

In the Strategy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 July 2023

Preacher: John Bartlett

[0 : 00] So Matthew 13, beginning at verse 1. That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

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 hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

[1 : 04] He who has ears, let him hear. Then the disciples came and said to him, Why do you speak to them in parables? And he answered them, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

But to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given. And he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

This is why I speak to them in parables. Because seeing, they do not see. And hearing, they do not hear. Nor do they understand.

Indeed in their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. That says, You will indeed hear, but never understand. And you will indeed see, but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull. And with their ears, they can barely hear. And their eyes, they have closed. Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears.

[2 : 13] And understand with their heart, and turn. And I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see. And your ears, for they hear.

Truly I say to you, Many prophets and righteous people long to see what you see. And did not see it. And to hear what you hear. And did not hear it.

Hear then, the parable of the sower. And as we come to God's word, Why don't we pray together? Our loving Heavenly Father, Thank you that you are a speaking God.

And that you have revealed yourself. Please grant that this morning, We would come to know you better. And love you more. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Now this morning, We're going to be thinking about communication. So we all experience communication every day. Don't we? Constantly, every day, In multiple ways.

[3 : 19] We communicate with others. And others communicate with us. And all of those communications are meant to achieve something. Aren't they? Whether it's conversations with friends and family.

Adverts. Lessons at school. Meetings at work. Newspaper stories. They're all intended to communicate something. And achieve a purpose. In those who hear it.

So marketing experts would tell us that the best communications tend to have the same things in common. They use that right combination of language, of visuals, of colour, of tone, pitch and pace of what's being said.

Everything working together to help the hearer understand the message that the communicator is trying to convey. But I wonder if you can think of times maybe when, despite the good intentions of the communicator, there have been misunderstandings.

Here is a can of the crisp and refreshing soft drink Tango. They had a memorable campaign back in the late 90s. So someone in the advert would take a big, long draw from the can of Tango.

[4 : 27] And then unbeknown to them, a rotund orange chap would sidle out from a hiding place and slap them right in the face. You see, instead of consumers following the metaphor and desiring Tango's hard-hitting orange flavour, the advert had to be banned because people responded to it by copying the orange chap and slapping their friends.

Rather than going out to buy the drink. It was a great example of those unintended consequences, of those miscommunication and a misunderstanding. Now I wonder where you most commonly experience miscommunication and misunderstanding.

If you're a Christian here this morning, maybe you find it's when you're trying to share the good news about Jesus, maybe with your colleagues or with your school friends or with your family.

You can use the clearest terms. You can answer all the questions that you get asked. You can point them to Jesus. And yet, despite all of that, you come away thinking, they still don't get it.

They still don't understand. And we wonder, don't we? Why is it with a clear explanation of the gospel, people don't understand who Jesus is and they don't put their trust in him?

[5 : 38] And that question, why is Jesus' teaching so often misunderstood and rejected, was also the question that we began to deal with last week as we started our summer sermon series in Matthew chapter 13.

The sermon's available on the Grace Church website. So if you missed it, do go back and have a listen. It's a really helpful explanation of this first parable in the chapter. And it'll set you up with a great foundation for the rest of the series.

Now, as we heard from Ben, the big point was that we have to be prepared for Jesus' teaching to be misunderstood, to be met with unresponsiveness and rejection.

And in many ways, our time together this morning in Matthew chapter 13 is the second part of last week's sermon. So if last week we examined the question of why Jesus' teaching is so often misunderstood, then this week we're tackling the supplementary question asked by the disciples in verse 10.

Look down with me at verse 10 of Matthew chapter 13. It's page 986 if you've closed it. Then the disciples came and said to Jesus, Why do you speak to them in parables?

[6 : 48] Why does Jesus speak to them in parables? Why does he deliberately use this teaching method, which can be hard to understand? Well, to help us start to examine the answer to the question, it's important that we grasp the context of our passage.

So Matthew has carefully organized the material in his gospel with the aim to point people to Jesus so that people would see and understand that Jesus is the king who comes in fulfillment of God's promises to King David in the Old Testament, that there'll be a king from David's line on God's throne forever.

But there have been mixed responses to Jesus so far. His ministry has been met with joy and belief from some, but also with increasing division and opposition from others.

And that division is built into the structure of our chapter. Look at verses 1 and 2. Jesus is teaching great crowds who've gathered to hear him speak. Yet look at verse 10.

Then the disciples came and said to him, Why do you speak to them in parables? And if you flick on to verse 34, All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables.

