

Responding to Parables

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[0 : 00] Our Father, we do thank you for your word through which you speak to us. Our Father, we ask this morning that you would indeed give us ears to hear and minds that understand. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, last week I was telling, Michelle was telling the children some funny things that they did growing up when they were a bit younger. And one was a story of our youngest, Megan. Then, after she'd just started school, someone said to her, I hear you're learning to speak Mandarin at school. And to which Megan replied, no, we're learning Chinese.

And then she kept going, actually. She said, Mandarin is a fruit. And then rolled her eyes as if to say, doesn't everyone know that? You see, Megan heard, but didn't really hear, didn't she?

She didn't really understand. And today, as we pick up our series in Matthew's account of Jesus' life, we come to the parables of Jesus, and in particular, the parable of the sower.

[1 : 05] And these parables draw a distinction between those who really hear and understand and those who don't. I mean, if you just glance through the passage, you might have realized this from the reading, the words hearing, seeing, understanding, they come up lots of times, don't they?

And the call is to be one who really does hear and understand the word of Jesus. But the first thing we need to do is understand the context of the parables, which is point one in your outlines and verse one in your Bibles.

That same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such a large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.

And then he told them many things in parables, saying, dot, dot, dot. And now here, I want you to notice that Matthew begins by saying that Jesus spoke the parables on that same day.

Verse one. Now, why do you think Matthew adds that? I mean, it could be just because it was the same day, but it's just odd that he seems to make that point. And I take it that he's trying to show us the context of what was happening.

[2 : 19] You see, if you turn back in your Bibles one page, we see what else has happened that same day. So just turn back in your Bibles to chapter 12, verse 22. It's the right hand side of the page there. Here we read that they brought Jesus, a demon possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him.

And so this man is blind, mute and demon possessed. He's got it all. And yet Jesus is still even able to heal him. And so in verse 23, all the people were astonished and said, could this be the son of David?

In other words, could this be the Christ, the king who would come from David's line? But the Pharisees in verse 24 say, no, no, no. He's only driving out demons by the prince of demon.

He's on Satan's side. And if you keep going down to the bottom of that column, down to verse 30, Jesus ends up saying to them, whoever is not with me is against me.

And the point is, we're starting to see these growing division between people who are with Jesus and those who are against him. These different responses are dividing people on how they see Jesus.

[3 : 30] And it continues over the page. So chapter 12, verse 46, under the heading, Jesus's mother and brothers. Here, while Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside wanting to speak to him.

Someone told him, your mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to you. He replied to him, who is my mother and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he said, here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. Here, Jesus is talking to the crowds. But you notice there's another division.

His family are on the outside of the house. And then Jesus says his true family are actually those inside the house. Those disciples who do the will of his father.

Did you see this growing division? People are responding differently to Jesus and his teaching. And in so doing, there's this division between those who think Jesus might be the king and those who do not.

[4 : 32] Between those who are with Jesus and those who are not. Between those who are his true family on the inside, who really listen to his teaching, and those who are his biological family on the outside, who want Jesus actually to listen to them.

And it's this same day, chapter 13, verse 1, that Jesus starts telling parables. Why? Well, to highlight this growing division and to even reinforce it.

It's as though he sees these various responses and the growing division. And so he starts telling parables to highlight it. And so we're at point 2 and verse 3, his first parable here.

He says, As a farmer went out to sow his seed, and as he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places where it did not have much soil.

It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among the thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.

[5 : 35] And yet still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop, 160 or 30 times what was sown, he says. Now, this parable of the sower is an appropriate parable to start with.

Because as we'll see, it's all about different responses to Jesus' teaching. And so, like the other parables, it highlights this growing division that's happening this same day.

Between those who really hear Jesus and his word and those who don't. But what really highlights and even reinforces this division is not so much this parable, but the method of speaking in parables.

So, have a look at verse 9. He ends the parable by saying, Whoever has ears, let them hear. And then the disciples came to him and asked, Why do you speak to the people in parables?

And he replied, Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Excuse me.

[6 : 42] See, Jesus says that he speaks in parables to the crowd because there is this division. God has granted that you disciples should know the secrets and hear the explanations of the parables, but not them.

You notice the you and them language, the division there? But why is this the case? Well, verse 12 gives us the clue. Verse 12 literally starts with the word, because.

And so he says, You know, the secrets are given to you, but not to them. Verse 12, Because whoever has will be given more. And they will have an abundance. But whoever does not have, Well, even what they have will be taken from them.

Now, it's a little bit hard to know exactly what Jesus means here. But I think what's going on is this. Jesus tells a parable and ends in verse 9 by saying, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

In other words, he drops a big hint that he's talking about much more than just farming practices.

There's more going on here. And for those who see something in Jesus's teaching, who really have ears to hear, then they go to Jesus to find out more, just like the disciples do in verse 10.

