

Matthew 13:1-23

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 June 2023

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Turn with me if you've got a Bible to Matthew chapter 13. We're beginning a short series, just four sermons in Matthew 13 that'll get us to the holidays. And it's boiling hot, isn't it? And so if you feel you need to get up and get some fresh air, honestly, feel free.

No one will think any badly of you at all. All right, how about that? Matthew 13 is about the kingdom of God. It's about parables. And you take verse 10 as a text.

Really, this question, why do you speak in parables? The disciples come to him and say, why is that the way you teach? There are three sections in the passage we're looking at.

And in the middle bit, Jesus explains the story. In the middle of it, there's this confusing explanation of why Jesus speaks in parables. And I want to dive just into the middle of it and ask that question that the disciples ask in verse 10.

Why do you speak to people in parables? Let me set the scene for you. Notice how the chapter opens. We're told that Jesus went out of the house and he sat beside the sea.

[1 : 12] Great crowds gather to hear him. In fact, the crowds are so great that he's got to get into a boat to get away from them. And he speaks to them from a boat.

This is what seems to be happening. Jesus, I must heal the sick. People are clamoring for it to touch him. And no doubt he wants to speak to them. So he puts a little bit of distance between him and the crowd. Picture it, if you can.

The boat is his pulpit. His voice carries across the water crisp and clean in the morning air. The steep banks are a little bit like a well-designed amphitheater.

There's perfect acoustics. And Jesus is in the boat. The crowds are on the shore. And they're hanging on his every word. And we're told that he began to speak to them in parables.

Why? In fact, at the end of the chapter, verse 34, we're told that Jesus didn't speak anything to them without using a parable. So why, Jesus, do you speak in parables?

[2 : 15] The disciples ask him. If you've got a church background and you're here this morning, you went to Sunday school when you were a child, you've probably heard that parables are an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Maybe. Maybe you think of them like beautiful little anecdotes that make difficult things straightforward. Stories Jesus tells.

So why doesn't every preacher speak in parables? Why don't they teach preachers to do that in Bible college? I love what Spurgeon says of so much of people's preaching.

He says, so much of preaching is over people's heads. Spurgeon said, don't forget, Jesus said, feed my sheep, not my giraffes. And yet so often, isn't it, the way preachers speak, it's kind of out of our reach.

It's inaccessible. So why does Jesus speak in parables? What is he doing here? It makes perfect sense, but it makes no sense.

[3 : 22] You see, in verse 10, you can sense their bewilderment. What are you going on about? Jesus has told a little story, nice little story about a farmer sowing seeds.

Well, what's that got to do with anything? Why do Jesus tell stories like this? And they say to him, verse 10, why do you speak in parables? And his answer is shocking.

His answer is shocking. It's not what you expect. He quotes from the Old Testament, from Isaiah chapter 6. And he says in verse 13, this is why I speak in parables. Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

Indeed, in their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says, you will indeed hear, but you'll never understand. You'll indeed see, but you'll never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they cannot hear, and with their eyes they have closed, lest they should see

with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart.

And I would turn and heal them. Why does he speak in parables? So that they could understand?

No. So that they wouldn't understand.

[4 : 45] Why does he speak in parables? To reveal the truth? Or to conceal the truth? And you can understand, can't you, why the disciples, they're bewildered. I mean, it seems, doesn't it, such a wrong move to Jesus' followers.

A strategic mistake, a PR blunder, of the highest order. The crowds are gathering, they're hanging on his every word. Surely now is the time to put the most clear, most comprehensive PowerPoint presentation available.

Now is the time not to be speaking in riddles. Now is not the time to be speaking in stories that people do not understand. Why don't you give it to them straight, Jesus says.

Don't you want people to know who you are? Don't you want people to follow you, Jesus? And the answer to that question is yes and no.

Doesn't Jesus want people to know who he is and what he's about? Well, yes, of course he does.

But no, he doesn't. Because with the rising popularity, at the same time comes mounting opposition to Jesus.

[5 : 57] You can see that in chapter 12, just the chapter before, chapter 13. His family come to take him away because they think he's mad.

