

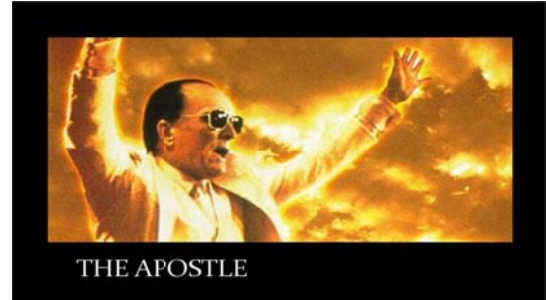
## “Seeing is Not Believing”

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Matthew 13:1-3a, 10-13, 18-23 = the parable of the sower

**S**onny Dewey is the minister portrayed by Robert Duvall in the movie *The Apostle*. He looks to be every inch the capable and successful pastor of a large and growing congregation.



Sonny Dewey strikes us for all the world like someone who carefully and prayerfully talks to God. He never stops talking: “Praise the Lord” and “Thank ya, Jesus” punctuates almost every other line he speaks. He appears constantly in prayer.

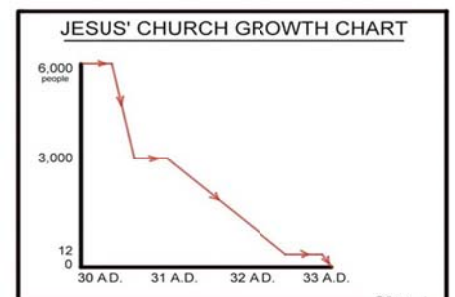
Yet he is a womanizer, and has a big problem with anger. In a fit of rage, Sonny strikes the youth pastor with a baseball bat right in the middle of a church baseball game. The young man dies. Sonny is a murderer. Like Jacob of old, he skips town ahead of the law.



One wonders in talking to God all the time if Sonny is actually listening. It seems he is talking past God rather than talking with God. He’s a prime example of what Jesus says about the crowds of followers: **“hearing but they do not listen.”** Jesus is right of course: “hearing is not necessarily listening.”

**A**nd seeing is not necessarily believing. Yes there is that old adage “seeing is believing” but it is apparently not true in the context of today’s parable.

A lot of people had witnessed Jesus healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, raising Lazarus from the dead, feeding the multitudes and changing water into wine. Even larger groups had heard Jesus teaching God’s plan ~ thousands heard the Sermon on the Mount. Yet after all that, only a tiny portion translate what they’ve seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears into actual faith in the living God.





Jesus is so right in quoting the great prophet Isaiah: *“seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”* If anyone can see the awesome power of God first hand and yet fail to respond, then seeing is not believing. Instead it is much more like us to say about what we see Jesus doing: “I cannot believe my eyes, so I won’t!”

Even the most dedicated can miss the mark. Even careful preachers and devoted Bible teachers can miss the mark. Jesus was right when he said *“seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”*

**A**pproaching the parable of the Sower the first question to ask is who is the prime actor, the sower? Who sows the seeds, us or God? Clearly God is the sower.<sup>1</sup>

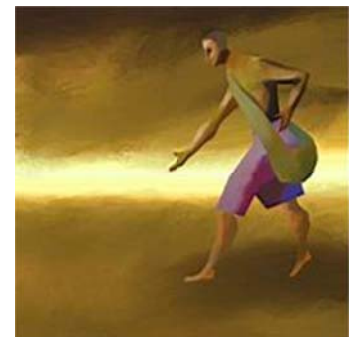
First and foremost Jesus says the indiscriminate sower is how God acts. We don’t normally sow seeds that way. Pragmatic human farmers give a great deal of attention to finding the fertile places, tilling, fertilizing and weeding.



God works differently, spreading God’s kingdom everywhere without discrimination. This is precisely how God wants us to do it. If we want to be part of God’s story, we don’t just sow God’s realm in the places we deem as the most likely to flourish. God’s way is to ‘cast our bread on the

water’ and sow the seeds everywhere we can.

**J**esus in this parable is definite ~ we are to spread the Gospel without discrimination. We are to share God’s Word far and wide and to throw seed everywhere without being overly analytic. We are not to say “Well, that doesn’t look like fertile ground. I’m not putting any of my precious seeds there.”

