

Matthew 13:1-23

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[0 : 00] Do you ever find yourself wondering if this Christian message, if this news about Jesus is true, how come so many people reject it?

! Or do you ever wonder if Jesus did these amazing miracles when he was on earth, healing the blind, causing the lame to walk again. If he did those things then, then how come there was still so much pain and suffering in the world? If Jesus really was God's appointed king, how come that kingdom hasn't yet come?

Do you ever wonder things like that? They're all good questions. I think they're probably the questions, or like the questions, the disciples were asking on this day.

Look at verse 1. The same day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the sea. Now that should make us ask, well what was this day? What has happened on this day? You can see what's happened on this day if you turn back to chapter 12. It had been a very busy day in the life of Jesus and his disciples.

So for example, it was a Sabbath day, he'd been in the synagogue, verses 9 to 14, he healed a man with a withered hand. That had caused some controversy. Then, verses 22 onwards, he'd cast a demon out of a blind and mute man, so the man could speak and see.

[1 : 19] Then it got the crowds wondering, who is this man? Is he the son of David? Is he God's promised king? But it also caused controversy. So while some were wondering if he was God's messenger, the chief priests and the Pharisees said, no, no.

He's on Satan's side. By the prince of demons, he casts out demons. So there was controversy about who Jesus is and what he was doing. So if Jesus' message was true, how come it was going to be hard following him?

How come even the experts, the really religious people, were rejecting him and concluding he was on the devil's side? So these are the questions in the disciples' minds.

Perhaps they have the questions in our minds. If Jesus is real, how could it be so hard following him? How come so many people reject? And these are the kind of questions that Jesus answers throughout the whole of this chapter.

At least we get part of the answers here as we look at this first parable he tells. So look what he does on this day. He goes out of his house, sat down by the sea and what happens? Verse 2.

[2 : 29] Great crowds gathered about him. So he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. It was the other way around to the way it is today in Jesus' time.

In Jesus' time the person teaching would sit down and everyone else would stand up. And now we do it the other way around. That's what's going on. As Jesus sits down in the boat, there's a crowd gather around standing there listening to him.

They've come to listen to what he's going to say. Now can you imagine yourself for a moment in that crowd, the sea of Galilee, glistening blue behind you. Why would you have come to hear this man?

It could be you'd heard his teaching before. At the end of chapter 7 the crowd said, who is this guy? He teaches with such authority. Maybe you've come because you've heard or even seen some of the miracles.

Perhaps you've come to see another miracle. I wonder what would have brought you there. I don't wonder what you'd expect as Jesus sitting down starts to teach. And he starts to tell a story.

[3 : 28] We've got that story there in verses 3 to 9. And it's a kind of funny story, isn't it? A guy goes out to sow some seed. Well that's how he did it in those days. He throws some seed around and some of it lands on a path.

And some of it lands in thorns. And some of it lands in rocks. And some of it lands on good soil. He who has ears, let him hear. What would you feel? I've got to be honest, I feel pretty short-changed. If I pay a lot of money to go and see a movie, and that's all that happens. I say, where's the plot? Where's the drama? Where's the tension? What's this about? And I wonder if the crowd felt a bit let down.

That raises a question, doesn't it? What does this mean, Jesus? Why are you telling us this story? Where's it going? And why are you telling these stories anyway? We came to hear some great teaching.

Why the storytelling? That is exactly the stupid questions the disciples ask. So two things we're going to look at. What does this story mean? But first of all, why is Jesus telling parables in the first place?

[4 : 28] Because that's the question the disciples ask down there in verse 10. Then the disciples came, as you will later on in the day, and said to him, why do you speak to them in parables?

I'm sure I remember hearing in Sunday school that Jesus told parables because they were memorable stories that people could remember. Yet that's not the answer Jesus gives.

Look at what Jesus says about why he uses parables. Verse 13. 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. This great crowd says Jesus, they've been following me around, they've been looking at the signs, they've been wanting to hear some wise words. But they don't really see what's going on.

They're not seeing the full picture. They don't understand who I am. And he goes on, indeed in their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. Isaiah had lived 700 years before Jesus.

