

Matthew 13:1-23 “The Parables of the King: The Sower”
Isaiah 6
Psalm 126

May 17, 2015 (Peter)

When Isaiah was called and commissioned as a prophet,
Isaiah was called to bring a message of judgment—
a message that he is told up front will be rejected.
Isaiah was to tell the people,
“Keep on hearing, but do not understand!”

God’s purpose was to bring judgment upon Israel,
and so Isaiah is commissioned as God’s instrument
in proclaiming this judgment.

And when Isaiah asks “how long?”
The answer is, until the cities lie waste and the LORD exiles his people,
and only a remnant—a holy seed—is left, like a stump in the ground,
after a great tree is chopped down!

Last time, we heard the story of Jonah.
In one sense, Isaiah has a task worse than Jonah.
A generation before Isaiah, Jonah had been commanded to go to Nineveh
and preach the judgment of God.
He didn’t want to go, because he knew that God might relent and have mercy.
But Isaiah is told to preach the judgment of God to Jerusalem,
with the promise that God is not going to relent.
Indeed, his mission is to close their eyes.

Jesus will identify himself with Isaiah’s mission.
His purpose is to bring judgment.
Keep hearing, but do not understand!

In Matthew 13, Jesus will tell the parable of the sower.
Psalm 126 uses the language of sowing and reaping to reflect on the return from exile.
When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we rejoiced!
And so we pray, “Restore our fortunes, O LORD!”
“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!”
God *will bring* us to a glorious harvest!

Sing Psalm 126
Read Matthew 13:1-23

“Few seem to perceive what appears fearfully evident to the writer,
that our existent Christianity is almost universally corrupt,
and is becoming more so continually;
that unless its present tendencies be speedily reversed,

a state worse than medieval darkness will soon settle upon Christendom;
not a state of intellectual decrepitude and enslavement,
but one of intellectual triumph and haughty independence...
one in which man will rise in proud supremacy,
and either trample the Church under foot,
or else spare her in Gibeonite degradation
to become a 'hewer of wood and drawer of water'
about the gorgeous Temple of Mammon!"
William Henry Ruffner, *Charity and the Clergy* (1853)

William Henry Ruffner, an Old School Presbyterian pastor,
penned those words in 1853,
as he reflected on how the Presbyterian church had become a church for the wealthy.

His concern was that so long as Presbyterians focused on the wealthy,
the preaching would increasingly be designed
to make the wealthy feel comfortable in church.
And, as the wealthy fell prey to the “deceitfulness of riches,”
the pastors would go along.
Already, in 1853, he noticed that in the big, wealthy urban churches,
if a pastor announced that he would preach on predestination,
half the congregation might stay away;
but if he preached on the big political and social issues of the day,
he would have a packed house.

Over the last 160 years, Ruffner’s fears have been realized.
The church continued to grow and flourish outwardly –
but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches
have eaten away at the church’s mission and identity,
the word has been choked by thorns, and it is not fruitful.

What does Jesus mean by “bearing fruit”?
Well, if the *seed* is the Word of God,
then bearing fruit is a life lived in keeping with the Word of God.

Matthew wants us to think about the parables in the light of what Jesus has just said in chs 11-12.

Introduction: “That Same Day”

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.

In Matthew 11-12 Jesus has shown us who God is.
Matthew 11-12 shows us the work of the Triune God –
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit –
in the work of redemption.

The Father sends the Son and hands all things over to him.
“No one knows the Son except the Father,
and no one knows the Father except the Son
and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt 11:27).
The Father puts the Spirit on the Son to equip him proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath –
he is not only all that Israel failed to be –
he also says and does that which only Israel’s God can say and do.
The Son is also the Servant of the LORD – the beloved of the LORD –
in whose name the Gentiles will hope.

