

Ears to Hear

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[0:00] Friends, would you please be seated. Do any of y'all remember the story of the tortoise and the hare?

One of Aesop's fables. Nod your head if you remember it. Remember the moral of the story is slow and steady wins the race. Because the hare burns himself out going way too fast.

And as a hare who's married to a tortoise, this is actually a really hard one for me. Maybe some of your hares also and you can relate to this. Or think about the story of the boy who cried wolf, right? The kid is not truthful. And so he's always kind of making up these stories about wolves are coming. And so when the wolves do really come, nobody believes him. And then he gets eaten, which is pretty dark.

But we remember. We remember the story, don't we? We remember. We tell the truth. Like, that's the goal. That's the takeaway. And I'm sure we can think of tons of other stories that are woven into our imaginations.

[1:10] And most of these do have like a single takeaway. Like, be patient. Be kind. Be gracious. Look beneath the surface. And a lot of Jesus' parables are deep in our cultural fabric too.

Many of us have grown up hearing these parables taught a lot like fables. We're exhorted to be a good Samaritan. Or we call irresponsible or wayward people prodigals.

And that's not entirely wrong. Okay? But when we do this, we're reducing the parable to one thing. And we often miss the big picture. And friends, the big picture is that Jesus wasn't dispensing life advice.

He was trying to show his listeners something about God's in-breaking kingdom. He wasn't trying to get his listeners to be good people. He was trying to get them to be his people.

And the same is true for us. So the first question we need to ask when we approach a parable like the one that Lisa just read is, what does this parable teach us about the kingdom of God?

[2:17] And only after we've considered that question from different angles can we ask, what does the parable mean for me? So would you pray with me? Lord, we thank you for your word.

Lord, we thank you that your word accomplishes what you desire. And so, Lord, would you give us ears to hear? Would we be attentive to how you're moving?

Would we listen well? And would you speak to us this morning? In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. So first, what does this parable teach us about the kingdom of God?

Well, before we answer that larger question, let's talk about why Jesus preached in parables. So a couple reasons. And I think the first reason is really simple. So we remember stories, right?

There's a lot of research out there about how we remember things, what our brain is able to retain. And overall, we're pretty forgetful. I think I read somewhere that we only hear about 5%, or we only remember about 5% of what we hear, which is kind of a bummer when you think about it, right?

[3:33] But that number goes way up if we are hearing something in stories, because we connect to stories emotionally. When it's something that we relate to, we can remember, right?

Our brains love a good story. My spiritual director has been a priest for 50 years. And for 50 years, his wife has been saying to him as he leaves the house to go preach, don't forget to tell a story, because she knows this, right?

And when I brought up all those fables, I saw you all nodding your heads. You remember these stories. You don't remember the list of ingredients from the last recipe you made, or your grocery list. But we remember stories.

And I think it's safe to say that Jesus knew this. He knew how we were created. He knew how our brains were wired. And he was an excellent communicator and a great preacher. And he used plain

language and imagery that would have made sense to his listeners and felt relevant, that they could connect to.

The parables always used these simple, everyday scenes that were really specific to the time and place that Jesus was operating in when he was in the flesh.

[4:40] And I can imagine Jesus preaching to us today, doing something similar, saying something like, when you're at school and you're in the classroom, or when you're at work, when you're home having dinner with your family, right?

And he always chose the story and the characters very specifically. Often in response to something. And this particular parable comes almost exactly in the middle of Matthew's gospel.

In the preceding chapters, Matthew has shown us in many different ways how people have rejected Jesus' message. So the first takeaway here is that Jesus tells this parable to answer a question, why?

Why did so many people reject his message about the kingdom of God? And he quotes the prophet Isaiah in verses 14 and 15 to explain this to the disciples.

He says their hearts are so hard. And while Jesus is offering an explanation to the disciples, he says this specifically to the disciples about why people weren't receiving his message, he told the parable to the larger crowd that was following him, hopefully to wake people up, to get them to listen another way, to reframe assumptions and understandings.

[6:03] That's true of almost all the parables. There are these everyday scenes, but a lot of times there's something unexpected that happens, that people would have heard and said, wait a second, I don't know about that.

