

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

How to Receive the Word

Study #3

(1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Introduction: How to catch a pass...

I'm no prophet, but I can pretty well guarantee that this afternoon, in a dozen NFL games played around the country, highly skilled players making millions of dollars will drop perfectly catchable passes. Others, having caught passes, will fumble the ball downfield.

All sorts of reasons/excuses for losing the ball will be given: Sun was in my eyes, too much traffic, lapse in concentration, fear of getting hit, actually getting hit, not being careful to hug the ball tightly.

But, the bottom line is that in every case the individual player who loses the ball will have missed an opportunity to shine, and his team will have lost an opportunity to make progress.

Put in twenty-first century language, the first century Thessalonian Christians "caught the ball." And today, they challenge us to be good receivers, too.

To warm to the theme of the day, I'm going to begin by reminding you of the kind of city Thessalonica was.

The Arrival of the WORD (AD 50)

The City - Thessalonica

Geography and History

From historical sources we know that Thessalonica was a beautiful and, by the time the New Testament was written, a very old city. Formerly known as "Therma", it was established near some hot springs many centuries before the apostle Paul made his way there.¹

It grew rapidly from village to town to city to major metropolitan area as it was located on what had become a major trade route (The Ignatian Way) and possessed one of the best harbors on the Aegean Sea.

Politics and importance

Home to 200,000 residents, Thessalonica was the capitol city of Macedonia.² It was a center of commerce and of politics. The movers and the shakers lived in and visited Thessalonica. It was where the action was.³

Culture, Arts, Education, and Architecture

Though conquered by Rome, Greek culture continued to thrive in Thessalonica. And for centuries - including the century of Paul's visit - Thessalonica was a center for the arts and a showcase of Hellenistic architecture. And, in addition, Thessalonica was known for its superior education system.

¹ Therma was renamed "Thessalonica" by Cassander, King of Macedonia, after his wife, who was half sister to the Great Greek ruler, Alexander, around 350 BC.

² When Rome conquered Macedonia, Rome divided the region into four provinces and named Thessalonica one of the four capitals. Shortly after that, the districts consolidated and Thessalonica was made the central capital.

³ Paul's missionary strategy consisted of going to the larger cities of his day to establish churches, knowing that the message of the Gospel would then make its way to the smaller surrounding villages. Most of the cities he traveled to were major metropolitan areas.

Demographics

Demographically, the city was terrifically diverse. Greeks were in the majority. But Romans made up a significant minority. Also represented in the city were sizable populations of Asians, Persians, and even those from the far east.

Religious life

And with the diversity in population, there came diversity in religious expression.

There was a synagogue for the Jews (meaning that there were more than a handful of Jews). Many in Thessalonica followed the philosophers, being either Epicureans, Cynics, Skeptics, or Pythagoreans. Others were still devoted to the gods of ancient Greece - Zeus, Apollos, Demeter, Poseidon.

And still others were connected to the mystery religions of the east. These were frightening cults whose worship consisted of snake fetishes, sexual orgies, physical mutilation, horrible sacrifices, and drunkenness. These would be the Eleusinian, Dionysian, Cybellian, and Orphic cults.

Into this eclectic population came Paul and his friends with the Gospel of Jesus.

The Proclaimers

Paul

Legend has it that Paul was short, bald and bow-legged, that his nose was crooked and that his eyebrows met in the middle.⁴ Ancient writers tell us that he was in good physical condition - he would have to be to endure the hardships he did - and enjoyed generally good health.

He is reputed to have been a friendly, outgoing man, very excitable, that he motioned with his hands when he spoke,⁵ that he often raised his voice when he warmed to his theme and that he could speak about Jesus for a very long time!⁶

Timothy

Timothy, who traveled with Paul and Silvanus, was the youngest of the three. We know him as a warm, but perhaps timid man. From Paul's descriptions of him, we know that he was solid, strong, genuine, tender.⁷

Silvanus

We know little of Silvanus, but assume that he was an able and persuasive teacher, a godly man, and a committed Christian.

