

‘THE SOWER AND THE SOILS’ MATTHEW 13:1-23

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday 14 August, 2022 – All Services]

1. Hearing But Not Hearing.

Do you know what it’s like to be speaking to someone and to feel like they’re hearing but they’re not really hearing? I suspect you do. Sometimes the person we’re talking to is distracted- what we’re saying is going in one ear and out the other. Sometimes it’s because the person we’re talking to doesn’t understand what we’re saying- they’re listening to us but they’re not really getting what we mean.

And it’s often that way when we’re talking to people about spiritual things. I had a very memorable experience like this a few years ago. I met a couple who wanted to get married and they came to me because they wanted to think about where God fitted in to their lives together. I’ll call them Michael & Kathy. And Michael & Kathy were very genuine. They really wanted to think about the Christian faith. And so I met with them several times. We talked about Jesus and what he said and did while he was on earth. We talked about what it means to be a Christian. And throughout the whole process they seemed really attentive, really interested. But, at the end of it all, they didn’t want to become Christians. They went away happy to carry on the way they’d been going- living life without Jesus at the steering wheel. And I went away wondering whether they’d heard me, but not really heard me?

2. The Sower Parable (13:1-9).

This next section of Matthew’s gospel is all about how we hear. It’s about hearing God’s word and responding to it in the way Jesus wants us to. Listen to how the chapter starts. Matthew 13:1.

[Read 13:1-3a]

It’s interesting here that Jesus ‘went out’ just like the farmer at the start of Jesus’ parable ‘went out’. And that’s because Jesus is actually embodying the story he’s about to tell. Jesus is himself sowing the seed of God’s word. And when Jesus goes out to speak, he comes to this great horde of people.

In that crowd would’ve been the disciples of Jesus- those who’d already decided to follow him. No doubt there would’ve been people who were still checking Jesus out, still trying to work out if he was worth following. And there would’ve also been those who were opposed to Jesus- people who didn’t want to follow but who wanted to keep an eye

on him none the less. And, significantly, it's to that mixed crowd that Jesus addresses this first parable- a parable all about the different ways in which people respond to his words.

It's a parable about a sower- a farmer who goes out to sow his seed on his farm. And he scatters the seed in four different places, with four different results. Some seed is sown where it produces no crop. And other seed is sown where it bears much fruit. If we didn't know any better we'd say it was a story about the difference between good farming and bad farming. But in a little while, Jesus will tell us what it's really about. Though for now, he has a word of exhortation for us. Verse 9.

[Read 13:9]

We've heard this exhortation before in Matthew¹. And it's as if Jesus is saying, "Don't just hear. I want you to really hear."

3. The Reason for the Parables (13:10-17).

Well, what happens next is that we get a little detour. Before Jesus explains what the sower parable means, the disciples come to him² to ask why he speaks in parables. And Jesus' answer is pretty surprising. You see if someone asked you that question and you'd never read these verses, then you'd probably say that Jesus uses parables to help make his teaching clear and memorable. Everyone knows that a good story makes a sermon easier to listen to and easier to understand. And that's why people often presume that's Jesus' approach too. But Jesus' answer to his disciples' question is disarmingly different to that. Verse 11.

- two groups of people (vv.11-12)

[Read 13:11]

Jesus begins his answer strangely. He tells the disciples that there are two groups of people. On the one hand there are people like them- people who've been given the secrets of the kingdom. God has revealed himself to them. We heard Jesus talk about this back at the end of chapter 11 as well. Matthew 11:25.

[Read 11:25]

Jesus' point is that knowing the secrets of the kingdom is not an achievement to be proud of, but a gift to be grateful for. And what he's saying here in 13:11 is that some people have been given that gift. But others have not.

¹ Matthew 11:15

² Their 'coming' to him reflects their desire to hear and understand.

But then Jesus says something that's even more strange. Verse 12.

[Read 13:12]

'Whoever has' is a reference to those people who have the secrets of the kingdom- those who Jesus mentioned in verse 11. And, he says, these people will have more and more knowledge of the kingdom³. But those who don't know the secrets of the kingdom, even the little bits of knowledge about Jesus and his kingdom that they might've heard along the way, even these tit-bits will be taken from them.

