

“The Parable of the Sower”
Matthew 13:1-23
April 15, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

The parable of the sower is the first of seven parables found in Matthew 13. A parable is a type of riddle, with its point being obscured to some but clear to others. Jesus uses common, everyday kinds of stories that are easily understandable at one level, but which also have a deeper meaning. This parable is a good example. It’s about a man who goes out to sow grain in his field. He carries his seed in a bag, or perhaps just in a fold of his garment, and spreads it by throwing it out by hand. As he does so, some of the seed will inevitably drop to the ground at his feet, hard ground that has been walked on often. Birds don’t take long to see what’s going on, and they come and eat this seed. Other seed gets sown in shallow soil—what our text calls “rocky ground.” This wasn’t soil with lots of small rocks in it, but rather soil that thinly covered giant rock formations. The stored heat in the rock would actually cause the seed to germinate more quickly here, and it would be the first to begin growing. But since the soil was shallow, it would also be more susceptible to drought, with the result that these would also be the first plants to die. Other seed would fall into good soil, but there would also be weeds in it. The vigorous weeds would crowd out the good seed and choke the life out of it. Finally, much of the seed would be sown in good soil and bear much fruit.

Jesus’ listeners could all relate to a farmer sowing seed and having different things happen to the seed. But the deeper point is not so easy to grasp. The disciples didn’t seem to approve of this method and questioned Jesus about his methodology. He explains himself to them and then interprets the parable for them. As he does so, it becomes clear that this parable is about listening to God.

I. The Importance of Good Listening

It is not without significance that this is the first parable of the seven found in this chapter. Its significance can be seen in the fact that all the other parables begin with the phrase, **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”** and then go on to describe something of the nature of the kingdom. The parable of the sower is more foundational, describing how one gets into the kingdom. All the benefits of the kingdom of heaven, which are many, come through the simple act of listening. In the 23 verses of our passage, various words for hearing and listening occur 19 times, almost one per verse on average.

Of course, listening in and of itself is not the point, because everyone listens to someone or something. Many today listen only to themselves and to their own desires. Others listen to what is current and fashionable. The kind of listening Jesus advocates here is listening to God, who is the Sower in this parable. It is significant that Matthew calls this parable the **“parable of the sower”** (v. 18). It would seem to be better called “the parable of the soils,” for the simple reason that it is the different soils that form the movement and interest in this parable. But it is rightly called the parable of the sower because the emphasis is on God’s act of sowing his word. This is the primary work of God in bringing about his kingdom. As the next parable will make clear, the time is coming when God will fully bring his kingdom about through judgment. But out of his grace he is acting now through the word. Listening to God is important because it is what God is doing now.

Such listening is easily overlooked or despised because it seems so little and inconsequential, just like a seed. The word of God is likened to a small seed, which seems so weak and insignificant. But it is filled with life and power. The word of God works like that in our lives. It starts small but then begins to grow. And the whole process takes time. Have you ever heard the phrase, “About as exciting as watching grass grow”? The way God’s word works within us may not be exciting, so we are going to need patience and persistence in our listening to God.

It is not only important that we listen to God, but the way we listen is also emphasized. Though we are going to go into this more thoroughly in our third point, I want to point out that all four soils here receive the seed of God’s word. Jesus is not talking about people who dismiss the word entirely, but those who all receive it to one degree or another. Even the first soil, the hard soil, which gives least place to the seed of the word, receives it for a time. Jesus is talking about people inside the church, professing Christians. If the numbers of only one in four soils receiving the word profitably mean anything, we might conclude that it is possible, and perhaps even easy to miss the kingdom because of not listening to God in the right way. And this is speaking of people inside the church!

So one of the important points to grasp here is that everything depends upon our listening to God in the right way. We don’t want to be like the pilot of an Avianca Airlines plane that crashed in 1974. The Spanish pilot was flying too low in foggy conditions. The onboard computer spotted an approaching mountain and repeatedly warned the pilot in its computer-generated voice, “Pull up, now.” The pilot, who didn’t speak English, finally got tired of hearing it and angrily responded, “Shut up, Gringo,” as he reached over to turn off the voice. Two minutes later, the plane crashed into the side of a mountain and killed all onboard. Everything depends upon our listening to God.

II. The Key to Good Listening

If listening to God's word is so important, why does Jesus speak this word in these riddle-like parables? That's what the disciples want to know, and the question they put to Jesus has a tone of criticism about it. **"Why do you speak to them in parables?"** (v. 10). Jesus' surprising answer is to speak of the sovereignty of God in election. **"To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given"** (v. 11). He then spends most of his answer talking about those to whom it has not been given, quoting extensively from Isaiah 6 about that. Jesus is speaking in such a way that the only hope anyone has of being able to understand what he means is for Jesus to open the ears and give understanding. He doesn't want the distinction between hearers and non-hearers to be within the hearer, but within the sovereign will of God.

Martin Luther wrote a book in the 16th century titled *Bondage of the Will*. It was written to counter a man named Erasmus who believed that the human will was fully free and not limited by sin at all. In his book, Luther commented about this passage: "What else does this mean but that free choice of the human heart is so held down by the power of Satan that unless it is miraculously raised up by the Spirit of God it cannot of itself either see or hear things that strike the eyes and ears themselves so plainly."

