

Matthew 13

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[0 : 00] So, today we have a passage on the sower, which is a well-known passage for many. And because Aberdeenshire is full of good farmers, I'm sure there's plenty here who know it even better than me. But I am from the Isle of Lewis, and being a good islander, I have plenty of gardening stories. And I could have used them to help us illustrate on how to grow a great crop of potatoes or any other number of random things. But if you want that, you can come speak to me later.

But I don't think we lack to understand the scattering of seeds and the growing of plants. And neither did the people listening to Jesus. But like them, we need an answer to why is Jesus speaking in this parable? And a parable is just using everyday things to convey a spiritual truth. But there are two questions that we have. Why does it appear that Jesus is not just speaking plainly? We also need an answer to what does this parable mean? And if I was going to use an illustration, it wouldn't be about farming. I'd probably use something for my niece, and she's now four.

But back when she was two, and she was just learning words, she had four main responses. Partly because she inherited a strong will from her father, but he's now reaping the benefits.

But our four main responses were, there was the classic straight, no. You ask her to do something, no. Okay, well, not really much getting around that. The next favorite one she had was soon.

[1 : 47] I don't know where she learned it, but she would just say soon. Well, could you pick that up, Flora? Soon. Well, for all the hope that soon may come, soon doesn't often happen. And the third, she'll say yes, and you think, wonderful. But then she would see something shiny or something tasty, and soon it would be forgotten. But then there was the final one, the fourth one, where she'd say, yes, and do it. That was more rare, but she was two. You can expect that.

But for us, there's all the same similarities, and Jesus would say there'd be similarities with the way that people, including us, respond to the good news of Jesus. And today, we're going to look at these same or similar four responses to the good news. The key point here is that Jesus is teaching the importance of listening and hearing the Word of God, and the blessing that comes from receiving and hearing this Word. And this morning, we just have two simple points. Why does Jesus speak in parables, and what does this parable mean for us? And our first point, why is Jesus speaking in a parable? Why doesn't He just speak simply, just tell them what He means? Why use a story?

But I would warn us that even if you do know this parable, even if you are a professional farmer and know everything there is to know about seeds, we need to listen, because in verse 9, Jesus says, He who has ears, let him hear. And Jesus' own disciples come to Him after verses 1 to 9 and ask Him, in verse 10, why do you speak to them in parables? Because the disciples are listening to Jesus speak.

They're struggling to understand, but see that the people listening just don't get it. Yeah. The answer Jesus has is a bit of a shock. It's a bit of a shock to them, and might even be a shock to you.

He says that He speaks like this in terms of fulfilled prophecy. The very fact that they do not understand what Jesus is saying, they do not hear it or see it, has long been promised by God. Jesus says in verse 13, this is why I speak to them in parables. Though seeing they do not see, though hearing they do not hear or understand. And then in verse 14, in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. And Jesus points them back to the quote that He takes them from. Is it from Isaiah chapter 6?

[4 : 44] And Isaiah was a man who was called by God. They go and speak to the people of God on His behalf. And this is a people who, as you read through the Old Testament, the part of the Bible that is before Jesus, who repeatedly do not listen to God. They forget what He has said, or they just quite happily choose to ignore Him. And as Isaiah is sent out, he's told by God that the people he

goes to speak to will not listen to Him. He says, you will keep speaking to them, and they will keep not hearing you. And though there were some people who were faithful to God for the most part, most would not listen. And they cannot hear because it's hidden from them, because they've shut their eyes. And in a few verses we read, I don't know if you noticed the number of times the word eyes, ears, and heart are repeated. And it's repetition because this emphasizes the problem. See, they have a habit of hearing and seeing without appreciating the significance of what they have heard. It says because their hearts have become calloused or hard or dull, they don't allow it in. In verse 15, we see their hearts, which is the inner thinking, what their inner being, their feeling, is described as having this outer layer that has become hard.

They're sluggish. They're unable to have the word of God come into their heart. Their ears are described as barely being able to hear, like having cotton wool stuck in their ears. And then we see again in verse 15, it says they have closed their eyes. It's almost a state worse. It's further from having a difficulty of hearing or a hard heart. They're actively closing their eyes. They're choosing not to hear. And we see this. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn.

