

### **Bearing Fruit for Eternity. Matthew 13:1-23**

I would very much have liked to be sharing this talk with you in person for this story of the sower and the soils which Jesus told is about us, about how we are hearing the gospel of Jesus, and about what we can expect as we share the gospel of Jesus.

And I was particularly keen to share its teaching with you for the key element in distinguishing the different soils, the different responses to Jesus' teaching is time, time to see what happens to the seed, and most of us have had enough time together for these different responses to become clearer amongst us, to become clearer and need to be addressed.

For this is not just descriptive, a story spoken about us, describing our lived experience. It does that. But It is also spoken to us.

Spoken to us to give us the opportunity to reflect, whether we are new or long standing believers, to reflect on how we are still hearing the gospel word, on the response we are continuing to make to the word of Jesus as our life circumstances change over time

To reflect and correct, if needed

To correct while there is still time so we are the good soil that receives Jesus' word and keep bearing the fruit that matters for eternity.

If it is a familiar story for many of us, the scene described by Jesus was very familiar to his first hearers.

#### **A familiar story**

*Matthew 13: On that day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. <sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore.*

*<sup>3</sup> Then he told them many things in parables, saying, "Consider the sower who went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn't have much soil, and it grew up quickly since the soil wasn't deep. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good ground and produced fruit: some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup> Let anyone who has ears listen."*

Galilee was an agricultural society with most of the population living in small, rural villages. They had all witnessed sowing in autumn to early winter, the sower walking over the ploughed field with his bag of seed over his shoulder and throwing it out onto the soil, broadcasting it before ploughing it in.

And they had witnessed time and again how that seed fared

They knew that on the border of those fields there would be paths where the ground had been made firm and hard by the passage of many feet and the seed would lie to be consumed by the birds

And experience had taught them that in areas of the field there would be rock shelves just under the surface and that the ground there would warm up more quickly because it was shallow, and so the seed would germinate earlier and send up its shoots, for these only to wither as spring became summer and the heat increased, because the roots couldn't tap into the deeper soil moisture.

Not having herbicides there were also parts of the field where the farmer had only slashed the weeds, not pulled them out, and ploughing hadn't got rid of the seeds and those seeds germinated with the wheat, grew up alongside it, competing for sun and nutrition, and choked it, made it unfruitful.

But they also knew the sower sowed to get a harvest – that was the whole point, and they would have recognised that the good soil, the good ground, really was good. 100, 60, 30 fold – varied outcomes varying from fair to very good.

They knew all this.

And There they were, gathered in such numbers that Jesus had to put out in a boat.

Attracted by his healings and his preaching, perhaps even by the controversy with the Pharisees.

Jesus had them, as it were, in the palm of his hand

And what does he do?

He describes for them what they already know, tells them a story – that didn't seem to have an obvious point.

It was a little dark, a little obscure, its meaning, if it had one, was not on the surface

He tells them this familiar story and challenges them to think about it

“Let anyone who has ears, listen.”

Why?

If that question was not troubling the crowd – perhaps they thought it just entertaining - it was certainly troubling the disciples, those who had responded to his preaching “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” [Matt. 4:17] by following him and being taught by Him

Those He had just called his family [12:49-50] for doing the will of His Father by following Him

Perhaps the disciples were looking for Jesus to build a popular movement, enlarge his following, keep up the momentum and the pressure on his opponents.

Perhaps they were themselves puzzled by this parable

So they ask “*Why are you speaking to them in parables?*” Why leave the crowd hanging with a puzzling story, one they had to work at to understand?

### **Why Parables?**

*Matthew 13: <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came up and asked him, “Why are you speaking to them in parables?”*

<sup>11</sup> *He answered, “Because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them. <sup>12</sup> For whoever has, more will be given to him, and he will have more than enough; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. <sup>13</sup> That is why I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand. <sup>14</sup> Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says:*

***You will listen and listen,  
but never understand;  
you will look and look,  
but never perceive.***

***<sup>15</sup> For this people's heart has grown callous;  
their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears, and  
understand with their hearts,  
and turn back—  
and I would heal them.***

*<sup>16</sup> "Blessed are your eyes because they do see, and your ears because they do hear. <sup>17</sup> For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see the things you see but didn't see them, to hear the things you hear but didn't hear them.*

Why parables?

They recognised the story as a parable.

