

Why So Slow?

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[0 : 00] These are the words of the Lord Jesus, the words of the living God. Please keep them open before you, and we'll consider them together. And as we do that, let's pray. Lord Jesus, you said heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Lord, we thank you that what we have just read is eternal truth. Words that last forever. And so we pray, Lord, that you would speak them tonight to us so that they would be imprinted on our hearts and minds, so that they would transform our lives.

And Lord, so that they would make us fit and ready to live fully in your kingdom and for your kingdom in this world that is passing away for a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

This we pray in your name. Amen. Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?

That was the question that John the Baptist asked back at the beginning of our section, back in chapter 11, verse 3. Not being funny, Jesus, but is this really what it looks like when God's kingdom breaks into the world?

[1 : 27] One king, 12 committed followers, a crowd that has not been won over, and some very powerful people who want you dead.

Is that really what it looks like when God's kingdom comes? Is this, are you really what we've been waiting for all this time? Or should we be looking for someone a bit more, how to put it, delicately? Effective? Powerful? Kingly? I wonder what you'd say if someone asked you that question tonight. You say God's kingdom has come. Well, where is it? When the Romans conquered Britain in the first century, no one wondered, has the Roman Empire really come?

Right? Life changed. Everything, roads, money, language, changed. When Jesus came from heaven, it was not obvious that a conquest had begun, that we had a new king.

[2 : 39] What's really changed? Life seems to rumble on around us, doesn't it? People are born, live, and die, and God's kingdom does not interfere with their lives, almost as if it's not really there.

So has the kingdom of heaven come, or should we be looking for something or someone else?

Now, perhaps that question has never crossed your mind, but I reckon it has, even if you've not put it quite like that, even in a vague sense of discouragement, disappointment in the Christian life.

Matthew thinks, brothers and sisters, it's an important enough question, that he's given us chapters 11 and 12 to show us in chapter 13 for Jesus to teach us the truth about the kingdom.

If tonight you're still on the fence about whether Jesus is the one who's brought God's good and loving rule into the world, it helps to know, doesn't it, that Jesus takes that question very seriously.

You can take time to ask him, and he will take time to talk you through it. He sits down with us to teach us tonight, and he invites you, come to me and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

[4 : 03] If you're on the fence tonight, he's really glad you're here. But it's as important, if not more important, that we know, I think, how to handle this question as Christians, because if we're not fully convinced that God's kingdom is coming in the world through the person and work of Jesus, then we're not going to be fully compelled to live for him and serve him in our lives.

Chapters 11 and 12 have reflected, haven't they, the confusion and conflict we see around us. One by one, Jesus has been setting the world the right way up, hasn't he? He's healing people, he's plundering the devil's kingdom.

But that's not enough for the crowds. Nothing he seems to do seems to please them. And it doesn't cut it with the Pharisees.

You just can't stand seeing Jesus bring God's good and loving rule to bear on people's lives. Just look back, flick back a minute to 12, verse 13 and 14. Right, there's a man with a withered, a deformed hand.

Jesus said to the man, stretch out your hand. And the man stretched it out. And it was restored healthy like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him.

[5 : 22] How do you destroy him? There it is. God's kingdom is definitely coming through King Jesus, but not without real battle.

Opposition, obstacles, obstruction. Friends, how do we keep going and keep sowing as Christians in a world where God's kingdom seems to come in patches?

It fits and starts with setbacks and disappointments and ever, ever, ever so slowly. Well, expectations are absolutely everything.

We constantly bring our own agenda to Jesus, don't we? And say, Lord, wouldn't this be a much better strategy? Shouldn't this be what you're about and what you do? Well, instead, friends, tonight, King Jesus calls us to come to him and learn from him.

We need the king to teach us the nature of his kingdom and how it comes, which is exactly what he sits down to teach us now in chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel, the third of the five big blocks of teaching in Matthew.

[6 : 36] Eight parables or stories all about God's kingdom. And in verse 3, it says he told them many things in parables. So there's more than one lesson.

Stay tuned for the next few weeks to get the full story. But he begins with a parable that gives us a kind of drone footage of the kingdom from way up high. And then he explains to us why it is that his word seems to have such varied and often disappointing results.

And so the first angle that Jesus gives us on his coming kingdom is that his word is designed to test our hearts, to show us that we need him to understand his word.

