

The Parable of the Sower

How to Hear the Word of God

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Parables, Sower

Introduction

Chapter 13 is another transition in Matthew's Gospel. In this chapter he begins the third of five major discourses of Jesus.¹ For the first time in Matthew's gospel Jesus begins to teach in parables, and the first parable is called by Jesus, "**The Parable of the Sower**" (13:18).



The Setting

The previous paragraph, which we considered last week (12:46-50), we discovered that Jesus' family, at this time, was having doubts about his new ministry. They "*thought he was out of his mind.*"² Jesus had just experienced an extended attack from the Pharisees (12:1-45), during which they accused him of being a servant of Satan and now he was experiencing the doubts of his own family. No doubt this weighed heavily on him.

Matthew 13:1-3 (ESV) ¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables,

Imagine this. Jesus *went out of the house and sat beside the sea*. One wonders if the pain of his own family publicly doubting him, propelled him to seek some time alone. Perhaps Jesus needed some fresh air. He went out and sat on the beach of the Sea of Galilee.

¹ Matthew 5-7, 10, 13, 18-20, 24-25

² Mark 3:21.

Jesus was never alone for very long. As he sat along the shoreline, the **crowds** of people **gathered about him**. Jesus was the kind of person to whom people were drawn and they simply could not leave him alone. Thus, with people pressing in around him, he got into a boat and sat down. From the boat he began teaching while **the whole crowd stood on the beach**. Thus, picture in your mind, Jesus is sitting in a boat, a little way from the beach, as he began teaching crowds of people as they had gathered to listen to him while standing along the beach. Out of the five major discourses in Matthew's gospel, this is the only one directed to the crowds and not to Jesus' disciples.³

The Boat

The boat may have **looked something like this**.

This represents a typical first century fishing boat, which has been in use along the shores of the sea of Galilee for hundreds of years.

The submerged hull of a boat almost identical to this was discovered in 1986 in the Sea of Galilee during a drought. It has been preserved for viewing in the Yigal Allon Museum in Israel.

Such a boat was about 26.5 feet long, 8 feet wide, and could hold about 15 people.

Tradition holds that this scene took place in what is called the "Cove of the Parables," which is horseshoe-shaped and surrounded by a low sloping hill that serves as a natural amphitheater providing natural environmental acoustics that would allowed Jesus' voice to carry about three hundred feet, thus enabling the crowds to hear his teaching.⁴

The Method

And he told them many things in parables (v.3). This is first time we find the word '**parable**' (παραβολή) in Matthew's gospel. Parables have been variously defined, such as, "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," or as "simple stories with a single point."⁵

Perhaps a simple but comprehensive definition of



ESV Study Bible, p. 1851



³ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 300.

⁴ ESV Study Bible, note at Matthew 13:1-2.

⁵ Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 301.

'parable' is "a relatively short narrative with symbolic meaning—'allegory, figure of speech.'"⁶ Matthew records fourteen parables told by Jesus, while the Mark and Luke add another ten.⁷

The Parable of the Sower (13:1-9)

As Jesus sat in the boat, he began teaching the crowds. Matthews tells us that Jesus "**told them many things in parables**" (v.3). He then goes on, in this discourse, to record a total of seven parables, but given how Matthew describes this teaching, these seven may not have been all that Jesus taught on this day.

Jesus calls this parable "the parable of the sower" (v.18), although when Jesus explains the parable (vs.18-23), the focus is on the response to the seed rather than on the one sowing the seed. Thus, this parable is often referred to as the parable of the four soils. In this first parable, Jesus uses an agricultural analogy with which all of his listeners would have been familiar.

Matthew 13:3-9 (ESV) "A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."

The image is one of a person walking through a field sowing seed as he goes. The seed falls in different locations on the ground and thus there are different results. Jesus offers four.

- 1) The first location is the **path**, which is very hard and exposed. The seed cannot break through the hard-packed dirt and is soon seen by the birds which quickly come and devour the seed. Everyone would have seen this happen.
- 2) The second location is **rocky ground**. This describes rock covered by a thin layer of soil that does not allow for the seed to take deep root. The thin soil is warmed by the sun and the seed quickly springs up, but the rock below prevents the roots from going deep to find moisture. Thus, the new growth is soon scorched to death in the hot sun.
- 3) The third location the seed falls upon is **among thorns**. Here there is sufficient soil and nourishment, but there is also the presence of thorns. The seeds grow, but so do the thorns. As the thorns grow they twist around the new growth and choke it to death.

⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 390.

⁷ See chart "The Parables of Jesus" in ESV Study Bible at Matthew 13.

- 4) The fourth location is on *good soil*. The seeds that fall on good soil find plenty of water and nourishment and so it produces a good crop of grain in varying abundant measure.