Parables were used by the prophets and wisdom teachers in the Old Testament. A parable was a way of teaching based on comparison, and could be a saying, a phrase, or a story – as here.

It was a way of teaching that asked you to think about what you were hearing, to go beyond the surface of the words to get the point – an invitation to put in effort to make a discovery of truth by putting one thing next to another, for example the Kingdom of Heaven next to a mustard seed, or Jesus' ministry next to the story of a vineyard owner [Matt.21:33] or a sower.

Sometimes the comparison was explicit – such as "The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, or leaven, or treasure. That's the way the other parables in chapter 13 start. You still had to think, but you knew where to start.

*Matthew 13: <sup>31</sup> He presented another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. .... <sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into fifty pounds of flour until all of it was leavened." .... <sup>44</sup> "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied.*

But sometimes the comparison is left unstated – as here. Then the story from everyday life became a bit more like a riddle, and you had to use features of the context to puzzle it through – here, the circumstances of Jesus' ministry, what we have seen in the last few chapters of Matthew.

That is, unless you could ask the teacher, the teller of the parable to explain it to you.

Jesus used parables, especially stories from everyday life, a lot – as a way of helping those who wanted to discover the truth about Him and the Kingdom to learn more.

In fact later in the chapter it will say

*Matthew 13: <sup>34</sup> Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables, and he did not tell them anything without a parable*

But it was not straightforward and transparent, and not everyone got them

So this question is important, as is this parable.

The question helps us understand why Jesus is teaching as He is, how using parables fits into His wider mission, and how it makes growing in understanding dependent on believing in Him

Just as the parable itself will help us understand how Jesus sees people responding to His mission, to the preaching of His gospel.

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'Secrets' is a good translation of 'mysteries'.

In English a mystery is something that is obscure, even confusing, mysterious.

But in Greek a mystery is something previously hidden but now made known, what was secret now revealed.

Jesus says there is a difference in understanding between His disciples and others. Those who respond to His gospel that the Kingdom of heaven is near with repentance and faith, who believe and follow Jesus as the one who brings the Kingdom, the reign of God, close in Himself, who turn to Him for understanding – they are the ones to whom the previously hidden truths of the Kingdom will be made known.

But they are not made known to those who don't follow Jesus

This is part of a basic principle – those who have, who have enough faith to turn to Jesus, get more.

But those who don't turn to Jesus, for them things just become more and more obscure, they lose their connection with the fulfilment of the promises to Israel

In fact you see that here. The disciples who also didn't understand the parable know enough to come to Jesus and ask, to listen to Him – and so their understanding of the Kingdom will grow. But those who think Jesus doesn't know what he is talking about, or who don't have the interest to ask because they don't think Jesus is that important – it all becomes more of a puzzle.

This is still a Principle for us. The starting point for understanding what Jesus teaches and for growing in understanding, is believing in Jesus, believing the gospel that He is the living King, the Lord, to whom you can turn for help. With that, God's gospel makes increasing sense. Without that, initial understanding becomes disinterest, and disinterest soon becomes dismissal.

Understanding is on Jesus' terms, a gift.

Parables are a way of believers growing in understanding of the kingdom, the reign Jesus brings and what kind of King He is, and at the same time they are a way of veiling the truth, keeping out, those who don't believe.

<sup>13</sup> *That is why I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand.*

Jesus uses the words of the Isaiah passage he is about to quote to describe the reaction of so many witnesses of his ministry, reactions he has just talked about in chapters 11 and 12.

The crowd saw the wonders Jesus had performed, and described for John – the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, the lepers healed 11:3-6

But they did not see Jesus was the one to come.

They saw him cast out demons, but they did not see the one stronger than the evil one [12:28-29]

They heard him teaching, but they did not hear one greater than Jonah, one greater than Solomon. [12:41-42]

They looked, but did not see, heard, but did not listen or understand.

And at this stage of his ministry you might think that would discourage Jesus.

But it did not.

He saw it as the fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9-10, a passage Jesus quotes in full, a passage that speaks of God's judgement exercised through the preaching of the prophetic word on a sinful and unbelieving people – a people who shut their eyes to God's action, hardened their hearts to God's truth.

