

Matthew 13:1-23: Have You Got Ears to Hear?

By Ian Cameron, 24 March 2024

If you're not here for the first time, you'll know we've been spending [how long?] going through bit by bit the eyewitness account of Jesus life and work written by a man called Matthew and this week we're at a pivotal section.

Now If you're familiar with the life of Jesus, you'll probably know that he often taught and explained things in parables – short stories. In fact, later in his account, Matthew says this:

Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables. Matt 13:34

And this particular parable is the first one Jesus told and Jesus says that it's his most important one of all. From another account of Jesus life, it says this.

Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? Mark 4:13

So this 1st parable of Jesus is the **master parable**. Today is the skeleton key – the one that unlocks all the doors. If we want to understand Jesus we need to understand parables and if we want to understand parables, we need to understand this particular one.

So it's a great week to be in church. If you're a follower of Jesus this is the key to understand Jesus teaching and if you're not a follower of Jesus then this is a great week to be here because this is the key to understand Jesus teaching and you'll hopefully have grasped by now that Jesus is the key figure in Christian faith. Don't get Jesus, you don't get the Christian faith.

It's a big week – big responsibility for me as I speak and you as you listen so let's ask for God's help [PRAY].

READ Mat 13:1-24

Now if I was to ask you why did Jesus use parables you're probably going to say what I would have said which is that they help us understand stuff. They use everyday events we're familiar with to help us understand something more complex or teach us a lesson – think Aesop's fables.

This is the question that Jesus' closest followers – his disciples had. After he tells this parable up they trot and **they ask him v10** *why do you always talk in parables Jesus? We don't get it and honestly we're not sure the other folks listening get it either. How about 3 points and having the start with the same letter. Have you thought about trying powerpoint?*

We're expecting Jesus to say *"Why do I use parables? These matters of heaven and earth are too complex for you to get your head around so I simplify it with these little stories they make it easier to understand."*

But look at his answer:

V11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

And then he goes on to quote from an ancient prophet – a messenger - to God's people called Isaiah who warned hundreds of years earlier that almost everyone who heard his message would fail to respond to it. And Jesus is saying, *This is what Isaiah was promising God's messenger speaking God's message to God's people and yet no one heeded him.* And he says *that's what's happening here.*

If you've been with us over these last months, Jesus has been demonstrating that he is more than a travelling teacher, more than even a messenger from God but that he is in fact God himself in human form – the Messiah – that God's people have been waiting for for generations, beginning to establish of God's kingdom – his rule and reign here on earth that will carry on into eternity.

The religious leaders of the time are also waiting for this promised Messiah but they refuse to recognise Jesus despite overwhelming evidence and at this point in Matthew's account, only a few people - his close circle of disciples and friends - have accepted who Jesus is. They are the ones to whom v11 *"the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given"*.

Jesus has laid out the evidence – he's healed the sick, he's proclaimed the kingdom of God, he's preached with authority – done everything foretold about the Messiah but the religious experts have stubbornly refused to understand and accept the plain evidence in front of them

And so now in his ministry, Jesus begins to speak increasingly in these parables which do 2 things

- **those who accept the teaching** of Jesus will continue to receive more and more through these parables : *"whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance" (verse 12a)*
- **But those who have refused** to accept the teaching of Jesus will become more and more mystified about the real meaning of the parables and his message: *"whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."* (verse 12b)

So why does Jesus speak in parables? To make things clearer to some and less clear to others. The same words has 2 different effects – softening some hearts to the things of God and hardening other hearts. Illuminating those who are a part of God’s kingdom and darkening those who are not. Same parable – 2 effects.

So this brings up the obvious question – well which am I?? Am I the one to whom these parables reveal stuff or am I in the dark about who Jesus is and becoming more so as time goes on? Am I in the kingdom or not?? You might be worrying I’m not sure I really understood that parable we just read, does that mean I’m not a follower of Jesus – can we read it again, can I get another shot, I’ll pay more attention this time???