And then Jesus expands on what he's just said. In verses 13-15 he tells us more about those who don't have, and then in verses 16-17 he tells us more about those who do.

- those who don't really hear (vv.13-15)

In verses 13-15, Jesus refers back to the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah. He quotes from Isaiah chapter 6. And in that chapter, Isaiah was called by God to speak words that the people of Israel would not understand. And this is because God is judging them- judging them because they're a hard-hearted people. God had spoken to them repeatedly, but they had not really listened to him and responded as they should- and so their hearts grew calloused. And as a result God resolves to punish their hard-heartedness with further hard-heartedness. And their further hard-heartedness leads them even further away from the healing they could have if only they turned to God. Their failure to really hear God is met by God's refusal to reveal himself, and thus his refusal to heal them. And Jesus is saying that there are people in his own day who are just like those ancient Israelites. Verse 13.

[Read 13:13-15]

Jesus' diagnosis is that the people in his own day have calloused hearts. And so, the parables Jesus tells are like the words Isaiah spoke. They only serve to further harden their hearts. We're inclined to think that Jesus tells parables to make himself clearer. But Jesus says, to these people, I tell parables to make myself less clear. This is the judgement of God upon such people. To the ears of the calloused-hearted, the parables seem cryptic and confusing. And that is God's intention. He is judging them even as Jesus speaks his word to them.

Here Jesus is explaining what he said in verse 12- even what they have is being taken away. Some of the people in the crowd that day, were people like the Israelites Isaiah

³ Note that the word 'abundance' here reflects the picture Jesus painted in the parable in verse 8.

spoke to. They were people like Michael and Kathy who I mentioned earlier. They were people who don't really hear.

- those who do really hear (vv.16-17)

But there were others who did really hear. And at the same time as the parables are judgement upon some, they are revelation to others. These are people like the disciples. And Jesus tells us about them in verse 16-17.

[Read 13:16-17]

These people are blessed. And even more blessed than the faithful Israelites in Old Testament times. You see, just as Jesus spoke to a mixed crowd- some hearing, others not, so too in Isaiah's day. There were people with calloused hearts, but there were righteous people as well. There was certainly one righteous prophet! And Jesus is telling the disciples that they see even more than the righteous people did in days gone by, even more than Isaiah did. Isaiah looked forward with a prophet's eye to the day when God would send the Messiah. But Jesus' disciples actually saw him in the flesh. Isaiah looked forward to the Messiah with expectant ears even though he was still hundreds of years away. But Jesus' disciples had the Messiah's words entering their ears from less than 10 feet away!

This is how Jesus explained his use of parables. His stories were sifting the two groups of people who listened to him. The parables sifted them even as they listened. That very day, when the crowd heard the parable of the sower, some walked away scratching their heads- hearing but not really hearing. Their hearts were hard and God made their hearts harder. They were a long way from healing. But there were others who walked away that day knowing more of the kingdom- they already knew something of it, but in Jesus' parable they were given more. God was revealing himself to them and they weren't a long way from healing at all. They were experiencing God's blessing already.

4. The Sower Parable Explained (13:18-23).

And it's to people in this latter group that Jesus then explains his parable- people like his disciples⁴. He tells them what the parable of the sower means. And he shows them how the four different places the seed fell represent four different responses to hearing the message of the kingdom.

- four responses to the word

⁴ The 'then' (or literally 'therefore') in verse 18 is significant. It's *because* the parables are revealing God's truth to those who have eyes to see, that Jesus opens their eyes to his truth even more.

In the first place there was the seed that fell on the path and was eaten by the birds. Jesus explains this response in verse 19.

[Read 13:19]

Imagine a young woman named Mia. One of her friends, Lydia, finds an opportunity one day to share the gospel with her. And she listens with one ear but she doesn't really understand it. Within minutes of the conversation she's thinking again about what she's going to buy at the shops. Though hearing, she doesn't hear. She doesn't understand⁵. The Evil One has snatched the word of Christ away.

Secondly there was the seed that fell on rocky places. It sprang up in shallow soil but soon withered because it had no roots. Jesus explains this response in verses 20-21.