Jesus' ministry, including His teaching ministry, was discriminating – as John had prophesied

*Matthew 3: <sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out."*

It would separate the wheat from the chaff

That was part of the purpose of teaching in parables

To those who have – they were a means to grow in their understanding, grow in life

But to those who did not have, they were a means of judgement

It tells you listening to Jesus is Serious – and it is troubling to think that

The word that brings life our unbelief can turn into a word that brings judgement by hardening our indifference to Jesus

But that judgment was not yet final for the crowd – they could still change, the parables could still become a revelation of the Kingdom, if they came to Jesus, sought from him the significance of what He is saying.

That judgment need not be final for us – if we can be bothered to learn more, to come to Jesus in the gospel for understanding, to ask the living Jesus to open our eyes, to give us hearing ears.

Need not be final for you if, puzzled by what you hear, you ask Jesus for understanding

But already Jesus is saying that to understand, to get benefit, you need to listen with faith in Him – the point this parable itself makes

But before he explains the parable Jesus reassures his disciples of the greatness of the privilege they have in learning from Him the secrets of the Kingdom

<sup>16</sup> *“Blessed are your eyes because they do see, and your ears because they do hear. <sup>17</sup> For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see the things you see but didn’t see them, to hear the things you hear but didn’t hear them.*

When everyone else is just dismissing Jesus’ teaching, saying that it doesn’t make sense, not listening.

It would be easy for the disciples to wonder whether it really was that important

So Jesus says – they are blessed – to have eyes that do see, ears that do hear – that see the works of God’s King in what Jesus does, who hear the words of God in what Jesus teaches

And they are not alone

While others may not understand

This is what God’s people over the centuries have longed for [1 Peter 1:10-12]

The prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, David, and those who received their word as God’s word, longed for the fulfillment of the word God had spoken through them, for the fulfillment of the promises to Israel of the reign of God, the time when God would act to save His people through His chosen King and servant

And that is what was happening in Jesus words and work – God establishing His saving reign amongst His people through His Son Jesus – for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, a reign that was better, more glorious, more extensive – than the disciples could then imagine, but would learn about as they kept listening to Jesus.

Jesus reassures them, but knowing that his disciples were also having trouble grasping the point of the parable of the sower Jesus explains it to them – and to us who come to the story through the gospel of Jesus

### **Our lived experience**

*Matthew 13:<sup>18</sup> “So listen to the parable of the sower:<sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word about the kingdom and doesn’t understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the one sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> And the one sown on rocky ground—this is one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup> But he has no root and is short-lived. When distress or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he falls away. <sup>22</sup> Now the one sown among the thorns—this is one who hears the word, but the worries of this age and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> But the one sown on the good ground—this is one who hears and understands the word, who does produce fruit and yields: some a hundred, some sixty, some thirty times what was sown.”*

### **As Hearers – which soil are you**

It is all about v. 19 how people hear and respond to the word of the Kingdom, the gospel Jesus is preaching [Matt. 4:17] that the Kingdom of heaven has come near. So this parable is about how the people of Jesus' generation are responding to Him.

*Matthew 4: <sup>17</sup> From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

But the gospel the apostles preach is the same gospel

When they are proclaiming that Christ has died for our sins, been buried, and been raised by God on the third day

They are proclaiming Jesus is God's King, the one who rules forever on David's throne, and that we have to get ready for the revealing of His reign of peace and justice which is certain, get ready for the day on which he will come and judge the living and the dead, get ready by repenting and believing the gospel

The apostolic gospel is the same word of the Kingdom made even clearer and more certain by Jesus' death and rising

And that means this parable is also about how people respond to the gospel the apostles preach, the gospel preached to us

This is a living story, describing what happens now, amongst us – as we see day by day the gospel seed sown, and as we and others respond day by day to that gospel

And the story outlines four different kinds of responses

And what time has taught me is that all these responses are present amongst us, present now, present always

There is the seed sown on the path

There are those who are disengaged.

And this can describe your work colleague or relative with whom you have shared the gospel and it goes nowhere

But it can also describe some who sit, for months, even for years, in church.

They hear, but all the time they are thinking the message is for some one else, not them

It gets no traction

They're thinking about something else, here for some other reason than hearing the word

Friendship, their partner, a childhood habit

The words just wash over them

And they don't realise that there is a bigger agenda, beyond their disinterest

The devil, that ancient enemy, plucks the gospel word away, blinds their eyes to Christ's significance.

Tragic.

If you are listening and have never really engaged with your sin, and the reality of judgment, and life offered to you in Jesus – the words have just been so much blah

Don't think its your intellectual superiority, or your feeling no need in your happy life, that means you don't bother

You are being robbed of eternal life by one who only desires your destruction

You need to engage

Then there are those on rocky soil.

