

Blinded by the Light

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[0 : 00] You'll find it helpful if you're able to open back to Matthew 13 on page 818 and it feels like a complete change of pace. Those of you who've been with us through Matthew so far, up until now it's all been action and conflict and miracles and marvels and magnificent teaching.

And now we move away from the enemies and Jesus has a massive crowd following him. So in verses 1 and 2 of 13, he gets into the first floating pulpit, a boat, with his 12 disciples so he's not crushed by the crowd.

And he's able to preach in a way that he is heard by everyone. It's a great device because sound travels over water. And then some churches are built like that, so that the pulpit is like a boat.

I'm not going there. So what he then does is he launches into seven parables in chapter 13. And each parable, there's one theme through them all and that is the kingdom of heaven.

He says the kingdom of heaven is like, the kingdom of heaven is like, as we'll see in the next weeks. This week in verses 1 to 23, we come to the parable. It's the parable that explains the others.

[1 : 17] The parable of the sower and the seed and the soils. Last week, if you were with us, you remember we looked at that very strange story of the demons and the other demons and the house being empty.

And it's a very unfamiliar episode. Our problem today is the opposite. If you've been a Christian for a year or two, you will likely know this story. You've heard the parable of the sower.

And you may think like, yeah, I've got it. I don't need to hear it again. Yes, yes. I need to be the good soil and listen to the word of God. I've got it. Let's move on.

It's exactly that position Jesus wants to puncture. It's exactly that attitude that this parable is addressed to. If you come to this parable thinking that you've got it, you haven't begun to understand it.

If you think you've got everything from it, you're the first soil. You're the path, the hard soil. And as you listen today, Satan's just going to come and tear the word of God out of your heart.

[2 : 23] Because Jesus uses parables precisely to engage us with his word, to engage our hearts with his word. They are deeply immersive.

You can't stay outside or roll along the surface. That way it's just going to bounce off. We cannot welcome the seed of God's word into the soil of our hearts unless we engage in this interaction with Jesus Christ, each of us inwardly.

This is about how we hear and how our hearts engage what Jesus says. Now, in the Old Testament, every now and again, there were parables. And one of the parables in the Old Testament brilliantly illustrates this point.

It happened in the days when King David was the king of Israel. He had sex with his neighbor's wife. Then to cover it up, he had the neighbor killed in battle, as you do when you're a king.

And God sent the prophet Nathan to go to David to tell him a parable to expose this sin. And this is the parable. So Nathan comes before the king. Nobody else knows that David has done this.

[3 : 31] And he tells a parable. He says, There are two men. One was very wealthy. So many sheep, he couldn't count them. Flocks and flocks of sheep. He had a neighbor who was a very poor man who saved up.

He bought one sheep. He brought the sheep into his home. He treated it like a daughter. It ate from his home. It's a thing he loved. One day, the wealthy man had a friend come over to visit. And he wanted to impress him with a feast.

And instead of taking one of his tens of thousands of sheep for the meal, he stole his poor neighbor's sheep. And he had it slaughtered and roasted it with rosemary and gobbled it up.

And at this stage, David, who's listening to the parable, is absolutely furious. And he bursts in and he says, This man deserves to die. And out of his estate, we're going to give four sheep to that poor man for restitution.

Make it so. Now. Now. And Nathan turns to David and he says, You are the man. And David is horrified.

[4 : 32] He sees what he's done in the sight of God. And here's the question. Until that moment, did David understand the parable? Sure. In an intellectual fashion.

He understood it at an academic level. But it's not until Nathan points the finger and says, You are the man that he really understood. That it was about him.

It was about how he had turned away from the word of God and the devastation that it caused. And that what he needs now is the forgiveness of God. And he needs to hear the gospel. And that's the way parables are meant to work.

Jesus' parables are not nice little illustrations to give us a happy meaning and a spiritual truth.

They're a dynamic exercise which involve us and engage us.

And it explains why there's such a wide variety of reactions to Jesus and his teaching. You and I, we are the soil. The word of God is the seed. It has a claim on your heart.

[5 : 31] And if you try and stand at a distance from the words today, it will not be revealed to you. That's what Jesus is saying. So the passage is divided in three.

