

The King's Teaching

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] The Old Testament reading this morning comes from Isaiah chapter 55 verses 6 to 11. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower.

And bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

This is the word of the Lord. The New Testament reading is from Mark chapter 4 verses 1 to 9. The Parable of the Sower Again Jesus began to teach by the lake.

The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

[1 : 54] He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said, Listen. Listen. A farmer went out to sow his seed.

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 thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. But still other seed fell on good soil.

It came up, grew, and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.

[3 : 00] Then Jesus said, Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear. This is the word of the Lord, and thanks be to God.

Well, in life, we can hear things, but not really listen to those things. I experience this whenever I cook dinner during the week, and call out to the kids, Dinner is ready, and what happens?

Nothing, absolutely nothing. That's right. I know they hear me, but they simply don't listen to me. Instead, they kind of pull this face on their screen, whatever that screen is.

Though I must admit, when it's Michelle's turn to cook, I sometimes do the same thing. Only it's on my computer. I keep going. In fact, us husbands sometimes have been rightly accused of selective hearing.

You know, like this guy whose wife says, You only hear the things you want to hear, and he says, Yes, a beer sounds lovely, thanks dear. I've seen my dad do that, but it was a cup of tea rather than a beer.

[4 : 07] But I wonder if you have ever done that with others. You know, practice selective hearing. You hear, but you don't really listen. Of course, sometimes it can be a good thing, actually.

Like this cartoon where a guy has a special hearing aid that filters out criticism and amplifies compliments. I mean, that's not bad selective hearing, is it?

But other times, selective hearing is bad. And especially when it comes to the teaching of the king, as we do today. Instead, we're to make every effort to hear it and accept it.

Which means doing it such that we produce a crop for Christ through it. I will also be encouraged not to worry when we see others around our world not responding to his word, as we saw last week.

For as we'll hear, and as we heard already in the first reading, God's word will not return to him empty, but accomplish the purposes he's desired for it. And so let's begin, though, with what Mark does.

[5 : 11] Jesus, the teacher. Point one, verse one. Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around, he was so large that he got into a boat, sat out on the lake, while all

the people were along the shore at the water's edge, and he taught them many things by parables. And in his teaching, he said dot, dot, dot. Here we're told a couple of things. One, Jesus taught in parables. And just in case you're not sure what a parable is, it's a story taken from everyday life, which was for Jesus' everyday life back then, like farming and so on.

And it carries with it a spiritual truth. When I was in Sunday school, I was taught they are an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Have you ever heard that phrase before? Yep.

So that's a parable. The second thing worth noting is actually the obvious, that Jesus was a teacher. And I think it's worth us remembering this, because sometimes we can forget it.

I mean, if you talk to people, even other Christians, and ask them, what did Jesus primarily do during his three-year earthly ministry? Many will say, well, he did lots of miracles, like healing people.

[6 : 21] But actually, he primarily taught people. In fact, just a quick scan of the first two chapters of Mark's gospel show this.

He's always proclaiming or teaching or preaching the word. In fact, 138 in the middle there, that is why I have come, he says, to teach.

Teach about the kingdom and about himself, the king, who would die and rise for them so that they might repent and believe in him and be given a place in his kingdom, in his family.

And this mattered more to him than even healing. Because healing would only give people still only a limited life. They would still one day die, right?

But his teaching would give people eternal life, you see. This is one of the reasons we prioritize teaching the word here at Holy Trinity. Why the biggest chunk of the service is devoted to reading the Bible and explaining the Bible.

[7 : 23] Because Jesus prioritized the teaching of the word in his ministry. Indeed, as we'll see, God works primarily through his word to grow us, his church.

And so I wonder if we place the same importance on the teaching as he did. It's such that we seek to read it during the week. If you need help, Ricky has written some devotional material on Mark's gospel.

And talk to me afterwards and I can get a copy for you. Or do we attend a Bible study group to dig into it? Or do we work hard at church to listen to it? Even when the sermon's a bit long, which I suspect it might be today.

I know listening is hard and I work hard to try and help you. But it is hard, especially when we have lots going on in our life or we haven't had a good night's sleep the night before. I'm pretty sure I saw someone in the 7.45am service two weeks ago fall asleep.

And that was before I even started the sermon. As long as it's just not Bruce on the organ. But do we give it the same importance as Jesus?

[8 : 32] Of course, not everyone does, which brings us to point two in the first three parables. This will be our longest point. Beginning with the parable of the sower. I'm not going to read verses three to nine again. We don't have time and we heard it in the reading.