The condition of the proclaimers

When these three walked through the city gates of Thessalonica, they would have been bruised, battered and bloody.

They had just been in Philippi, where they had been beaten (at least Paul and Silvanus had been) and imprisoned.

But their *condition* didn't keep them from their *mission*. They went straight to the Jewish synagogue to teach about Jesus. And, for three consecutive Sabbaths, they reasoned with the Jews, trying to convince them that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

During the week, and for several weeks after those first three weeks, the trio taught and preached throughout the city to anyone who would listen to them as they shared the Good News that Jesus saves.⁸

⁵ See Acts 20:34, and others

⁶ Acts 16:28

⁷ See the pastoral epistles, especially 1 Timothy 6:11ff and 2 Timothy 1:3-7; 3:10ff.

⁸ Acts 17:2-3

⁴ A church elder in Asia from the second century described Paul as "a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness..."

As we saw last Sunday, Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus treated the new Thessalonian converts as tenderly as a nursing mother does her infant child, led them as fiercely and shepherded them as courageously as any father does his children, and linked arms with them in serving the Lord as the brothers they were.

And sure enough, within a few weeks to a few months, a church was established in Thessalonica!

The Receivers

The believers received the message that the missionaries were teaching. They caught the ball (the WORD) that the apostles threw!

The Thessalonians imitated Paul's character and his faith. The Word spread from their city throughout Macedonia. They turned from idols to serve the living and true God.

And others became inspired by what they saw in the Thessalonians. They began imitating the Thessalonians as the Thessalonians had imitated Paul.

The lives of the believers had changed dramatically and the witness of the church had become just as dramatic. God had done something in Thessalonica. Souls had been saved. Lives were changed.

Now we come to the one verse that we are going to look at in 1 Thessalonians today. It is the verse that explains the health and vigor and vitality of the church. Listen closely as I read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

The Reception

[1 Thessalonians 2:13] For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

There are all kinds of things that could have been done with the message that Paul and Silvanus and Timothy brought to Thessalonica.

There wasn't much choice about hearing it. Sound waves hit the ear and we "hear."

But following that initial hearing, the message about Jesus might have been rejected or resisted.

Discussion is a good thing, but the message could have been debated, argued, disputed, and contemplated to the point of exhaustion.

Instead, after appropriate discussion it was *received*.

Paul writes what he does in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 with great joy because of the manner in which the Thessalonians received the WORD.

They recognized that this message was different than any other message they had ever heard. This was not a message a human being could have made up, or would have if he could have!

And so, accepting the message as the WORD of God, its soul-saving, life-changing power was released to work its wonders in their lives.

As it was then, so it is now. The message performs its work when it is received by those who believe it is what it truly is - the WORD of God.

That's not saying that we who believe the Gospel and the WORD of God to be true are playing make believe.

We could say the same thing about Jesus. He is - objectively - the Son of God, the Lord of lords, and the Savior. But He only saves those who receive Him for who He really is.

Likewise for all the WORD of God. It IS true. But the key to experiencing the life-changing power of the WORD of God is to be found in the manner of our receiving it.

Now, if you and I think that what happened in the first century church at Thessalonica was pretty neat - all the changed lives and impact for Christ and far-reaching testimony - and we think that we'd love to see the same sorts of things happen in our own lives and in our own church, we need to learn to receive the WORD in the same manner they did.

And to shed more light on this theme of receiving the WORD, I'm going to ask that you turn from 1 Thessalonians to a different place in your Bibles.

Turn with me to the fourth chapter of Mark's Gospel, where we find Jesus speaking to the issue before us today: How to receive the WORD.

In coming to the parable we find in Mark 4⁹ (also found in Matthew 13 and Luke 8¹⁰), we are coming to the one passage in the Gospels where Jesus addressed Himself to the theme of receiving the WORD more directly than He does anywhere else. It is the parable of the soils.¹¹

The Arrival of the Word (11/04/2007)

INTRO: The Parable of the Soils (Mark 4)

Mark tells us that on the day Jesus gave this parable He was surrounded by a great multitude. This crowd no doubt consisted of serious disciples, curiosity seekers, sincere questioners, doubters, skeptics, and enemies.