[5 : 26] Now Isaiah had lived in a time where most people in Judah were turning away from God's word. Where even the king of his day had not listened to God's message through Isaiah. This is what the Lord had said through Isaiah.

You will indeed hear, but never understand. You will indeed see, but never perceive. For this people's heart, the hearts of the people in Isaiah's day and now in Jesus' day, have grown dull.

Their ears 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.

The people in Isaiah's day were blind to spiritual truth. If they'd opened their eyes and seen it, they would have turned to God for rescue, but they didn't. The word of God is just like background noise in their eyes.

They just ignored it. Maybe you're one of these people who has a television on all the time at home. We have friends like that. It drives me nuts, I have to say. So they have the television on, or the radio on, and you say, well, what was that they just said?

[6 : 27] What was that you just heard? Oh, I have no idea! That was just noise. I just ignore it. I just cut it out. Well, that's what these people were like with the word of God.

It was just the background noise of their eyes. They didn't really listen. They didn't really have eyes open. And Jesus says, that's true of this crowd. There were remarkable things happening.

But they're not really paying attention. It's always like elevator music to them. Now remember, Jesus is speaking at a time of conflict. He's speaking at a time of a huge crowd following, but when the religious leaders are getting very upset by what Jesus is doing.

And so now, rather than speaking plainly and clearly, he's speaking in parables. In fact, if you look down to verse 34 for a moment, you'll see he's now doing all his teaching in parables.

All these things Jesus said to the crowd in parables. Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. He's changed his style of teaching now. That's the way he's doing it.

[7 : 26] Why is he doing it? Surprisingly, he says, I'm using parables because this people will not perceive spiritual truth. They only want to hear what they want to hear.

So Jesus is telling us first, he's using parables as a means of judgment. He's actually taking away from people. Some people will not get it.

That's the message, isn't it? In verses 13, This is why I speak to the parables, because seeing they do not see. Does that surprise you?

Does it shock us that Jesus would actually, in a sense, take away clear-fetching from us? Say things so people don't understand. I guess it might make us worried.

If Jesus isn't trying to make it clear to us, then what's the point trying? Maybe we just can't know God at all. Well, parables are not only a means of judgment. They're also a means of engagement.

[8 : 27] If we look back to verse 11 for a moment. Remember, the disciples asked Jesus, Why are you using parables? And he says this to them, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

And then in verse 18, he starts to explain the meaning. As the disciples ask, as the disciples are hungry, as the disciples have had their eyes at least partially opened to truth, so they want to hear more, so they want to find out more, so they ask more.

So for them, the parables are a means of engaging them, not judging them. They're a means of making them ask, making them seek, making them want to find out more. And remember who Jesus is talking to back in verse 2.

He's talking to the crowds, talking to the crowds that have gathered. And so for them, he's not just giving them information, but an invitation. If they want to find out more, if they want to learn, if they want to be able to see, they will be able to.

Back in chapter 7, when Jesus had finished the Sermon on the Mount, as he was finishing the Sermon on the Mount, in chapter 7 verse 7, he said, Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find.

[9 : 42] Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. And for the one who knocks, it will be opened. See, for those who want to engage with the parables, for those who want to understand, as they pray, as they seek, they too can receive the kingdom, the secrets of the kingdom.

And so Jesus wants to encourage his disciples in that as well. You see down to what he says to them in verse 16. Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

Truly I say to you, many prophets, and righteous people, long to see what you see, and did not see it. And to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. In other words, Jesus is saying to them, Look, the whole Old Testament, these prophets, these righteous people who looked for the day of God's promised King coming, they will long to see and hear these things.

You've got the privilege of living in these times. Now, what do you think? Are we less privileged or more privileged? What have you had to do today to come and hear the word of God?

We had to come to this room, or you could have opened up a Bible, I suppose, you could read the word of God, it's in our own hands. We didn't have to go down to a lake to hear the one person preaching it, did we? You get to sit down, the crowd's here, you have to stand up.

[11 : 01] We're in an enlightened position. We have a greater privilege. Surely that should cause us to want to hear, to want to know, to ask, to knock, to seek.

