

Confidence in Jesus' Kingdom - In Hearing

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[0 : 00] Psalm 19, to the choir master, a psalm for David. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words whose voice is not heard.

The measuring line goes out through the earth, all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

[1 : 15] The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold.

Sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them there is great reward.

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins.

Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

The second reading is taken from Matthew, chapter 13, starting at verse 1 on page 986. That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

[2 : 29] And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying, A sower went out to sow.

And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path. And the birds came and devoured them. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain.

Some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear. We'll go to verse 18 on the next page.

[3 : 32] Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy.

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. 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.

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.

Good morning, everyone. Let's pray, and as we do so, I will read out a couple of verses from John 15 that we'll see again later on. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you

wish, and it will be done for you.

[4 : 52] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. And Heavenly Father, we pray this morning, as we turn to your word, that you help us abide in you, and we ask humbly that your words abide in us.

Amen. Well, the disciples are puzzled. Jesus had told them that God's kingdom was going to grow. And in Matthew chapter 11 and chapter 12, while things looked really promising, he'd performed miracles, he'd offered to remove burdens from people, Jesus had shown that he was the fulfilment of Old Testament promises.

Even his own people showed no sign of faith. They demanded more signs, and they resist the kingdom. And it doesn't look like an advancing kingdom at all.

Now, a neighbour of ours has just set up a company to develop a mobile phone app. An enormous amount of money has been spent by him.

Huge amounts of time go into these sorts of projects. And then launch day comes. And imagine on that day, the app goes out into the various app stores, and no one buys it.

[6 : 09] Not even his mum. And the reviews are mixed, to say the least. How utterly, utterly disheartening. And he'd start to question, wouldn't he?

Maybe I should have developed a different type of app. Maybe it's not quite as good as I thought it was. Was all that work, was all that money really worth it? Perhaps I should just give up now. Just the sort of reaction that the disciples have. In fact, just the sort of reaction that many of us have when we consider God's kingdom.

How is God's kingdom going to spread if even his own people won't accept him? If God's kingdom is so great, why don't more people believe in Jesus?

If Jesus really is the king of kings, why do his followers experience so much opposition? Why is there such a varied response to the gospel?

[7 : 07] And the problem is, like our neighbour, when we have such questions, we begin to think that we're doing something wrong. Or we begin to think that we need to alter the message to make it a bit more palatable.

Or we perhaps consider giving up altogether. Now imagine my neighbour takes the advice of an industry expert. And he confirms that this app really is unique.

And it really is excellent. And furthermore, he provides reassurance to my neighbour about how such products tend to be received. And what exactly to expect on launch.

And with my neighbours, with this expert's help, my neighbour gains renewed confidence in the quality of the product. And also a perspective of what the days ahead will have in store.

He'll now be prepared for his app to be criticised and ignored by some. But he'll also be prepared for it to be accepted and purchased by others.

[8 : 06] And those two things, by being prepared for rejection, but expectant for growth, he'll gain confidence in his sales, even when responses are varied.

And Matthew chapter 13, where we're going to be as a church family together over the next five weeks, provides this sort of perspective on the growth of God's kingdom.

We're going to see that God's kingdom is here, that it is growing, it's growing secretly, it's growing penetratingly, but it's not yet here in all its fullness. And until that day, a day that will surely come, it will be resisted, it will be rejected by some, but it will be accepted by others.

And in being prepared for opposition, but expectant for growth, we will together gain renewed confidence in the message of the gospel and of the kingdom's growth, even when it receives varied reception.

And all of this, as we've seen from the first couple of verses of today's passage, will be done in parables. Parables that we'll see next week act to sift and to sort people into one of two groups, those who are hungry and ready to accept God's kingdom, those who have their eyes closed and who are not interested.

[9 : 29] And in the first of these parables, the one that we've read this morning, the one we're looking at this morning, these responses are represented by four different types of soil. Three that are unfruitful and one that is fruitful.

Firstly then, have a look down at verse three. A sower goes out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path and the birds came down and devoured them.