And in the middle of the chapter, the authorities accuse him of being in league with the devil. They think he's bad. And even his strongest supporter, John the Baptist, his best friend is having second thoughts about him.

He sends disciples and he says, are you for real? Or should we look for another? And so you see, Matthew 13 is a really crucial point in Jesus' ministry.

His popularity is on the increase, the crowds are gathering, but at the same time, opposition is growing. And so Jesus speaks in parables to sift his hearers.

He sorts his hearers into those who want to know and those who don't really want to know. Those who don't want to know, who are hard-hearted, will wander off to someone else and they'll get bored of their stories.

[7 : 04] Jesus is playing hard to get. And only those who really want to know will hang around. In other words, what I'm saying is this, parables are a little bit like a filter.

If you like, they reveal the truth to those who want to hear and they conceal the truth from those who don't. Think, for example, of a stained glass window. We haven't got one in this church, but think of a stained glass window.

And as you're walking along the side of a church, maybe a path alongside the church, you look up from beneath the stained glass window. What do you see? You just see colored glass.

You don't see it from the pathway. It just looks like dark glass, doesn't it? Discolored glass. But if you go into the church and the sun comes blazing through that window, you see this beautiful picture.

You get the message. You're walking alongside. You don't get it. It's just dark glass. It's indistinct shapes. And the parable's a bit like that. Maybe you're sitting here and you just think, what are they going on about?

[8 : 15] They're just like dark shape. Dark shapes. They don't illumine the truth. But actually, inside the church, at the same time, you go in and suddenly you see the beauty.

The beauty of the truth. It all depends, doesn't it, with the stained glass window, are you on the outside or are you on the inside? To you, Jesus says to his disciples, his followers, verse 11, to you, it's been given to know the secrets of the kingdom.

But to them, it's not been given. Let me give you an illustration from church history. Two of the great reformers of the English Reformation were Hugh Latimer, he's one of the martyrs, and the other guy was a guy called Thomas Bilney.

Now, they were both in Oxford University. Latimer was a priest. Bilney was converted first. And Bilney wanted Latimer to become a Christian.

But these were dangerous times. There was serious opposition to the Reformed faith. In England at that time, if you were caught reading some of the works that were being taught on the continent by Luther or Calvin, your life could be in danger.

[9 : 24] You could be imprisoned. You could lose your life for reading the Bible. That's what it was like. And Bilney had come to know the truth of the gospel. He was burdened for his friend Latimer.

He really wanted to share the gospel with his friend Latimer. And so what he did was brilliant. The Bible says, isn't it, that as followers of Jesus, we should be innocent as doves and as wise as serpents.

So Bilney comes up with this great idea. He says, I'll go along and I'll go into the confessional. And I will confess to my priest. I will confess to Hugh Latimer.

I will confess to him the new ideas that I'm finding in the New Testament all under the seal of the confessionals. Very clever. But do you see what he was doing? He was planting, wasn't he, the gospel's truth in Latimer's mind.

So that when the Holy Spirit began to work in answer to Bilney's prayer, those truths would spring forth to life and would bring fruit. And that's what Jesus is doing in Matthew 13.

[10 : 26] He is planting the truth into people's minds for later on. And he puts it in such a vivid and unforgettable way. But it requires interpretation.

To understand these truths, you have to come out of the crowd into the house. You have to be willing to come and sit humbly at Jesus' feet and be taught by him as the disciples do.

So let's do that. The introduction is a bit long and the points are quicker. This parable is about the kingdom of heaven and its progress in the world. Three things. A vital activity, a variable response and a very big result.

So first of all, there's something that's absolutely vital. Something absolutely vital to the coming of Christ's kingdoms in this world and that is the word of God, the seed. A farmer went out to sow.

It's an everyday story of country folk and it's probably happening at the very moment Jesus is speaking. There on the beach, Jesus is preaching to them from a boat.

[11 : 28] There's probably a farmer up on the cliffs planting crops and he's sowing the seed. But notice the seed according to Jesus later on in the passage is the word of God.

And it's a message about the kingdom, how the kingdom comes. How God's sovereign rule gets set up in the world. This is how the king sets up his kingdom.

Not with a fanfare of trumpets. Not with a motorcade of limousines. Not by military force. Not by political wheeling and dealing but by the patient, continual scattering of the seed.