But you'll remember the story is taken from everyday life, farming. And we're a sower. Here's a picture to represent it. It has a bag of seed, which is in front of him.

And he's scattering the seed, which is hard to see. And as he does, it naturally falls on different parts of the field. So some on the path next to the field where the birds eat it. Some on the rocky places on the right-hand edge of the field where the soil is naturally shallow.

And so it springs up, but then withers in the sun. And some even amongst thorns, which we can't see at the moment because they will grow up with the wheat, but will end up choking the wheat.

And then some on good soil, usually in the middle of the field, which produces a crop. The point is different things happen to the seed. And as we'll see, it's about different responses to the word.

[9 : 39] But for the moment, it's worth realizing that even Jesus anticipates different responses to his word. And so we're not to be surprised or discouraged when we see that happening in our world.

In fact, the purpose of his parables in his own day was to provoke different responses, which would actually divide people ultimately not into four types of soil, but to two groups of people, insiders and outsiders.

And so if we pick it up in verse 10, when Jesus was alone, the 12 and others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to

those on the outside, everything is said in parables, so that they may be ever seen, but never perceiving, ever hearing, but never understanding.

Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven. And so here in verse 10, we see a group of disciples along with the 12, so it's more than 12, come to him and ask him about the parable.

In reality, they probably did this much later when Jesus had finished teaching all the parables in our chapter, and then he got off the boat and went to somewhere else, and then they came to him.

[10:57] But Mark has put the explanation of the sower with the parable of the sower. But either way, verse 12 sounds rather harsh, doesn't it? I mean, it's a quote from Isaiah, who was sent by God to preach, knowing that it would reinforce people's unbelief.

And Jesus is saying he's teaching in parables, so it would do the same, so that people would not understand, would not turn and be forgiven. But doesn't he want to forgive people?

I mean, hasn't he come to seek and save the lost? Yes, he has. And so what's going on here? Well, we need to remember a few things. First, Jesus has been doing miracles of healing sickness and casting out evil, and he's been proclaiming the kingdom of God now, clearly for some time, to show that he is the one who makes God's kingdom a reality.

You know, that by believing him, we can enter God's kingdom, be part of his family now spiritually, and enjoy God's kingdom fully later physically in a world where there'll be no more sickness and no more evil.

That's why he's doing the miracles, to show that he's the one who can make this happen. And so Jesus has already said enough and done enough for people to believe he is more than an ordinary man, to even believe that he might just be the one who makes God's kingdom a reality for us.

[12:23] He just can't come out and say it openly, I'm the king, everyone, because if he said that right at the start of his ministry, what do you think the Roman emperor would do? Well, actually, he'd crucify him much earlier and he wouldn't be able to reach many people at all.

But he's certainly done enough for people to believe he's more than an ordinary guy. And so the parables then simply confirm what people already believe or don't believe about him.

And so for the insider, God has helped them believe Jesus is more. That's the secret of the kingdom that's been given to them in verse 11, that Jesus is the one who makes it a reality, which means when they hear the parables, they come to Jesus for more meaning.

You know, they think Jesus is more, so there must be more to this story. I believe he's more than an ordinary guy, so there must be more to this ordinary parable, which means the parable ends up just showing their belief that Jesus is more.

Whereas those on the outside, they refuse to believe Jesus is more, despite the evidence. They are like the crowds last week who only take from Jesus as healer, but refuse to see Jesus as king.

[13:38] Or they're the religious leaders from last week who think he's demon-possessed and refuse to believe he's from God. And so when Jesus tells them a parable, they don't come to him for more meaning.

They don't think there is any because they don't believe Jesus is any more than a normal person. They have selective hearing and think, oh, nice story, Jesus, but how about more of that healing stuff?

Let's get into that. Or they say, what's he going on about a farmer and a seed? I told you he was demon-possessed. Or, what a lovely story.

Out in the boat, what a lovely day. Did you see that fish jump up beside Jesus? They don't hear anything more or think there's anything more because they don't believe Jesus is anything more. And so the effect of the parables on them is simply to make them think it's just a story which reinforces their unbelief that Jesus is nothing more.

[14:38] And so that's what he's getting at in verse 11 and 12. Those on the outside who've had enough to believe in Jesus but don't think anything is more, he's anything more, well, the parables just confirm their unbelief, that they will be ever seen but never perceiving.

They'll have selective hearing so we'll never understand and sadly we'll never come to him for forgiveness like the insiders. But the last thing to realise is that Jesus actually wants them to come to him and believe.

Jesus wants them to really see and perceive. He doesn't want them to have selective hearing.