They like what they hear

There is a lot of good involved in the Christian life, in the gospel.

There is a sense of purpose, the idea that your life matters, that there is a God who cares for you, and Jesus is so good

The Word finds a place, they are glad

But then distress, or suffering, or persecution because of the word comes

The suffering spoke of can be quite general – hard times, as well as opposition to their faith, what Luke calls together 'times of trial, or times of testing'

And they give up because 'he has no root in himself, or herself

We see that, people who have been enthusiastic but then just drop off – when they realise the cost that they will lose friends, or they get tired of being mocked at work

But we also see people who are tested by sickness, or trouble with their children, and just stop – stop meeting with the Lord's people, let their confession of Christ just fade away into the background

They have No root in themselves

No depth of faith on which they can draw

No deep conviction of gospel truth

No tested personal dependence on our Lord Jesus

No habit of drawing near to God

When I have spoken with them

Not convinced of their sin – tend to believe they are not such a bad person

Not convinced of judgment – being saved from eternal death is not as important as being happy now

Not convinced that Jesus in His death is the only way to be saved, so that nothing is more important than holding on to Jesus



Not convinced of Jesus' love, of God's love. Being healed now only to die again would convince them they are loved, but God giving His Son for them while they are His deserved enemies to give them eternal life doesn't convince them of His love.

We are seeing people wilting in their faith even now – as they are tested by the circumstances of the pandemic

Just seems so hard

So hard to be thankful

So hard to trust that the Lord is in control in an anxious time

To believe that we are loved even as we find life a trial

So easy in weariness to give up listening to the word,

Withdraw from contact with other believers

Stop praying

Sometimes to start grumbling and complaining

What have you found in yourself through this time?

Do you have root in yourself?

Have you been shocked at how easily your confidence and hope has been shaken

How hard you have found it to be thankful to have a Saviour,

To lose sight of His sovereign love

Reminder that we need to cultivate a depth of relationship to our Lord Jesus

By keeping on listening to his word

Keeping on hearing the gospel

So that we keep gospel reality before us

The reality of sin and judgement – of our sin and our deserved judgement

The reality of forgiveness through faith in Jesus and the promise of eternal life

The assurance of God's love given by His Spirit in the conviction of the truth of the gospel – that Christ died for us while we were still sinners

And we keep on with the practice of that relationship in prayer and thanksgiving to our living God

Remember one of God's purposes in the lives of His people in trial is to cultivate that depth of relationship

*Romans 5:*<sup>3</sup> *And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance,*<sup>4</sup> *endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope.*  
<sup>5</sup> *This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

We need that depth for there will be other trials

And if you find yourself wilting – call out to the Lord Jesus. You can't renew yourself on your own.  
 You need the one who said we can always draw near for mercy and grace to help us in our need.

Then there is the third soil

There is growth, but without fruit

Cares of this age, and the deceitfulness of wealth – choke the word

In Mark – the desire for other things

In Luke – the cares, riches and pleasures of life

These things crowd in so there is No light, and the believer is robbed of nutrition

Again, it takes time for this to become apparent

It is something that happens over the lifetime of the plant, over years

A kind of slow death of zeal

Until Covid came along I have thought for many years that this is the biggest danger facing you

Life can be so rich for so many

Like the rich young ruler – we become so attached to our career satisfaction, or our housing plans and hopes, or what money can buy, or planning our retirement

Or life can be so hard as the years go by, coping with sick family, balancing tight budgets

And we can Stop hearing the word

Our Cares, or plans, or desires push the word out –

We no longer focus or concentrate on it

Or we don't want to give time to it – because it challenges our pre-occupations and ambitions

Keeps reminding us that there is an accounting beyond this life when those things we live for will all be consumed

Or that there is a Lord who challenges us not to be anxious but to seek first His kingdom and righteousness

You know that the cares, riches and pleasures of this world are very close to us

Are you listening to Jesus?