He was pressed and pressured on all sides by the throngs. So, being by the Sea of Galilee, he simply climbed into a boat and addressed the crowd that was on the shore from the boat.

He began by issuing an interesting call: [*Mark 4:3*] "*Listen to this!*"

⁹ When Matthew records this parable in chapter 13 of his Gospel, he tells us that Jesus came outside to sit by the seashore "*on that day*." That is, the day of the events of chapter 12. That day started off when Jesus and His disciples snacked their way through a grainfield, picking the heads of grain and eating them. Later on that same day, while in the synagogue, Jesus healed a man. After this, He cast a demon out of a man who was demon-possessed, blind, and dumb. Finally, the Lord preached a scathing sermon against the Jewish leaders.

¹⁰ There are slight variations in the telling of this parable in each of these three Gospels. He probably told the parable on more than one occasion.

¹¹ While all three of the so-called *Synoptic* Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke; John's Gospel has no parables, *per se*) present numerous parables, and they present different parables in different order, they all begin the sections of their books that include parables with the same one: the Parable of the Soils.

Speaking to the whole crowd, not just to His twelve disciples, He calls them ALL to LISTEN.

He wants them to listen - but why? For what purpose does Jesus tell this parable and what is the point of it? What are they - and what are we - to listen for?

We'll see as we breeze through this parable that there are four soil types that represent four types of people who give four different responses to the WORD of God.

Some, seeing the four responses think that Jesus is telling who is and who is not saved, based on their responses. I think that identifying the saved and the lost from this parable makes for a very interesting conversation - but I do NOT think that this is the point.

More to the point, Jesus is alerting His disciples to the responses they will receive as they spread the WORD of God. It's important to know that not everybody will enthusiastically endorse what you have to say, even when you are talking about God. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and Jesus equips His followers with realistic expectations by this parable.

Most importantly, though, this parable is given to warn all of those who hear it that they are each responsible for the kind of hearing they give to the WORD of God. Jesus' immediate audience was - and is! - His immediate TARGET.

He wanted that audience by the Sea of Galilee and this audience - you and me - to **consider our own receptivity to God's message.**¹²

The first response to the WORD that Jesus considers is a non-response. A dropped pass.

¹² This parable has very definite figures and symbols which represent different things in the real world. In each of the four pictures, there is the seed, the sower, and the soil. The SEED is God's message. God's Word/message is compared here to a seed. A seed just sits there, inert, apparently lifeless. Yet in the proper medium it brings forth life. Likewise, God's Word goes forth as a word, looking for all the world like any other word. But, give the Word of God the proper medium and it, like the seed, will bring forth life. The SOWER is the one who communicates the message to an audience. These two ingredients, SEED and SOWER, are static in the parable. But the SOIL is dynamic, changing with each new scene.

Dropped Pass (no reception) (Mark 4:3-4)

Hard-packed soil (v. 4)

[Mark 4:3-4] “...Behold, the sower went out to sow; [4] as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road,¹³ and the birds came and ate it up.

In the fields of the Middle East, where farming is often done today as it was in Jesus’ day, little footpaths run back and forth through the fields on which the sower walks while he casts seed.

As he throws his seed over the tilled earth, some seed inevitably lands on these footpaths. When this happens, the seed doesn’t find its way into the ground, but lies on the surface.

Birds sweep down and eat the seed. The farmer himself may inadvertently step on some of his own seed, crushing it. And, of course, there is no harvest, no crop at all, from these seeds.

So what does this have to do with God? Why did Jesus tell a story that starts off with seed that doesn’t produce a crop? Well, translated into real life, this corresponds to the person who does not respond to the WORD of God that is sown on their hearts.