Now, the parable of the sower is one of Jesus' best-known soundbites, isn't it? It's a very simple story about someone planting seeds in a field. Back in the day, that was done by hand.

Someone walked up and down a field and they chucked the seeds about the sower. And Jesus' story is about what happens to the seeds that the sower sows.

[7 : 49] Some seeds fall on the path where the soil is all kind of trodden down. Some seeds fall on rocky ground where the soil is shallow. Some seeds fall in thorns and in the soil with weeds in it.

And some seed falls in good soil. Notice that he's not kind of placing them there, putting them there. That's just where they fall. And those four different soils that the seeds fall into produce four different results, don't they?

What are they? No growth, temporary growth, stunted growth, and full growth.

And the farmers among you could tell us that only one of those outcomes is actually positive. You sow seeds in the hope of a harvest, don't you? So Jesus' listeners know that only the good soil has done what the sower wanted with the seeds.

Same seeds, same sower, different soils, different results. So get ready for the application.

[8 : 58] Ready? Verse 9. He who has ears, let him hear. Amen. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Jesus finishes the story, drops the mic, and walks off stage. Just a simple story, right? Or is it? The crowds are there on the beach. In fact, it's so crowded, Jesus has to get into a boat on the water to give him enough space to speak. They're hanging off his every word, and this is what he tells them.

A story about a field. And instead of an explanation, he just says, if you've got ears, then hear it. Right? Put yourself on that beach.

If that was the sermon that you got tonight, what would you think? Right? Wouldn't you turn to the person next to you and say, what? What? Do you get that?

[9 : 53] I don't get that. Seeds in a field. I was expecting something more. Sermon on the Mount. Right? Half an hour of solid truth from God's word, and he's just given us a story about someone chucking seeds into different types of soil.

But perhaps some of you would give a knowing, a wise smile and say, well, that's lost on most people. Only a few wise, insightful people will really get that here.

Perhaps some of you would be frantically kind of flicking through the pages of your Bible, trying to work out what obscure Old Testament reference there was, or what detail of life in first century Galilee we needed to unbox the secrets of this story.

Perhaps some of you would just shrug and say, just had an off night. Just go home, pack my lunch, get ready for tomorrow. Forget all about it. And perhaps some of you would come up to me afterwards and say, what was that about?

What are you doing? What's going on? Why did you preach that story? Now, I don't know this for sure, but I think all of those things are happening at the end of verse 9.

[11:08] We're not told that outright, but we do know what Jesus makes of the different responses he gets to his parable. 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. The crowds do not get him or his words.

It's all there to see and hear, but they do not see or hear it. And he's going to go on to say, not only that, but they don't get it in different ways, like the different soils.

So is Jesus failing then as God's king? He's speaking, right? But he's not winning the crowds over. Or what's wrong with his words? Is he saying the wrong things?

Has he got a bad pack of seeds? Or could it be possible that he has a different purpose in speaking to the crowds? Just have a look at why Jesus says he spoke to them in parables, verse 13.

[12:18] Have a look. 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.

In their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says, you will indeed hear, but never understand. You will indeed see, but never perceive. You've probably heard it taught that Jesus told parables to help people understand God's kingdom.

He took difficult truths and he wrapped them in easy-to-understand stories. Stories about a farm and seeds and fishing and bread.

And that's partly true. But it misses the point. Right? These people knew what a farm was. They did. But they didn't understand God's kingdom.

And Jesus knew his stories wouldn't help them. He says they would never understand. So why does he speak to the crowd in parables? A long time ago now, I had an echocardiogram.

[13:25] Maybe you've had one. They put wee wires all over your chest and a machine. Then spends about ten minutes spewing out a graph that looks like a spider has walked through ink and then scattered all over the page.

Right? It's a complicated bit of kit. But those lines and dots on the page are telling you vital information about the electric signals in your heart that you can't see from the outside.

And the parables are doing that. Says Jesus. The parables are complicated bits of kit. But when he puts a parable to the crowd, their response will tell him how their hearts are doing at a much deeper level than we could otherwise see.

His parables test people's hearts. With those with a right heart towards him, the parables will give more. Right? The seeds that fall in good soil will bear 160, 30 times more fruit.

But for those with a hard or a shallow or a cluttered heart, even what little they have grasped, the parables will wash away whatever they get from Jesus.

[14:36] It will not be fruitful. So how does he know? How do we know which is which? Well, we can't see the heart like he can. But who does he say the secrets of the kingdom have been given to?