And the Father has put his Spirit upon the Son,
so that the Son casts out demons by the Spirit of God,
thereby demonstrating that the Kingdom of God has come.
The Spirit of God is *also* God –
since blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Matthew 11-12 reveal *three persons* in the one Godhead –
we say “three persons” – because they interact with one another –
and yet “one God” because they are not three separate beings.
They are one God – the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

But as we saw last time,
this Trinitarian pattern of Matthew 11-12 concludes with an emphasis on the church –
just like the Apostles’ Creed.

And Matthew wants us to hear the parables in the light of what Jesus has just said:
“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

The church – the whole body of Jesus’ disciples – is his mother and his brothers.
Jesus says of his disciples: “Here are my mother and my brothers.”
Do you think of the church as your mother?
If you have God as your Father, then the church must be your mother!

And as we saw last time, how you respond to Jesus reveals what family you are part of:
if you respond to Jesus like the Pharisees –
if you demand a sign, insisting that Jesus obey you before you will obey him,
then you are a part of “this evil generation” that refuses to repent.

But if you respond to Jesus like his disciples –
“whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

I know that some of you had questions after last Sunday.
After all, none of us are perfect at this whole “doing the will of my Father”
How do you know whether you are a Pharisee or a disciple?

It would appear that many of Jesus' first hearers had the same question.

Verse 1 suggests that Jesus was in a house when he healed the man oppressed
And "that same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea."

The crowds gather – because they, too,
want to hear what does it mean to "do the will" of Jesus' Father!

1. The Parable of the Sower (13:3-9)

³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ 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, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, ^[a] let him hear."

Jesus starts by telling a story about a farmer.

Everyone would have been familiar with agriculture.

There is nothing confusing or difficult about what Jesus says.

When you sow your seed,

some of your seed falls on the path and never sprouts;

some of your seed falls on rocky ground and sprouts,

but never develops a good root system;

some of your seed falls among thorns—

and it grows into a weak, sickly plant whose grain never ripens.

But hopefully most of your seed falls onto good ground,

and produces a bumper crop.

The ancient historian Pliny refers to the "hundred-fold harvest" as "very good,"
but not extraordinary.

If you want extraordinary, the 2nd century writer, Papias, speaks of a single grain of wheat
producing 10,000 ears!

Jesus, however, is not talking about anything miraculous.

He is talking about ordinary planting.

If you sow a bushel of wheat, you hope to harvest at least 30 bushels.

His hearers no doubt understood that there was some spiritual point to this.

But without the explanation, they were left guessing.

"He who has ears, let him hear."

Many people claim that Jesus spoke in parables in order to make things clear.

They think that he told stories because stories illustrate the truth more clearly.

But that's not what Jesus says.

After all, what is a parable?

A “parable” is an utterance which means more than just the surface meaning.

The word *parabole* is used regularly in the OT to translate the word “proverb.”
It can include any number of cryptic sayings that require special insight to interpret.

In order to understand a parable you need wisdom – you need insight.
The “literal” interpretation of the parable is *not* the *real* meaning.

And of course, Jesus himself explains why he speaks in parables.

The parables are designed to make his teaching murky.
Indeed, the parables *are designed to distinguish* between his disciples and his foes.

2. The Parables Are Designed to Distinguish (v10-17)

When the disciples ask him why he speaks in parables,
Jesus answers in verse 11:

a. The “Secrets of the Kingdom” Are Not for Everyone (v10-13)

¹⁰ *Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”* ¹¹ *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.*

Remember that Jesus has just said “No one knows the Father, except the Son
and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (11:27)

The parables distinguish and divide.

This aspect of Jesus’ teaching may leave us a little uncomfortable.
We want Jesus to unite and bring people together.

But Jesus is very clear that the *Son* chooses to reveal the Father to *some* –
not to all.

Jesus has chosen his disciples – and he has rejected the Pharisees.
“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven,
but to them *it has not been given.*”

Election is God’s sovereign choice.

In history, we do not always see clearly who is elect and who is not.
(Jesus makes this clear in his explanation of the parable).