Week in, week out, year in, year out. And Jesus' teaching, never underestimate that. A farmer went out to sow. Notice Jesus doesn't identify who the farmer is.

We know it's Jesus of course. Jesus came to preach, didn't he? Somebody has said about Jesus, God had one son and he made him a preacher. Jesus is the farmer who came out to sow but he leaves it open-ended, doesn't he?

[12 : 40] He doesn't necessarily identify himself in the parable. And so it is anyone who sows the word of God. Any parent with children growing up in your home telling them Bible stories.

It's any gospel worker, any Sunday school teacher, anyone who has a conversation with another person and drops the name of the Lord Jesus into a conversation.

A farmer went out to sow. That is what the church is called to do. To scatter the word of God amongst all sorts of different people. To scatter the seed of the word of God in countless conversations and to be intentional about it.

And so God's kingdom is not going to come to healing just by us meeting and building and worshipping in this building. Every year I buy grass seed.

I use most of the grass seed but I leave some grass seed in the box. I now have six boxes of grass seed that I've bought over the last six years and I've found out the seed is useless now.

[13 : 51] There's no point keeping it. There's no point having grass seed and keeping it in the box in the shed. The point of the seed is what? It's to sow it. It's to get it out into the ground. And so God's kingdom is going to come when we leave this building and start having conversations with people in our families and our networks on our streets and telling them about the Lord Jesus.

Of course you don't need to tell them everything there is to know about Jesus. You don't need a word perfect gospel presentation with drawings. You don't even have to have a particular method. You just have to love Jesus and because you love Jesus out of the abundance of your heart your mouth will speak and talk about Jesus and his kingdom. Slip him into conversation.

Pray Lord help me to do it. It doesn't seem like very much does it as I say that. And sometimes you have to wait a very long time before you see any results. But there is life in the seed isn't there?

And it will produce the harvest. I love what Martin Luther said about the Reformation. Somebody said to him how did the Reformation happen which changed the face of Europe?
[15:09] How could something like that happen? How can a man stand up against the might of the Roman Catholic Church? How did that happen? And Luther said I did nothing.

The word did everything. I got up in the morning I preached the word I prayed I went to bed and I slept and it happened because the word of God finds good soil and bears amazing fruit and that's what we must do to sow this message about Jesus in people's hearts and minds and broadcast it far and near.

And the kingdom of God will only come as you and I go out to sow the message of Jesus in people's lives. The kingdom comes as the word is taught as the word is spread.

And so why is there such a weak response? Why doesn't everyone get converted? Why doesn't everyone in your family believe?

And the answer according to Jesus lies in the soil. There are different types of soil. There is secondly a variable response. And so when the seed is scattered it falls on the wayside some falls on the stony ground some among thorns some on good ground.

[16:24] And I think we have to be really careful here. We mustn't be kind of fatalistic about this. You mustn't think there are four types of people. And which one of the types of people am I?

And if I'm one of the three types of people that doesn't bear fruit well there's no way that I can be saved. Am I a wayside shearer or a stony ground shearer?

No, no, I don't think Jesus is talking about that. He's not saying there's four different types of people. He's not saying there are four different types of personality. He's saying there are four different kinds of responses to the word of God, to the message of the kingdom.

And so you mustn't absolutize this. You mustn't put people in a box and label them, well they're a hard hearer, there's not much hope for them, or she is a thorny ground hearer.

We mustn't do that. We mustn't judge people like that. You might be this morning a thorny ground hearer. But next week, a good soil hearer for the gospel.

[17:27] Sometimes if you're like me, you have a good week and you have a bad week. And there's no reason at all. In the mercy of God, I find that I can be a thorny ground hearer and a good hearer all in the space of one sermon.

And you may have come in here this morning and your heart might have been stone hard, cold as ice. But God promises you to take away your heart of stone and to give you a heart of flesh.

And he can do that even as I speak to you this morning. And so the question is not what kind of person are you, but how are you responding? When you come here and you listen to the word of God preached, how are you preparing yourself for the word of God?