Are you still letting His word dictate your plans

When you make a decision about a job, or a home, or about involvement in a growth group or ministry – do you do what you are convinced is pleasing to Jesus, and do it for that reason

Are you Longing for the fulfillment of what He promises, is that where you have put your hope

Can you trust Him for your grief or pain, for your income and work

Do you love Him – more than – your wealth, the fulfillment of your plans, your worries

Then there is the Good soil

They hear and understand – and understanding is not merely intellectual

True understanding involves commitment to the response the gospel understood calls for

They understand that Jesus has come to save sinners – because our sin, our rebellion against God our Creator, is serious, deadly

So They hear and understand the seriousness and urgency of the call to repentance – and show that by repenting, saying no to self, and yes to Jesus – every day

And they understand whom the gospel proclaims Jesus – the Lord with all authority, the one who loves them and gave Himself for them, and they believe and follow, and keep on following

These believers bear fruit – fruit in Matthew's gospel is the practical outworking of commitment to Christ in what we think, do and speak [Matt. 3:8-10, 7:16-20, 12:33].

So fruit is a commitment to do all that Jesus has taught

It's a changed character – that shows poverty of spirit, meekness, mourning for sin, a hungering for righteousness, a purity of heart, mercy – and more

And it's good works that bring glory to the Father – faithfulness in relationships, trustworthiness in our word, love even of our enemies – and more

And yes, it will also involve a commitment to make disciples

And it is not as if these believers don't know the heat of the sun – times of trial – but they endure

And they know the allure of the riches and pleasures of this life – but they say no

And their Fruitfulness will vary depending on our circumstances and gifts

It is 30, 60, 100 fold

There isn't one set, uniform expression of hearing and understanding the word

But there will be fruit

It takes time, but praise God I have seen that fruitfulness amongst us over time, as you certainly have

People listening to the word, holding fast to the promises – and bearing fruit

Fruit of faithfulness – in trial – in sickness, or a hard marriage, or uncertain work,

persevering with thankfulness in loneliness and the disappointment of earthly hopes

persevering in hope as bodies become frail

Fruit of service of others – in ministry to mums and children and youth, in faithfully leading and attending growth groups

Fruit of generosity of support of gospel ministry – here, and in AFES, or our brothers and sisters who serve overseas

Fruit of persevering prayer for others to be saved, of bold conversations about the Lord Jesus

Fruit of a life ordered to tell others about the Lord Jesus and to serve His people in love

Seen all four

But there is only one to be, isn't there

Only one bears fruit for eternity, only one will share in the heavenly kingdom

What matters – is keeping on listening to the word of Jesus

Yourself

In your own heart

Always hearing it, and understanding

Challenge for you this morning

How are you hearing

One month a Christian – know what you need to do

One year

Ten

Fifty or sixty

You want to be good soil

This parable speaks to us directly as hearers of the word

But it also speaks to us as speakers of the word, as sowers in our own turn as we share the gospel of Jesus

### **As speakers – sharing the word**

This sowing can seem so random because the kind of soil is unknown until the seed lands

That apparent randomness is encouragement to take every opportunity – you can't judge the soil, the reception – the seed will find that out

And As you share the word – this is the kind of response you will see

So don't be discouraged

Don't be discouraged

By the Things that frustrate you. When, for example you speak clearly, sincerely – and it has no impact. That is a reason to pray, remembering you are in a spiritual struggles, and recognise, as the first hearers would, that the path on the border of the field, might one day be turned over as the boundaries changed. Keep sowing

Don't be discouraged by what Grieves you – that person who seems so enthusiastic, but then they start making excuses for not meeting with you

Don't be discouraged by those who Disappoint you – who may have started with you in the Christian life, but don't keep bearing fruit

Don't be discouraged

The word will bear fruit, find good soil

That is the whole point of sowing,

Our Lord sowed the seed to have a harvest

And it will

And The more you sow the bigger the harvest

But it takes time – and sometimes you may even have moved on before you see the seed you have sown bear fruit

### **Be Good Soil**

Brothers and sisters, the Lord Jesus has made known to us in His gospel the secrets of the Kingdom

Made them known in the parable of the sower to encourage you in your sowing, so you will persevere hopefully and expectantly. The gospel seed will find good soil

But more, in his mercy, before the final day, He has brought you to hear this familiar story to challenge you in your hearing

So do a check

Which soil are you?

What is happening now to your hearing the word?

Develop deep, tested convictions about the truth of the gospel

Weed out of your heart those things that stop you loving, trusting and obeying the Lord Jesus wholeheartedly

Be Good soil – bear the fruit of those who hear, understand, and put into practice all that Jesus teaches

Harvest time will come, and it will be apparent to all then how you have heard the gospel