

# Matthew 13:1-23

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, the parable of the sower, probably one of the most important of Jesus' parables from! Jesus suggests in Mark's version of the parable that it's key to understanding the parables.

! If you don't understand this parable, he says, how are you going to understand the rest? And in both Mark and Matthew's versions, there's an extensive explanation of the significance of the different components in the parable, and a reason attached as to why Jesus used parables at all. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see or 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.

For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them. So, Jesus is using parables as a kind of filter for identifying the true disciple. So, on the one side, there are those who came to Jesus, and they were steeped in the Old Testament. They were looking, however, for a different kind of Messiah to the one who was actually foretold in their Bible. They were looking for a kind of nationalist, revolutionary leader, or a miracle worker, and they heard the parables, and they were confounded. It didn't make sense. We came looking for somebody who was going to lead us to freedom, and what do we find?

A teller of fables. And so, they were disappointed, and they turned away. But in their lack of comprehension, God is judging them, and God is exposing the nature of their hearts. But the parables don't just work by identifying unbelievers. They are also used by Jesus to bring about the revelation of God's chosen people.

[ 2 : 31 ] There were those who were drawn by the Holy Spirit who were moved to search further by the use of parables. And so, at first, just like the disciples don't get it, and they come to Jesus, they maybe find it difficult to understand, but their interest is piqued. They want to go deeper. They want to understand. They know that beneath the story, there is a deep truth. There's something that is echoing deep within them, and they move on.

Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Or in Mark 2, there has been given the secret, the mystery of the kingdom of God. And so, straight away, there's a kind of fundamental lesson about God's Word and how we are dealt with by the Word of God, that you don't get to grips with the message of Jesus from a distance. But spiritual light, spiritual illumination comes to people who are in a relationship with Jesus, who are personally committed to Jesus, who have ears to hear what Jesus is saying. Unless there's a personal relationship, a communion, a fellowship, then it all seems like strange fables. But to this eager, tiny band, Jesus gives himself holy. And it's absolutely the same today. And there will be all kinds represented, even in a predominantly Christian gathering like this evening. Maybe that there are some who will simply want to have their curiosity satisfied, but want to still keep Jesus at a distance. And it's not to them that Jesus promises illumination, revelation, but it's to those who come in a saving relationship with him, eager to hear and to please him. And to those, and to those only, Jesus gives more truth. So, we grow in our knowledge only insofar as we're growing in our obedience, in our relationship with Jesus. So, this is what Jesus' parables do. They're never ineffective when they are shared but rejected. They are always doing their work.

They are revealing what is in people's hearts. They're showing up where there is unbelief and indifference, but they're also highlighting those who love him and who want to move on in their discipleship, who are hungry to learn more. And to these, says Jesus, he will give more truth. So, to the parable itself. Jesus is busy teaching the crowds, and as often happened, he's crowded out. And so, he has to get onto the lake, get into a boat, in order to have space for preaching. And so, he's teaching from the water's edge, and there's a large crowd. And imagine it's a sunny day,

and Jesus, who is the great preacher, will doubtless be observing the different people who are listening to him that day by the lakeside. Over in the back, there's a young lad, and he's nodding off in the sunshine. I'm not looking at anybody in particular at this point, but in your mind's eye, there's a young fellow, and he's just overcome by the warmth of the day, and maybe a big lunch, and he's nodding off. He's not taking anything in any longer. But at the front, there's a number of people who are listening intently, and they're deeply moved by what Jesus is saying. And here and there, some are so moved that perhaps there is the glistening of tears coming from their eyes. And then, quite possibly, Jesus notices in the background a farmer, a real-life farmer. He's out, and he's doing his work on the hillside. He's sowing seed. And so begins one of Jesus' most famous parables. A farmer went out to sow. Farmer went out to sow his seeds. And in our mind's eye, we're to picture what is going on. This lone figure traversing the ploughed field, sloping down to the lakeside shore, possibly wearing a wide-brimmed hat to shelter him from the sun. Sturdy sandals on his feet, and certainly bags of grain slung around his neck. And as he goes up and down the field, he's flicking the grain side to side in a kind of robotic movement. And he has his eyes directly in line on some marker so that he can keep a straight line and not overlap what he has sown before. And he's involved in one of the most primeval activities known to man, and which, in its modern art guise, all of us depend on for our existence, for our food. And we learn from Jesus that the sower is spreading the Word of God. The seed, Jesus says, is the Word of God.