Think about your holiday. Perhaps some of you are going down to Cornwall this year. You've been given your 12 pound portion of fish and chips, but you've not been quite careful enough. And just before you've managed to savour them, whoosh, a seagull dives down, grabs the best bit and off it flies.

Verse 19, 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 that's been sown is the word of God, the message that Jesus is king. It's the message of the gospel that might be heard here at church.

[10:39] It might be heard or read in a Christian book. It might be in a one-to-one with someone. It might be an overheard conversation on a bus. It's heard and yet for the hard-hearted, it just sits on the top.

It doesn't break the surface to have chance to root and Satan just snatches it away like a seagull. People may hear the news of the gospel. They may understand it intellectually, but if they don't cling to it or value it, eventually it'll be snatched away.

And wherever the gospel is shared, the devil is there ready to take it away from those with hard hearts. Remember back to Genesis 3 when he asked Adam and Eve, did God really say?

This is what the devil does. He devours the word by bringing doubt and distortion. And for the hard-hearted, there's just nothing left. And the parable is telling us that we need to be prepared for hard hearts.

Now, it's a situation I suspect many of us are familiar with. Perhaps there's someone you've spoken to about the gospel on the occasion. Maybe you've chatted to people many times. They've been to a talk with you.

[11:55] You've had a chance to explain the great news of Jesus to them. And their response is as if they've never heard it before. And it's so discouraging. But this parable is getting us ready.

It's getting us ready for just this sort of response. And the question is, are we prepared for that response? Are we prepared for hard hearts? When we come across this reaction, perhaps we're tempted to give up.

Maybe the lack of reaction leads us to think, what's the point? Or maybe we think that because of a lack of fruit this time, next time, will give a slightly altered message.

We'll miss out the challenging parts. We'll make it seem just a little bit more attractive. But one of the things that we see in this parable is that the problem isn't with the seed.

It's not with the message of the gospel, but with the human heart. And so what we mustn't do is to change the gospel message. Perhaps we know of churches that have stopped teaching the gospel.

[12:58] perhaps because they wanted to be more relevant or not cause offence, avoiding things that are difficult culturally. I mean, society doesn't like to hear about sin or judgment, does it?

So we downplay that element of the message. And indeed, there are churches that don't talk about sin and the implications of sin and instead focus on the format of the services or the profile of the speaker, the appearance of a venue, the quality of the marketing.

And while each of these things might be good in themselves, they are absolutely not if the message of the gospel has been altered. It's not the message that is at fault. It is the soil.

It's not the message of the gospel that's wrong. It's the hard heart. And we must be ready for hard hearts. Secondly, verse 5, do you have a look down.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground where they didn't have much soil and immediately they sprang up since they had no depth of soil. Now we see a second type of unfruitful soil that initially looks promising.

[14:07] Look ahead to Jesus' explanation in verse 20. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. The initial response is wonderful, isn't it?

It's so encouraging. Verse 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.

Here are rocky places where that tribulation or persecution rise up like a scorching sun. Difficulties in life, opposition, persecution, they'll come and like the sun they'll come on everyone who has heard the gospel but this listener has got no proper root and so their faith withers to nothing and we need to be prepared for shallow hearts.

Maybe we know people like this, people who came to Grace Church, they did Christianity Explored maybe, they instantly responded with joy having heard the gospel, they love being part of the church family, they love the forgiveness that comes from Jesus, they love that promise of eternal life, they talk about it, they share their testimony, they're so excited about being part of Jesus' kingdom but then difficulty comes and when it does they back off.

They're not ready for the reaction of their parents. You don't believe that, do you? They say. They're taken about by a reaction of a boyfriend or girlfriend. Come on, you can think about that when you're older.

[15:46] They're not ready for the change in their lives that the gospel calls for. This hero hasn't fully understood and grasped the seriousness of sin and in turn his or her desperate need for a saviour and therefore as discouragement comes that person falls away.

Or how do we respond when we see this? Well again, it's sad and discouraging, isn't it? We think, if only things have been a bit different, what is God doing? Why is he allowing this pressure on this young Christian?

