

The Parable of the Sower * Matthew 13:1-23

September 17, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning I am excited to begin a brand new sermon series with you: 'Another way to see the world' – Jesus' parables from the Gospel of Matthew.

I wonder how many of you have been looking at the little image on the handout today going – 'what is that? Why did Graham put that on the bulletin?' Do you see what it is?ⁱ

I remember the first time I saw one of these. I spent forever staring at it until my mom said 'Look at the light parts, not the dark.' And then 'CLICK' I got it. It says 'Jesus.' And now you look at it and it's obvious.

That's what parables do. They give us another way to see the world. We're so used to thinking of the world in one way, because this is the world we grew up in, but Jesus' parables come along and give us familiar things with a twist – they help us to see the world we know from a heavenly perspective.

And that's not the only thing that parables do. In fact, in the middle of our passage today, Jesus has this little aside where He says 'I speak in parables to hide the truth from people who don't want to see it but reveal the truth to those who do.' In essence, parables show us what we want to see.

Maybe you've heard the saying 'speaking truth to power;' parables are speaking truth to the willing. Some people have no interest in Jesus, they have no interest in what He has to say. They hear the parables but just think they're dumb little stories. But if we're willing to hear, parables give us another way to see the world and reveal the Kingdom of God at work in our world and in our lives.

The parable that we're going to look at today is a prime example of that. The Parable of the Sower. Join me in Matthew 13, starting in verse 1 and I'll show you what I mean. Matthew 13, starting in verse 1. This is a perfect example of a parable that challenges our view of the world and invites us to think about how we respond to the message of the Gospel that Jesus brings.

So Matthew 13, verse 1.

As Matthew 13 opens, Jesus is staying near the Sea of Galilee. One day, He went out of the house to sit by the lake. Seagulls were flying through the air, waves lapping up on the shore. The smell of salt hung in the air and so many people crowded around Jesus that He got into a boat, pushed off the shore and began to teach as He often did. (The water would help to carry His voice and the slope down to the shoreline would give people places to stand and listen.ⁱⁱ)

And here's what they heard:

"3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed.

4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.

8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

9 He who has ears, let him hear."

Now many of us have heard this story so many times that we know exactly what it's about. But the people standing on the shoreline that day must have been thinking 'what is this guy talking about?' Remember, this is all they hear. It's only the disciples who hear the explanation later. All they hear is this story. There's a sower who scatters seed (ok, we're familiar with that), some seed falls on the path and the birds eat it up, some on shallow ground but it withers, some on thorny ground that chokes out the seedlings and then there's the seed that lands on the good soil – and that's the only soil that produces a crop.

I think that there were probably some people in the crowd today who said 'Yeah, I know how agriculture works. Don't sow seed on the path. Don't let weeds choke out the seeds. I don't see what the big deal is. How is this guy so popular?'

But Jesus is not just talking about farming, is He? He's giving us another way to see the world. We know that because of the way He ends the parable. 'Let anyone who has ears to hear listen and learn.'

This is Jesus speaking truth to those who are willing to hear it. This is Jesus calling us to listen with our hearts and to understand that this earthy story has spiritual meaning. To everyone else, this is just a story about a pretty incompetent farmer, but to those who are willing to hear, this is a story about how we respond to the Good News of Jesus. This is a story about what we do with the message of the Gospel.

And that's clear from Jesus' explanation of the parable to His disciples a few verses later. Slide down the page to verse 18:

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

20 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.

21 But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

23 But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Mat 13:18-23 NIV).

If you have ears that are willing to hear truth, listen up.

Jesus tells us what the parable means. The sower goes out to sow the seed. The sower is Saviour; the seed is the Gospel. The seed is the message that we are all sinners and separated from God (that's bad) but Jesus came to redeem sinners like us and restore us to God when we believe (that's good). Just like a seed, that message carries within it the potential for life – in this case, abundant life and eternal life.

The different soils are the different ways that people receive that message.