[Read 13:20-21]

Imagine a woman named Bobby. She works in an engineering firm in the city and a colleague named Andrew one day invites her out to lunch. And at the end of the meal he gives her a copy of John's gospel with his favourite sections highlighted for her to read. He's sowing seed. And when she walks away from the lunch she feels quite moved by his kindness and really enthusiastic to read the gospel story. She goes home that night and gets through a few chapters before she drifts off to sleep. She reads more the next day, and more the day after. She feels a happiness in her spirit that she can't really explain. She's very drawn to the man Jesus she meets in the book's pages. But a couple of weeks later her Mum goes into hospital and she's very busy caring for her. And she finds her new happiness dissipating. And then she suggests to her Dad that she might read some of the gospel to her Mum in her hospital bed but he tells her not to be ridiculous, and asked her where on earth she got a collection of fairy tales like that. And she starts to feel embarrassed about her interest; and less sure of its relevance to her life. And before you know it Bobby has stopped reading the gospel altogether. And after a little while longer she's not even thinking about it anymore. There was no chance for roots to grow. She never counted the cost. She wasn't prepared to be a sheep among wolves⁶. Her early interest proved fragile and didn't last.

Thirdly there was the seed that fell among thorns and was choked. Jesus explains this response in verse 22.

[Read 13:22]

Imagine a guy named Drake. He has a friend named Ben who occasionally invites him to church and talks about what he learns when he goes there. Drake isn't rude to Ben.

⁵ See verse 13.

⁶ Matthew 10:16

He listens. He thinks about it a bit. But he thinks about lots of other things too. He thinks about the rising interest rates and wonders if he'll have to cut out the regular wine order just to keep up with his mortgage repayments. He thinks about how he's dissatisfied with his job and would really like to find something that pays a little better. He thinks about his other friends and the holidays they take and the restaurants they seem to go to every weekend and he can't help but feel envious. He's been deceived. Wealth has lied to him. It promises him more than it delivers.

But then there's the fourth seed in the parable. It fell on good soil and produced an abundant crop. Jesus explains in verse 23.

[Read 13:23]

Imagine an older woman named Helen. One Friday evening she's out for a walk and she passes the hall next to the local church. And the lights are on and there are lots of young people inside who seem to be having a great time. So she edges up to the door to have a look. The next Sunday she decides to visit the church for a service. The people there are really kind to her. And she takes in some of what the preacher said and it seemed to make sense. She goes back the next week and she feels like she took in even more. A few months later she's in a group with a few other women reading the gospel of Matthew together and she loves it. A year later she's a regular, she looks forward to Sundays and to the mid-week group she's in. She's even started reading the Bible at home. A year further down the track and she's keeping an eye out for people who are new to church like she had been just a couple of years previous. And she always tries to introduce herself and make them feel welcome. And she prays God would give her opportunities to tell others her story. And sometimes he answers that prayer.

Helen didn't just start out with joy but continued to be joyful. And when trials came Helen's way she had the roots in the soil of God's word to sustain and strengthen her. And she had worked out that the things she used to see as important or worrying didn't really matter as much as she once thought. Helen was determined to persevere with Jesus to the very end. She had the word. And she was given more. And she ended up with an abundance.

- two responses to the word

These are the four different responses Jesus describes. But I hope you can see that they really boil down to two different responses. There are those who hear the message of the kingdom and bear enduring fruit, and there are those who hear the word but bear no lasting fruit. The first three responses, you see, all have something in common- none of these people remain in the kingdom. They all end up like those who are hearing but

not really hearing. It's only the fourth seed, the fourth response, that's the response Jesus seeks.

You see, the parable itself illustrates what Jesus was talking about in verses 10-17. It depicts the fact that there really are two groups of people in the world. There are those who have the kingdom's secrets and who grow to know the kingdom more and more. And there are those who don't have the secrets of the kingdom and who find that in the end, everything is taken away. There are those who hear Jesus and understand⁷ and embrace him. But there are those who don't really hear Jesus at all.