He tells the simple parable in verses 3 to 9. And you notice how he finishes it in verse 9? He who has ears, hear it. And then at the end, the third section in verses 18 to 23, he explains the parable. And he begins verse 18 by saying, hear it. And then in the middle, in verses 10 to 19, he explains the dynamic of how parables work. So let me go through these three quickly with you.

I want to get to the third section as quickly as I can. So the first paragraph, verses 3 to 9, is a very simple story.

Disarmingly simple, really. I mean, it's a picture of life and it's a picture of organic growth. A sower goes out and sows the seed. But everything depends on what happens next.

[6 : 32] Everything depends on where the seed falls, on what kind of soil it falls in. And three of the different places where the seed falls don't produce grain. On the rocky path, on the path, I'm sorry, the hard path, birds come down and take it away because it doesn't penetrate.

On the rocky ground, it grows up very quickly but then the sun comes out and burns it. Amongst weeds, it grows up and the weeds grow up and choke it. And there's only one soil, the good soil, that produces fruit.

But Jesus is talking about real people. He's talking about our human hearts and the word of the kingdom. And one comment before we move on. The seed is made for the soil and the soil is made for the seed together, not separately.

They don't do their work on their own. They only work when they're brought together in a certain way so that the seed takes deep root in the soil. When the word of the kingdom enters the heart of the hearer in such a way that it grows and bears fruit, then it comes to its purpose.

Secondly, this middle section, verses 10 to verse 17. Someone came up to me between the services and said he didn't understand what I was talking about in this middle section.

[7 : 52] And I didn't say it to him. It's because I don't understand it either. It's a confession. However, there are two things I think Jesus does say here.

And one of them is that parables are a spiritual sifting strategy where they expose what's in our hearts and they work according to the purpose of God.

And there's a dynamic in them which means that if we close our hearts, they will be forever closed. That if we close our eyes, that we'll find it harder to see in the future.

And yet this is the purpose of God as well. In fact, Jesus perfectly combines the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. So let me point out a couple of things.

It begins in verse 10 where the disciples say, why do you speak in parables? And the answer Jesus gives in verse 11 is quite mysterious. He says, to you it's been given to know the secrets of the kingdom, but to them it's not been given.

[9 : 01] In other words, if you understand the kingdom of heaven, if you understand that Jesus is the king of the kingdom, it has been given you by God. You can't work it out for yourself.

And there are some who it's not been given to. This is God's sovereign purpose. The word secret simply means mystery. It means something that was secret and now it's been opened up.

Jesus does not give this to everyone. And the reason he doesn't give it to everyone comes out in verse 15. This is a quote from Isaiah. God says, and he's speaking about Israel, this people's heart has grown dull.

And with their ears they can barely hear and with their eyes they've closed. Their eyes they've closed. Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn. And I would heal them.

In other words, the revelation of God comes to us and addresses us exactly where we are. And whether we receive the word of God into our hearts or not will depend upon whether our hearts are soft or have grown dull.

[10:17] And together that is combined with the sovereign power of God. And Jesus doesn't resolve it for us. He just leaves both things out there. So let's look at the story itself.

The explanation Jesus gives in verses 18 to 23. So it's interesting as he explains the story.

The sower falls into the background. The seed does in a way. The focus is on the soils. The four soils. Every one of the four soils receives the same seed.

In other words, Jesus is not talking about the Pharisees, the people who hate him or want to kill him. Jesus is talking about four different kinds of listeners who are in church.

He's talking about people who come and listen to the word of God. It's about the people in the crowd that day. It's about people sitting around you today. It's about you and it's about me.

[11:15] And even his explanation of this is an act of kindness because he wants us to know there are very great dangers in listening to the word of God. I'm deeply conscious of this.

So he says there are four soils. The first is the seed on the path. This is verse 19. It falls on the path, doesn't penetrate. The birds come and gobble it up. Verse 19 he says, So they hear the word of the kingdom, which is another word for the gospel that Jesus has been preaching since chapter 4, what we'd call the word of God.

Whenever the word of God is taught, the pure word of God is taught, the seed is sown. But this first soil, the seed, does not penetrate below the surface.

There's no humility and there's no hunger to take Christ into their hearts. So the soil lies on the surface of their hearts. And Satan, who hates the kingdom of heaven, he hates the idea of salvation, leaps in and violently, the word is, rips it out of the person's heart as quickly as he can so that nothing is disturbed, nothing is changed, it's left as before.