There is power in the Word of God. As we said already, it never fails. It always brings about a purpose.

[ 8 : 45 ] It always does its work. Sometimes it's exposing hard-heartedness and rebelliousness. Sometimes it comes with transformative power, unleashes power, new life in people's lives, but it is always effective. It is always doing that which God has intended. And in a later parable, the parable of the growing seed, you know the parable? It's a very short one. Jesus is saying that when the seed has been sown, when it's scattered on the ground, the farmer goes away and everything is left to God. You know, whatever the farmer does, whether he gets up or goes to bed, the seed is growing alone.

There is life power in that seed, and without his assistance, it grows. The seed sower knows that whenever these baskets of grain are empty, his work is done. It's over to God.

God has to provide the rain and the sunshine. He has to give life. And it's the same with sowing the gospel, the good news of Jesus, into people's lives. All of us are called to scatter that seed, but that's all we can do. God is the one who brings about the life-transforming power in people's lives. And so, here is the first takeaway lesson from the sermon tonight, and that is be confident in the seed of the Word of God. The Word is powerful. There's a power that resides in it.

And if that's the case, then all of us really ought to think of how we can share it, how we can actually scatter that seed. So, I want you to think of somebody that you might be able to read the Bible with, because that is sowing seed in a life, sowing the seed. And God is pleased to work however it is we sow that seed. We read from Ecclesiastes 11, sow your seed in the morning and at evening, let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. So, there are lots of different ways in which we can share the Bible, and so long as they are done in God-honoring ways, the actual method doesn't really matter. You know, we don't need to get hung up about how it's done so long as the Bible is going into people's lives. Sow the seed, and do it in different ways, and be enterprising, because you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or both, because God is the one who gives life.

[ 12 : 06 ] And the seed goes everywhere in the field. This is important as well. It's scattered at random. It goes all over. The whole field is covered by the seed. Everybody is to hear the good news.

Now, we've been having a lovely time staying with Diane and Alistair, and Alistair's got some incredible tackle on the farm, and he was telling me about how they, nowadays, you can vary the seed that goes out into the field, and the fertilizer, because the fields are carefully mapped, and these modern seed drills are connected with GPS technology. You all with me still? And the seed is let out more or less, depending on the soil conditions. So, maybe some parts of the field aren't getting much because there's a bit of a rock or whatever, and others are getting more seed. But that's not the way this sower operates. He doesn't have GPS technology. The seed's going everywhere. It's indiscriminate.

Everybody's to hear the gospel. We don't know who God's going to save. We can't see into people's hearts. God is the one who calls people, and sometimes he calls the most unlikely. Therefore, scatter the seed.

Let everybody hear. The seed is scattered indiscriminately. And therefore, the process seems wasteful, doesn't it? You know, there are four different soil types, and there's only one which is actually, in the end, fruitful. But remember we said the seed is still doing its work.

Every time. Everybody needs to hear the gospel. Some seed fell along the path. So, this first soil was compacted by the traffic, maybe traffic of livestock or the traffic of the farmer himself walking up and down, so that over the years it became really hard.

[14:17] And Jesus says that in this category there are people who just never come to grips with the gospel. Their mind is never really engaged with the gospel. The devil takes that seed and he gobbles it up before it has any time to penetrate. So, there's no engagement. There's no attempt to understand the gospel. And of course, the devil is very adept at diverting us from engaging with the Bible.

