

The Parables of Jesus: The Sower

Matthew 13

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Novice preachers dream. Experienced preacher's nightmare. Haddon Robinson, the professor of preaching at Gordon-Conwell theological seminary has said: preaching the parables is a lot like playing the saxophone: it's easy to do poorly. And, historically, it has been done poorly, even by great men. How's this for an interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan?

The wounded man stands for Adam; Jerusalem stands for the heavenly city from which he has fallen; the thieves stand for the devil who has deprived Adam of his immortality; the priest and the Levite stand for the OT law; the Samaritan who binds the man's wounds stands for Christ who forgives sin; the inn stands for the church, and the innkeeper – get this – stands for the apostle Paul.

Such was the interpretation of St. Augustine. This type of interpretation, treating the text like it was an allegory along the lines of Pilgrim's Progress, persisted, with a few exceptions, up until very recent times. Yet, as our text today will show, the parables are, at least in part, allegorical. Things in the parables STAND FOR other realities.

The difficulty comes in sifting through the details and determining which ones have special symbolic significance and which ones are added for color and vividness. I fully believe that, with the proper care, we shall find the parables to be just what Jesus intended. And what did he intend? The context of the parables shows them to be prophetic, provocative, challenging and often subversive stories. They frequently are in the context of judgment/indictment/radical decision. When Jesus starts telling a parable, the response shouldn't be like the children at the library – O great, story time! More like son/father – story – in trouble. But, if we hear them aright, they are not only accessible, but transforming in their power.

So, today we begin a new series on the parables of Jesus. And we start with what has been called the parable about parables, the parable of the sower in Matt 13. The significance of this parable is seen in a number of ways. First, it is the first major parable in Matthew's chapter of seven parables. Second, it is one of only two parables that receive an extended interpretation from the lips of Jesus. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it alone contains a section on the

purpose of the parables in general. In fact, in the parallel in Mark's gospel Jesus says: Do you not understand THIS parable? How then will you understand ALL the parables? Clearly then, this parable has foundational importance.

We will look at this text under three headings: the parable in vv.3-9, the purpose of parables in vv.10-17, and the interpretation in vv. 18-23.

I. The Parable

First, the parable itself in vv. 3-9. In v.3 Matthew tells us Jesus told them many things in parables. He loved this form of teaching, and, depending on how you count there are between 30 and 40 parables in synoptic gospels (Matt, Mark and Luke).

The actual parable is quite straightforward. The sower, a well-known image in ancient Palestine, goes out and sows. In v.4 some seed falls on the path which would run alongside the fields and be hardened by foot traffic, but, inevitably, at the edges of the field, some seed would fall here and be devoured by birds. The second set of seed falls on the rocky soil common in Palestine. And since it had no depth, the seed would germinate upward quickly and later be scorched by the sun and wither. The third set of seed fell among thorns and attempts to grow up with them and, eventually, is choked. And finally, the fourth category of seed fell on good soil and yielded various productive harvests; some a hundredfold, some sixty and some thirty.

Verse 9 completes the parable with the crucial words: Whoever who has ears, let him hear. Here we see that the parable is about how we hear. Matthew uses hearing fifteen times in this text to drive the point home. This is a command. Whoever who has ears, let him hear. Jesus is calling for a response that pierces the surface, that allows the word to penetrate. True hearing, as we shall see, IS obedience.

II. The Purpose of Parables

Our second point is the purpose of parables in vv.10-17. Here things get a good deal trickier. The disciples ask him "why do you speak to the people (meaning those outside, the crowds in general) in parables?" Jesus' startling answer begins in v.11: the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but NOT to them. The note of sovereign grace is stuck here right away – to you it has been given, but to them it has not been given. While that note is present, the emphasis here will be on human responsibility.

It's important to see that, in this context, the ones to whom it is given does NOT refer to a decree of predestination. It refers to those who, desiring to pierce the surface, come to Jesus and ask for help. Here, in v.10, this group is called the disciples, but Mark says it was those around Him AND the twelve. "Those who are outside" are those content to hear the words without any serious engagement of their call to discipleship. In other words, willingness to truly HEAR is what determines whether one is in or out in this context. Those who refuse to hear him are out; those who are willing to hear are in. Parable provoke a crisis.

Another way to see this is to note the phrase, the secrets of the kingdom. The word for secret means mystery, which, in the NT, does not mean something esoteric and unknowable. It means something hidden, which NOW in X, is REVEALED. So, the parables are fundamentally revelatory. How one responds to the revelation determines if FOR THE GIVEN PERSON, they reveal or end up concealing.

Verse 12 continues: whoever has will be given more, and he will have and abundance, whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. True hearers prosper, false hearers are judged – no one is unchanged. Those who refuse to truly hear. Such people, v.13 says, see but do not see, they hear but do not hear – and the parables are for them an indictment.