Jesus explained this non-response in a private conversation with His disciples after telling the parable to the crowd.

“Hard-packed” people (v. 15)

[Mark 4:15] “These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan¹⁴ comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them.

At first blush, this non-responder looks like a helpless victim of a satanic attack. We might be tempted to say that the person who has the seed of the WORD stolen by Satan is not at fault for not receiving the WORD.

But, notice. The person who has the WORD stolen from them is the person whose “soil” (heart) is so hardened against the WORD that it does not penetrate. That hardness against what God has to say is in place *before* the enemy steals the Word.

Satan is simply the ultimate opportunist. When he sees a hard-packed soil/soul, he takes advantage of it.

Perhaps you’ve known people who have pavement souls. They aren’t interested in anything God might have to say on a topic. Talk to them about eternal matters and they yawn disinterestedly. Speak to them of the state of their soul or tell them of biblical truths and you get a blank stare or a sharp word.

It’s tragic when people don’t have ears to hear God’s WORD because His WORD is truth, leads us to life and joy, protects us from evil, equips us with wisdom, tells us what He is like, and points us to Jesus.

But this morning God’s WORD is not being sown on the hearts of all those people you might know whose souls are hard-packed. It is being presented to you.

Are you listening? Is there a hardness about you when you are presented with God’s WORD?

There have been times when the soil of my soul has been pretty pavement-like. I haven’t wanted to hear what the WORD said to me about being a husband and a father. I haven’t always wanted to hear what God had to say about forgiveness.

Maybe that’s you right now. And if your heart is as hard as a stone this morning, but you long for receptivity, there is hope for you! And I promise that I’ll point you to that hope before we’re through.

The first person in Jesus’ parable did not receive the WORD. It was passed to him, and it bounced off his hands.

The second and third characters in the parable do catch the ball. But they later fumble it away.

The first fumbler is described in agricultural terms in Mark 4:5.

¹³ Luke adds “*and was trampled under foot*” to Mark’s iteration of the story.

¹⁴ Jesus’ words demand that we accept the idea of a personal devil.

Fumbled Pass (received and then lost)

Rocky soil (vv. 5-6)

[Mark 4:5] “Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil.¹⁵ [6] And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.”

Not a lot of comment is needed here. What is in view is shallow soil. Most of us could go out into our backyards this afternoon, dig down, and find perfect illustrations of verse 5.

Shallow Soil Syndrome is very common in South Texas!

It is not so much soil that has rocks in it as it is soil that is only a few inches deep before you reach bedrock.

In such a medium, a plant germinates quickly and sprouts quickly, because the sun warms the soil quickly.

However, due to the shallow soil, the plant has no chance to develop a decent root system. When the sun shines on this plant, it scorches it and the plant dies.

Then, there is another fumbling soil.

Weedy soil (v. 7)

[Mark 4:7] “Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.”

In this part of the field, the soil may be dark, rich, full of organic material and humus, moist from recent rains. There is no problem with the makeup of this soil.

The problem is that this soil is crowded. There is competition for nutrients, moisture and space. The good seed and the bad seed fight for the soil’s resources.

Weeds, thorns, thistles, brambles and briars wage war with the grain. Jesus says that the thorns choke out the good seed.

My experience in backyard gardening leads me to say “AMEN” to Jesus’ comment. The weeds will win just about every time over tender, succulent, vegetables.

Who knows why! Maybe bad seed has more tenacity than good seed. But the Lord’s point is that if bad seed and good seed compete in the same space of the garden, the good seed will characteristically get choked out.

Again, in a closed-door session with His disciples (not the crowds) Jesus explains what the rocky and weedy soils represent. First, the rocky soil guy.

Rocky people (vv. 16-17)

[Mark 4:16] “In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; [17] and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away.”

This is the person who rejects the WORD, who fumbles the ball because the going gets tough.

He or she hears and receives the WORD for the good news it is. But, the seed of the WORD doesn’t take root deep. So, he is subject to wilting under pressure. She is temporary.