Our lives, all of us, are busy, aren't they? Filled with the endless cycle of earning and spending and beginning and ending different things. Someone tells a person, you know, the greatest news that could ever be heard that Jesus came into the world to save us, to bring us into God's family. And the devil says, check and see how many people have liked your post on Facebook. And we easily lose interest.

Our minds flit here and there. Never any engagement, never any response to the message. The gospel seed simply bounces off the path. And that's true to greater or lesser degrees. I had a friend who told me once that in his first charge, it was like sowing seed on concrete. It just seemed to bounce off.

And then he went to another charge and there was a great response to the gospel. God was really at work and people were listening and they were responding to the message of salvation.

So, the first soil or the path, there's no response. There's simply no understanding. The devil comes and snatches away the seed. Now, in the next three soils, there is a response of some kind, but only the fourth soil comes with a fruitful response, the desired result. And what we're dealing with in soils two to three is the heartbreaking reality of gospel work. And that is that there are people who at some stage thrill our hearts because of their response to the gospel, but over time show themselves not to have been the real deal. There is only a superficial or a short-lived response. They turn out to be a bitter disappointment. They turn away and are never seen again. And so, Jesus' portrayal in these soil types is a powerful reminder of what we need to be ready for. There is disappointment in gospel ministry.

[17:27] And so, there are others like seed sown in rocky places hear the word and at once receive it with joy, joy, but has no root in itself, but endures for a while. And when tribulation comes or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. So, the rocky soil. Now, I think here, with this soil, we're probably not to think of rocky outcrops, you know, bare rock, but very thin soil over underlying rock, shallow soil. A lot of the Middle Eastern soil lies over limestone. And the good thing about this kind of soil, thin soil over a bedrock of limestone, is that the soil warms up quickly. So, when the sun is shining, the rock acts like a storage heater. So, it's storing up heat. And, of course, the soil warms up quickly at sowing time. So, there's going to be a rapid germination when the seed goes in. But if the soil is shallow, not much of it, the seed is going to die. So, I mean, we see that you don't need to be a farmer to appreciate that. You just need to be growing something in a pot, and, you know, it's not repotted in time, and so the roots don't have space to grow. The plant is weak, and the first brush with a frost or with bad weather of some kind or pests, and it's a goner. And Jesus says that there is a response to the Word of God that is like that, like seed that was sown into very shallow ground.

So, there are people who make a very quick and joyful response to the good news. So, maybe in a situation like this, the minister preaches, and at the end of the service, somebody comes up and says, minister, that message really touched my heart. I'm going to follow the Lord Jesus Christ from now on. I just feel that I'm never going to be the same again. And, of course, it's wonderful to hear that, wonderful to hear that. And for a time, everything seems to be going well. They have a story to tell others, and maybe they quickly learn to use Christian expressions for being saved or trusting in the blood and so on. And everyone is delighted. And why would everybody not be delighted?

Because this is exactly what we pray for. This is what we long to see. But after a few weeks, there is a falling away. You know, they're not turning up at worship, not really interested in getting along to the prayer meeting any longer. And you dig a little deeper, and you discover that they have buckled under pressure when they encountered their first opposition to being Christians. So, typically, maybe somebody goes into their place of work, and at the break time, a colleague comes over to them and says, hey, what's this we're hearing about you getting all religious and all that? Is it true? And the person kind of begins to shrivel up under the interrogation. They get all embarrassed, all confused.

Or maybe others in the family don't share the same enthusiasm for Christianity as they have shown, and over time, the teenage children are dragging their feet when it comes to going to church. And when they ask dad why they need to go to church, their dad struggles to tell them, and in the end, he admits to feeling disappointed. He didn't expect his new faith to be such a struggle. And Jesus says that the collapse under pressure is because of shallow rooting. So, you could say that it's a decision that's based on warm feeling rather than a grasp of the issues that are involved in salvation. You see, if a Christian fellowship, if a church is operating properly, right, if it's what we call a healthy gospel church, then it should be a place where there is warmth and care. People are welcomed into church, a good reception. And sometimes people will respond to the warmth and the friendship, which are really byproducts of Christian living, not in themselves, the gospel. People respond to the warmth of the message and the reception, but the message hasn't really taken root. To be effective, the gospel really has to get under our skin.