Maybe if we just adjusted the message a little bit, changed it so that it was just a bit less pressure or overlooked the hard parts. But remember, the problem is not with the seed, it's not with the message, it's with the human heart.

Now many of us will know people who've responded to the gospel in the same way. I think of one of my own friends who became a Christian just before university and was utterly on fire for Jesus.

But as quickly as he picked up his faith, he arrived at university and very quickly walked away from it. I don't know quite why that happened. Perhaps he hadn't been told or grasped the cost of following Jesus.

[17:03] Maybe he wasn't prepared for the comments his friends made or the call for a change of lifestyle. But he certainly hadn't made Jesus his king. There was no problem with the seed, but it was a seed that he hadn't given chance to grow proper roots.

Jesus says that the scorching sun will rise. persecution and tribulation will come on all soils. We must be prepared for shallow hearts.

Verse 7, the third soil. Other seed fell amongst thorns and the thorns grew up and choked them. If a gardener lets weeds grow up, plants do well, rather, don't do well, do they?

And Jesus says the same of the human heart. Verse 22, as for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and it proves unfruitful.

Here's someone who hears the word and it takes root and begins to grow. And as with that last soil, there is much to be delighted by initially. There's growth.

[18:14] They see something of the goodness of the gospel. They begin to read the Bible. They appear to grow as a Christian. They do a great job of chatting to their friends about Jesus.

Maybe they began running a small group at church, but then the busyness of life, the distractions, just pull them away. And it's interesting to think what these thorns might represent.

Does Jesus explain and mention extreme immoralities? No. The thorns are very ordinary. They're just the normal realities and the worries of this life.

They're the deceitfulness of wealth. They're the desires for other things. As someone summarised, the spiritual killers are wealth, worry, and wanting.

And there is such subtlety. The thorns, they grow slowly. They gradually choke. Bit by bit, they remove spiritual life. Without the hearer being aware that it's actually happening.

[19:17] And to add another level of subtlety, the weeds, the distractions are often not bad in themselves. It's just that they begin to take a greater position of value in people's lives.

But Jesus says this is to be expected. Be prepared for distracted hearts. People believe that money can keep them safe and fear losing it. They invest so much time in their interests or their children's interests, that church or time in the Bible gets squeezed out.

They become anxious about health, savings, reputation, and they fear losing them. And slowly and surely, these things, things that didn't used to have any significant impact, begin to choke and make lives unfruitful.

Sadly, this will be a familiar story to a number of us. We'll know of people who've shown signs of real growth. people who've been part of Grace Church, but wealth or worry or wanting, they've gradually choked spiritual life from them.

It's a tragedy and it can be so discouraging. And again, we begin to think, well, if that person can fall away, well, maybe there is something wrong with that gospel message.

[20 : 30] Why is God allowing this to happen? But we must remember that the problem is not with the seed. it's not the message of the gospel, that news of the kingdom of God.

It is with the human heart. Now, while this parable is primarily written to prepare Christians for unbelief in others, it would be impossible to read this section without being challenged ourselves. Do we need to do a bit of weeding? Do we need to double check the impact of the world around us? And are these things squeezing out our Christian joy?

What about the deceitfulness of riches? Are we spending too much time thinking about our salary or bonus or pension contributions? What about the things we're longing for?

And it might not be about luxury, we're perhaps too modest for that, but perhaps it is about security. What are the things we spend time looking at on shopping websites? The items that promise happiness and ease and comfort, but actually never really allow us to rest?

[21 : 35] In our own lives we must do some honest weeding, watch out ourselves for the thorns of wealth and worry and wanting. Maybe you're here this morning and you're investigating the Christian faith.

Can I urge you not to put that on hold? Not to delay thinking about Jesus until sometime in the future when those exams are out of the way or until the marriage is out of the way until after you've got married or until you've settled or until your illness passes or until you've bought the house or whatever it is.

These can all be good things in themselves but they risk becoming thorns that choke your faith. If you're drawn to Jesus come to him straight away and lay deep roots.