That's why he says at the start of the parable, listen! And at the end of the parable, whoever has ears to hear, let them hear that there is something more going on in this story.

Come to me. See who I am. In fact, that's why he adds two more parables which I think would have originally gone straight after the parable of the sower to reinforce this.

So if you come down to verse 21, he said to them, do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? Verse 21 literally says, the lamp does not come to be put under a bowl or under a bed.

[15:57] Who do you think the lamp is? Jesus. He's saying he doesn't come into the world to be hidden but to shine and be seen. He's already done enough and said enough clearly and openly to be seen.

And he wants them to see who he really is. Which is why he goes on to say in verse 22, whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed.

It's meant to be made known. Whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. You see, he wants people to see who he really is and to hear who he really is.

Which is why he then adds in verse 23, if you have ear, any ears at all, one ear, then please hear what's going on. That this is more than just a story.

Hear who I really am. In fact, he even goes one step further from pleading with them to warning them in verse 24. He says, In other words, how you listen to him will determine what happens to you.

[17:17] If you use big measure or big ears, if you like, to listen to him, such that you come to believe in him as the one who makes God's kingdom a reality, then you'll be given more.

Not just life with God now, but life with God later in a perfect world which will be far richer than we can ever imagine. But if we use small measure or small ears to listen to him, such that we don't really believe in him, then even what we have in this life now will be taken away in the next life later.

And so the warning really is to make sure we have big ears. Although I think I did it wrong.

Are they growing at the top of my head? Anyway, I'm going to take this off. You get the point. Make sure we have big ears that listen to him such that we see who he really is and come to believe in him.

You see, Jesus wants people to believe in him and be saved. And so do you. Have you put on your big ears and come to hear and see who he really is and believe in him?

[18:27] And for us who have, I think we're to keep hearing the word and accept it, he adds, such that we end up doing it and produce a crop for Christ with our lives, which is where the explanation of the parable, the sower, comes in.

So verse 13, Then Jesus said to them, Don't you understand the parable? How will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path where the word is sown.

As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive 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. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word. But the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and desires for other things, come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it and produce a crop, some 30, some 60, some 100 times what was sown.

[19:37] Here these four sorts of soil represent four sorts of people and their responses to God's word through Jesus. And I suspect we could probably think of people who've responded in each of these ways over the years.

I've sat next to guys at a men's outreach event where the gospel word was shared and I asked one of them afterwards about it and he goes, yeah, I can't really remember what it was about.

Nothing. Satan snatched it away. Gone. I've chatted to young people who were like the second type of soil who received the word and they're young Christians, they don't have much root but then they go to school or uni and they get hassled for being a Christian, going to church and so they give up and stop believing.

Even though some older people who even though they've been coming to church for a long time, their faith hasn't really grown over the years, they still don't have much root and so when a different sort of trouble comes like health issues or loss of loved ones, they give up and walk away.

I've known other people who are like the seed against the thorn, scattered amongst the thorns like a guy at my old church and a friend of my wife's who received the word with joy, started coming to church for a while but slowly their love for money and materialism and family, the worries of life, choked the gospel from them such that they no longer call themselves Christians.

[21 : 10] In the end, all those types of soils are unfruitful and all three of them are basically like the outsiders. It's only the fourth type of soil that produces a crop, isn't it?

For they hear the word of God and accept it which implies then doing it so that they might produce a crop for Christ. It's hard to know exactly what that crop is.

It could be producing a crop of good deeds by doing God's word. For example, God's word says to love as Christ has loved us and if we do that word we can do a multitude of good loving deeds to others, can't we?

And so it produces 30, 60, 100 fold of loving good deeds. Or it could refer to producing a crop of Christians by doing God's word. God's word says we're to do what we can to help others become Christians and help people remain Christians.

And so if we do God's word then we could be part of producing a whole crop of Christians 30, 60, 100 fold. Whatever it means, good soil hears and accepts God's word such that by doing it we produce a crop for Christ.

[22 : 25] Now I take it most of us would put ourselves in the fourth type of soil, wouldn't we? We all want to be the good soil, don't we? But if you're anything like me, we can sometimes act like the other types, can't we?

I've been at conferences or heard the word taught in churches and sometimes I'm just not listening. You know, I'd look like I was listening, no one could tell.