So why does Jesus use parables? Well, partly as a means of judgement. For those who really are not interested in spiritual things, those who do not want to perceive, do not want to see, will not see, will not hear.

But partly as a means of engagement, to make us think, what is that about? To cause us to pray. To cause us to seek the kingdom of God. So that's why Jesus uses parables.

But then what does this parable mean? Well, the great thing about preaching on this is that Jesus tells us what it means. So this is where I know I cannot go wrong. Look down to verse 18. Let's look briefly at Jesus' explanation of this parable.

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom but does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

[12 : 06] Just those birds come and take the seed away from the hard soil. So the message of the kingdom of God, the message of Jesus, God's King, is just taken away from them.

See, Jesus is the sower. He's been preaching, spreading the good news of the kingdom since chapter 4. The word of the kingdom is the message he's been preaching.

And this is how God's work is done in the world. God's word is preached. And it goes out and does its work. Yet for some it has apparently no effect as the message is taken away.

So the invitation for us is to listen to the parable as Jesus says at the end. So who is the soil? The people on the path, or the soil, the people represented by the soil on the path, are the people who were told the message just gets snatched away from their heart.

Never impacts their heart at all. Like falling on deaf ears. The heart in Jewish thought was not just the emotions as we often use the heart. But it was the whole control centre of the body, the whole control centre of the person.

[13:16] It was mind as well as emotions. Rational thought as well as affections. So the people here are the people who just never really register the message at all.

And so Satan snatches it away. Do you notice it's a spiritual battle here as well? It's not a neutral world where the message of God goes out. Rather there is an enemy represented by the birds here.

He snatched away the message. As I was preparing for this, I was thinking about a man I know well. He comes to church sometimes. We exchange many emails. And he will often tell me that he is a follower of the Lord Jesus and a follower of the Lord Buddha.

And he has his spirit guide and he doesn't want to read the Bible with me. In other words, he is not actually listening to what Jesus says at all. And in fact, he doesn't really want to listen.

All my invitations that open up the scriptures to him, he turns down. Why? He just doesn't really want to know. He only wants to hear what he wants to hear. He doesn't want to be challenged by anything that is outside what he believes.

[14:22] His heart is hardened. You see there is an enemy there snatching away the message. And that's what's happening. So there is the path. There is also the rocky ground.

Look at verse 20. As for what was sown on the rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. Yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while. When tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. This is the kind of person who is desperate for good news. They hear the good news that God loves them in Christ.

They hear the good news that there is hope of a new creation one day. That every tear will be wiped away. They think, that's great, that's what I need. I need to feel loved. I need to feel this hope. Yes! They have instant joy. And yet, they don't last. Why? Verse 21. Yet he has no root in himself.

[15:19] In other words, that seed, the message, hasn't got down deep into the soil. It hasn't really affected their lives. They don't own him, or shape him, or change him.

It's just there on the surface. And so when hard times come, he gives up and looks for another quick fix. Look at what Jesus says. When tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

I think of a young lad named Hamish, who I knew 14 years ago. Great guy. He came to a couple of Christian camps I ran. He came with a friend of his from school. He was ever so excited about the message.

He enjoyed the meetings. He enjoyed singing praises to God. He professed his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And then, he left school and went to university.

And on his own, living in Dundee, away from his old friends, away from his own church, standing up as a Christian was too hard.

[16:19] It was easier to get drunk in the bar like everyone else. It was easier to fall into what everyone else was doing. See, he liked the good news. But Jesus doesn't just make his good promises.

He also promises his persecution. He also promises his life will be hard. And for my dear friend, that message had never sunk into his heart. It didn't control him. It didn't shape his identity and who he was.

And so, judging by his Facebook posts, he fell away. There's the path, there's the rocky soil. And thirdly, there's the thorns. As for what was sowing among the thorns, verse 22, 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.

Notice there was no joy in these people's lives when they heard the word. They didn't go, yes, this is good. Rather, they thought, okay, let's get on with life then.

And so they did. But the message never bore fruit. The message was choked out. Why? Because they were too absorbed with the cares of the world. Literally in the original, the cares of the age, this present age.

[17:31] The cares of the things that were right about them, material things. The worries they had. Now, what are the cares of this world? Well, they may not be bad things necessarily.