So, you know that Satan has been at work in you if the word of God doesn't make a dent in your hearts. If you go home today, for example, thinking as though you've heard absolutely nothing.

[12:44] I mean, that could be the preacher's fault, but it's also the soil's fault. What does this mean? I think the key to the seed on the path is the person, Jesus says, hears, but does not understand the word of the kingdom.

This is not the normal word for understanding, for academic taking something in. It's not just knowing something. It's the word for insight, receiving and meditating and turning it over and thinking through the implications and gaining comprehension.

And there's very good reasons why you wouldn't want to comprehend God's word. You know, later on in the New Testament, in Hebrews chapter 4, the writer tells us that the word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit of joint and marrow and discerning the thoughts of the heart and the intentions of the heart.

Literally, judging, separating the thoughts of the heart, our worldview, how we think about things, our opinions, and our intentions, our motivations, our attitudes, what we really want.

So the word of God comes to us and challenges and confronts and exposes and corrects how we live and our motives. And frankly, some of us are just not willing to go there.

[14:10] We don't want to take it in because we know it's going to mean changes and we don't want to change. If you like the way things are in your life and you don't want God messing around and you're not willing to let go of control, you can still come to church.

Just don't take the word of God in. Let it bounce off you. But know this, that Satan will make sure you never get it back. So it's a warning.

But it's also an encouragement. And I think this first soil is a great encouragement to all parents with children as well as Bible study leaders. It's an encouragement.

Keep explaining the Bible to your children because once they grasp it, once they comprehend it, the seed is beyond Satan's reach. He can't touch it.

That's very encouraging. Secondly, the rocky soil. Verse 20 and 21. This has a thin layer of topsoil. When the seed falls in it, it begins and sprouts up quickly.

[15:10] And when the sun blazes, it shrivels up because it has no roots. What does Jesus say in verse 20 and 21? He says, Here is someone who's happy and excited and eager and thankful to hear the word of God.

It's wonderful to have people who are excited to hear the word of God. It's much nicer than having people who are grumpy when they hear the word of God, isn't it? And in the crowd in Jesus' day, there were many who were moved and marveled at Jesus' miracles and pleased at his preaching. And we've known many people at St. John's who started out this way. But that initial emotion and enthusiasm does not always translate into spiritual reality.

When they have to come to nail their colours to the mast and take a stand for Jesus in the gospel, when it becomes uncomfortable for them in their family or with their friends, they're out.

And I think the key here is in verse 21, they have no root in themselves. Their hearing is shallow and emotional.

[16:31] In other words, with no root in themselves, all their excitement was basically to please you and me. They never came to Christ as the King of the Kingdom, as the Lord of all.

They were moved by the story of the cross, but they have no intention of joining the way of the cross. And this is the way of externalism. It's participating in the externals of Christianity without engaging the heart.

This is a faith that doesn't shape and change our deepest motivations and assumptions. This is a faith the experience is your heart is pleased, but it still remains unchallenged.

There's a Sri Lankan theologian called Vinoth Ramachandra, and he's written on this, and he says there's a lot of Christianity today, particularly in the West, that appeals to the rocky soil.

Let me read you a quote. He says the good news today is packaged and marketed as a religious product, offering peace of mind, how to get to heaven, health and prosperity, inner healing and the answer to your problems.

[17:36] This kind of Christianity leaves the status quo untouched. It does not raise fundamental and disturbing questions about the assumptions in which we build our lives.

It doesn't threaten false gods. This kind of gospel is essentially escapist. It's simply a religious image of the secular consumerist culture in which men and women live.

I know it's a big mouthful. You can get the tape online. I think it's a good quote. Let's move on.

Thorny soil, verse 22. Now each soil lasts a bit longer than the last, and this third kind of soil, the seed goes in and starts to sprout up, and the plant grows, but thorns gather around it, and the danger here is not Satan or shallowness.

The danger are thorns which gather around the plant and choke the life out of the person. Verse 22. This is the person who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

What chokes the spiritual life out of a believer is having an overcrowded heart, having a heart that has no room except for thorns, no room for the seed, the precious seed, of thorns which continue to grow and weaken and strangle the seed to death.