But the principle is very clear, as Jesus says in verse 12:

¹² *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.*

There is a clear allusion here to the future of Jerusalem.
The disciples have Jesus – and because they have Jesus, they will get more.
The Pharisees have the earthly Jerusalem – and because they do *not* have Jesus,

even what they have will be taken away.

¹³ *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.*

Jesus fulfills all the law and the prophets.

He speaks in parables in order to distinguish and divide.

b. As Isaiah Had Said (v14-15)

¹⁴ *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.*”

¹⁵ *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
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

This is where it gets hard.

Jesus says in his quote from Isaiah, that if they turned then he would heal them.

And yet, following Isaiah, Jesus *refuses* to speak in a way that they could understand!

He chooses to speak in parables in order to keep them in their blindness.

Jesus' purpose is to distinguish between his disciples and the Pharisees.

Jesus' point is to make clear to all generations that follow –

that there are only two options:

either you understand Jesus, obey him, and live;

or else you refuse to understand Jesus, and perish.

But the blessedness of the disciples is not just that they are different from the Pharisees.

c. “Blessed Are Your Eyes...and Your Ears” (v16-17)

¹⁶ *But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.* ¹⁷ *For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.*

Moses and the Prophets longed to see Jesus.

They longed to hear Jesus.

That is why Jesus says that *their* eyes and ears are blessed!

The apostles get to see and hear what *all the faithful* in all generations
desire to see and hear!

Because now *the apostles* get to see and hear Jesus!

The division and distinction is not just between “the righteous” and the “wicked.”

You are now seeing and hearing what all the righteous have longed to see and hear!
This is why the apostolic witness is essential to the rest of the biblical message.
These disciples heard and saw what all the faithful longed to hear and see.

John will begin his epistle to us, saying,
“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard,
which have seen with our eyes,
which we looked upon and have touched with our hands,
concerning the Word of life –
the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it,
and proclaim to you the eternal life,
which was with the Father and was manifest to us...” (1 John 1:1-2)

Because while the apostles are *blessed* because of this revelation,
this blessing is not to be hoarded and *kept* secret!

Jesus has revealed the secrets of the kingdom to the disciples
in order that they might proclaim these secrets to the nations.
This is why *Jesus* speaks in parables – but the apostles do not!
Jesus is the Son of God.
He chooses to reveal the Father to some, but not to others.

The apostles are *not* the Son of God!
The Father handed all things over to the Son.
But the Son *did not* hand over all things to his disciples!
The apostles do not have the right to preach to *some* but not to others.
The apostles are called to preach the gospel to *all creatures*.

Jesus is still the one who opens the eyes of the blind.
Jesus is still the one who opens the ears of the deaf.

But what will happen as the apostolic preaching goes forth?
What is happening right now?

3. The Meaning of the Parable of the Sower (v18-23)

As the word of God is proclaimed,
the seed is sown.
The Word is going forth to all who can hear my voice.

But the Word does not have the same effect on all.

Each of you hears it differently.
The same sound waves come to your ears.
You all hear the same words.
But you hear the same words differently.

What effect the Word of God has depends on what sort of soil you are!
What kind of soil are you?
How are you hearing the word?

Jesus suggests that there are four basic responses to the Word.

a. The Seed Sown Along the Path: the Hard Heart (v18-19)

¹⁸ *“Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.*

Notice that Jesus says that they *hear the word*.

They hear, but they do not understand.

This is the same word translated “understand” in verses 13, 14, and 15.

The problem is not that the preacher is using fancy words that no one understands.

The problem is that these people *refuse* to understand.

The Pharisees would be a perfect illustration of the “hard heart.”

The problem is not intellectual but moral.

“So what if Jesus claims to be King?

What does that have to do with me?

Why should I care?

Show me a sign – then I’ll believe.”