These people have made up their minds. And they're so set in their ways that when they hear the word of God come, and they begin to think about it, when it begins to challenge them to new ways of thinking, to challenging their set ways of doing things, they simply close themselves off to it because they do not want to hear and do not want to understand. This is a picture of a child who puts their fingers in their ears, closes their eyes, and says, I'm not listening over and over again.

[7 : 42] And this quote from Isaiah closes with what God had wanted to give them, what was offering to those who would listen, who would turn to Him from their path of rejecting His message.

And if they had, God says, I would have healed them. God's desire is that they would have turned and been healed to receive the full blessings of what He offers them, what we read about in Isaiah 55, the blessings of abundance and God's goodness being showered over them. But in their rebellion and their refusal to listen to God, they say, I don't want that. They don't want to turn and be healed.

So they cannot and do not want to receive from God. They do not want to hear. And the more they hear the message, the more it sets them in their way.

And this is what you see throughout the whole of the Old Testament. God repeatedly comes to them and speaks to them. And they keep turning from them. They keep rejecting Him.

And even though God sends them another messenger and He sends them Isaiah, they still reject it. But Isaiah also promises something else.

[9 : 06] Isaiah speaks about later. He speaks about someone who would come. God would send a messenger who would be different. Someone who would come and change these hearts, these hard hearts.

Who would take the punishment of these rebellious people. But He also promised that this messenger would be rejected. He would appear weak and He would suffer. And so this crowd does not hear.

This crowd that are listening to Jesus, they do not hear as Isaiah promised. They do not hear Jesus' message. And if we turn back to our passage, we see in verse 16 that God does open the ears of the disciples.

They do hear. God makes them able to hear. And He says again in verse 11, To you, the disciples, it's been given. Jesus says their eyes have been opened to see the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

To understand the parables. Because God wants to make it known. And secrets or mystery just highlights that something is hidden.

[10 : 21] It couldn't have been figured out on their own. And Jesus says that if these people had not been made alive to know these truths, they would not understand.

They might hear great stories or truth about planting crops. But that's all they will go home with. It's not anything special about these disciples that helps them to hear.

But true to the fact that it's a gift. That God wants and chooses to reveal Himself. And in verse 16 and 17, Jesus tells the disciples that He is the one that the prophets of the Old Testament all pointed forward to.

They saw some of what was hidden. But now it is revealed. He says that people long to see this day. Long to hear this message.

And now it's been revealed. Jesus is saying He is the one that Isaiah and all these other prophets spoke about. The one that was promised to come and speak to people of God.

[11 : 34] To turn the hearts of the people. And so we turn our second point. What does this parable mean for us?

How are we to interpret this? I mean, if you listen to this parable, maybe if you heard it in Sunday school, you might think, well, we just need to be good soil.

We just need to try really hard and be good soil. You might think it's something that we need to do. Well, fortunately not.

Unfortunately, we don't have to try hard to figure out this parable because Jesus explains it to us. The expression given here is the disciples, to help them understand, is that whoever comes to Jesus and wants to learn, whoever comes to Him and says, speak to me, will receive more from Jesus, who will get abundantly from Him.

Verse 18, Jesus tells it to His disciples, He says, listen then to what the parable of the sower means. He tells them, this is for you. That though the parable might conceal truth from those who do not want to hear from God, it is also here to reveal God's truth to those who will listen.

[13 : 00] It might go over the heads of Jesus' enemies or those who are careless, but to those who say, God, speak to me, will hear.

And He walks through these four soils, which are four possible responses to the word of the kingdom. And He begins first in verse 19 with anyone who hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, which is, the seed of the word is scattered.

He says, Jesus begins with this, careless heeder. The person hears what is said, they hear the words that Jesus spoke, they hear the word of the kingdom, but they do not understand it.

And this is someone who hears the good news about Jesus, knows there's something important there, but actively chooses not to act upon it. Someone who comes into a Sunday service, they hear something there, they think there might be something more, and they think, hmm, maybe I'll deal with it later.

Or they choose just to not respond, not to press it further. And then we hear that when they do think about it or do want to come later, that we hear that the devil or the evil one, as it's called here, becomes active.

[14 : 23] So that as the word of God is spoken, as the message goes out of God's good news, so this person who is careless loses it.