[8 : 02] Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. So we have these changes of camera angle. It's as if Matthew's a film director. He's zooming out to give us the wide shot, but then zooming back in to give us a more intimate focus on the action with a more select group of participants.

So he's setting up a contrast. We have those on the inside, the disciples with Jesus, and they're contrasted with those on the outside, the crowds. These two groups, insiders, outsiders, and the increasing division between them are a function of Jesus's public ministry now as he heads towards Jerusalem and the cross.

So let's examine the question the disciples ask and one which we may be asking too. Why does Jesus speak in parables? And there are two points for us to grasp this morning. The points are on the back of your service sheet as well if you want to follow along.

So first point, God's kingdom is deliberately hidden from the hard-hearted. God's kingdom is deliberately hidden from the hard-hearted. Let's read verses one and two.

That same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.

[9 : 22] So put yourself in the scene. Imagine that great crowd on the beach. Jesus has had to move to sit in a boat in order for as many of the people to be able to hear him as possible.

The sun is shining. There's no wind. It's a perfect day. It's a real gospel opportunity, a chance for many to hear the good news. So verse three comes as something of a surprise, doesn't it?

Verse three, And he, that's Jesus, told them many things in parables. So I went to the dictionary and it defined the word parable as a short, simple story that teaches or explains an idea.

But that's not quite the sense of the original word. The original Greek word that Matthew used here has a wider meaning. So it can mean a short story or a wise saying. But it was also commonly used to describe a riddle or a puzzle as well.

And that gives verse three a slightly different slant, doesn't it? And he told them many things in riddles. Now that explains why the disciples are so confused. In verse 10, the disciples came and said to him, Why do you speak to them in parables?

[10 : 30] Why is Jesus speaking to these great crowds in riddles? And his answer is shocking. Let's look at verse 11 together. And Jesus answered them, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

But to them it has not been given. I wonder how you felt as I read that verse. I mean, our society likes to think that it's egalitarian, doesn't it? Being equal is part of our cultural sense of the times.

The thought that some could be deliberately excluded is it can be troubling to us. And yet Jesus is unashamed. Did you see what his answer does? He is deliberately setting up those two groups of people.

There are those to whom the secrets of the kingdom have been given. But there are also the them, those to whom the secrets of the kingdom have not been given. The crowds who are on the outside.

Yet Jesus goes further still. Look down with me at verse 13. Jesus says, It is a devastating message, isn't it?

[12 : 08] The crowds are seeing Jesus. They are hearing him. But they don't understand who he is, nor why he came. Jesus is deliberately using the parables to emphasize their lack of understanding and to confirm them in it.

To harden their hearts against what they are hearing. And that's borne out by the reference to Isaiah. So Jesus first alludes to it in verse 13. But then directly quotes Isaiah chapter 6, verse 9 onwards from verse 14, which I just read.

His verdict on the crowd is stunning. Their reaction to his ministry fulfills Isaiah 6. Now we're not going to turn back there. But it is crucial for us to understand this point because it does a lot of the heavy lifting here.

So Isaiah was prophesying to Israel in the 8th century BC. And he was given a ministry of judgment on Israel. So when Isaiah was prophesying, Israel had turned away from God to follow idols, false gods.

Instead, they were worried about the encroaching superpower of their day, which was Assyria. And the big question was, how would Israel respond to that coming danger? And the terrible answer is that they don't turn to God for rescue.

[13 : 21] Instead, they seek after an alternative savior. So in response, God acts in judgment on their rejection of him. He sends Isaiah to speak to Israel, but with the specific intention that they are hardened against what they hear and they will not turn back to God.

He deliberately uses the prophecy of Isaiah to act in judgment upon them, intending that they go into spiritual exile. And Jesus is doing the same here.

He's deliberately speaking in parables as a sign of judgment on the crowd. Now, I can tell what you might be thinking. Isn't that unfair? Why isn't Jesus making things clearer?

Well, it's worth reminding ourselves what the crowds, the outsiders are like. So look with me at chapter 12 and verse 15. Chapter 12, verse 15. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there and many followed him and he healed them all.

This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.

[14 : 32] I will put my spirit upon him and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. And moving on. A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not quench until he brings justice to victory.

And in his name, the Gentiles will hope. So Matthew has just announced that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 42. He is God's servant, God's king. He is filled with God's spirit and he brings healing and victory.

And yet Israel has not recognized who Jesus is. Instead, we see rejection. So the Pharisees, that's the spiritual, the religious elite of the day.