Jesus then concludes the parable with the words, "*He who has ears, let him hear*" (v.9). This phrase is first found on the lips of Moses, as he speaks about the necessity of God to graciously work in the heart⁸ of a person in order for true faith to take root and bear fruit through active obedience. This phrase is echoed throughout the Psalms and the prophets as a call from God to consistent obedience to his law and commands. Here, in Matthew 13, it is a similar call to not only hear words, but receive and welcome them into the heart, by putting them into practice.

What Should Be Heard?

Well then, what does Jesus want to be heard? That he knows about effective techniques of productive farming? Jesus does not at this point offer any further explanation. Only later, when "*he left the crowds and went into the house*" (Mt 13:36) and "*when he was alone*" (Mk 4:10) with the Twelve (and some others), did he offer an explanation of this parable.

The Explanation (13:18-23)

Jesus' explanation reveals that he is thinking not about farming, but about why different people respond differently to the same message of the kingdom of God. Jesus helps us understand what is going on in the heart of a person who hears the word of God. He summarizes four different responses.

We've all seen this too. We know a group of people who hear the same message, but they all respond differently. Why? How do we account for this? What is happening in their hearts? Jesus helps us understand.

Invitation to hear

When the disciples ask for an explanation Jesus begins by inviting them to hear.

Matthew 13:18 (ESV) "Hear then the parable of the sower:

Jesus begins his explanation with his disciples in exactly the same place as he ended with the crowds; with an invitation to hear and of course, as is understood, to obey. Hearing is the dominant idea in this parable. Jesus repeats the word five⁹ times in this explanation.

⁸ Deuteronomy 29:4.

⁹ Matthew 13:18, 19, 20, 22, 23.

1) Sown on the Path

The first response is response is symbolized by seeds falling *along the path*.

Matthew 13:19 (ESV) "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and 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."

The *seed* in the parable represents "*the word of the kingdom*." The *sowing* represents a person speaking the word of God or testifying about the message of God's kingdom.

When a person hears the word, but *does not understand it*, this gives opportunity for "*the evil one*," which is a reference to the devil¹⁰, to come in like birds and "*snatch away what was sown in his heart*." The ears hear, but the heart (i.e. mind) does not perceive. The '*heart*' represents the "person's innermost being."¹¹ It stands for the center core and depth of one's thoughts. Just as the seed cannot penetrate the hard-packed dirt on the busy foot path, so it is with some people whose hearts are so hard that the truth of God's word and kingdom does not penetrate with understanding.

These are those who think they understand but truly do not. They say things like, "I've already 'tried' God and it didn't work." Or "I know the gospel. I know all about Jesus. I've already heard this before. I know the story and it's not for me. Good for you, but this is not for me." Too much religious foot-traffic has trodden over their hearts and so they have grown hardened to God, to his only Son Jesus, to his word, and to his kingdom.

2) Sown on Rocky Ground

The second response to the word of God is seen in the seed that was sown on *rocky ground*.

Matthew 13:20-21 (ESV) ²⁰ "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."

The rocky ground in the parable represents the person who hears the word of God and "*immediately receives it with joy*," but later when "*tribulation or persecution*" comes, he discovers there is no faith deep enough in him to sustain him through the heat.

Notice that this person abandons God in difficulty just as quickly as he embraced him in the beginning. Jesus uses the same word, "*immediately*," to describe both their reception and rejection of the gospel. However, the problem is that there is *no root* that goes deep. The word

¹⁰ See Luke 4:12.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 346.

of God was only received superficially, rather than deeply. Thus, this person only “*endures for a while*.” Where there is no deep root, there is no long abiding in the word of God.

Some people hear the gospel and immediately receive it with enthusiasm. However, they fail to deeply consider it. They fail to “count the cost.”¹² They hear the good news and they receive it as good news, but they fail to consider the full implications of this holy calling. They fail to hear the words of Jesus, who says, “If they persecuted me, the leader, then they will also persecute you, my followers.”

The word “*tribulation*” here is the word that means “heavy pressure” and is used to describe the kind of pressure exerted while treading out grapes so as to make them burst.¹³ The word “*persecution*” is a particular kind of persecution, which “*arises on account of the word*.” In other words, this persecution because of one’s connection to God, his word, his Son & Messiah, and his kingdom. When this kind of pressure comes, there are some people who are “immediately offended¹⁴” and so they reject God, his word, and his kingdom.

3) Sown Among Thorns

The third response to the word of God is represented by the seed sown *among thorns*.

Matthew 13:22 (ESV) “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.”

A third possible response to the gospel and the word of God is seen in those who hear the word of God and they begin to grow in God’s word, but “*thorns*” are also growing along side them. The thorns are too close. They have not been uprooted and thrown away, but rather they have been allowed to remain close and crowd the new growth. Soon they “*choke the word*,” and are “*unfruitful*.”