Or it was designed to make you think. Remember what Jesus says at the end, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. So he says this to the crowd to say like, if you really sit with this, something's going on.

Think about it. Theologian Amy Jill Levine writes, Friends, the point here is that Jesus wasn't going around giving life hacks or morality lessons.

He was telling people to get ready, that they can choose to participate in something that's eternally significant. And it's no different for us. Okay, so why were so many people rejecting him when what he had on offer was so good?

Participation in the kingdom of heaven. Why were people hard-hearted? So let's turn to the images he uses here. And this scene of a seed and a sower was very common in agrarian society.

[7:41] But it was also deeply spiritually significant. Both Jesus and his listeners were steeped in the Hebrew scriptures. So they would have connected to this on two levels.

So let's talk about the characters in the parable. The seed, the sower, and the soil. And what each shows us about Jesus' kingdom. This passage from Isaiah that Sharon read is just one example where the scriptures compare God's word to seed.

But we see this a lot in scripture. So in this parable, the message of the kingdom of heaven, is the seed.

And that would have tracked with what Jesus' listeners expected. They knew this. But what they didn't expect was the form of delivery. Jesus himself.

Most people expected the Messiah to show up as a conquering political hero in the physical sense. They didn't expect Jesus. And I think a lot of us do something similar.

[9:09] We tend to impose our own expectations on Jesus and his kingdom. And when we do that, we can end up pretty far from who he actually is. So here's a quick check to see if this is something you might be struggling with.

Let me ask you a question. Does Jesus agree with you about everything? I mean, does he?

Because if he does, you might have the wrong Jesus.

You probably have the wrong Jesus. And I won't get the exact quote right, but I remember reading something Beth Moore wrote once. I don't even remember where it was. I know it was her. Along the lines of, sometimes I think Jesus must hear our prayers and our conversations and think, are you talking to me?

Because I'm not recognizing myself in this conversation. So the first thing this image of seed shows us about the kingdom of God is that Jesus is the word.

He is the kingdom incarnate in the flesh. He is the fulfillment and the climax of Israel's story, as Tim Mackey of the Bible Project says. And friends, he's the climax and the fulfillment and the hero of our

stories too.

[10:24] So that's the seed. Let's talk about the sower. And interestingly, Jesus doesn't specifically identify who the sower is. But based on the rest of the story, we can draw some conclusions.

God is the sower. Again, people that knew the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures knew this.

The Isaiah 55 passage references. And this was what people expected.

And as we saw above, Jesus is the seed. But he's also showing in this parable, he's also the sower. And coming as the word incarnate, he is replanting all that has been uprooted in Israel's history, all the brokenness around him.

He's healing it, making it whole, replanting that seed. And he's extending the opportunity to participate in the kingdom of heaven beyond Israel to everyone, to us.

He's scattering the seed everywhere. So the second thing that shows us is that the kingdom is available to everyone. It is generous. And it is abundant.

[11:30] So lastly, the soil. This is where Jesus really answers that question of why. Why the rejection of his message. And we see that there are three bad types of soil, three types of soil that are inhospitable to growth.

And there's one good type. And these illustrate the third principle, which is that while the kingdom of heaven is generous and abundant, even in the person of Jesus Christ, some will choose to reject it. So now that we understand more about what Jesus was illustrating here, that he is the word incarnate, that he's generous with his word, and that people can choose to accept or reject his kingdom, what does this parable mean for Jesus' listeners and for us?

Well, let's come back to the soil. Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience who assumed that they were good soil because they were the Israelites. God's chosen people.

And I think we do this too. We tend to focus on our external actions, maybe our credentialing. But Jesus makes it clear that being part of his kingdom and being good soil means bearing fruit.

[12:51] It's not just about knowing things about Jesus. It's about hearing and obeying. And bearing fruit happens from the inside out. It's not a checklist of things we should be doing.

It comes from the heart. So let's look at each of these types of soil and we can link them up to a heart posture. So the first one that Jesus talks about is those who hear but don't understand are the rocky path.

I think sometimes we hear something like this and we think, but if someone doesn't understand, it's not their fault. But Jesus is casting this as someone who has an opportunity to understand but doesn't take the time necessary to let the word take root.