They're openly hostile. In chapter 12, verse 14, they're conspiring to kill Jesus. Their opposition continues. We see Jesus healing a demon-oppressed man. And the response of the Pharisees?

Well, instead of rejoicing, they accuse Jesus of colluding with the devil and deriving his power from Satan. And by chapter 12, verse 48, so just before the parables that we're looking at this summer, we can clearly see that the people are hard-hearted and opposed to Jesus.

[15 : 39] And even his own family are included. So if you look there in verse 48, they want to speak to him. But notice the metaphor where they are. They are stood outside.

So it is right for Jesus to speak in parables and judgment. It is deserved. They have Jesus in their midst, bringing the kingdom, and they harden themselves against him.

They aren't neutral in this. They don't want to believe in Jesus. And their response to him and his word reveals where their hearts are. And that deals with the potential objection that it's somehow unfair that Jesus does this.

No, the parables here in the chapter confirm the hard hearts of the crowds. On one level, they're not meant to bring understanding. They're meant to confirm the judgment on the people for their failure to recognize Jesus as God's king.

They are being kept from understanding. And I was looking for an illustration of this. I found it rather difficult. I went with the idea of those magic eye pictures.

[16 : 38] You know the sorts of things? It's a massive color. It doesn't appear to be any coherent pattern at all. They don't look like anything. Unless you're one of the few people that can look at it and then see through the image to see the picture hidden behind it.

Unless you can do that, you remain ignorant, don't you, of what's really there, unaware of the true picture. And it's the same here. Jesus is deliberately teaching in parables so that those on the outside will not understand.

They will not see. They will not turn and be healed. He deliberately teaches them like this to bring judgment on those who are hard-hearted. But thankfully, that's not the end of the story.

And that takes us to our second point this morning. So secondly then, God's kingdom is graciously revealed to the humble. God's kingdom is graciously revealed to the humble.

So far, things have seemed quite negative. But there is a huge contrast here being made. Did you spot it as the passage was read? Let's look again at verse 11. And Jesus answered the disciples, To you, it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

[17 : 42] But to them, it has not been given. Note that there's been a change of audience here in verse 10. Matthew is recording a private conversation between Jesus and his disciples.

Maybe they're with him on the boat as he's teaching the crowds. And they just take him to one side and say, Why do you do this? So there's this clear contrast being set up. There are those on the inside with Jesus in comparison to those on the outside.

But what is the dividing line between those two groups? Well, back to verse 11. It is knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God. Those on the inside know the secrets of the kingdom of God.

That's rather an enigmatic phrase, isn't it? Well, the word secret in the Greek is *mysterion*. So it's the same word that we get our word mystery from. So Jesus is disclosing the mysteries of the kingdom.

That is the truth that he is the fulfillment of God's promise of a king in the line of David from the Old Testament. But also, and crucially, how are the disciples on the inside?

[18 : 46] And listen up, because this bit is really important. They have been given the secrets of the kingdom. So it's not their wise minds. It's not their dazzling intellects.

They haven't reasoned their way to the secrets of the kingdom. They haven't discovered them for themselves through scientific experiments. No, the secrets have been given to them. God's truth only comes by God revealing it to people.

And that explains the tricky phrase in verse 12. Look down with me. Verse 12. So the final destiny of those on the inside is abundant provision.

To the one who has, which in context means understanding the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, more will be given. Not earned, given. And we can see this clearly in the parable of the sower.

The good soil has the seed sown on it and multiplies fruit abundantly. 30, 60, 100 times what was sown. But to those outside who don't have understanding, even what they have will be taken away.

[20 : 02] And again, we see this clearly in the parable of the sower. There are the three other soils. They all have the seed of the word sown onto them. But for differing reasons, what they have is taken away.

They ultimately prove to be unfruitful and are left with nothing. It's mathematical, isn't it? Add, multiply, and subtract. Subtract. To those on the inside, more will be added.

And there will be abundant multiplication. To those on the outside, there is only subtraction. And we can see from verses 16 and 17 that the disciples are in an incredibly privileged position.

Jesus has already challenged the crowd in verse 9. He who has ears, let him hear. So look with me at verse 16. Jesus says to the disciples, Isn't that an incredible blessing?

They can see and hear Jesus for themselves. There's no equivocation. They have been given understanding of who Jesus is. And as we heard last week, they are on the inside in the kingdom.

[21 : 09] As Jesus explains the parable of the sower to them in verse 18 onwards. This is incredibly humbling, isn't it? They're not on the inside in this blessed position due to their own intellects.