The path that seed just bounces off of is like a person with a hardened heart. Like many people in Jesus' day, their hearts are so calloused by years of hard living, years of selfish living, years of people trampling over them, that they are unwilling to open up and hear the news that Jesus came to give life to people like them. They don't open up to receive the truth; their hardened hearts cause them to reject it.

The rocky ground that produces rapid growth that withers in the sun is like a person with a shallow heart. They think the Gospel will solve all their problems, they receive it with joy and start to grow, but never do it with any seriousness. They're happy to remain in the 'cheap Gospel' of feel good and Jesus makes me happy and never put down roots by growing in their faith. When trials comes, when Jesus asks things of them, they wither and fall away. Their shallow hearts prevent them from growing any further in the truth.

The thorny ground is like a person with a distracted heart who hears the message of the Gospel but can't be bothered to receive it by faith. They have better things to do. They have money to make and problems to solve and they've got better things to do than bear fruit for Jesus. But what does Jesus say? 'The relentless and deceitful pursuit of wealth and the worries and anxieties that come along with it choke them out;' their distracted hearts actually prevent them from gaining life.

But the good soil that produces a crop is like a person with a receptive heart. They hear the Gospel with ears to hear, with a willingness to take God at His Word, to turn from sin and receive new life from Jesus and then grow, bearing fruit for the Kingdom. And it doesn't matter how much fruit they bear – some will grow a lot, some will grow less – but what's important is that they have opened up their lives to the power of God and that they are extending the Good News through the way they live their lives. People with receptive hearts receive the Gospel and put it to work in their lives.

Here's what Jesus wants to know: which kind of soil are you? What kind of heart do you have?

The fact that Jesus concludes this parable by saying 'if you have ears to hear, then listen' compels us to ask: what is the condition of my heart? How do I respond to the message of the Gospel?

So let me ask you: do you have a hardened heart that is unwilling to open up the message of the Gospel? Maybe you've been trampled over by people in the past and you can't possibly imagine that anyone would do anything for your benefit and you've closed your heart to the idea. Maybe you've grown cynical through the years or gotten used to the idea that you're the only one you can count on. It's a humbling thing to say 'I've sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and I need His renewing work to turn things around' but it's even worse to close yourself off to the One who is inviting you into a brand new life. Do you have a hardened heart?

Do you have a shallow heart that's only interested in what Jesus has to offer? Some people hear the message of new life in Christ and think 'that sounds great!' and they add it to the list of quick-fixes in their emotional life. Is that you? Do you just want Jesus to take away your troubles and give you a happy life or do you actually want to go wherever He goes and do the kinds of things that He Himself would do? Do you have a shallow heart?

Do you have a distracted heart that is so caught up in the pursuit of wealth and the worries of this world that we miss out on the fullness of life that God intends for us? I think it's striking that Jesus talks about

‘the deceitfulness of wealth;’ we need money to operate in the world we live in but money has a way of saying ‘just a little more and then you’ll be happy; work a little harder and you’ll have enough’ and before you know it you’re ragged and worn out from serving the Almighty Dollar instead of the compassionate God. Is yours a distracted heart?

Or do you have a receptive heart, a heart that is willing to say ‘Yes, Jesus, I’ve gone my own way and wandered from You but I can’t do it any longer and I need your forgiveness and restoration?’ That’s the kind of heart that Jesus calls us to have, a heart that is willing and humble and receptive, a heart that receives the Good News and puts it to work in our lives.

If you have ears to hear, then hear what Jesus is saying: receive the Gospel, nurture the Gospel and help it to grow.

If you have a hardened heart, open your heart to receive the message.

If you have a shallow heart, nurture the message and put down roots.

If you have a distracted heart, get rid of the weeds and give the message a chance to grow.

And if you have a receptive heart, receive the Gospel, nurture the Gospel and help it to grow.

Now there’s a sense in which we could leave it there. That’s essentially the message that people heard that day when Jesus got into the boat in Matthew 13.

But if we’re really going to hear this story rightly, we need to hear it within the larger story of Jesus’ redeeming work in the world.