There is no earnestness, nothing solid about this person. Hardship, persecution or affliction comes and he falls away from the WORD.

The rocky person falls away because of difficulties. What a contrast to the weedy person! This guy falls away because of prosperity (or the hope for it)!

¹⁵ Matthew adds that these seeds immediately sprang up, that the sun was the cause of the plant’s withering, and that this plant had no root.

Weedy people (v. 18-19)

[Mark 4:18] “And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, [19] but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”

This guy hears the WORD. But, the busy-ness of life gets in the way and he neglects God’s message. He doesn’t give his undivided attention to the WORD.

The good seed of the WORD takes root and sends up a seedling that is choked out by **worries** and **riches** and the **desires for other things**.

This man or woman knows full well that what God has commanded is good, and that what He has promised is good. But the lures of this world keep reeling him in.

He’s running downfield, trying to keep the ball in tight, but he’s distracted by other things. And he is stripped of the ball (the WORD).

Lots of football players catch the ball only to fumble it somewhere downfield. And lots of Christians receive the WORD only to have the good seed of the Word choked out by either problems or by prosperity.

You probably know folks like this. People who used to walk with Jesus. Their witness was strong, their testimony vibrant. And then they encountered trials, illness, career setback or persecution of some sort and they lost interest in the WORD.

And you may know others who, when they were young, broke, and struggling had a passion for Christ that was unquenchable. They were always serving somewhere, were constantly talking about Jesus. Then, with increasing income came more stuff which added to their worries which distracted them from the WORD.

What a tragedy it is to see spiritual passion choked out by either the tough stuff of life or the stuff that makes life easier.

Does “fumbling the ball” picture where you are right now in your own spiritual life?

You have ceased to give due attention to the WORD. Distracted by any number of things - what observers would call “bad things” or by what observers might call “good things” - the things of God have dropped on your priority list to second, third, fourth - or farther.

Maybe that’s you right now. And if you have fumbled the Word and you long to be receptive again, there is hope for you! And I promise that I’ll point you to that hope before we’re through.

The final person in Jesus’ parable is of the kind of receiver Paul pictures when he writes to the Thessalonians. Agriculturally, this is the kind of soil that makes any farmer’s face beam.

Caught! (receives and scores) (v. 20)

Receptive soil (v. 8)

[Mark 4:8] “Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

The seed sown on good soil yields a good crop. This soil is not hard-packed, but is rich and deep. This soil is regularly weeded, mulched, watered and fertilized.

And when such soil is sowed with good seed, it generally yields a great crop.

Occasionally, I’ll enjoy a bumper crop of tomatoes or okra or squash or peppers in my home garden. I love to go out to the garden, pick a few plants, and then come back in with a bucket full of fresh produce. (I’m an unusually good gardener when San Antonio gets forty inches of rain...)

And this picture of a fruitful garden conjures up the mental image of living in such a way that we yield a great harvest for God. Or, as Jesus explains it to His disciples -

Receptive people (v. 20)

[Mark 4:20] “And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

Whether Jesus is speaking of evangelistic fruit bearing or the fruit of a God-honoring character is not clear - and probably not important. The point is that the life of this person is bringing God maximum glory. She's shining for Jesus. He's making a difference for the Lord.

And what is the difference between these people and the others we have seen in Mark 4? They hear and accept the WORD.

And that sounds remarkably similar to Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians - ***[1 Thessalonians 2:13] For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the WORD of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the WORD of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.***

I think here we find the reason why some Christians grow and others don't. The WORD is sown on each believer's heart. Some listen well. Others don't.

The ones who listen well, accepting the WORD for what it truly is, grow. Those who don't listen carefully, who treat the WORD just like every other word, stagnate, go backwards, drop the ball.

Today, if you have recognized yourself in any one of the first three pictures Jesus has painted for us today - hard-packed, rocky, weedy - there is a path to a fruitful life. It is the path of listening.