This is the rocky ground that it comes and picks away what is sown. They're not hostile to the message. They know there's something there. But since they do not act upon it, soon what was heard is lost.

It's soon forgotten. And it's easy to find yourself interested in Christian things, even moved for a moment, and you think, maybe I should, I'll think about this later, but fail to do anything about it. And not pursuing it quickly results in a total loss. It's quickly heard and forgotten. And the next soil we hear about is someone who, he hears this, in verse 20, on the rocky ground, Jesus says, he stands for the person who receives the word, and they're immediately happy.

They hear this good news, and they think, wonderful. Wonderful. But unfortunately, as we see, this enthusiasm fades. There's little soil here.

[15 : 38] The ground is rocky, so roots can't develop. And in the hot Middle Eastern sun, a plant without roots will soon wither and die.

And Jesus explains that he's referring to the time of testing that will come to everyone who follows him. Sooner or later, the trials and the pressures of this world will mount.

But even more so, we see that the persecution comes because of the word. There's no easy way for those who want to be part of his kingdom. When trouble of this kind comes, people need roots. Not just an initial joy, they need something that will hold them fast. Something that will hold you when the wash of the world comes upon you, when the waves of this life threaten to overwhelm you.

But yet, for these people, without roots, there's little to stand upon. They take offense. They start to think that coming to follow Jesus is something of a trap.

[16:51] The joy was great when I walked in, but if it means persecution, if it means people are going to speak badly, I don't want anything to do with this. We then come to this third soil.

We see that these plants do take root. They have depth of soil, and they begin to grow well. But there's something else. There's something else that's wrong here. There's thorns that spring up. They choke out the life. Verse 22, this one who's sown among the thorns. There's someone who really listens to the Word. They hear it.

But with all the attention that they give to the Word, they're also caught up in the affairs of this world. Jesus gives us two things that preoccupy this hearer.

The worry of the world. The first one is the everyday things of life, the worries that come upon us all. The things that consume our days, the kids, the chores, the cooking, the job, the meeting people, the emails, the texts.

[17:54] It's something we can all understand. There's always more to do. Our to-do lists and our minds are overflowing. And it's possible to be so taken up with all the threats and the opportunities of this life that when we receive the Word of God doesn't get the attention it needs.

It says it chokes out the Word. And our life can only hold so many things. And he's referring to a life that is so full of worry there is no room for attention to God's Word.

It's not to say that cares of this world are wrong. But they take up our time and they consume us.

And I see this myself in the most simplest of ways. I wake up in the morning.

I check my texts. I check my diary, especially when it's on the fridge. And then I check the news.

And I'm so overwhelmed by what I face in this day. I'm so overwhelmed by all I have to do and forgot to do yesterday.

I feel overwhelmed. I forget God in that moment. But if I had stopped and considered who God is, if I considered all that God was able to do and His care for me and His love for me and the promises that were available, well then, all these worries of this world wouldn't have begun to overwhelm me.

[19:24] I understand that He has it in control. And then Jesus continues on to another one of the problems we all face. As Jesus puts it, the deceitfulness of riches, the worries about money.

And to some people, I know I've been tempted to think myself that if I just had money, then I wouldn't have any worries. If only I was just able to step in, win the lottery, tomorrow would be easy, right?

Well, the problem is money comes with its own problems. The first being that someone's always happy to liberate it off you. Someone's always happy to take some of that for themselves. But then there's also all the things that you need to buy and looking after it and it has problems.

There's always a new TV, a new car. Someone's always happy to scratch it at the supermarket.

However much you get, how much is enough? And we can get caught in a treadmill or in pursuit of this wealth that will give us security.

And these plants, they were sturdy. These plants had roots. They'd listen to the Word. But all these other things come in and choke out that blessing of knowing God.

[20:46] They make competition for hearing from God. Because a little weed is easy to pull out. But if you let that take root, soon you'll have thorn bushes everywhere.

And finally, we come to the seed that fell on the good ground. This is good seed going into good ground and it bears a good crop. We're told it multiplies abundantly all the way from a hundred times to thirty times.

It's a picture of a crop that is abundant and it's continual. It keeps producing. See, this isn't a careless person.

This isn't someone who's distracted. This is someone who receives. And the emphasis on this final soil is placed on the person who receives rather than the seed themselves.

