

**Listen!**  
**Sermon by Rev. J. Hugh Odhner**

Lessons: Isaiah 2:3; Psalm 119:64-68  
Mark 3:7-10; 4:1-9  
Doctrine of Life 90

*“And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. Then He taught them many things by parables and said to them in His teaching: ‘Listen!’”*  
(Mark 4:1-2)

The Lord taught in many places. He taught in synagogues, he taught in the Temple, he taught in people's houses, he taught on mountains, he taught by the sea, and here we have a description of the Lord teaching while sitting in a boat just off shore, with a crowd of people on land facing the him. When you think of it, this is a very unusual situation in which to be teaching – sitting on a boat, most likely being rocked by waves, and speaking to a large crowd of people on the shore. One may wonder how such a multitude of people could all have heard him? We may also wonder why he chose to teach people from a boat on the sea?

Now that question appears to be answered when the gospel of Mark tells us, " Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude ... followed Him, ... a great multitude, when they heard how many things He was doing, came to Him. So He told His disciples that a small boat should be kept ready for Him because of the multitude, lest they should crush Him." (Mark 3:7-9)

But that is not the whole answer. Everything the Lord did had a spiritual reason, not just a natural reason. There was always a deeper meaning to what the Lord did, where He did it, and how He did it. His actions and speech were always representative of and corresponded to deeper spiritual meanings and realities. So also in the present case. If we look at some of the meanings of the sea, from which the Lord was speaking, and of the land, on which the crowd was standing, we can get a glimpse into the spiritual situation or state that this

passage is speaking about. The sea is of course made up of water, and water represents truth. It follows that a sea signifies a collection of spiritual and natural truths, as well as truths of doctrine from the Word. (AC 28, AE 445) Land signifies the church or where the church is. It also means what is their essence, namely love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor, for it is upon these that the church depends. (AE 730:39, AC 2571) The boat, in which the Lord was sitting, has a similar signification to a ship. Concerning this representation we read:

*'Ships' signify the cognitions of good and truth out of the Word serviceable for uses of life. ... for the doctrine of the Church is derived from them, and a life in accordance with it. 'Ships' signify those cognitions because they are containers, and in many places in the Word the thing containing is taken for the content. (AR 406)*

So, by the Lord, out on the boat on the sea, speaking to the crowd who are on the land, we have a representation of the Lord teaching truths to those who are in the church, especially to those who are in some love to the Lord and some charity towards the neighbor for they are the ones receptive to the truths that the Lord teaches. The Lord is teaching truths that are necessary and useful for spiritual life. When we look at the story this way, we can see that it applies to us. We are part of that crowd on the land that the Lord is teaching. But are we understanding what the Lord is teaching us?

The gospel says that the Lord taught the crowd many things by parables. In this case He teaches the parable of the sower. But notice how the Lord begins his teaching. He says, "**Listen!** Behold, a sower went out to sow." He said this in the imperative tense, that is, as a command. He was telling the people, and us, "Pay Attention! This is important!" In fact this parable is so important, that he later explains it to us. The Lord said:

*The sower sows the Word.*

*And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.*

*These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.*

*Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.*

*But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."*

(Mark 4:13-20)

We can understand this explanation of the parable. This does not mean that the parable does not have more interior levels of meaning. It does. However, we can understand and apply the explanation of this parable as given in the gospel of Mark. We can often think of people who fit the different classifications that are mentioned in the parable. And if we are willing, we can even see its application to ourselves.

Let us take just one application from the parable of the sower. Can we think of times when we have initially heard the Word with gladness, but then stumbled when temptation comes or fear of persecution or criticism arises? Some New Church beliefs and teachings are not politically correct or socially acceptable in our modern Western culture. Some New Church beliefs and teachings are outside the mainstream of commonly accepted religious beliefs. How have we handled such times? Have we modified our beliefs in order to conform to those in the world -- to avoid criticism or to avoid being thought of as different or out of the mainstream?

Now this is not to say that we should never modify what we believe. When a challenge arises to our belief system, it may be a good time for us to examine that belief system, or more properly re-examine our personal belief system. When doing this we need to go back to the Word and the church's doctrine. What does the Word really say about a topic? Have we made assumptions about what the Word teaches based upon our culture, education, and upbringing? In the New Church we are actually encouraged to examine our beliefs. New Jerusalem Its Heavenly Doctrine says:

*"They who are from the Church, or in whom the Church is ... examine from the Word whether the doctrinal teachings of the Church in which they were born are true. Otherwise the truth possessed by everyone would be from another and from his native soil." (NJHD 246, AC 6047)*

This examination of our personal belief system, that is of our personal individual doctrine, needs to be done out of an affection for the truth for the

sake of the truth itself. It needs to be based upon the Lord's Word as best as we can understand it, praying to the Lord for enlightenment and understanding. It should not have as its motivation a desire to conform to the beliefs of the world around us, but rather a desire to conform to the Lord's teachings, together with a desire to live according to those teachings.

Think again of that image of the Lord speaking to the crowd from a boat. They had seen him perform miracles, cast out demons, and heard him preach. And they were asking themselves, "*saying, "What is this? What new teaching (or doctrine) is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."* (Mark 1:27) Now here He was, teaching more new truths to the people, more teachings that they had never heard before. And we are part of that crowd. The Lord in the boat is talking to us.

As we listen to Him teach the parable of the sower, we can sense the Lord inviting us to meditate upon it. Where do we fit in the parable? How can we apply it to our lives? As we reflect upon what the Lord is saying, we can hear Him now asking us to examine how we treat the seeds of truth that He has been sowing. We can ask ourselves what we have been doing with the Lord's teachings. Have we been behaving like *the wayside, the stony ground, among the thorns, or the good ground?*

At the beginning of the parable the Lord is telling the crowd "**Listen!**" He is telling us likewise "**Listen!**" And at the end of the parable He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Mark 4:9) He is saying that to us also. It is as if the Lord is asking us, "Did you listen?" "Did you hear me?"

Amen.