And the answer is what this parable is all about. The answer is in how you hear Jesus

Notice that phrase in v9

He who has ears, let him hear

It’s not a phrase we use -most of us have ears, but Jesus is saying there’s more to hearing than having 2 ears. If I said to you *“If ya sabi wettin ah day talk abeg raise you hand”* . Now you all heard me say this noises – you’ve all got ears. Most of you might even hear that those noises are words but only a portion of you will understand what those words mean and then only [number] of you respond in the right way and do what I’ve asked.

So hearing for Jesus is more than being aware of sounds – it’s not even about just understanding, it’s about responding to that understanding.

The religious leaders can see Jesus actions, they can understand his words – in one sense better than anyone else – they are religious experts and although they’ve heard they’ve failed to really hear because they’ve failed to understand, accept and respond. They’ve got ears but they don’t hear.

Hear Jesus properly – listen, respond to his message and you will be a part of his kingdom gaining from his teaching, but reject Jesus message and you will be increasingly left in the darkness away from his presence.

So Let’s go to the parable and let’s see about these different kinds of hearers of Jesus. It’s fairly easy to imagine the scene – a farmer is walking through his fields and scattering seed. Grabbing handfuls as he walks and chucking it all the over the place and later it will be ploughed to get it right into the soil. Jesus says the seed here is his message about the kingdom and it’s being broadcast all over the place. Landing here and there and everywhere – there’s all sorts of people listening along to him. And the 4 places the seed falls are 4 different types of hearer and their response to Jesus which will show whether they are in the kingdom or not.

1. Hard v4/v19

In 1st century Palestine, the paths would run through or around the field separating one section from another and they'd be trodden hard packed earth dried out by the sun not tilled soil. Seed falling here lies on the surface and before you know it birds see it and nab it and if it's not the birds, you could imagine it getting washed away or blown away by the wind- no chance to even get started.

So what types of hearer is this v19. Well it isn't people out there who've never heard of Jesus and his message. They do hear the message and it does get *sown in the heart* (v19). In his day that was almost everyone in Palestine as Jesus and his teaching was the biggest news ever and probably all anyone talked about.

Nowadays hearers like this are probably in a church as there's not so many other places Jesus message goes out from. See in V19- they do hear it goes in the ears but crucially they do not understand it and no sooner is it in one ear than it's back out the other. Snatched away by the Evil One.

We don't have time here to discuss this Evil One. It's a big area of theology but suffice it to say there is an enemy absolutely committed to sabotaging your spiritual progress – totally opposed to God, at war with God. And this enemy is actively working to prevent you understanding Jesus message and it's ideal if he can just snatch it away – wash it off the path of your heart before the seed even gets going.

Are you this hearer? Let's take a soil sample. Are you easily distracted in church? you're thinking about what's for lunch, whether there's puff puff on the home baking today? Do you go to your happy place as soon as I start talking? Are you getting better and better at it as weeks go by? Have you been coming to church for years and all these talks just wash over you like water on a window – bump and roll away.

When was the last time you dialled in and actually sat up & listened? We all know people who've been coming to church even for years but the message has never penetrated, the challenge has never hit home.

Before you start looking around, what about you? When was the last time you felt a tear well up, a lump in your throat, the pain in your stomach from the weight of your guilt before God. Has it ever? Maybe you're hard soil – just bounces off you week after week after week. The Evil one delighted with your hard packed dried out heart that he can just distract you with something new so it never has the chance to break through.

If this sounds familiar then watch out. This can't go on forever Jesus says *Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him* (v12) leading to a calloused heart, closed ears and blind eyes. Unwilling and eventually unable to receive the Good News Of Jesus.