[ 23 : 01 ] It really needs, in a sense, to trouble us at some point. We need to be really convinced of the fact that we are rebels against God, and that that's a very serious condition to be in, and that we really need, absolutely need, the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. And without that salvation, we perish eternally.

But the issues are really as black and white, as serious as that. We need to relinquish our control on our lives. We need to render obedience. We need to submit to Jesus. And people who are like the seed of the shallow, stony soil have never considered this fundamental need caused by their sin. They've never understood their absolute need for Jesus and his salvation. And their response to the gospel is really, in the end of the day, pure emotion.

It's like the kind of feeling that you have when you're in a vast stadium and your team has scored a goal and you get caught up in it all. Fortunately, not every joyful response to the gospel is like that. No. But Jesus warns us to be careful about weighing the depth of people's response to the good news. So, still others, like seeds sown among thorns, hear the word. This is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Now, this soil is much more promising. This soil is a good medium for growth. So, sometimes there are kind of things that we call weeds, which are actually indicators that the soil is very, very fertile. So, even in your garden, if you see nettles growing, it's very often because there's maybe some organic matter or people that keep hens will find nettles growing up near the chicken coop because that's an area that's full of nitrogen. And so, basically, weeds and thorns and all the rest of it are really plants that are growing in the wrong place. And you could say that the art of agriculture is getting the right plants to grow in the right place. And this farmer's interested in sowing wheat or barley. He wants to see that particular plant growing. He's not wanting to have couch grass or buttercups or nettles growing.

[ 26 : 07 ] And he knows that there's only so many plant nutrients in the ground. And he wants his boys to have all the good stuff. He doesn't want these weeds coming in and crowding in and taking up all the food that there's in the ground and maybe shading the plants from the sun. But weeks later, the sower goes into the field.

And while he's happy to see the green blades of corn emerging, there's other suspicious plants also in the field. Not to worry, he thinks they'll probably be out-competed by the wheat. The wheat will grow up and it'll take over eventually. But instead, the weeds grow as though they were on steroids and they take over. And at the end of the day, that's all that you can see. And Jesus is warning that early promise can be snuffed out by competition from other things, other things that he characterizes as the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. And just like weeds, they're often good things but in the wrong place, or good things which are disproportionately, they have a disproportionate affection from our hearts. So the cares of the world, cares of the world, how many

things that covers, isn't it? And the cares of the world are different at the different stages of life. Things that really cause us anxiety are different depending on our stage. When we're young, it's a really big thing as to whether we're going to get into the school team, whether we're going to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. And then later on, it's worrying about a mortgage or about something else like that.

The cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches. And again, the description of riches being deceitful is very, very telling, isn't it? Because none of us really thinks that we're rich.

Riches, they creep up behind us. They deceive us. But with our guard down in this way, the love of money slips in and hooks us. We become preoccupied with our latest project. We become obsessed with the ups and downs of our saving account or our stocks and shares. And we think that this is the key to the life that we want. And we tell ourselves that we'll be content when we have the next thing. But of course, we're never content because our ideal life is now being based upon things which are unpredictable and which don't satisfy. So, the desire for things or the deceitfulness of riches is speaking to the things that come in and crowd out the love of Jesus.

Ordinary things, things that are good in themselves. Maybe things like our career or our kids, the garden, whatever. And such people may keep up appearances for long enough, but they're long dead.

[ 29 : 37 ] The life has been snuffed out of them, whatever that life was. And there are numerous examples in the Bible of people who were promising, promising contenders to be disciples. And it was the deceitfulness of riches that came in and smothered the life out of them. Remember the rich young ruler came to Jesus, and Jesus is drawn to him. He's full of promise. He's kept all the commandments, he thinks, eagerly.