Because, did you notice, this is not the parable of the soils. This is not just about you and me. We often call it the parable of the soils because it’s the most memorable aspect of the story, but Matthew 13:18, Jesus Himself says very clearly: “Listen to what the parable of the sower means.”

We are not alone in responding to the message of the Gospel. And that’s good news! Because just like soil, we can’t change ourselves. We need a supernatural hand to come in and prepare our hearts to receive the truth, the nurture it and to grow in it. And Jesus is just the one to do it.

The sower in the story is the Saviour at work in our lives. And frankly, if you have the wherewithal to recognize that you’re the hardened soil or the shallow soil or the thorny soil, that means that you are actually good soil. The Saviour is already at work in you to open your eyes to the spiritual realities of your life.

So wherever your heart is this morning, this is what I want you to hear: Invite the sower to become the gardener in your life and partner with Him in bearing fruit. Ask the sower – Jesus – to become the gardener and partner with Him in bearing fruit.

So if you have eyes to see that you are hardened soil, invite the sower to become the gardener and come in and break up the hardened parts of your life. Invite Him to take out the stones and debris that have accumulated through the years and give you a heart that’s willing to receive the truth. Turn from sin and self to trust in Him.

If you have eyes to see that you are shallow soil, invite the sower to become the gardener and help you to put down roots. Ask Him and He will give you living water to motivate your roots to go deep down

into the soil of His love. I know I'm mixing metaphors now but this is exactly what Paul prays in Ephesians 3:

He says: 17 And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love.

If you realize that you have a distracted heart, invite the sower to be the gardener to clear out the weeds and thorns in your life so that real life, productive life can grow. Receive the Gospel, do what you can to rip out the distractions and make room for the Gospel to grow.

And regardless of what kind of soil you start with, once you've invited the Saviour to be the gardener, partner with Him in bearing fruit. Do what you can to nip weeds in the bud. Go where's He's calling you to go, do what He's calling you to do, bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, the fruit of good character wherever you are in the world. He is the one that will multiply then message thirty, sixty, one hundred times what He started with.

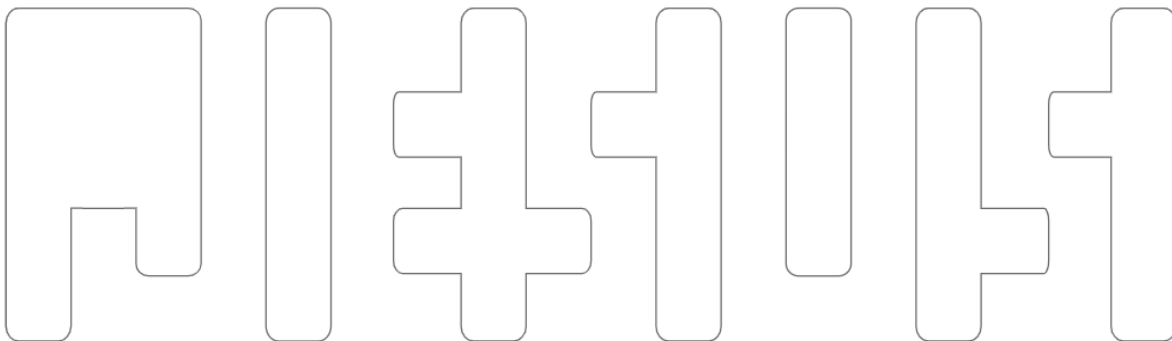
Frederick Bruner puts it like this: "Being a fruitful Christian is not complicated. Fruitfulness is not a matter of many spiritual steps or of difficult disciplines or of particular techniques. It is simply a matter of 'receiving... the Word of God. All the rest of the work of the sovereign God" (*Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook Matthew 13-28*, page 23).

Invite the sower to become the gardener and partner with Him in bearing fruit.

BENEDICTION

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

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ii <https://www.allchurchsound.com/education/edart/jkuhflp.html>