The very last time I met together with Michael and Kathy we actually read this parable together. And I asked them which kind of seed they thought they were. And with unsettling honesty they told me that they were like the third seed. They could see the message about the kingdom was true and, in one sense, they believed it. But there were other things that were more important to them at the end of the day- they had their dream home they wanted to buy and they were working hard to get the money for the deposit. There were many things in life that demanded their more immediate attention. They could see that that was the response they were making, but they were unprepared to make a different response. And I feared their hearts were growing more calloused by the second. Tragically we didn't meet again. And I was very, very sad.

5. The Questions for Us.

I was sad because I knew that they were still outside the kingdom. From inside the kingdom I could see- only because God had graciously opened my eyes. But I could see that they were trading in the most precious gift of all- trading it in for a promise of happiness that would never compare. I could see that they were rejecting Jesus' easy yoke and light burden and strapping on to their backs a heavy yoke that would lead them to restlessness rather than to rest. I could see that were rejecting the King of the Kingdom, and that one day, they would have to answer to him for their rejection. They were outside the kingdom because they weren't really hearing. And this section of Matthew is here to show us that this is what will often happen. Not everyone who hears the gospel receives it and lives for Jesus. Jesus expected that and so should we.

But chiefly, this section of Matthew is not here so we'll consider the responses of others. It's chiefly here so we'll consider our own. Jesus wants us to ask ourselves some questions. And I think there are two crucial ones for us this morning/evening.

- the first crucial question

⁷ Note the prevalence of the language of 'understanding' in this section: v.13, v.14, v.15, v.19, v.23.

And the first and most obvious question is this. Which kind of seed are you?

Are you like the first lot of seed, and the word of God has really had no significant effect on your life at all?

Are you like the second lot of seed and you once received the word warmly but you have begun to ignore it because life is hard?

Are you like the third lot of seed and the word of God has become hard to hear because there are so many other voices clamouring for your attention?

Or are you like the fourth lot of seed and the word of God is the root system of your life, and it's producing abundant fruit.

Which kind of seed are you?

If you think you're probably like one of the first three seeds, then I hope today/tonight you'll allow Jesus to show you how he sees the pattern of your life. And I hope you'll start to listen to him like you haven't listened before. I hope you'll come to Jesus and seek understanding. Because he longs to give understanding to those who truly seek. And he longs to heal those who realise they need his healing. He wants nothing but what's good for you. He wants you to bear fruit and to be in his kingdom forever. Will you come to him?

And of course, if like me, you have embraced the word and you know you are inside his kingdom, then please remember that you're not here because you deserve to be in any way. Know that you're here only by the grace of his revelation. And know that if you get distracted from his word, or if it ever feels like life is choking his word out, he remains gracious. And he will call you back again and again to the fruitful, joyful life that is borne of hearing and treasuring his voice.

- the second crucial question

If the first crucial question is "What kind of seed are you?", then the second crucial question is this: "What kind of seed will you be?"

Because this is really a parable about the way people respond to Jesus over the whole course of their life. You see, you might be joyful about God's word now, but Jesus wants to know what your attitude will be to his word when trouble comes down the track. You might feel like the word has taken root in your life now, but Jesus wants to know whether there are other things growing up in your life now which might one day choke his word? Jesus does want to know whether God's word is bearing fruit in you now. But

he also wants to know if it will be bearing fruit in your life in 6 months, or in 3 years, or in 50 years time? Will you still be bearing fruit when he comes to take you home?

It is crucial that we respond to God's word rightly today. But it is just as crucial, if not more, that we respond to God's word rightly every day of our lives!

So, can I encourage you this morning/evening. Pray, and pray regularly, that you'll always have God's word bearing fruit in your life. Find people in your life who will love you enough to encourage you and rebuke you for as long as life lasts- people who will take you back to God's word, who will urge you to obey God's word. Nurture the kind of relationships and priorities in life that will mean his word will be your constant companion, your constant delight, your constant guide. And keep reading the Scriptures- read them disciplinedly, read them humbly, read them obediently, read them ravenously.

Jesus' parable invites you to answer these two questions tonight- to answer them with a soft heart, to answer them well now, and to be able to answer them well for all your days.

Which kind of seed are you?

Which kind of seed will you be?

May the Lord make the words of Psalm 119:111-112 your prayer and mine, your experience and mine. The psalmist says:

'Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.'