It's true, isn't it, that for some of us who've been in church for decades maybe, it can be like water off a duck's back. For some our hearts are like the well worn foot path, nothing gets through. It never seems to penetrate the surface. So many feet have trodden it down over the years and maybe you've been brought up on this. Maybe you've heard me a thousand times before and you've become gospel hardened.

[18:47] Maybe that's you. And some see Jesus says fell along the path and the birds came and they added up. And no sooner do you hear than you think I've heard it all before leaving and you switch off.

No sooner do you hear than verse 19 the devil comes and he snatches it away. And the reason that the devil can come and snatch it away is because we're not allowing it to penetrate our hearts and minds.

It's one of the reasons why I think we've got to work really hard as a church to cultivate the art of spiritual conversation. Some seed fell along the path and the birds came and added up.

And so we need to shoo away the birds. If you go to the cinema, it's so expensive to go to the cinema, but you go to the cinema, you come out of the cinema and you walk from the cinema to the car.

What do you talk about? What do you talk about on the way from the cinema to the car? Anybody want to shout out? It's really interesting, isn't it?

[19:56] When you walk from your seat to get coffee, what do you talk about? I don't really know why. I think part of it is the devil, isn't it? The devil loves to pluck away the seed of the words.

You're all thinking, no, good grief, I'm going to have to talk about the sermons through the office. Can't even ask someone how you are. The reason Satan can snatch it away is because we're not allowing it to penetrate our hearts.

I want to introduce a new ministry to IPC this morning, and maybe you want to volunteer. I think we need a scarecrow ministry. You could be a scarecrow, couldn't you, in church life?

You should talk to people about the sermon. What did you find helpful in what was preached? It's one of the reasons we have house groups, isn't it?

In lots of ways, the most important thing about house groups is what happens before or what happens after. They're kind of natural spiritual conversations. Say to someone, it'd be great to dig into this a little bit deeper, isn't it?

[21 : 06] I've read a book on this, maybe we could read it together. Why don't we meet up? We could read through Mark's gospel. There's all sorts of ways, aren't there, that we can do it in a way that shoots off the birds. And so let me ask you, don't do the devil's work for him.

Let's not do the devil's work. Let me say this again before you, this isn't about memory. memory. I think the internet hasn't helped us.

I think for some of us, we hear too many sermons. And I don't want you to feel guilty at all about not remembering my sermons. What I'm talking about here is not remembering sermons.

This isn't about remembering sermons, it's about responding to sermons. Let me show you the difference. If you were to ask me what did I have to eat last Thursday, I couldn't tell you.

What did I have for dinner? I couldn't tell you, and probably you couldn't either. But I did eat last Thursday. And I know that it did me good, and I'm still here. But I couldn't tell you what it was that I had.

[22 : 20] It's not a bad thing for you to remember. It's a good thing to furnish your mind with. But what is really important is that as you hear the word of God proclaimed, that you respond to it right now.

That as God's word is proclaimed, Jesus is speaking to you. He's not sitting in a boat. He's in the highest place that heaven affords. And by his spirit, and through his word, Jesus is speaking to you right now.

And he expects a response from you right now. He doesn't want you to make a mental note and say, do you know what, I'll look over that. Do you know what, I'll look that up on the internet. It's feeding on the word of God and receiving into your heart, not in one ear and out of the other.

Sometimes there's another response, it's an immediate response, but it's shallow and it's short-lived, doesn't bring any lasting change. It's like the seed that falls on the stony ground, says there in verse five, and he explains it in verse 50, that he hears the word, immediately receives it with joy, but it's got no root.

And it lasts for a little while and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, it immediately falls away. And so we talk about people, don't we, with rocks in their heads.

[23 : 40] rocks, but Jesus says we have rocks in our hearts. Our garden, certain parts of our garden has got a really thin level of soil, so the grass doesn't really grow in that area, because underneath it is the rock.

And the grass kind of springs up, but when the sun comes, it just dies down. And there are people like that, they're superficial in their response, they respond with enthusiasm, a show of interest, but it's short-lived.

And when trouble comes and persecution comes, they just back out. When it comes to standing in work or in school, they just back off. You don't see them anymore, maybe they're scandalized, they've never counted the cost, nobody's told them there's a cost.