Jesus seals the point dramatically with a citation from Isaiah 6 beginning in v.14: In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. Jesus is likening the state of Israel in His day with the hardened Israel Isaiah prophesied to. So when He cites Isaiah here it is a provocative and ironic way of stating the inevitable – the bulk of Israel will not repent. You will indeed hear, but never understand and you will indeed see, and never perceive. Your hearing is a simple physical auditory phenomenon; your seeing of me and my works never becomes true perception.

Verse 15: For this people's heart has BECOME calloused. Notice there has been a long process of hardening BEFORE the parable. With their ears they can BARELY hear – Israel's hearing is virtually gone, though Jesus will continue to call them to repentance to the very end. And their eyes they have closed. The desire of Isaiah and Jesus is seen at the end of v.15 – otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them. So the parables reveal, and to those who have been hardened, they conceal.

So Jesus is urging HEARING where judgment is assured, and a remnant will respond and be blessed. This becomes clear in v.16: but blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. Verse 17: for I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. Here we see something of immense importance. Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT, of the longing of prophets and righteous people down through the ages of Israel's history. In Him the

kingdom has come. The future has broken into the present. In Him the mystery is revealed. Hearing Him, hearing his parables, is the path to blessedness.

III. The Interpretation

This brings us to our third point, the well-known interpretation of the parable. Verse 18 brings us back to our theme of hearing. Listen then to what the parable of the sower means. v.19 says when anyone hears the word /message of the kingdom. The parables are pre-eminently parables of the kingdom. What is sown is the gospel, the word of God. What Jesus is doing here is giving us a meditation on the various classes of hearers of His proclamation. Though it is never stated, He is the primary Sower, along with the church as she declares His word.

This is really a striking way for Jesus to describe His ministry, especially in light of Jewish expectations of a political Messiah. One commentator said that to many Jews bringing in the kingdom by sowing the word would seem like trying to train a hockey team by teaching them knitting. The Word appears weak and unimpressive and vulnerable. Words are just syllables. Just sound waves evaporating no sooner than they appear. Yet this is the Word which implanted is able to save our souls. It is the imperishable Word by which we have been born-again, it is the word which is everywhere increasing and bearing fruit. It is the word of the kingdom.

The first class of people correspond to the seed sown on the path. They are hardened up front. They don't understand the word, and the evil one snatches it away just as the birds devoured the seed. They come to church, hear the word and walk away wholly unaffected. As I said, this parable functions as a prophetic warning, and if you see yourself in this class of people then cry out to God to break up the hardness of your heart before it is too late.

In v.20 we are told the second class, the seed sown on rocky ground, is the one who hears the word immediately. They hear the word and at once receive it with joy; they are very excited about Jesus. Yet, v.21, says, they have no root. They endure for a while (they have what Calvin called "temporary faith") and when trouble or persecution comes on account of the Word - when the gospel begins to cost them - they quickly fall away. They are shallow, superficial hearers. And the church, as the follow-up statistics from any evangelistic ministry will tell you, is full of them. They never become disciples willing to take up their cross and follow Jesus.

This is a category that should give us all great pause, since we face very little real hostility (though it is increasing) because of the Word. The only remedy is to labor while there is time to put down roots, to be trees planted by streams of

water, and meditate on the law of God day and night. Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

The third class is in v.22 and is probably the most relevant to our situation. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the man who hears the word – some amount of legitimate, real hearing takes place here – but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

There are two deadly enemies here. First, the cares/worries of the world. Your career, your 401K account, your desire for success, what shall we eat, what shall we wear. How unrealistic the gospel and the call of the kingdom sound with all these voices clamoring for our attention. And after all we have to attend to these things, don't we? We must be realists. We must be good stewards. A thousand excuses and thousands of distractions. Legitimate cares, but they can obtain a deadening grip on our spiritual life.

Jesus does not view wealth as neutral. For Him it is positively dangerous and often destructive. Riches are deceitful. Mammon is a power that competes with God. It is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. What is the greatest threat to the Western church? Is it Islam? Abortion? The homosexual agenda? Creeping secularism?

A good case can be made that Jesus would say it is our wealth and our materialism, which have spawned a thousand amusements for us to fritter our lives away with. Notice that, in this class the people, are those who remain inside for a long while. These things are said to **CHOK**E the Word – it's a slow, gradual process. It ends with being unfruitful and useless in the kingdom. We need to be ruthless and self-critical here. The Word of the Kingdom will not share the stage with our cares and our riches.

Finally, the fourth category, in v.23 is that which is sown on good soil. This is the one who hears the word and understands it. Luke says he has a good and noble heart. They are true believers, they endure to the end. They hear truly and build their house on the Rock. Though they are all fruitful, they are not equally fruitful. There are three yields, a hundred, sixty and thirty fold. The Word, which seems foolish and weak, will through these hearers reap a bountiful, world transforming harvest. The parable is thus calling us to hear the Word of the Kingdom. It challenges our perception and calls us to re-orient our lives around the gospel. It pleads for responsible and, thus, productive hearing.

There is a story of three older men, all hard of hearing, who went out for a walk. One says: "It's windy." The second says, no, it's Thursday. And the third says, me too, let's go get a drink. Be careful what and how you hear – it will determine your destiny! Amen.

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