It could be finding a new job because you need a new job. It could be worries about your health because you're not feeling well. It could be worries about family, elderly parents or young children.

There are all kinds of things that can rightly take some of our attention and some of our energy. But the problem with these people, as Jesus describes them, is that the message was just choked by that.

Just like the flowers in our garden. They do not grow. Why? Because of all the weeds. It's just impossible for the flowers to grow. And so it is with these people.

The message of the kingdom of God doesn't bear fruit in their lives because they're, it gets choked and swamped by these material matters. These practical everyday things that just choke out the message.

[18 : 32] To occupy the spiritual, with material matters, to consider things of spiritual importance. But it's not just the cares and worries that preoccupy them. What else does Jesus say in verse 22?

The deceitfulness of riches choke the word. Money and wealth are deceitful, aren't they? Proverbs 23 verse 4 says this, Do not toil to acquire wealth. Be discerning enough to desist.

When your eyes light on it, it is gone. For suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven. It's deceitful. It's deceitful because it promises so much, doesn't it? Think of all the adverts we see.

If you have this car, you'll be happy. If you wear this makeup, you'll be loved. If you do this, if you have the nice house, you'll have an easier life. It's all lies, it's all deceit, isn't it? Yet the deceitfulness of wealth so easily creeps up on us.

About eight years ago, I was preaching on this parable in Mark's Gospel in my old church. And at that time we were trying to sell one house and try and buy another house. And it really struck me as I was preparing how the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth had been occupying my heart, were choking out God's message.

[19 : 49] Suddenly the desire to, oh we could get this kind of house, ooh we could have this sort of place. It was all just taking up my brain space and therefore taking up my heart space. Wealth is deceitful, isn't it?

Wealth is deceitful. When material matters, when the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth control our desires, now thinking the word of God gets changed. So that's all the bad news, isn't it?

The seed on the path, the seed on the rocks, the seed among the thorns, they all represent people who hear the word of God but for some reason, or for various reasons, it doesn't bear fruit in their lives.

It doesn't actually change their lives or bring them salvation. John Chrysostom, who was a great preacher in the early church, around 400 AD, said this, preaching on this passage.

Mark this, the way of destruction is not only one, there are differing ones and wide apart from one another. That's his warning, and it's a good warning. But what's the way of life then?

[20 : 51] Well, let's look at verse 23, the good soil. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit, and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, in another thirty.

In a normal harvest in those days, seeds would produce between five and fifteenfold a harvest. So this is a supernatural harvest, thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

This isn't natural, this is God's work in people's lives, causing this abundant harvest, this great crop. There's a picture for us of the transforming power of God's work.

That as God's word, as we accept it in our hearts, as it gets rooted in our hearts, as it controls our thinking, our affections, our identity, our desires, our hopes and our ambitions.

So God causes fruit to grow in our lives. It's the fruit of a transformed life now. And the fruit of eternal life to come in God's kingdom.

[21 : 52] So what is the good soil? Well, as we look at the parable, it's a heart that's uncluttered by being obsessed with the things of this world, with the cares and worries.

It's a heart that doesn't fear tribulation, but holds on to God's promises, even in the face of persecution. It's a heart that will receive spiritual truth, not just let the truth bounce off.

It's a heart unlike the people Jesus describes in verse 15. With their ears they can barely hear, with their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts.

And turn and I would heal them. See, ultimately good soil, the hearts represented by good soil, the hearts that are ready to receive God's message, that we need to turn and be healed.

A message that's so counter to what we hear about human beings today in the media. It says, oh, you're all you need, you can build your own self, you can build your own life, you're a good person really.

[22 : 58] No. Good soil is ready to receive God's message and turn to God to be healed. In short, good soil is a heart that's been touched by God's grace and so will bear fruit.

So the big question for us, for you and for me as we close, is what soil am I? So this is a message for preachers, not just the people having to listen.

How do I listen to the word of God? Is my heart ready to receive God's word? Or is my heart only ready to receive what I want to hear? What soil are you?

What soil am I? He who has ears, so Jesus, let him hear. Let's pray.