Elsewhere the Bible says it starkly *Whoever remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.* Proverb 29:1

This is our school grass. When it was laid, it seemed fine but as the kids played on it, it wore away and became all lumpy. It turns out when the new gym hall was built, all the spare rubble was dumped in the playground and they laid the grass over the top and after a while the grass isn't strong enough to survive. And that brings us to our 2nd soil our 2nd type of hearer

2. Rocky v5/v20

In some places where the seed falls, the soil is shallow- not that there are visible rocks – in fact the soil looks fine, the seed falls here and gets ploughed in. Because the soil is shallow it stays a little warmer than other places and the seed *springs up quickly* v5 in ideal germinating circumstances. But it's not conducive to long term growth. When the plant breaks the surface and is exposed to the sun, it withers because it has no root. Nowhere for roots to grow into. It looks like the best in the field but only time and scorching sun will tell.

V20 Initially this hearer looks promising - Jesus message takes root and they receive it with joy appearing to understand and respond, they grow quickly and even look more impressive than some folks with their fast response. But the problem is it's superficial. This is the person who comes to church and is bowled over by the heartfelt music, the warmth of welcome. *"I want to be a part of this"* they think and respond with joy. But trials inevitably come – something challenges their superficial faith and they wither.

The word *fall away* vXXX is where we get our word 'scandalised' they're not gradually worn down by hardships, it's when the first troubles come they take offence they're scandalised. The faith that looked like joy and freedom suddenly seems to be a trap *"If this is what faith in Jesus gets me, I'm done with it. This is a load of rubbish. I thought I was in this for love and care. You're a total let down, God"*

Maybe you're rocky soil? Let's take the soil test. Maybe you're growing well and to outward appearances you're doing great – maybe even better than most – you're springing up quickly. The test will come when you face trials.

Jesus consistently told people to count the cost of following him before doing committing

a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. "Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father. "But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Matt 8:20-22

So have you counted the cost of following Jesus? If you haven't you'll be unprepared for when trials come. They always do. Jesus said if they hate the master, they're sure to hate his followers.

Being a Christian won't be popular. You'll find yourself on the "wrong side" or much of modern life. You'll lose friends, you'll be left out so social stuff, maybe passed over for promotions. If you're not prepared to lose everything when you follow Jesus, you'll not be

ready to lose anything and when trials come you'll turn your back on your faith. What seemed so promising was just a shallow root that will wither away.

Where are those guys I went to uni with? On fire for their faith, sprinting ahead for Jesus – involved in the CU, short term mission over the hols, talking about a life in ministry I can think of at least a dozen who are nowhere – not interested in church. They didn't count the cost. Don't be rocky soil.

3. Thorny v7/v22

Here the seed gets to what looks like good ground, the soil is rich and deep plenty room for the roots but the seedlings are not alone. It can't be seen but the soil is filled with thorny weeds. Both grow up but the weeds are stronger just like in my garden and they choke out the good plants, blocking out the light, soaking up the water and nutrients. It's a slow decline and stunting of growth. The plants don't die but they're don't mature. They don't bear fruit/harvest. In the end if they don't bear fruit, they're no better than weeds themselves.

V22 Jesus says that these hearers are taken up with the worries of life pressing in on them and the desires of wealth that bubble up from their heart and there's no space left for faith so it gets choked, stunted, never bearing any fruit, useless.

True faith cannot live alongside the worries of this life and a grasping for wealth. We must be totally committed. Jesus puts it that we Cannot serve 2 masters.

So let's take the soil test. Does it sound familiar – it does to me? Oh we meant it when we came to Jesus, we wept with Paul that we're the worst of all sinners, we counted the cost but as time as gone on, we've grown cold. We've got busier, busy at work, busy with home life busy with the kids. Church life and the things of God take second place. We sometimes read our bible, we pray now and again when things are bad we come to church when we can and the kids aren't busy. If we've got some money left over we might think about giving it to the church. But our faith is just one of the things in our life and increasingly smaller part.