[7 : 55] We need to remember, by the way, that the disciples at this point included more than just the 12. It included all who followed after Jesus to find out more, just like they do in verse 36.

In fact, when Mark records this same incident in his gospel, he says this on the next slide. I think it's a verse from Mark. It says, So that's what's going on here.

Those who have ears to hear, those who see something, not just the 12 follow after Jesus, but those who do not have ears to hear, those who are no doubt impressed with Jesus's miracles and want to see the next amazing thing, sure, but they're not really interested in his teaching.

Well, those people don't follow after Jesus to find out more. Instead, they go home. And in so doing, these parables divide the people between those who really have ears to hear and seek to understand and those who don't.

In fact, I was thinking of trying to demonstrate this to you. I had a different introduction for my sermon, but I chickened out. But I was actually going to give you a modern day parable, just a short one.

[9 : 12] And then at the end of it, say, whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. And then I was going to sit down. And then I was going to see how you might respond. Now, there could be, it would have been all sorts of different responses, I guess.

And for some people, they would have went, yes, shortest sermon ever. Early mark. Still others might have thought, oh, I've got no idea what he's going on about.

Whatever, what's next? But others, on the other hand, might have thought, well, that's interesting. I wonder what he means by that. I might ask him afterwards. And so whatever response it is, they can be divided into two groups.

Those who are not interested in finding out more and just happy to go home early. But those who are interested to find out more. And I think that's what's happening here. And so in verses 11 and 12, I think Jesus is saying, the secret of the kingdom has been given to you disciples, but not to them.

Because, verse 12, whoever has ears to hear, like the disciples do, and understands that Jesus is saying something more here. Well, they will be given more, more understanding, the secrets of the kingdom.

[10 : 23] And they will have an abundance of understanding. Such that towards the end of the chapter, they're even able to teach others. But those who do not have, verse 12, and I take it he means do not have ears to hear, who stubbornly refuse to understand, then even what understanding they do have will be taken away from them.

You see, the parables are designed to highlight the people's divided responses to Jesus. And in fact, even reinforce them. And so Jesus says the same thing in verse 13 to 17.

He says, this is why I speak to them in parables. Those seeing, they do not see. Though hearing, they do not hear or understand. And so in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah.

Our first reading. You will be ever hearing, but never understanding. You'll be ever seeing, but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused.

They hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn.

[11 : 34] And I would heal them. But then he says to his disciples, but blessed are your eyes, because they do see, and your ears, because they do hear.

For truly, I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it. You see, the crowds do not really see Jesus like the disciples see.

The crowds are not really interested in hearing Jesus' teaching like the disciples are interested. No, the crowds are just like their forefathers in Isaiah's day, who heard God's word, but refused to really understand it.

And so just as God called Isaiah to reinforce Israel's hard hearts, so that Israel would not understand, and would not turn to God for healing, or so too does Jesus speak to the crowds in parables to do the same.

Jesus speaks in parables to actually reinforce the crowd's hard hearts, to keep them on the outside, to keep them from really hearing and understanding, so that they will not turn to Jesus for healing and forgiveness.

[12 : 50] Now, when you hear this, it doesn't sound right, does it? I mean, didn't Jesus come to call sinners, to reveal the truth of the kingdom?

So why is he now speaking in parables to conceal the truth, and to ensure people will not turn to him? Well, we need to remember three things for why Jesus does this.

First, Jesus has been teaching plainly to them for some time. And so it's not as though the crowds haven't had opportunity to understand. They've just chosen not to.

And so they deserve to be kept on the outside, actually. Second, even when Jesus does speak in parables, he still calls on people to hear. That was verse 9 to remember.

The big hint, whoever has ears, let them hear. Hint, hint, there's more here. Come, follow me, find out. So he's still here to save. And the people could at any time still come to him.

[13 : 54] But third, God's plan to save actually meant that Israel had to reject Jesus. You see, if all the crowds understood the parables, if they all followed Jesus to seek understanding, if they all then accepted Jesus as the Christ right there and then, well, Jesus would not have been rejected.

And he would not have died on the cross. And healing or forgiveness would not have come to us for our sins. But Jesus used parables to reinforce the crowd's stubborn hearts so that he might be rejected and sent to the cross to die for us.

You see, God's plan was to use Israel's continued hard heart to bring salvation to the world. And now that he has done that, God does offer healing and forgiveness to all who turn to him.

I had a Sunday school teacher once ask me, she said, if the purpose of the parables was to conceal the truth from the crowds and only reveal it to the disciples, then should we really use them in Sunday school?

Should we teach them to our friends? And the answer is yes, as long as you explain it. Because the time for concealment is over. It was only meant to send Jesus to the cross.