Jesus invites his hearers to think through what he has said. It's a responsibility that can be overlooked all too easily. You might have heard a hundred sermons.

[21:54] You might have read many pages of the Bible or had many people talk to you about Jesus. But there's responsibility in all of us not to take it lightly and to act upon what we hear.

We might hear great words like repent and believe. They're serious words and they can be all too easy to dust off. To walk out of church and throw that over your shoulder until you walk back in the next time.

But what we see is the person who seeks to listen, the person who seeks to understand and who comes to Jesus to receive, God says they'll bear fruit.

And all will bear fruit. There's an effect on the person's life. Someone who hears and receives this word, it comes in and causes new life to grow.

Fruit will be there. And it's an abundant, a hundredfold, thirtyfold. It isn't a point of how much, but just that it is growing and overflowing.

[23 : 06] And the truth here is that for all of us, our lives might reflect the first three soils at various stages, even as people who know Jesus. There might be times where we just do not want to listen to God.

There might be times where the cares of this life take over. There might be times where all of us do not give attention to what we hear.

but we must come back. We must come back to listen, to contemplate, to hear, and to receive from God.

Because God delights to reveal Himself to us. God delights to speak to all of us and doesn't want any of us to close ourselves off to Him. Even as we might delight to keep Him at a distance.

because when it comes down to it, there is only two kinds of soil. There's only two kinds of people. One that hears, one that holds fast to what they've heard, and who bears fruit, and someone who will ultimately reject Jesus.

[24 : 23] We are not people who will be able to seek one, seek both.

We can't have all the things of this world or the worries and Jesus. Ultimately, we have to seek Him or something else.

And then, for those who receive, there's fruit that will be bare out in our lives. we're not promised that this will be Christians, people becoming Christians as we speak to them, but that we will be people who reflect God.

We will be people who speak these words to other people. That we will be a church that proclaims this word, and there'll be some who receive it.

There'll be some who come and want more and will receive more. There'll be some who come and they might seem interested for a while, and sadly turn away.

[25 : 27] But we are called to be people who proclaim and have confidence that it is God who saves, that as we speak, God is at work in the people who listen.

when God comes to you, you can be like my niece and say no, you can say maybe, you can say soon, or you can say, God, speak to me.

God, as you open your Bible in a morning, say, God, I want to hear from you and pursue that voice above all the other ones, as loud as they may be in your life, all the distractions and everything else that is trying to fight for your time.

God will speak. God will speak. God will speak. And if we doubt how this fruit is bearing out in our lives, if we doubt this fruit that we're bearing, look back to Isaiah.

He was promised that he would go out and he would speak and almost no one would respond.

Look at Jesus, the crowd that he speaks to, even the ones who are excited by him, all too soon will be crying, and crucify him.

[26 : 48] Even his disciples who follow close will reject him for a time. Jesus didn't look impressive, nor will any of us who are part of his kingdom.

But we will still bear fruit, even if we don't see it. And if you're not a Christian, I am glad that you're here this morning, and I'm glad that you're still listening. And I would say to you, if you do not understand yet who Jesus is, ask him.

Or come speak to any of the people here who do know him, who would be happy to speak with you, happy to pray with you, and happy to read the Bible with you. God will delight to reveal himself to you.

So I would ask, let us come to God and ask for his help, as we all would like to receive from him.

God, we come to you because our hearts are full, our minds are full, our worries are full, and this world feels like it will overwhelm us.

But Lord, we come that you would open our eyes, open our ears, and help us to see, to hear, and to receive from you.

[28 : 10] Lord, forgive us for the times where we turn away from you. Lord, help us to turn and receive, to turn and be healed. Lord, we pray that no one here today would leave rejecting you, that we would all come and receive.

Lord, we pray that we wouldn't forget your word as we leave. Lord, that you would help it to be constantly in our minds. And Lord, we pray that we would all see that your word reveals who you are, how you love us, and all that you offer us.

Forgiveness of relationship and new life in you. So help us this morning. Help us in the midst of tiredness. Help us in the midst of pain and loss and worry to know that you are good and you love us.

In Jesus' name. Amen. We're now going to sing again as we close. We're going to sing, I heard the voice of Jesus say.

So please, if you're able, stand as we begin. Amen.