Verse 10. Who does he say that's true about? He says the people who've been given to know are the people who came and asked them about it.

Right? He doesn't say that to them. Because they got in a midi disciple huddle and they'd figured out the answer to his riddle. Jesus, we've got it. Did they?

He says that to them because they came to him and said, Jesus, we don't get it. Why do you speak like this? They do it again in verse 36. Look, further down the page.

He left the crowds and went into the house and his disciples came to him saying, Explain to us the parable of the weeds in a field. Brothers and sisters, understanding Jesus and his words is not rocket science.

[15:38] Right? It doesn't require some mystic process of contemplation, years of guesswork. You don't need a divinity degree to understand Jesus. The test is not a test of how switched on you are, not of how holy you are, how spiritual you are.

The whole point of the parables, the whole point of them is that you will never, ever understand them without coming on your knees to Jesus and asking him to explain it.

The secrets of his kingdom are like a present that is wrapped in beautiful but impossible wrapping. You've had a present like that, haven't you? The best wrappers are the hardest wrappers. How do I get into this thing?

Don't want to tear it. It's too beautiful. Can't get under the wrapping. Can't get through the sellotape. So that we have to go to him and ask him not only please to give us the present but please also, Lord, unwrap it for us.

That's how Jesus knows that the crowds don't see or hear and understand because if they did, they would have brought his gift back to him for him to unwrap for them.

[16:46] Instead of desperately trying to get into it themselves and failing or smugly pretending that they secretly knew what was inside when they really didn't. Or just dumping it on the beach and forgetting all about it.

Friends, that's how the parables test our hearts. If you try and work out what Jesus is saying on your own, if you try and figure out what he's about by yourself, then you haven't understood. But if you come to Jesus for him to reveal himself to you, then you have grasped the secret of the kingdom.

Which isn't really a secret at all, is it? The not-so-secret secret of his kingdom is that we need him to reveal the truth about himself and his kingdom to us. Let's just flick back, if you would, to chapter 11, verses 25 to 30 and see this.

Isn't this what the parables press home to us? Isn't this it? Verse 25, chapter 11. At that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to you little children.

[17:59] One of the first things our boys learned to say was, read it. And a book would be shoved into your hands and a little person would clamber up onto your knee and wait for the secrets of the storybook to be revealed to them.

Because they knew, and they know, what we forget, what we don't understand, which is that that is much better than opening it up and sitting there pretending to understand it, but not being able to read it.

So where do we take the closed book of God's kingdom? Verse 27, chapter 11. Jesus says, All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Anyone. The secrets of the kingdom rest in his hands only. It's his gift to give to anyone. So verse 28, Come to me.

Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. There's his invitation, isn't it?

[19:23] For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Friends, when Jesus speaks, what do we do with what he says?

That is the whole test. That is the test. Do we go back to him with the book and say, read it? Do we take the present back to him and say, unwrap it? Or do we try and get into it on our own and give up or fail or just pretend we get it and we just don't?

Jesus says in that case, what Isaiah said is true of us. You will indeed hear, but never understand. You will see, but never perceive. You can come to church and read the Bible your whole life long, but never come to Jesus.

And it will not make any sense to you. It will be lost on you. You won't get it. Why? For this people's heart has grown dull.

[20:31] Brothers and sisters, understand, this is not, he's not talking about an intellectual problem. You're a clever bunch. It's a spiritual problem. It's an issue with my heart.

Ours is a willing ignorance, isn't it? See that? With their eyes, their ears, they can barely hear. And their eyes, they have closed. You're walking around like this, he says.

You, isn't that the crowds and the Pharisees? The king is in front of them doing and saying things, but they've screwed their eyes shut. They've put their fingers in their ears. And here's the sharp cutting edge. Why do they do that?

Lest. Lest. Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn. And I would heal them.

Why do they not want to see and hear and understand? Because if they did, they would have to turn. And horror of horrors.

[21:34] Jesus would heal them. Look how freely he does that in verse 18 of chapter 13.

How freely does he give that gift? Hear then the parable of the sower. Come and learn. Hear it. I'll teach ye.

He's so willing to heal our hearts. To freely give us the truth about him and his kingdom. If you haven't tonight, won't you turn and be healed? And he will.

But why does Jesus' kingdom come so slowly? Because the hearts of many people don't want to see and hear him. Because they don't want to turn to him and be healed.