And when trouble and persecution comes, I didn't sign up for that. And you don't see them again. It's a surface, superficial response. How do you deal with people like that?

Maybe you know people like that. Maybe they used to be here, they were full-on for a time, but now you don't see them anymore. How do you deal with the stony ground? Well, you've got to plough it up.

[24 : 49] You've got to get rid of those stones. Isn't that what Jesus did? I think of a couple of examples. In John chapter 4, he meets the woman at the well, and Jesus says, go and fetch your husband.

And she says, well, they're having a nice little chat about water. And she's got to get water from the well. She goes in the middle of the day, the sun is blazing hot, and Jesus says, well, actually, I've got living water for you.

I've got water on tap. She thinks to herself, that would be great, I wouldn't have to keep coming out here to get it. And they're having a nice little conversation. And Jesus is drawing her, he is giving her a thirst for something deeper, and then he suddenly introduces into the conversation, go and get your husband.

She says, I haven't got a husband. He says, no, the truth is, you've actually had five husbands, and the man you're living with now is not your husband. And do you see what Jesus is doing there? He is ploughing up the ground, he's showing her her need of a saviour.

She's a woman with many regrets, has done things that she bitterly regrets, there's stuff in her life that needs to be dealt with. If she is going to receive the living water that Jesus has come to give, he ploughs up the ground, it's painful.

[26 : 08] Why does he say to the rich young ruler, this guy who's got everything going for him, who turns up to church and people are tripping over themselves to welcoming. He's well known around town, he's wealthy, he's good looking, he's a moral guy, full of religion, and Jesus, he asks Jesus some good spiritual questions, what must I do to inherit eternal What a great question!

And Jesus says, you know the commandments, don't you? He says, I've kept them since I was a boy. Jesus says to him, and one thing you lack, he tears up the ground, he says, go and sell all that you have and give to the poor.

That's not a general command that all Christians are supposed to obey. Jesus is dealing with an individual and the problem with this man is not that he's got money, but money has got him.

He's greedy and covetous. And he doesn't realise it until Jesus puts his finger on it. And challenges about him. Do you see what Jesus is doing there?

He's ploughing up the soil in order that that seed might be sown. for people to become real Christians for the long haul, then it's so important that they come to Jesus for the right reason.

[27 : 23] Martin Oll Jones was a great preacher in the 20th century in central London. On Sunday night, 3,000 people would go and hear him. And he's a very powerful preacher.

And the story is told of a man one night when the doctor had preached a very, very powerful sermon, the man came up to him afterwards and said, Doctor, if you had given an altar call, if you had invited those who wanted to make a response to come to the front, I would have come forward.

And the doctor said to him, if you don't want Jesus five minutes after the sermon, you really don't want him. It's not about a surface emotion, but how much do you really want the Lord Jesus?

How serious are you about following Jesus? That is the test, isn't it? Not a surface emotion, how you feel, but serious discipleship. What are the rocks this morning that need removing for you to be a genuine follower of Jesus?

But even more dangerous on the hardness of the wayside here and the shallowness of the stony ground is the thorny ground here. Look at verse 22. As for what was sown among thorns, 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.

[28 : 48] The word grows, but so do the weeds and the weeds take over because the weeds are competing for the same nutrients, the same light.

And I think many of us fall into this trap. I get a notification on my phone every Monday that tells me how much screen time I've used. Incredibly, it almost always seems to be 20% less than the week before.

I'm pretty sure that's not the case. but I think in my life there's far too much screen time and not enough Bible time. Think how twitchy you get when you leave your phone at home.

Think how panicky you get when you can't find your phone. Too much screen time, too little Bible time. And sometimes we think we hear the word, read our Bibles, but the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, they just begin to choke us.

To change the metaphor, there's no more room on the hard drive. Our hearts are overcrowded with things. There's just too much in our lives. The things we see on the internet and the shops that we worry about.

[30 : 05] And maybe as I talk this morning, there are things that you know in your life, they've just crowded out the seed. The world comes and it wraps itself around us like a boa constrictor and it squeezes the life out of us.

We don't realise at first. And what Jesus is saying here is that to listen to the word, the life giving word, is the most important thing you do all week. And so it's not me just preparing a talk and giving it.