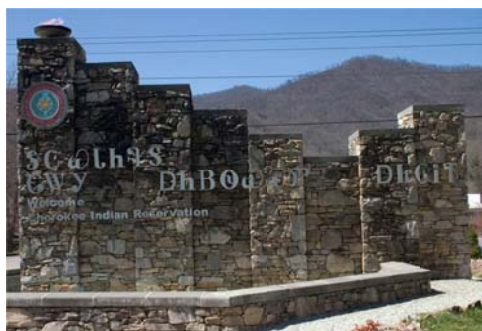


If we only looked for the most fertile ground, the Gospel would likely never have spread beyond Palestine. Over and over we have seen the

supposed least fertile ground in our human judgment is where the Gospel bears the greatest harvest.

Yes, it is so easy to miss God's point: *"seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."* We know when we come to Scripture it is better to listen, perceive and wait for God's meaning; better that than to fill Scripture with our own human meaning. We know that, but to really listen, to really perceive, these are the most difficult ~ and at the same time the most needed.

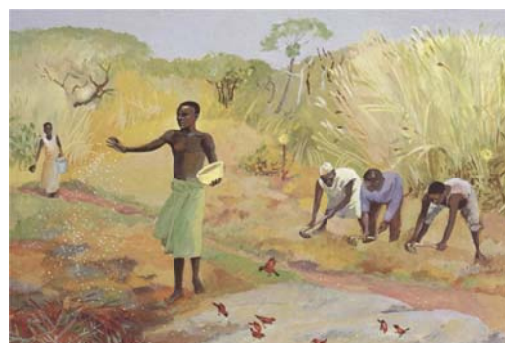
**L**istening with integrity for God's Word? How is it possible to hear but fail to listen? Isn't listening just hearing something.



Red Owl, a Cherokee storyteller can help us here. He has observed that whites commonly don't dialogue, rather we routinely talk past each other, and he's right. We can do this with God as well. Red Owl says when he is home on his reservation in Georgia, there is a strong culture of listening. The people there don't talk over each other. They listen carefully without letting their minds run to how they are going to respond. They pause and process. Then and only then they respond.

Red Owl's grandmother says this in a marvelous way: "Why do you think the creator gave Grandmother two ears and two eyes but only one mouth?" Why do you think? "Because there is more medicine in understanding than in being understood." A wise woman indeed!

**H**ere then is a solution to Jesus' paradox of *"seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen."* With God there is more medicine in understanding than in thinking we can make ourselves understood. God indeed already knows us so much better than we know ourselves. In our walk with the LORD there is more medicine in listening than there is in all our clever explanations and interpretations of God's words.

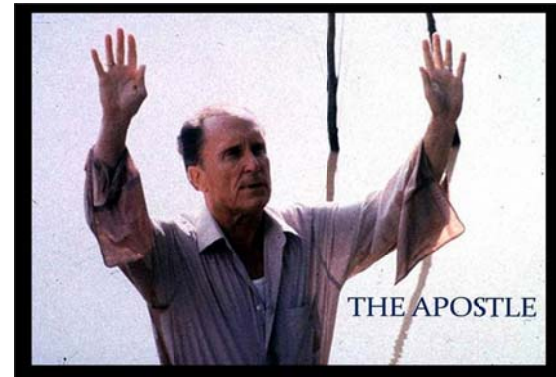


That is why we start our worship with praise and self-examination. As I often say, "being honest with God and ourselves." God already knows us,

knows everything about us, everything we have done for the good and also what we have done which diminishes us.

So why do we say “honest with God and ourselves” since God is already more than aware. The question is not God’s awareness of us but our awareness of God. As usual we get everything backwards. God is not asking us “have you seen?” but “have you perceived?” Not “have you heard?” but “have you listened?” God gave us two eyes, two ears but only one mouth for a solid reason.

**L**et us return to the movie *The Apostle*. Sonny Dewey hiding from the law baptizes himself in a stagnant river ~ rechristens himself the “Apostle E.F.” Newly reborn he tries to start a new life and eventually even a new congregation. He begins to talk less at God and listens more to God and others, and slowly he begins to experience a transformation in his life. He begins to lose his anger. God grants him a kind of second sight. He knows things before they happen.



Even Sonny Dewey this weak, broken vessel can be molded and used by God. God utilizes him to build a new congregation, this time build on a firm foundation with spiritual integrity. He touches souls with healing power. God uses Sonny to turn a hate attack in worship into a conversion.

Sonny knows precisely when the police will arrive to arrest him. He surrenders meek and mild. His life has been truly transformed by the power of the Spirit.

If God can do this with a murderer, maybe God can do something like this with us, even us. What must we do to be fully and truly receptive to God? Let us perceive and not just see ~ listen and not just hear. Then the disciples’ blessing will be ours as well:

**“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.” [Matthew 13:16]**

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon *Pulpit Resource* July 13, 2008, p12