[2 pie charts – conversion then now. Faith a small slice] When we came to faith we were on fire – nothing mattered but serving Christ. Relationships, career, wealth all a distant second to radical faith in Christ. But now... we still own our faith, we're still followers of Jesus but are we bearing fruit? If we're honest, no.

Following Jesus takes radical commitment. Not just at the start, but constantly. The worries of the world press in on us – I know as much as anyone, I've got 25 staff I'm responsible for in my business, I've 3 kids I want to see achieve their best, a mortgage to pay. It's so easy to take my eye off and those weeds start appearing in my life, choking my faith, making me unfruitful. It happens so slowly, I can barely see them growing but as I look back I can see the thorns have surely come alongside.

Is it time for a prune of your life? Is it time to see where you spend your time each week, is it time to think about where your priorities are – and not just where they are but where they

should be. Have you thought about where you spend your money. Does your calendar and your banking app show radical commitment to Jesus and his priorities?? If not, then beware, thorns are growing, your faith is stunting and may fail to reach maturity.

And Jesus says elsewhere what happens to those who are withering *John 15:6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

4. Good v8/v23

And so the final type of soil. The word takes seed, it puts down roots, it weather the storms, it beats off the weeds and in time it produces a harvest an abundant harvest – more than could have been foreseen. Some soil the harvest is incredible, some it's a big harvest, some it's fairly ordinary but fruit it produces – the very purpose for which it was planted in the first place.

This is the hearer who not only hears but 'understands' take Jesus words and puts them into life. She's the hearer who doesn't let things wash over her but allows them to penetrate and plant. He's the hearer who has counted the cost of following Jesus before he commits, not to be shocked or ruined when trials and difficulties come. She's the hearer who works hard to not let the weeds grow, who has cleared them out radically committing to following Jesus and keeps at it, turning from the worries of life away from the deceitfulness of wealth but towards Jesus.

And eventually the harvest comes. It takes time, maybe doesn't look like much is happening a lot of the time. Much of the growth is slow and below the surface but fruit appears and is multiplied. In some believers, that fruit is incredible – preaching to millions, impacting thousands of lives, writing best selling Christian books that encourage generations – a 100 fold harvest.

But it goes right the way down to the quiet Christian who faithfully serves God day after day week after week, gently and patiently sharing the hope they have in Christ. And God is pleased to honour that life – it doesn't look like a 100 fold harvest but it bears much fruit.

SUMMARY

Another Sunday, another talk. Maybe I reckon 3000 sermons. You've all heard this morning but you have ears to hear. Do you really hear, do you understand? Jesus says this is how you can be a part of his kingdom.

Are you hard...

Are you listening/changing or is it in one ear & out the other

Are you rocky...

Unable to withstand the trials that will come because you haven't counted the cost

Are you thorny...

Are you preoccupied with the worries of life, faith squeezed to the edges

Or are you good soil...

Listening carefully, considering, working to understand and put it into practice

If you're not a Christian, then this is your chance to think about what soil to be. How to hear Jesus, don't be hard soil in one ear and out the other. Let Jesus message penetrate your heart, work to understand it because in his message is rescue, redemption, forgiveness and life.

If you're a Christian, I hope you want to be good soil. I can't tell if you are, only God knows for sure but don't be discouraged. If you care what type of soil you are, you're probably not hard soil, if you've been plodding along in your faith for a while through ups and downs and you're still here at church, you're probably not rocky soil. If you battle to keep coming to church even when you're busy, even when it's boring, even when you don't feel like it, you're resisting that thorny soil.

You might feel like a pretty puny sapling, trying to push up through the dirt. There's all these folks around you growing faster and higher. Don't be discouraged, the fact you are still putting one faith foot in front of the other is a good sign you are good soil. And Jesus promises that where hear – really hear - in you he will reap a harvest – maybe you'll not be a 100 fold harvest but you will bear fruit and if you have received Christ's forgiveness God will be pleased to welcome you into his presence as a good and a faithful servant.