So we're to be prepared for hard hearts, shallow hearts and distracted hearts. Three soils that bear no fruit. But verse 8 have a look.

Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain some a hundredfold some sixty some thirty an abundant harvest. The sower who has scattered seed all over the place finds that some has landed on good soil and a fruit is produced.

[22 : 53] Verse 23 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 case sixty and in another thirty an abundant harvest.

In September we'll be going on a church day away to Canterbury and behind the barn that we meet in is an orchard. Now one apple tree can hold about three or four hundred apples.

each apple has around eight seeds in it so one tree could lead to about three thousand two hundred odd new trees. If each of them produced trees you would have over ten million trees that's in two generations.

As gospel seeds are sown in the hearts of people who are hungry lives can be changed. Notice again that the seed is no different. fruit. This is the wonderful news of King Jesus.

The only difference that we see here is with the soil and the fruit is remarkable. While we should be prepared for hearts that bear no fruit we should be excitedly expectant for fruitful hearts.

[24 : 11] And the fruit itself well it must surely be people coming to faith in Jesus Christ but in the context of Matthew's gospel the fruit could also be lives that are committed to God and committed to serving Jesus as King.

So what is that difference what is the difference in the soil in this case? Well it's someone who makes room for the word to do what the word does create new life and what a wonderful encouragement that is.

And we've seen it at Grace Church this year. People who've been invited to read the Bible with a member of the church family who've heard the good news of the gospel they've recognised their rejection of God their need for a saviour and yes like everybody the pressures of business have risen like the sun the deceitfulness of riches the worries of life have come along.

All those pressures from people around them have been there as they are for everyone these people have been hungry for and have understood the gospel. Good roots have been planted and they've continued to follow Jesus with corresponding fruit in their own lives as well as the lives of others and it's been wonderful to see.

As suggested while this parable is primarily written to prepare Christians for the response to the gospel in others it is clear that there is direct application to us too.

[25 : 36] Do we stick with Jesus? Do we treasure and value his word? Look at the appeal of verse 9. He who has ears let him hear.

Perhaps we do read the Bible each day. Wonderful. Perhaps we come to Grace Church on a Sunday and look forward to hearing the sermon. Wonderful. But do we recognise God's word as powerful as being able to multiply our growth by 10,000% and that is the potential of God's word in our lives.

Printed on the sheet are the words of John 15 7-8. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. If we're trusting in Jesus, then let's sow the seed ourselves.

Let's preach this word to ourselves with great joy. Even if life today feels dry and barren, we must recognise that there is great hope in Jesus' word, the word that will lead to fruit in our own hearts.

[26 : 50] As we finish, think back to the sower in verse 3. Did you notice how extravagant and careless he was? Did you see that he didn't look remotely bothered about where he was sowing?

It was all over the place. He sows on the path, the rocky ground, the thin bits, the weedy bits, anywhere and everywhere. The sower just wants the seed out there, praying that when it lands, it takes root.

Now this is how the kingdom of God grows, through widespread and extravagant spreading of the gospel. As we see from today's parable, some seed will fall on good soil, some on bad, only God knows which will be which, but the sower keeps on sowing anyway, desperate for it to find soil in which to take root.

So where will you be tomorrow? At work, on holiday, sow the gospel. Where will you be over the summer, with your family, at home, out shopping? Sow the gospel.

Yes, we'll find it hard and frustrating, we won't know in advance what type of soil we're sowing on, we'll be met by people with hard hearts and shallow hearts and distracted hearts and God's word will be rejected in many ways, but we'll remember that it's the hearer's heart that is the problem and not the message itself.

[28 : 15] And so let's also be expectant for good soil, for hungry hearts and pray for a significant fruit and the growth of God's kingdom. Let's pray.

Verse 1, a sower went out to sow. Lord, we thank you for the incredible life-changing message of your kingdom. Thank you for preparing us today for varied reactions to the message of the gospel. Please may we go from here this morning eager to sow seeds of the gospel extravagantly and that by your grace we see deep roots laid and tremendous fruit and the growth of your kingdom.

Amen. ■■ serv Eine