Jesus' parables, aren't they? They're deliberately, they're even, they're provocatively confusing. Right? Jesus wants people not to get it and say, Jesus, what?

[22 : 34] And yet the crowds, they resist that impulse to come to him and ask him for a simple explanation. Because they know that if they understood, then they would have to turn and bow to him as king.

Better not to understand, not to think about it, push it away, than to acknowledge Jesus Christ as king. And learn from him and have our hearts healed.

So why doesn't Jesus seem more effective as a teacher? Why isn't his word more powerful?

Friends, his powerful word, his simple stories, are doing far, far more than we give him credit for.

Why don't people get his simple stories? Well, that's just the point of his simple stories. To show us that we can't even begin to understand the simple things without having our hearts healed by him.

We would love it, wouldn't we? Isn't this what we live for? We would love it if whenever someone heard the gospel, they were converted. And sometimes Jesus does do that. I think there's evidence of that in this room.

[23 : 39] But more often, when people hear the gospel, Jesus is probing and testing people's hearts. More than they are reading the Bible, the Bible is reading them.

His word is bringing out into the open the deeply buried stubbornness and resistance of the heart towards him. So that the real condition of our hearts becomes visible.

As his word lands on us, his stories, they diagnose our heart disease, don't they? They show us what kind of hearer we are of Jesus. Are we a hearer who really wants to get in?

Or are we a hearer who actually really doesn't want to get in? That is the purpose of the parables. That's what he's doing with his word. He is sorting us into what kind of hearer, what kind of heart, what kind of soil we are towards him.

And the point of his parable, the parable of the sower, is simply to illustrate that truth. To us, the crowd just looks like a crowd, doesn't it? To him, it looks like a field. And there's nothing simple about it.

[24 : 49] He's been spreading the word of the kingdom, his gospel. He did that in the Sermon on the Mount. Then he sent the 12th out to do that in chapter 10. But there are some who have heard it, whose hearts are packed hard like soil in a path.

And the gospel bounces straight off them. Or just stays on the surface. And the evil one comes and snatches away what's been sown in his heart. And it's so true, isn't it?

Haven't we all had conversations like that? Where it goes absolutely nowhere. No openness, no interest, maybe even resistance. And as soon as the conversation is over, any leftover benefit is wiped out by the devil.

By the way, that's the problem, isn't it? With saying, you're hoping that maybe something that someone heard once will one day change everything for them.

Because Jesus says the devil's already hoovered it up. It's gone. We need to keep praying, keep sowing fresh seeds, don't we, all the time. We heard this morning about God's call for us to reach out.

[25 : 57] I wonder, are we prepared as a church for this to happen? As we faithfully reach out. Right? For the gospel simply to reveal the depths of hardness of people's hearts.

And then for the devil to undo what we've done. How encouraging to know, brothers and sisters, that Jesus had conversations just like that.

People resisted. The devil hoovered up the seed that he sowed. The king tells us that that's normal when his kingdom comes. But there are some whose hearts are like shallow, rocky soil.

And this is a bit more complicated, isn't it? Because this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. At first. It's so fresh. It's so exciting. But it's all superficial, verse 21.

He has no root in himself, but endures for a while. And when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he, she fall away. As quickly as they sprout, they wither.

[27 : 05] The word did have a visible result in their life. But only as long as it met their felt needs. Right? I'm happier. I've got new friends.

I've got purpose. But as soon as it brings trouble, makes life harder, loses you friends. Well, now the gospel isn't serving my needs anymore and I'm done with it. Love affair over. We've seen that happen, haven't we? This past year or two. Friends, Jesus says that is not a failure on our part or a failure of his word.

But the gospel reveals the shallowness of some people's hearts. As we reach out with the gospel, are you prepared to see people burst into life and die back?

Not because of what was said or who said it, but because of the heart that heard it. And it's a similar story with those whose hearts are like thorny soil.

[28 : 09] The one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and it proves unfruitful. Again, the gospel produces a visible result. There's growth.

But now there's competition in the heart for space, for energy, time, resources. In a word, for love. Whether that love causes anxiety and stress.

You care so much about your children, your career, your lifestyle, your goals. And those cares of the world don't actually leave space for the gospel to flourish in you.

Or perhaps a love that causes this kind of blip and this flush of fullness and satisfaction. Like wealth that money can bring, but that's ultimately deceitful and doesn't last.