It is King Jesus speaking to you through his word, inviting you to respond. And there's nothing more vital than what we do as we gather as the people of God to hear the word of God.

And so what kind of soil are you? What kind of response do you give to the word of God? Every parable has a punchline and that is the thing to remember about the parables.

And the punchline is there in verse 23. three. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word, understand it, and indeed bear fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, another sixty, and in another thirty.

[31 : 14] And so it ends this parable in a very positive note. Let me finish with this. Jesus concludes his parable with a promise of super abundant harvest.

It's probably lost on us, but the average harvest in that barren desert region was never any more than seven or eight percent.

Never seven or eight times the amount of seeds sown. So ten times the seeds that were sown, that's an abundant harvest. Twenty times would be exceptional.

Thirty times, would be unthinkable. Sixty times unfathomable. One hundred times glorious. So what Jesus is saying here, he's not saying all Christians will bear fruit, some will bear a lot of fruit, some will bear enough fruit.

He's saying all Christians will bear lots of fruit, some a lot, some a whole lot more, some an extraordinary amount. And that's the test of whether or not you're a good soil for the gospel.

[32 : 28] Is the word bearing fruit in your life? They all hear the word, hard hearts, shallow hearts, thorny hearts, but it's only the good soil that bears fruit. The good hearer welcomes the word so it can't be snatched away.

Burrows it deep so that it won't wither and die. And exclusively it hangs onto the word, nothing else in case it's strangled.

And so what kind of soil this morning are you? Careless hearer. Notice you need to hear the word, then we're onto something else. receiving it with joy but actually never really deeply applying it.

Never seriously trying to live it out. Or the carnal hearer that responds but actually gets the life squeezed out of it by the cares of the world.

Careful to receive what James calls the word that is able to save you. And that's what's at stake, isn't it? The saving of your soul. And so this very big result, can you see it?

[33 : 45] Can you just see with me for a couple of minutes what Jesus is doing here? He's not just talking about your personal salvation. What Jesus is doing is he's preparing his disciples and us as a church for the future.

He's looking beyond his own lifetime, right up to today in fact. He's saying to us this morning, to his disciples in that room, welcome to word ministry.

Welcome to gospel ministry. Yes, there's going to be heartbreak. There will be bitter disappointments. If you've been around this church, you'll have experienced that. You're up against a powerful opposition.

You're up against the world, the flesh, and the devil. It's really easy to get discouraged. We do live in a day of small things. But in the midst of all the discouragements and setbacks, Jesus promises a harvest.

And those hearing him would never have believed it was possible. Think of Jesus. He fell into the ground. He died, and he was buried. And what came of that?

[34 : 55] More than can be numbered. More than the stars in the sky, more than the sand on the seashore, more than can be numbered. Think of the twelve disciples, opposed, persecuted, martyred. And just 25 years after Jesus spoke, the apostle Paul says, this gospel is bearing fruit all over the world, and it's growing.

Right up to the present day, and we can say the same. This gospel is bearing fruit, and it is growing today. We might not see much of it in London, but there's revival happening in other parts of the world.

And so don't lose your confidence in the word of God. Rudyard Kipling, in that famous poem If, said this, if you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken, twisted by knaves, to make a trap for fools, or watch the things you gave your life to broken, and stoop and build them up with worn-out tools,

you'll be a man, my son.

And that is the way to be a man or a woman of God. As a church, don't give up scattering the seed. Keep on scattering the seed.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this vision of your kingdom that you've given us. And we pray that we wouldn't lose heart.

[36 : 22] We do see so little in terms of results. So few people respond. Lord, we've got two blinkered view of things. We know that with you a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is a day.

And that you don't desire the death of the wicked, but that all might repent and come to a knowledge of the truth. And so Lord, we pray that this week, as we go out from this Lord's Day, carrying that precious seed, that message, which the prophets looked forward to, and now has been fulfilled in Jesus, the message of your kingdom.

We want to pray, Lord, that we would not keep it to ourselves, but that we would spread it all around our families and all around this glorious city. Help us to not grow weary and to not give up scattering the seed.

Thank you that there will be an abundant harvest in Jesus' name. Amen.