The thorns represent “*the cares of the world*” and “*the deceitfulness of riches*.” The word translated “*care*” here is the word that means, “feeling of apprehension or distress...’anxiety, worry, anxious concern.”¹⁵ Back in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described the “cares of the world” as excessive worry and anxiety about what to eat, what to drink, what to wear, and

¹² Luke 14:28.

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992). 346, note 48.

¹⁴ The phrase here in the ESV, “he falls away,” translates one Greek word, *σκανδαλίζομαι* (*skandalizetai*), whose root meaning is “to cause offense,” and here means, an offense that leads one “to give up believing what is right and let oneself believe what is false” (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 375.)

¹⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 312.

where to live.¹⁶ When these worries of the world are given ground in one's life, they rise up and choke out the word of God.

The same is true with "*the deceitfulness of riches*." The deceitful promise of riches is that having wealth means having a happy life free from worry and anxiety. Riches never deliver on the promise. Riches always comes with its own attendant pain and problems. And when a love of money is given too much ground in the heart, it tends to rise up and choke out the word of God. When such is the soil of one's heart, the word of God proves unfruitful.

4) Sown on Good Soil

The final response is categorically different from the first three. The first three responses result in no fruit, but this final response results in abundant fruit.

Matthew 13:23 (ESV) "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, and in another thirty."

This is *the only response that bears fruit*. The first three bear no fruit, while this fourth example bears much fruit. In this example, the person hears the word of God and understands it. There is no hardness of heart, but rather tender-hearted acceptance of God's word. There is deep consideration and deep acceptance of the message of the kingdom. The word of God goes deep into the heart of this person. There is joyful acceptance, but also deep rooted endurance. Thus, neither the pressure of tribulation nor the presence of persecution can keep the word of God from being unfruitful. The result is abundant fruit.

The Application: How to Hear the Word of God

This parable is about hearing the word of God. Jesus is helping us understand what happens when different people hear the word of God and respond differently. So, Jesus, what would you say to us who desire to hear and obey your word? How should we hear the word of God?

1) Hear with Prayer: For Understanding and Against the Evil One

The first thing this text says to us regarding how to hear the word of God is that we are to hear with a prayer for understanding and against the devil. The devil snatched away the word sown in the heart, because the true nature of God's word was not rightly understood. Therefore, as we hear we ought to pray for the ability to understand his word.

We ought never to think that that we can rightly understand the word of God without help from the Spirit of God. Jesus concludes this parable by saying, "*He who has ears, let him hear*" (13:9). Jesus may be referencing Moses who said to Israel before they crossed into the

¹⁶ Matthew 6:25-32.

Promised Land, "*But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear*" (Dt 29:4). Understanding comes from the Lord. Ears to hear come only from the gracious work of God the Father. Therefore, if you want to hear and understand God's word rightly, then *when you hear God's word, pray for understanding*.

The Prayer of the Psalmist

The psalmist was so desperate for the Lord to give him understanding that in Psalm 119 alone he prayed for it more than a half dozen times.

Psalms 119:34 (ESV) Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.

Psalms 119:73 (ESV) Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.

Psalms 119:125 (ESV) I am your servant; give me understanding, that I may know your testimonies!

Psalms 119:130 (ESV) The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.

Psalms 119:144 (ESV) Your testimonies are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live.

Psalms 119:169 (ESV) Let my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word!

Whenever you are hearing God's word, be praying to him for the gift of understanding.

Pray Against the Evil One

We ought also to understand that there is an enemy who seeks to snatch away God's word from our hearts as we are hearing God's word, therefore, pray also against the evil one who desires to keep you from loving the word of God. The evil one and his wicked accomplices seek to sabotage your understanding of God's word. Pray for God to protect you from such attack. Pray against the evil snatching away of God's word.

2) Hear with Joyful Depth

Second, Jesus might say to us, **hear with joyful depth**. Yes, the word of God is rightly to be received with joy, but allow that joy to go deep so that pressures and persecutions are unable to shake your faith. Yes, receive the gospel with great gladness, but also receive it with great joy down into the depths of your heart and soul. Let joy find expression in deep rooted endurance, rather surface level exuberance. Yes, hear the word of God with joy, but hear the

testimony of the biblical fathers who tell us that the trouble will come to those who cherish God's good word, but the reward for faithfully endurance is eternally greater than the temporal relief from worldly persecution that comes from abandoning God's word.

Recall the words of Jesus to Saul, who become the apostle Paul.

Acts 9:16 (ESV) "For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Now consider all the suffering that Paul endured.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (ESV) ...imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Now hear his later words.

Romans 8:18 (ESV) For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Paul learned that those who desire to be glorified with Christ must also suffer with Christ (Rom 8:17). Look to Christ for how to endure suffering. Looking to this greater joy—an eternal joy—is what gave Jesus the endurance to faithfully make through his tortuous abuse and death on the cross.

Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV) ...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Listen deeply while expecting opposition. Pressure and persecution did not destroy Jesus' joy in God the Father, his word, or his kingdom. It was a deep joy, an eternal joy that gave him strength to faithfully and righteously endure the injustice of this cruel world. When you hear the word of God, receive it with joy, but hear the deep truth that God's eternal joy—found through enduring suffering for the sake of Jesus—is infinitely better than temporal relief of not enduring hardship in this life. *Temporal suffering is required for fullest enjoyment of eternal joy.*

3) Hear with Discernment

Third, hear the word of God with **discernment**. The word of God that was sown “among thorns” was unfruitful because thorns were allowed to grow close by, such that the thorns choked out the word. The “thorns” were worldly worries and anxiety along with the deceitful lies of riches. The discerning listener of God’s word must carefully discern when the worries of the world, like wickedly subtle weeds, are creeping in and gaining ground. We cannot allow the eyes of our hearts to be too much enthralled with the fading glory of this world. We must keep our eyes on the eternal glory of the next.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (ESV) ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

The thorns of this world choked out the word of God because they were allowed to grow too close and too large. Hearing God’s word with discernment will allow the Spirit of God to bring to our attention when we are too heavily occupied with, worried about, and consumed with the worries and deceitful riches of this world. The discerning hearer of God’s will cast her eyes beyond the temporal seen things and to the eternal unseen things. When you hear the word of God, listen for the spiritual realities to which it points.

4) Hear with Abiding Hope

Finally, hear the word of God with **abiding hope**. Those who “**hear the word of God and understand it,**” will most certainly bear fruit, each in his own measure. The person who truly is in Christ will bear fruit. All we have to do is to keep our faith firmly fixed in the word of God through Christ. Jesus made an amazing promise.

John 15:4-5, 8 (ESV) ⁴ “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ...bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

There is no fruitfulness apart from Jesus. He states clearly that the disciples who abide in him are the disciples who will bear fruit. Whoever abides in Jesus, “**he it is that bears much fruit.**” The first three examples are those who may appear to be in Christ, but truly they were not because none of them bore any fruit. None of those first three lost their salvation. They never had in the first place, because there was no bearing of fruit. Only those in Christ bear fruit.

Thus, the task of the disciple is to abide in Jesus. Jesus goes on to explain that abiding in him is abiding in his word and allowing his word to abide in us (Jn 15:7-8). This can be done through reading his word and meditating (throughout the day) on what you have read. Jesus

also says that abiding in his love means obeying his word (i.e. keeping his commandments, Jn 15:10).

Conclusion

Jesus steps out from the hustle and bustle of life and sat down on a beach. Maybe he needed to get away from everything for a few minutes. But he was simply too interesting to be left alone. So Jesus soon found himself surrounded by people. Out of his own deep compassion and love for people, he lays aside his present preference for a little time alone, and gets into a boat and sat down and taught the people.

He taught them a story they would all understand. A sower sows seeds. As he was sowing the seeds were scattered here and there. Over time, there were different results. This really is a story about how different people respond different to the same gospel message.

- 1) Some people hear the gospel of Jesus and do not understand it. There is no place for the word of God in their hearts and thus it is unfruitful in their lives.
- 2) Others hear the gospel and receive it gladly, but then when pressure and persecution come because of Jesus, they quickly leave. They find following Jesus is too demanding and too costly. So they leave and thus the word of God is unfruitful in their lives.
- 3) Others hear the message of the kingdom of God and enthusiastically receive it and begin to grow, but soon the worries about all the stuff of the world creeps in. It takes a lot of time to manage investments and stay on top of all the material things that are owned. Soon they're so busy managing stress and all their stuff, that there's no room in their lives for the word of God. Thus, again, they are unfruitful.
- 4) Some however hear the word of God and understand it. They receive it for what it truly is, the word of God and not the mere word of man. They receive God's word deep within their hearts. These are the only ones who bear fruit.

The one question that begs to be answered is which one of these four describes you? Where do you fit into this parable? Which scenario best describes your response to the word of God?

Do you hear it and dismiss it as too difficult to understand?

Do you hear and receive it with joy at first, but then turn away things are tough?

Do you hear and receive and grow for a while and then find that other things are more important and so there's no longer any time for God's word or his kingdom?

Or do you hear the word of God and receive it as life to your soul and treasure to your heart?

Discussion Questions

1. What is a parable?
2. Whom does the 'sower' represent?
3. What does the 'seed' represent?
4. Whom or what does 'birds' represent?
5. What is the purpose of this parable?
6. What does God want you to hear from this parable?
7. What is the most confusing part of this parable for you?
8. What part of this parable gives you the most joy?
9. What questions does this parable raise?