Jesus began this parable with the invitation, ***[Mark 4:3] “LISTEN to this!”***

And with that call He made clear that the real issue in bearing fruit for God is how we listen to the WORD.

The ear is the receptacle for God's truth.¹⁶ So, friend, how is your hearing today?

I have good news for everyone here today. Your hearing can become tuned to receive His WORD in such a way that you bear fruit for God.

Conclusion:

In the Old Testament, King David was aware of the need to listen to God's WORD with ears wide open. He guzzled God's WORD with outstretched ears.

And in Psalm 40, David used a brilliantly conceived metaphor to help us imagine how we can learn to listen to God's WORD for what it really is - not the word of man, but the WORD of God, which performs its work in us who believe.¹⁷

Psalm 40:6 says, ***“Ears Thou hast dug for me.”***

Most Bible translators don't render the sentence into English with these words, though. They mostly prefer to paraphrase at this point, presenting the meaning adequately, but, sadly, losing the metaphor.¹⁸

But, it is tragic to lose the metaphor in this instance. The Hebrew says that God has “dug” ears for David, making it possible for him to “hear” the Word of God for the WORD of God it is.

Imagine a human head with no ears. A “blockhead.” Eyes, nose, and mouth, but no ears.

¹⁶ In the Medieval church, the organ of conception in the Virgin birth was considered to have been Mary's ear.

¹⁷ The setting for Psalm 40 is that of Jews obeying God's commands, but without being penetrated by a sense of worship in the obedience. Something needs to be done to provide a means of penetration. So God “digs ears” into His people's heads.

¹⁸ RSV, ***“Thou has given me an open ear”***; NIV, ***“my ears you have pierced”***; NASB and KJV come closest, ***“Mine (MY, NASB) ears Thou has opened”***

Where ears are usually found there is only a smooth, impenetrable surface, granite bone covered with skin. God speaks, but there is no response.

How can there be a response? There are no ears!

David says that God has taken out a pick and shovel and has dug through the cranial granite, opening a passage that will give access to the interior depths, into the mind and into the heart.

Now that ears have been dug, David can obey Scripture's commands from the heart.¹⁹

Or, perhaps we are to picture, not a smooth expanse of skull, but something like wells that have been stopped up with noise.

Our ears are so clogged up that we can't hear God's WORD. Like Isaac who "dug again" the wells of Abraham that the Philistines had filled, God redigs human ears that have been trashed.

In order for us to access the life-changing power of the WORD in our own lives, we, too, must receive the truth of Scripture as the WORD of God. We must **hear** it as from God's own lips.

So -

- Have Scripture's truths not been making inroads into your life of late?
- Have the Bible's teachings not been making much of a difference in your attitudes?
- Have sermons and Sunday School lessons and personal Bible study times left you untouched and unchanged in such specific areas of your life as whole-hearted devotion to the Lord, the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit, sexuality, finances and speech patterns?

If that has been your experience, I would suggest that the problem is in the manner of your reception of what Scripture has to say. It is primarily because you have not been **listening** to the WORD of God for what it really is.

Both 1 Thessalonians 2:13 and the parable of the soils are united in telling us that the primary target of the WORD of God is the ear.

Jesus either speaks to pavement ears that can't receive His Word, or rocky ears into which no seed can sink roots, weedy ears in which no seed can mature, or good-soil ears in which all seed bears fruit.

Are you willing to ask God, today, to get out His shovel and dig ears for you? To unstop ears that no longer receive His Word as the life-changing Word it is?

I believe that God will be pleased to answer "Yes!" whenever we sincerely ask Him to allow us to hear His WORD truly.

Imagine if each of us at Northwest were receiving the WORD for what it really is - not a word like any other word, but the WORD of GOD!

If that were to happen, we would receive the WORD He is throwing our way. There'd be no fumbling. We'd each make progress and our team/church would score, experiencing even more of the life-changing power of that WORD as we believe.

¹⁹In medieval times, the common idea was that the organ of conception for Mary was the ear.