[15 : 14] And now that he has gone and died for us, then we are to clearly proclaim the gospel, to teach all people as clearly as possible with parable and explanation so that everyone might really hear and understand.

So people might respond in faith. Unfortunately, of course, not everyone will respond that way, will they? There are different responses people have.

And that's the message of the sower parable, point three, verse 18. He says, now listen then to what the parable of the sower means. When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart.

This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time.

When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word. But the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

[16 : 27] But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop yielding 160 or 30 times what was sown.

Here, the four types of soil, as I'm sure you know, represents four types of responses people have towards Jesus and his word. And my guess is that you may know people that fit into each of those types.

I mean, I remember sitting with a man at church, at a church outreach event. The gospel was clearly proclaimed and I asked him about it afterwards and he said, oh, he wasn't really listening. He couldn't really remember much of it now. And so like the seed on the hard path, the word was spoken but fell on hard ears and now it's gone. I've also spoken to youth group kids who, like that second type of soil, received the word with joy.

I remember one year eight boy in particular, he was excited to understand the gospel. But then when he was going back to school after holidays, he was persecuted for going to youth group and very quickly gave it up.

[17 : 36] For others, I know it was because of great suffering or loss in their lives that caused them to give up. That's like the second type of soil. Or like the third type of soil, I know another person from my old church who heard the message, heard the word of the gospel, started coming to church for a year, Bible study group got involved, but then slowly his love of money and career choked the gospel from his life.

And now he no longer calls himself a Christian. And then, of course, there are those who are like the fourth type of soil. Those who not only hear the word, but notice, notice it says verse 23, not only hear the word, but understand it.

There's that key word, understand, such that the word transforms their life and fruit is born for God. You see, the parable is saying that there will be always different responses to Jesus and his word. But it's also getting us to think about our own response to Jesus and his word. I mean, I suspect if we had to put ourselves in one of those types of soil, then most of us would pick the fourth one. After all, we're here at church, aren't we? Yeah, we've heard the gospel, the good news about Jesus' death for us. We've understood it such that it has changed us and started to bear fruit for God in our lives.

[18 : 59] But the question then becomes, do we continue to hear and understand his word such that it continues to transform us and we continue to bear fruit for God?

You see, I take it that the picture of the farmer sowing seed is also a picture of what happens here Sunday by Sunday as the word is preached. And if you're anything like me, even though I've accepted the gospel, I can sometimes act like those other types of soil.

I mean, I remember going to a conference. It was even a pastor's conference, I'm ashamed to say. And I heard the word, but I just wasn't really listening. I couldn't remember what was said afterwards.

I looked like I was listening. No one could tell. But I couldn't remember a thing of it. I wasn't really making any real effort to digest it.

Has that ever happened to you? Or perhaps you hear something that really struck a chord with you, encouraged or challenged you, but then you leave church and the worries of life take over such that you forget about it instead of perhaps rereading the passage or praying for God's help to transform you by it.

[20 : 15] We can sometimes be like that too, can't we? And so even though we might describe ourselves as that fourth type of soil who have heard the word of the gospel and believed it, it's very easy to sometimes act like the other types, isn't it?

And so the challenge for us is to keep working hard at really hearing God's word. Not just so that we hear it with our ears, but so that we understand it with our hearts such that it shapes our minds and our lives.

We bear fruit for God. I remember an older person from a couple of churches ago that I was at. I was actually a student minister at the time.

And this person apparently came to church every Sunday, certainly did while I was there. But as soon as the sermon started, the eyes would close and the breathing.

God, diva. I don't think he ever snored, but it certainly got quite heavy. For the record, he did it no matter who was preaching. But you see, no effort was made to really listen, to have ears to hear, to read, mark, and inwardly digest, as they say.

[21 : 30] That's the negative example, though. Take a positive one. I visited a couple from Wednesday at 2. I think it was last week or the week before. I read a psalm to them and gave them communion.

But after we read the psalm and I explained it, the lady said, oh, what number psalm was that again? I want to write that down so I can read it again tonight and really reflect on it. I thought, oh, fourth type of soil.

Or a person at 1030 Church who deliberately writes notes so that she can concentrate, learn, mark, and inwardly digest it.

Fourth type of soil. See, the word of Christ is important. It is what both saves us and grows us. It's what encourages and challenges us to keep living for the one who died for us.

And so we must work at truly hearing and understanding it so that it might transform us and we might bear fruit in our lives for God to his glory.

[22 : 37] So let me finish by asking you this question. What kind of soil has this word fallen on this morning? and continuing? Okay. So let's put that in.

Let's take a look at your lower nose condam from our soil design and moving in short and then HERA and touching in short and touching. So let's normally just take a look at a little bit of the water and creating with the water and so on she never gives her life because she has a supply due and so on the soil is very cold and inside burning