The birds devour the word –

Satan comes and takes away the word that is sown in your heart –
and nothing ever comes of it.

Beware of letting the word of God simply bounce off you!

If the word is not settling into your heart,
then beware, because the evil one *will* snatch it away.

But, of course, the first category largely consists of those who reject the gospel from the start.

The fact that you are here means that you have responded to the word!

Second, we have

b. The Seed Sown on Rocky Ground: the Temporary Disciple (v20-21)

²⁰ *As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.*

This is perhaps the category we have the most difficult time understanding.

They endure for a while.

But they *fall away*.

Is it really possible for a believer to fall away?

The key to understanding this is found in the analogy:
when a grain of wheat falls on the rocks,
it may in fact sprout and grow for a time.
It may look for a few days or even a few weeks like all the other wheat—
at least, on the surface!
The difference is that it has no root.

Without roots it has no source of sustenance,
and it soon withers away.
Without roots, the Word has no connection to your life.

Is the Word taking root in your life?
Or is the soil of your heart *rocky*?
Are you just coming to church on Sunday,
and then forgetting the word for the rest of the week?
When tribulation comes – when persecution comes –
does the Word sustain you and comfort you?
Or is religion just something to make you feel better?

Notice that Jesus holds *you* accountable for the soil of your heart!
What are you doing to plow up your fallow ground?
It's not enough to "receive the word with joy"!
It has to take root in your heart!
If you are ever struggling with "what do I do with this sermon?"
Come talk to me!
Talk to one of the elders – talk to one another – get connected to a Bible study –
search the scriptures together!
Do not become rocky soil that falls away from the word of God!

Third, we have

c. The Seed Sown Among Thorns: the Unfruitful Disciple (v22)

²² *As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.*

The thorny soil are those who also receive the word with joy and believe,
and these do in fact have roots.
Some say that these are true believers—
but true believers who aren't acting like it!
Others say that these are not true believers,
because they prove *unfruitful*.

I don't think that Jesus is particularly concerned about whether they are "true" believers.
His point is that they are *not* what believers are supposed to be!
They are not hearing the word of God rightly!

I think that this is where you and I are especially tempted.
God's word has taken root in our lives,
but we are lured away by the cares of the world.
We are so busy with the day-to-day stuff,
that our ears become partly closed.
We do not really hear.

I know that you are busy.
There are many things that compete for your time and energy.
But Jesus warns you that if you allow the cares of the world to choke the Word,
then you will never bear fruit in his kingdom.

What is getting in the way of God's word?
What is interfering with your hearing and doing the Word?

Let me ask you a question.
How many hours a week do you spend hearing the word?
(Including your own private reading of the Bible)
Okay, now how many hours a week do you spend listening to other voices?
(TV, radio, internet, books, movies)

I know that it is not simply a question of quantity.
But quantity is not a bad place to start!

It will tell you something about your priorities!

Whose word are you listening to?
Whose word is taking root in your heart?

But it is not just the cares of the world.

Second, Jesus says that the word is choked by the deceitfulness of riches.
I know that most of you don't think of yourselves as wealthy.
But even the poorest among us has immense amounts of stuff.

Wealth is deceitful!
If you make 30,000 a year you think,
"if only we made 40,000 – life would be so much easier"
and if you make 100,000 a year you think,
"if only we made 120,000 – life would be so much easier"

And then we live a lifestyle that puts us on the very upper edge of our income.
We think that because everyone around us is buying the latest gadget,
therefore we need the latest gadget!
And then those gadgets start to take over our lives.
We are serving money – not Jesus!

And the demands of discipleship “get in the way” of our lifestyle.
We become more interested in our own kingdom—
our own “stuff” —
preferring to spend our time, energy and money
on our lifestyle rather than devoting ourselves to the word of Jesus.
Riches are deceitful.

John Chrysostom rightly points out that Jesus does not *blame* the world or riches.
It is not the world that prevents us from hearing Christ,
“but the cares – the *anxieties* – of this age.”
It is not “riches” in themselves, but the “deceitfulness of riches.”