How much space and thought and time are we giving to the word of God? These are people that reject the word outright. Again, this other part of Isaiah.

Isaiah, seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.

[14:07] Let them turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on them and to our God, for he will freely pardon. Isaiah's putting the responsibility to seek God and to turn from wickedness squarely on us, rejecting him as a choice.

That's what that first soil shows us. And the second type of soil is those who receive the word with joy, but then they wither away when their faith is challenged.

They don't persevere. Now, the way that Matthew writes this is that this is persecution directly followed, directly related to being a follower of Jesus.

And this was something that a lot of Matthew's readers would have been dealing with at the time that they heard this gospel. And it could be another type of hardship related to our lives as followers of Jesus.

But the emphasis here is on things that happen to us that call into question whether we really believe if Jesus is who he says he is. So when something happens, whether it's a job loss or a broken relationship, a diagnosis, suffering, pain, some kind of persecution, do we doubt the character of Jesus?

[15:36] Do we say, it must not have been true? Or do we say, Lord, hold me fast and shelter me in this storm and strengthen me.

Would you show me where you are in the midst of this? Would you show me what you're calling me to? Do we trust what Jesus says to his disciples in John 14?

In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world. The third soil is those who get choked by distractions and cares of the world.

So there is some sort of growth happening here, but there's no fruit on the plant. It's unhealthy and it's anemic. It's not flourishing. And friends, this is the human condition.

We're distracted and we're drawn to things that are quick, that are easy, or we think that if we have a certain circumstance, then it'll solve our problems, that we'll be content.

[16:50] And I'll never forget something that Pastor Thomas said in our wedding homily when Tom and I got married 10 years ago. He said, marriage doesn't make contentment possible.

Contentment makes marriage possible.

And you could fill in anything for marriage in that statement. A job, having more money, buying a house, having certain friends, whatever it is.

We have a tendency to think that our circumstances, which are always shifting, are what we draw contentment from. But contentment comes from our creator.

St. Augustine famously said, thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee.

And friends, those who find rest in the Lord are good soil. They produce good crops. And here's the thing, crops take time to grow.

[17:52] So the seeds might be planted for a long time before we see growth. Especially an abundant harvest like Jesus is talking about. It's not a fast process.

God's kingdom is patient. And producing a crop is generative. It's self-replicating, right? So I am not a gardener. I have never planted anything that has lived ever in my life, actually.

I just feel like I should be honest about that. Not physically. But I know that when you have crops, when you have fruit, that they also have seed, right?

So as crops flower, as you bring in the harvest, then you have more and more seed. And so the implication is that we get to join Jesus in being sowers because as our crops produce seed, then we get to replant and re-sow the seed with Jesus.

He sends us out as sowers. So what does it look like to sow seed and to participate? How do we get there? How do we get to that point of producing this incredibly abundant crop?

[19:07] First, we cultivate good soil in our own lives. So we cultivate understanding rather than a lack of understanding. So what does this mean?

You can have a lot of knowledge but not understand something. There's a difference. The people that Jesus was addressing here knew a lot about God in most cases.

But a lot of times they were missing the larger points of God's kingdom. So relationships require time. It's not just like driver's license stats, right?

You know, your driver's license that has like your eye color, your hair, your weight, your height. But that doesn't mean somebody knows you just because they look at your driver's license, right? So a relationship takes time.

Understanding God takes time. It means we have to learn to listen and we have to learn to sit with Him. And it's okay to put an appointment time with God on your calendar.

[20:10] Block it off. The same way you would meeting with somebody else. We can also cultivate faith that lasts rather than faith that withers.

We do that through the sacraments. We come to the table. We receive the Eucharist every week. We join with one another in worshipping the Lord.

We read the scriptures together and on our own. And these things strengthen us. They help our roots be deep. they help our soil be deep.

These things are a long obedience in the same direction as Pastor Eugene Peterson says. And we cultivate a quiet life rather than a life choked by worry and distraction.

So something to consider your inputs. What are you marinating in? What are you soaking in on a daily basis? And we probably remember what the beginning of 2020 was like when the pandemic started to shut everything down, right?