But my mind was elsewhere and I wasn't really making any effort to digest it. I don't know if that's ever happened to you or if it's happening now. Or you hear something on Sunday and think, oh that's the best thing I've ever heard but then you start to think about all the worries in your life or the worries of your week and suddenly they choke out the word you've just heard and it disappears. So even though we might describe ourselves as a fourth type of soil who generally hear and accept the word it's easy to act like the other types isn't it? And so the challenge for us is to keep hearing and accepting God's word that we might do it and produce a crop for Christ through it which is why some people take sermon notes to help them hear and listen and digest it.

Others I know Grace Nicodemus actually used to always come to church at 7.45 and then go home and watch the 9 o'clock service watch it again to help digest it.

[23 : 52] Or people talk about it with others after the church on Sunday and we can all pray can't we for God's help? That's why we pray before the Bible is read and I pray at the end of the sermon.

Whatever it is we're to keep making every effort to not just hear it but accept it you know do it and produce a crop for Christ through it. But what about those who don't respond like this?

Jesus has already told us there will be different responses to his word like those we saw last week or those in our world today. So should we despair when people don't have the right response you know when they have selective hearing to his word and just you know give up sharing it?

Well of course not. And so to encourage us Jesus ends with two parables about the kingdom and so more briefly point three and verse 26 he also said to them this is what the kingdom of God is like a band scatters seed on the ground night and day whether he sleeps or gets up the seed sprouts and grows though he does not know how all by itself the soil produces grain first the stalk then the head then the full kernel in its head and as soon as the grain is ripe he puts the sickle to it because the harvest has come.

Jesus is talking about how the kingdom grows a man still scatters the seed which is still the word but notice the man doesn't make it grow does he?

[25 : 23] All by itself we're told the soil produces grain ready for the harvest there's even a sense of unstoppable growth here verse 27 night and day whether he sleeps or gets up the seed keeps growing it's unstoppable and the point is while we scatter the seed of the gospel it's God behind the scenes who makes it grow isn't it?

Indeed as we heard from our first reading his word will not return to him empty but will accomplish unstoppable will accomplish the growth he desires even when we don't know how a guy at Bible study last week was sharing with the group how he grew up as a non-Christian in a different country and when he was actually in New Zealand a man gave him the word literally gave him a Bible he

said thank you explained he wasn't a Christian but he took it just a bit polite and put it on his shelf when he got home some time later things in his life went pear shaped and so he started well he decided to start reading it and as he did God helped him to start seeing the truth of it and so he decided to find a church who could help explain more of it and now he's a committed Christian in our 1030 congregation today the man who gave him the Bible all those years ago scattered the seed but then that was it it was God who made it grow in his life even though that man who gave him the Bible didn't know how and so he's an encouragement to support the work of scattering the gospel trying to scatter it ourselves for God will make it grow according to his purposes even if we can't see how and our efforts won't be wasted because God's kingdom is never going to fall apart it's actually going to be the greatest kingdom of all verse 30 again he said what shall we say the kingdom of God is like what parable shall we use to describe it is like a mustard seed which is the smallest of all seeds on earth but when planted it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade here the seed no longer represents the word but the kingdom which is why Jesus calls it a mustard seed and says it is like a mustard seed the kingdom is like a mustard seed which starts off small and insignificant but will grow to be the largest kingdom not in the garden but in the world where the birds from all nations can come and become part of it it's like that

Paul Kelly song do you remember that song from little things big things grow and the church certainly started off pretty little Jesus and his band of disciples but it has grown and Christianity is still the largest faith in the world and while it might seem like it has shrunk in our country there is still growth last Saturday not yesterday but last week the Chinese one of the Chinese congregations been running an alpha course and two people have become Christians already that's just a week ago there's still growth what's more like the mustard seed God will ensure that his kingdom grows to be the largest kingdom in the world so we're not wasting our efforts on a kingdom that's going to fall no God will use our efforts to scatter the gospel he'll use them to make them grow according to his purposes until his kingdom is the greatest in the world indeed until it's the only kingdom left in the world and so it's worth doing what we can to scatter this gospel seed isn't it well I need to finish Jesus is a teacher who prioritized teaching and so do we prioritize his teaching in our lives second will we respond to his teaching like good soil hearing and accepting such that by doing we produce a crop for Christ and will we do all we can to see this gospel seed scattered knowing that our efforts will not be wasted well I wonder what type of soil this word has fallen on here today let's pray it would be the good type let's pray our gracious father we do thank you for your word and the reminder this morning of your word help us to remember the importance of it in our lives help us to respond like the good saw that we may produce a crop for Christ in our lives and help us to do what we can to see the gospel seed scattered knowing that our efforts will not be wasted in all these three ways help us to respond rightly to your word in Jesus name we pray amen