What is the difference?

As Chrysostom puts it:

“Let us not place the blame on what we possess, but on our own corrupt mind.”

The problem is not “riches” – the problem is not “the world.”

The problem is *us!*

Jesus has already told us,

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:21).

“No one can serve two masters....

you cannot serve God and money.” (Mt 6:34)

We are to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

We are to love the LORD our God with *all* our heart.

Any other desire that does not lead us toward Christ our King is a weed –
a thorn that left unmolested, will choke the word and make us unfruitful!

What is your deepest longing?

What is the thing that you desire more than anything else in the world?

Our society tells us that your desires are unqualified *good*.

“I just want to be accepted.”

“I want my children to grow up to be strong Christians.”

“I want to be loved.”

We fail to see that our desires for these *good things*

have become stronger than our love for God.

And when our love for created things becomes stronger than our love for our Creator,
that is the definition of idolatry!

If we crave human affection more than we love God,

then we need to *repent* of our craving!

It will not do to say simply that “God fulfills our deepest longings” –

when Jesus says that the *cares* of the world and the *deceitfulness* of riches
are the thorns that choke the word and render us unfruitful!

I don't know if you are listening.

If you are, then you understand that I just challenged your deepest longings
and said that they are idolatrous!

What is choking the word in your life is *not* something outside you!
What is making you unfruitful is *not* what someone else is doing or not doing!

It's no wonder that the gospel has made so little headway in America in recent generations!

If our problem is that we love the creature more than we love God,
then change involves turning from idolatrous cravings "to the Jesus who died for sinners,
who lives to remake us into lovers of God and neighbor,
and who will return bringing glory and joy." (Powlison, *New Eyes* p207)

So, how can we be *good soil*?

d. The Seed Sown on Good Soil: the Fruitful Disciple (v23)

²³ *As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."*

Jesus says that the good soil is the one who "hears the word and understands its."

Again, not just an "intellectual apprehension" –

the word translated "understand" is a word that means "to bring together."

The seed of the word *comes together* with the good soil –

takes root in the good soil –

grows, and *bears fruit*.

Everyone hears the word.

What is different about the good soil comes down to two things:

they understand the word

and they bear fruit

Understanding the word means embracing it and owning it as the pattern for your life.

It means that you look around you and you see the thorns for what they are!

You see the cares of the world and you deliberately seek to root them out.

What are the thornbushes in your life?

What are the anxieties that distract you from the Word?

Remember, the problem is *not* the world.

The problem is *your heart*!

So when you understand the word of God,

you see the deceitfulness of riches, and so you set your budget priorities
in a way to combat those weeds.

Men, if you want to be serious about combating weeds,
 come on Tuesday morning at 6:30 for the Men's Discipleship Study.
And if Tuesday morning doesn't work for you,
 put together another group!
(I'd be glad to facilitate, if you need help to connect with others!)

Women, if you want to be serious about combating weeds,
 come to the Thursday Bible study – or if that time doesn't work, start another one!

Village will be starting up on Thursday evenings after Memorial Day.

Bearing fruit means that the Word of God is reproducing itself in you.
 After all, what kind of fruit does a seed produce?
 If you plant a grain of wheat,
 you should wind up with more wheat!

So as you come to know the Word of God,
 as the word is planted in you,
 the result should be that your life is more and more shaped by the Word,
 controlled by the Word,
 driven by the Word.

The difference in the yield –
 thirty, sixty or hundred fold –
 reminds us that *God* is the one who gives the growth.

Different disciples will have different yields.
 Discipleship is not a "one size fits all" proposition.
 But *bearing fruit* means that your life will be more and more shaped by the Word.
 The way that you speak – the way that you write – the way that you live –
 will look more and more like Jesus.

The Word has the power to change your life!
 What kind of soil will you be?