But when Jesus challenges him in regard to his wealth, Luke writes, when he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. And one of the saddest lines in the whole of Scripture is in 2 Timothy when Paul notes that one of his own circle, one of his confidence, Demas, because he loved the world, has deserted me. The seed that fell among thorns.

But now, let's look with great relief at the fourth soil, because some seed fell on good soil, and those are the people who hear the word, Matthew says, and understand it, or as Mark says, accept it. He indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. The seed that's sown here is finding good soil. There's a good home here.

Think about this. It wasn't always such good soil. It wasn't always such good soil. In everyday life, much of the fertile places have been made so by heroic transformation over the years.

And by God's grace, there needs to be a spiritual transformation in the soil of our heart before the seed of the Word will bring about its crop. The Bible tells us that true believers have been chosen by God before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. But these very people, these chosen people, they, all of us, have had hearts that would never accept the gospel, which would be continually hardened and rejecting of the gospel. But God sent His Holy Spirit, and God made good soil of that stony heart. And so, unlike the people who were like the path, they listen, and they engage with the gospel. And now the seed goes on, and it produces its fruit.

[ 32 : 58 ] There is an abundant, and it is an abundant harvest. Wonderful to see somebody who is in this category not only understanding, but with meekness, accepting the Word of God as the truth. This is the very truth of God. It's become real to them, and they're ready to trust themselves in the Savior to whom the Word is pointing. It's a beautiful thing, a beautiful thing to see a plant growing and blossoming, but beautiful, more beautiful by far, to see new life in an individual, and to see that person being transformed by the Spirit of God, and to see an abundant harvest in their lives.

And so, they are fruitful. And that, I think, means at least a couple of things. First of all, it means that the Holy Spirit, in the life of somebody who has been transformed by God's Spirit, has understood and accepted the Word and is trusting in Jesus, they themselves become more like Jesus.

The Holy Spirit produces in them the qualities of Jesus—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

That is a mark of the genuine disciple. It's the only mark that can't be counterfeited. Fruitfulness, Christ-likeness, and it's wonderful to see an individual growing to become more and more like Jesus. That is the harvest that Jesus is looking for. That is the harvest for which He came.

Now, a single grain of wheat will not ordinarily produce just one stem, but it will tiller, so it will send up other stems from the one seed, and ultimately each may have an ear. And so, there's a second aspect in which we can say that a fruitful Christian will ordinarily see this change that has been at

work in their own lives, also replicated in other people's lives. We're called to be ourselves, sowers of the seed. And so, to us also, we'll be given the joy of seeing others accept the Lord Jesus Christ and becoming more and more like Him. Fruitfulness. Friends, don't we want to be more and more fruitful in our Christian lives, more like Jesus and seeing more people come to know Him as we share the Word. And how will that come about? What's the key to the fruitful life? Well, [ 36 : 16 ] Psalm 1, at the beginning of the Psalter, holds the key for that fruitfulness in all kinds of conditions. Just like the psalmist, the Christian is somebody who loves the Word, who meditates upon the Word of God.

It becomes a delight. So, the Bible at one time was an enigma, a mystery. We weren't interested, but now it becomes a delight, and we love to be in it, and we love to be sharing it with others and reading it with others, and it's changing us. And when drought or storm comes, they are not affected. They are like a tree growing by a river bank so that when there's dry weather, its roots which are deep are being fed by the river. And who knows what blessing someone will be to others whose delight is in Jesus and His Word.

So, the parable of the sower, a farmer went out to sow. Which soil is your life most representing now?

Jesus calls on each of us to listen, listen carefully, believe, and obey. Father, we pray that You would bless the seed of Your Word in our lives. Grant, Lord, that we might be fruitful. Lord, may it be our delight. May we meditate upon it, and may it change us. And grant, Lord, too, that we might find ways of sharing Your Word, so that we too become sewers of the seed into others' lives, and that we might look to see You work in power in their hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.