And yet you're feeding those perhaps even legitimate loves so that the gospel is choked. And underfed and underwatered and never actually becomes fruitful.

[29 : 09] Notice that. So that what's left over is a kind of a remnant of a past Christian influence, but not a saving faith. Right? This is a person who says, I gave my life to Christ 10 years ago.

Or might even call themselves a Christian, but there's no evidence to point to now that the gospel was ever given the whole heart to grow in. Or was ever supreme in their life.

Even we can all think of people like that too, can't we? Perhaps even some of us tonight in this room. Has the gospel failed?

You know the answer now, don't you? No. No, it's simply exposed, brought to the surface, the busyness and dividedness and clutteredness of this person's heart.

But, again, are we prepared to see disappointing results like that as we reach out to people we love with the gospel?

[30 : 08] But, there are also some whose hearts are like good soil. The one who hears the word and understands it, he, she, indeed, bears fruit and yields.

In one case, a hundredfold, in another sixty, in another thirty. I take it that these are people then who, whatever the condition of their heart has been in the past, have heard the good news of Christ and come to him to understand it.

And when you understand it, you have to respond. So they have seen and heard, understood, and turned and been healed. And so they bear fruit.

And praise God, Jesus says, that's normal too, when God's kingdom comes. We're seeing that as a church big time this year, aren't we?

Big time. What an amazing thing. Praise to God, because it is his gift to give. Hearts are being softened.

[31 : 12] And for as much as we should expect to meet with the closeness or shallowness or clutteredness of people's hearts as Jesus' word comes to them, friends, we should expect the gospel also to show us the goodness and readiness of some people's hearts as the word of Christ comes to them.

How can we tell who's who? Because when they hear the word, the call of Christ, they come to him, turn to him, bow to him, and follow him.

That might take time. But in time, we should expect to see lasting fruit in those people's lives. And I wonder, and perhaps this is the most challenging question, perhaps.

I wonder, are you prepared for that to happen? Are you prepared that as you reach out with simple words of life and share the good news with ordinary people you know, are you prepared for that word to bear fruit?

On one level, Jesus' words, they warn us, don't they? How careful we must be to listen to him.

Friends, his word tests our hearts. So what do you see tonight in your hearts?

[32 : 44] What is your response to hearing Jesus' word? Are you coming to him tonight? Or are you leaving it, thinking you've got it sorted, or just leaving it for another time, or you're distracted with other things?

Jesus' parable warns us, doesn't it? Be careful with his words. Take care how you hear. Come to him. Bow to him in your heart and learn from him. But the big point, brothers and sisters, is that we, who belong to him, should never lose heart, just because God's kingdom isn't coming in the way we think it should.

As the evangelistic temperature rises in our church family, as it is, we will see more of all these types of soil. The more seed we sow, right? The more disappointment, the more people ignore us, the more people receive it with joy and then leave.

The more people show some promise but never actually become a Christian, the more people receive it with joy and then leave it with joy and then leave it with joy. The more people receive the word and understand it, turn to Jesus and bear fruit.

Isn't that true? Don't give up, because the word of the king is doing his work by exposing people's hearts.

[34 : 01] Good, bad, and ugly. Perhaps, here tonight, won't you turn, won't you turn to Jesus and ask him to unpack the secrets of his kingdom to you?

If you haven't, would you turn to him and be healed? Let's pray.

Let's pray for that. Lord, we turn to you and bow to you in our hearts tonight.

Lord, we thank you that you are the Lord of the harvest and not us. We thank you, Lord, that you have sown and you are sowing seed in your field of the world through us.

And Lord, we thank you that it is you and not us who's responsible for the harvest. Father, we confess that we can be disappointed and discouraged by what we see.

[35 : 34] And Lord, when we do share something and it isn't received, Lord, it can knock us back and it can knock our confidence. We confess that before you.

We thank you, Lord, for the way that your word challenges our hearts. And Lord, it lifts our hearts to know that you do give life through your gospel.

And even, Lord, when life does not come through your gospel, that you are still doing your work, bringing the truth to the surface, exposing the heart.

Lord, we thank you for the way you've done that for us here tonight. And Lord, how we pray, how we pray that every one of us who's heard your word would turn. Lord, keep us from that stubbornness and resistance to you that says we can do it.

Lord, we need you. Lord, give us a heart by your spirit to come to you tonight and be healed, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.