They didn't figure it out for themselves. Their position on the inside is one which has been graciously given to them. Now, my younger daughter, Rebecca, recently had a part in her year two school musical.

And this year, the school pushed the envelope a little bit and put on a performance of the musical Annie. Now, I don't know whether you know the story. The central character, obviously, is called Annie. She's an 11-year-old girl who is in an orphanage in New York City who harbors hopes that one day her parents are going to come back to find her.

Now, in case you haven't seen it, I'm not going to spoil the story. It doesn't quite work out the way she does. But one of the main developments in the story occurs when Annie is taken from the orphanage to spend Christmas with the richest man in New York, a businessman called Oliver Warbucks.

She's taken from hopeless, grinding poverty to a position of incredible privilege and simply by being given it. She doesn't earn her change in status.

[22 : 18] And it's the same with the secrets of the kingdom of God. Those on the inside are those who are given their blessed position. But there is also one other point to notice about those on the inside.

The disciples come to Jesus and they ask for an explanation. They know that they don't know. So they humbly come and ask Jesus to explain his teaching. They want to understand.

And Jesus does that. He explains the truth to those who are inside, those who ask. God graciously reveals his kingdom to the humble. So we've answered the disciples' question.

Why does he speak in parables, in judgment on the hard-hearted, whilst understanding is given to those who humbly ask? But so what? What were the implications for the first hearers?

What are the implications for us now? Well, for them then, it was the main implication is to not be surprised that as Jesus came and as he taught, that it was met with unresponsiveness and division.

[23 : 18] They would have seen increasing rejection and opposition to his teaching and the challenge of his teaching would land. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And did you spot as we went through, it doesn't say that it's not possible to move from one group to the other.

So for those on the outside, the offer is there. Come to Jesus and ask for understanding from him. And gloriously, there would be some who did do that, who did understand, who did believe.

Jesus is building the new people of God with him as the forever king. And that process is still going on. And for us now, in many ways, the implications are exactly the same.

If you're a Christian here this morning, don't be surprised that the proclamation of the gospel of King Jesus is met with mixed reactions. This is a really important point because I think we're often tempted to look for different ways to make the gospel more palatable to our society.

And yet we don't have to. We should trust Jesus that he knew what he was doing. When he was preaching the good news, his message met with mixed reactions. We've already seen that. He spoke in parables on judgment on an unbelieving crowd.

[24 : 30] The word was sown, but people are hardened against the truth. And that, sadly, still goes on today. Yet, it doesn't mean that the strategy is wrong. It doesn't mean that we have to change the strategy either.

There's no silver bullet, only faithful, persevering, and clear proclamation of the good news of the kingdom wherever God chooses to put us. So we should stick to Jesus' strategy.

Speak the truth about him when and where we can. And if we're Christian, another big implication is that we should recognize the incredibly privileged position we find ourselves in too. We live after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We have the scriptures, God's word, in our own language pointing us to him. So if you're trusting in Jesus this morning, be grateful that the truth has been revealed to you. And continue to ask for understanding and continue in the word.

But perhaps you're here today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. Maybe you're just looking in at the Christian faith. Well, if that's you, then let me encourage you to listen carefully to God's word in the Bible.

[25 : 35] Be careful how you listen to Jesus. Each time we hear his word, as we've seen, the word is being sown and we are responsible for how we respond to what we hear.

Each time we reject his word, some of what we have is taken away. And what that means is that we can't think that we've plenty of time later in life to come back to Jesus.

We can't think that we can deal with Jesus maybe when we're older or when the kids have grown up or when life is less busy. So I wonder, have you ever really taken the time to listen to Jesus?

Have you read through a gospel as an adult? Well, if that's something that you'd like to do, we can offer a number of ways in which you can do that. We run a course here at Grace Church called Christianity Explored.

Four sessions, about an hour each, run over four weeks looking at Mark's gospel. It's a great way to meet with others, examine the claims that Jesus makes and ask any questions that you might have.

[26 : 29] Or if you'd like to do something more informal, we can also do a guided read through of a gospel, perhaps one-to-one. Do ask the person who brought you if you'd like to do that or come and speak to Simon or me afterwards.

So as we close, as we head back out into Dulwich and Hearn Hill life, how is this passage going to stay with us? Well, let's not be surprised at mixed responses to the good news of Jesus.

And let's keep on coming to Jesus the King, humbly asking for understanding. As we close, let's pray together. Amen. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

He who has ears, let him hear. Amen.