[21:17] And there was so much we didn't know. Like news reports were coming out every day and it seemed like things were really quickly shifting all the time. And there was just an anxiety in the air, right?

And I remember personally starting every day by looking at the news and then I would check that website. I don't know if y'all remember the website, but there was the World Health Organization

website where it had like the number of new COVID cases every day tracking how many cases there were.

And I remember Tom and I were walking the dogs one morning. This was probably like a month into the pandemic. And of course we had already been online reading as much as we could.

And we just noticed this really deeply anxious response in ourselves. We could feel it in our bodies. we felt like our minds were distracted and we felt like we needed to reorient ourselves.

And I remember around that same time we started an online Bible study in the book of Acts at Advent. Some of you guys might remember this. And we would just Zoom and read a passage from Acts and I think it was like at 7.30 or 8 o'clock in the morning so it was first thing.

[22 : 29] And then we would just talk about it for a little while. And that was so important for us in reorienting ourselves to the word of God to what was true.

And it's not that this other stuff wasn't true too but it was like what's our focus? Where's our gaze?

And it was hard to do but it was necessary for our souls.

And the thing is it didn't change how informed we were shifting this way shifting our day around but our heart posture was different because instead of coming to one another and starting the day full of anxiety and fear we were able to have conversations that were rooted in the sovereignty and love of God and in our identity as his children.

So that grinding anxiety started to lift but it was hard. It's still a really hard time. And I think that's true for a lot of us now too. It may not be as pronounced but what's the first thing we do in the morning when we wake up?

Do we check our phones? Open our laptops? Turn on the TV? I mean I checked my phone first thing this morning because I knew that I needed to text somebody about a thing and you know and we do that right?

[23 : 48] But did I really need to do that first thing? Or could I have sat right away when I woke up and asked the Lord to orient me to him? I wonder if that would change things for us if we made a practice of doing that because as we cultivate this good soil as we reorient our hearts the crop comes and then we sow seed with Jesus and our families with our friends our neighbors and our workplaces in the world.

And here's another thing about sowing seed with Jesus you're on a mission with him and your responsibility is the planting you're not responsible for the state of other people's soil that's what Jesus is saying here some people will reject the message Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 I planted Apollo swattered but God causes the growth so neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but God who causes the growth and friends he is faithful as Isaiah says his word will not return to him empty it will accomplish what he desires so as we close I just want to give you something to consider this week I would love for all of us to take some time with this parable so it's Matthew 13 1 through 23 and try doing

Lectio Divina with it now what is Lectio Divina if you don't know that stands for divine reading and it's an ancient way of reading the scriptures prayerfully and in a mood of contemplation in a space of contemplation and it suits the parables really well because they're actually designed for this kind of marinating and contemplative thought so what you're going to do there are different ways to do this but I would say read the scripture maybe three times just take some time read it three times so the first time as you finish reading it then just sit for a few minutes be aware of thoughts or feelings or questions or just anything that comes up for you after you've read it and just sit with it don't try to like think about it or immediately start chewing on it and then after a few minutes read it again and this time see if like a word or a phrase or a sentence a picture something really kind of rises to the surface for you and just sit with that and then the third time you read it see if the

Lord is asking you to do something see if there's a response he's calling you to see if there's something he wants you to know and you're praying and you're checking in with the Lord about this you know whatever your phrase might be if it's he who has ears to hear let him hear Lord what does that mean what are you asking me and you'll be surprised I think you know how conversations you have might be along those same lines what the Lord says and if you've never done this before I understand it could feel a little bit kind of foreign or not something you're used to but I would just love for you to try it and then I would love to hear how it goes talk to me about it send me an email and we can have coffee or have lunch and and this is a way that the scriptures we learn to really receive the scriptures as food and so let's see what the Lord plants would you pray with me father thank you that you nourish us with your word

I pray that as we sit with your scriptures this week that you would be our teacher that you would guide us that we would learn more about your kingdom and how you're calling us would you convict us where we need to be convicted would you comfort us where we need to be comforted and Lord in all things would you be glorified and we pray these things in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit amen and Thank you.