So what is the key to proper listening? It is nothing within us. The answer is not simply to try really hard to be a good listener. Rather, it is to accept our inability and call out to God to do what is impossible for us to do. And for those of us who have been given the ability to listen, our response is to be grateful for this great blessing of being given hears to ear. Jesus says, **"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear"** (v. 16). It is the blessing of God that allows us to hear, not some ability within us.

III. The Obstacles to Good Listening

If it is true that the key to listening is the sovereign decision of God, giving to some ears to hear while not giving that ability to others, then some might be tempted to conclude that we have no responsibility to work on being good listeners to God. That would be an unfortunate and an unbiblical conclusion. Though it may seem to us that the sovereignty of God releases us from responsibility, that is not the way God sees it. Jesus makes it clear in his interpretation that we do have a responsibility for good listening. We can see that in the three unfruitful soils, which show us obstacles to good listening.

The first soil is the hard soil. It receives the seed but doesn't pay enough attention to the seed of the word to understand it. The seed lies on the surface and Satan quickly steals it away. This seems to me to be speaking of our need

to take the time to notice the Scriptures. We don't want to skirt over it quickly, like a stone skipping over the water. We want to stop and try to understand it. God has chosen to speak to us through his word, and that requires that we pay attention to even the smallest part of it. There was a book published about ten years ago on the exciting topic of punctuation, bearing the title *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. The title comes from a sign in a zoo beside the panda bear habitat, informing zoo visitors that pandas eat the small shoots of trees and the leaves on those trees. But someone made a mistake in the printing of the sign and added a comma after the word "eats." That unfortunate comma changed the nouns "shoots" and "leaves" into verbs, as if the panda does three things: he eats, he shoots and he leaves. One can imagine a story of a panda enjoying a meal at a restaurant, getting into an altercation with a fellow diner, pulling out his gun and shooting his opponent and then leaving the restaurant. Small things, whether commas or the smallest part of words, can make a big difference in meaning and need to be heeded.

The person described in the second soil has a more significant relationship with God's word, but still inadequate. This is the seed sown in rocky soil, which we've already pointed out describes shallow soil covering a giant rock formation. This is the person in whose life the word begins to take root. He receives it with joy and seems to be growing rapidly. But then something happens that exposes the shallowness of his roots. A major trial comes and he immediately falls away.

This points to a couple of obstacles to good listening. One of them is to hear the word of God only as principles to make life go more smoothly. This person thinks, for example, that if he conforms his life to the Bible's principles about money management, then he will be successful financially. But then he experiences a financial reversal and concludes that the Bible is of no benefit to him. It is obvious that his heart is not to obey God and love him but to use God to get what he wants.

A similar error is to value God's word only for its entertainment value, often seen in its ability to move a person emotionally. This is to seek a satisfying experience through God's word rather than to seek God himself. I remember reading a sermon years ago that was preached by a man named Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers of the early church. His name means "golden-mouthed" and he pastored in the city of Antioch in Syria. He later became the archbishop of Constantinople. In the sermon I read, he was addressing what he considered to be a huge problem in the worship services of the church where he served as pastor. The problem was the practice the congregation had of breaking out in applause during his sermons because of the brilliance of Chrysostom's oratorical abilities. So eloquent was he in making his point against this practice that the congregation was moved to break out in applause. That seemed to stir Chrysostom even more, so that he continued with even greater passion and eloquence to rebuke such applause, with the

result that the congregation applauded even louder. This cycle was repeated a couple more times until Chrysostom finally just gave up. This shallow reception of the word will not be able to endure hardship.

The third soil receives the word most deeply, but still falls short. In this person's life, the seed begins to grow and even to mature. But there are vigorous weeds growing in that soil, and they end up choking out the word of God and killing it. Jesus even names two of these weeds. The first is translated **"the cares of the world"** (v. 22). The word "care" is actually singular. The idea is that of someone who is in despair because of how bad things seem to be in the world. This person spends more time reading and hearing about politics than in reading and hearing the Scriptures. It results in a deep-seated anxiety that makes the dangers of the world more real than the promises of God. The second weed that is named is **"the deceitfulness of riches."** This describes the person who has put hope in earthly riches. The first weed leads to anxiety and depression, and this one to false hopes that will be dashed. One commentator worded it like this: "Where two thrones are set up on each side of the Word, one for life's anxieties, the other for life's ambitions, the Word is reduced to a word."

CONCLUSION:

The fruitful soil is described with simplicity. It simply receives the word, bears fruit and yields. Soil is pretty much passive. The power comes from the seed and the rain that falls from the sky. That describes faith, which is more about receiving than achieving. But how should we receive? I like what our confession says about this in the chapter we looked at in last week's Sunday School lesson. It said that we are obey its commands, tremble at its warnings and embrace its promises.

Have you done that today as we have heard these words from Jesus? Obey Jesus by listening to his word. We should tremble when we consider the first three soils as describing professing Christians who receive the word but don't really receive it as they should. And we should embrace the promises. Will you embrace God's promise right now? You can't embrace someone at arm's length. You have to get close, wrap both arms around that person and hold them close. That's what we must do with God's promises. God promises to forgive those who come to him through the blood of Christ. Don't hold that promise at arm's length. Embrace it fully. God has said that you have every spiritual blessing in Christ. Embrace that fully, and you will find yourself bearing much fruit.