[19:05] And Jesus gives us two illustrations of thorns. He says, he just mentions deceitfulness of riches. You don't have to be wealthy to be deceived by riches. Riches offer us what God offers us, and the deceitfulness of riches moves them to take a key part in our hearts where we think they're going to save us and give us justification.

We've seen people, haven't we, who've come into money and gradually begin to think about what they're going to do with it. Nothing wrong with money.

They say to themselves, you know that it offers what only God can offer. Still, it begins to dominate their thinking. And the things you used to look to God for, now you look to the money.

And the spiritual temperature cools. You choose not to mix so much with Christians because they really wouldn't understand. You withdraw from serving others over time until the heart is so crowded with what you're doing with your money that it chokes out any desire for the kingdom.

And the other thorn Jesus mentions are the cares of this world, the anxieties of this age, literally. It's a wonderful word, this, because the anxieties and concerns can be perfectly good ones.

[20:27] Anxieties for our career, anxieties for our future, anxieties for our family, our marriage, our kids. But there is a way for those anxieties, Jesus says, to gradually colonize our heart and choke

out our spiritual life.

And that happens when we allow these thorns to grow beside the seed of God's word. They grow together until there's no room for both. And the person whose thorns are in danger of strangling them, you can see that person because they never get past a certain point in their faith.

There's always something competing so they never go further. And I think we all have to deal with thorns that threaten God's word. Our hearts are like a forest of thorns, in fact.

Lots of good things and bad things that divide our hearts and strangle us. Calvin wonderfully says, there's so many thorns in our hearts that we think we're paralyzed into thinking we can't begin to deal with the first one.

Which I think is a nice way of thinking about it. So here's a question for us this morning. How long is it since the word of God has made a real change in your life?

[21 : 39] Are you able to identify what threatens the growth of the word of God in your heart? And are you actively working to root it out?

Because thorns grow by subtlety and by deception. And what we need is the spirit of God in the word of God to show them to us. I don't think it's always easy to figure out what the thorns are.

You know, if you're behaving badly, if there's a behavior issue, that's not the issue. There's something to, there's a heart issue underneath it. If you're making bad decisions, there's a heart issue going on.

If you speak unkind words or are constantly judgmental and condemning of others, that's something, there's a thorn growing there. And the only thing that has the power in the end to root out those thorns and, you know, don't just try and trim them.

But the only thing that has the power to root them out is the word of God. So this is a positive thing. Not only do we have to root them out, we have to give oxygen and priority to the hearing and meditating and understanding the word of God.

[22 : 47] We want to try and bring the word of God to bear on our thorns and ask Christ to root them out. Otherwise, they'll choke the word of God and we will be unfruitful. Fourth soil, the good soil finally.

Verse 23, Jesus says, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. It's that same word of taking it in. And he indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty and in another thirty.

It's such a powerful and positive way to finish, I think. You know, we've all seen seeds fall in good soil in our lives and then someone puts concrete over or asphalt over.

It doesn't make any difference. If it's in soil, the seed grows up and cracks the concrete and grows through the asphalt. The power of the seed is astonishing. And this is the seed of the word of the kingdom and it's going to continue and grow and push forward until there will be fruit.

There will be fruit. It doesn't happen automatically. It doesn't mean there's going to be no hindrances and it doesn't happen all at once. And it doesn't mean we're going to be free suddenly from anxieties and sin.

[24 : 01] But it does mean that when we hear the word of God, we meditate on it. The very power of God enters our life and bears fruit in our lives. It is, after all, the word of the kingdom.

It's by the power of this word that we were born in you. It's by the power of this word that we will be kept for heaven. It is through this word that Christ himself comes to us and plants the seed of eternal life in our hearts.

And he is going to bring it to completion on that day. What's lovely about this last soil is that in the end the sifting of the parables is not always negative.

It's not always challenging and rebuking. It also says to us this is blessing and this is life. And Jesus says this is what the prophets longed to look into.

They wanted to hear what you hear. They wanted to see what you see. And Jesus says today as we hear his word our eyes are blessed and our ears are blessed.

[25 : 08] And if at this point you are listening carefully you might be able to hear Jesus say you are that man and you are that woman. This blessing is for you.

Amen.