufficient.

The Pharisees tried to repent of sin in their own strength, but refused to believe. Jesus condemned their lives because he saw the sin in their heart. Jesus said, “If you love me you will listen and obey my teaching” (John 14:15 paraphrased). In the book of James, we learn that “even

the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19).

Everyone who loves Jesus and believes wants to grow in obedience, even though we continue to make mistakes. That’s what repentance is all about. When believers fail, we can always run back to Jesus, confess our sin and look to follow him afresh. What a comfort to know that everyone who comes to Jesus is appointed by God to bear lasting fruit (John 15:16). While Jesus calls us to obey, it is the Holy Spirit, our helper, who changes our hearts, and empowers us to follow Jesus.

## Day Four

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### Listen Up

Read Luke 8:9–15:

(We are taking a look at the same parable story we read earlier in the week in Matthew’s gospel.)

*And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word,*

*receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. 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.*

### **Think about It**

Some of the parables are found in more than one gospel. It is helpful to compare the stories side by side to see what more we can learn. Matthew, who heard Jesus teaching first hand, gives us an eyewitness account of Jesus's explanation. Luke on the other hand, was not one of the twelve disciples. He wrote his gospel by interviewing people who heard Jesus teach or perhaps those to whom the disciples told the story. Luke then gathered all the information together and wrote an orderly account (Luke 1:3). As a result of his careful investigation, Luke adds a few extra details about Jesus that Matthew did not include.

For example, Luke clearly tells us that the seed in the parable stands for the Word of God. Matthew tells us the birds represent the evil one, while Luke names the evil one as the devil. For those seeds which fell among the thorns, Luke adds a third reason for their failure. In addition to the cares of this life and riches, Luke also warned that the pleasures of life can prevent God's Word from bearing good fruit in our hearts.

On the other hand, Matthew gives us more detail with regard to those represented by the rocky soil. Luke tells us they "believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away." Matthew describes the time of testing as "tribulation and persecution on account of the word." So you can see how reading both accounts, or even adding a third retelling from Mark's gospel (Mark 4:1–20), can help you more fully understand what Jesus taught.



## Talk about It

► What does the seed represent in the Parable of the Sower? (*The seed is the Word of God sown into a heart—spoken to a person.*)

► What are the four different responses to the Word? (*Parents, simply go through Jesus's explanation from today's Bible passage and remind your children any of the four responses they miss.*)

► Which soil are you most like, the hardened path, the rocky soil, the thorny soil, or the fertile soil? (*Parents, see if you children can identify themselves with the groups of people presented in the parable.*)

## Pray about It

Ask God to plow and soften the soil of your heart, to kill the thorns, remove the rocks, and make your heart ready to receive the seeds of the gospel. Ask for faith to believe the Word of God and trust in Jesus.

## Going Deeper

Matthew wrote as an eyewitness. That's one of the main job descriptions of a disciple. Just before he returned to his Father Jesus told his disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Luke was not an eyewitness or a disciple. He was a doctor. So rather than provide an eyewitness account in his gospel, he went through a process of compiling an accurate account of Jesus's life. In the introduction to the gospel of Luke, he explains this process:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1–4).

Understanding Luke's compilation of stories from eyewitnesses explains how he is able to include additional details that are not found in the other gospels.

## Listen Up

Read Luke 8:16–18:

*“No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.”*

## Think about It

The Parable of the Lamp Under a Jar directly follows the Parable of the Sower in Luke’s gospel. The parable is a simple one. When you light a lamp, you put it on a stand so that it can shine its light into a dark room. It would be silly to then cover up the light to keep the room dark. No one ever does that. Jesus uses a ridiculous story (covering a lit lamp to hide the light) to get our attention. Once again we need to understand what the lamp represents to understand the parable. Sometimes we can get a clue from another part of the Bible. For example, when we read a similar parable in Matthew Jesus says, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14–16).

The lamp represents a person who believes in Jesus. The light is the gospel truth Jesus taught, which has the power to change people’s lives.

Jesus ends the short parable with a warning. One day, all that we’ve done, both good and bad will be brought out into the open

and be made known. God is going to judge what we did with the truth we learned from Jesus. Did we follow Jesus's teaching or go our own way? Did we share the message about Jesus with others?

Once again Jesus warns us to "Listen Up" when he says, "Take care then how you hear." Those who listen and follow what Jesus taught are eager to dig into God's Word and learn more. Those who ignore what they learn are not eager to study God's Word, and what they have learned will be forgotten and lost.

It is important to remember that we all fail to follow Jesus, but those who trust in his sufficient work on the cross are forgiven of their sin. When believers stand before God's judgment throne we stand with Jesus. Jesus will tell his Father, "I died to take away his or her sin." On that day, all believers will be welcomed into heaven to shouts of praise.

### **Talk about It**

- ▶ What does the light of the lamp represent in this parable? (*The light of the lamp represents the truth of Jesus that we as the lamp can share with the dark world around us.*)
- ▶ What does light do to the darkness? What happens to the darkness in a room when you turn on the light? (*The darkness goes away; it just disappears. When you shine the light of the truth of the gospel it changes people's lives.*)
- ▶ What darkness goes away when we shine the light of God's truth into our lives? (*The darkness of sin and evil are sent away by the truth of God's Word. It acts like a light to dispel sin and evil by helping us to know the wonderful truth about Jesus.*)

### **Pray about It**

Ask God to help you listen and obey all that Jesus taught so that your life will be like a lamp on a stand, shining the truth of God's Word for everyone to see.

## Going Deeper

The very first person to tell anyone about Jesus was John the Baptist. When John's father, Zechariah, prophesied over his newborn son, he spoke of the light:

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:76–79)

Jesus told his disciples to go into the entire world and share his story and teaching with the people they met (Matthew 28:19–20). In a sense, he was telling them to put his light on display for all to see. When we tell others about Jesus we are shining the light of the gospel too. When Jesus taught a similar parable in Matthew's gospel he explained it saying, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14–16).