

THE SCROLLS

Bridges: Connecting the Gospel with Everyone We Meet | Matthew 13:1-23

Life Lesson

The parable of the sower shows that, although we are called to share the Gospel boldly and patiently, we are free from the burden of producing the harvest. Our primary responsibility is joyful obedience, loving our neighbors and scattering the seed of God's Word in our daily interactions. At the same time, we must remain fiercely vigilant over the soil of our hearts, ensuring that the deceitful allure of wealth and the busy worries of this world do not choke out our spiritual vitality. True discipleship is marked not by a fleeting, shallow passion but by a patient, enduring faith that yields an abundant crop of good works and authentic obedience to Christ.

Examine Scripture

Read Matthew 13:1-23

As you read Scripture, slow down and ask these three questions to move from information to transformation:

1. *What does this passage reveal about who God is?*
2. *How is God calling you to grow or change?*
3. *What is God leading you to do or who is He calling you to be in your everyday life?*

Introduction: Presenting Jesus

Imagine the mounting tension in the air. Just moments before the events in Matthew 13, Jesus faced severe hostility from the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had audaciously accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Satan. The handwriting was on the wall; while a small number would receive Him as the long-awaited Messiah, the religious establishment and the vast majority of Israel were choosing a path of hardened rejection.

Against this backdrop of brewing opposition and spiritual lostness, we see Jesus pivot His ministry: "On that day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea" (Matthew 13:1). The crowds were so large that He stepped into a boat, using the water as a natural amplifier, while the crowd stood on the shore (Matthew 13:2). What follows is not merely a rustic farming story; it is a profound, prophetic masterclass on the future of evangelism. Jesus is preparing His disciples and us for the harsh and glorious realities of presenting the gospel to a lost and dying world.

To convey these truths, Jesus speaks to the crowds in parables (Matthew 13:3). The Greek word is "parabolē" (παραβολή), derived from the verb "paraballo," meaning "to throw beside." It was a method of placing one thing beside another for comparison. In His infinite wisdom, Jesus takes the unsearchable, eternal mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven and places them beside the ordinary dirt, seeds, and thorns of first-century farming.

This text strikes at the heart of our core competency as believers: evangelism. We are called to share Jesus with others through both the personal proclamation and the tangible demonstration of the gospel. Yet sharing the gospel can often feel discouraging when we face rejection or apathy. As we present Jesus to a world of people who are spiritually lost and lacking direction, we must understand that the problem is not always in the presentation; it is often in the reception. Charles Spurgeon astutely observed, "The gospel is a seed, and the preacher is a sower, but the crop depends upon the soil."

Personal Notes

As we read and study this text, we will see that our call is to faithfully scatter the seed of the gospel, echoing the urgency of the Puritan Richard Baxter, who said, “I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.” We are not called to shallow, “drive-by” evangelism but to a patient, enduring witness that recognizes the heart’s diverse conditions.

Vs. 1-2

Again, Jesus draws large crowds. As we consider sharing the Gospel, or at least sowing Gospel seeds, it helps to understand the attractiveness of Jesus and His ministry. Though we may not be able to perform the miraculous works or teach with the same authority He did, we can still show the same compassion and empathy for people that He did. Some of the crowds were there simply to “see the show,” while others were there out of curiosity. Some were there to criticize. However, the majority were there because they saw a man who truly cared for them, someone who showed compassion and love they had never experienced. We can attract people in the same way; we ought to show the love of Jesus so that people are simply drawn to us. That gives us a platform to share the Gospel.

Because of the crowd, Jesus had to step back and use a boat as a floating pulpit. The boat was likely Peter’s, so Jesus probably had him move it a short distance from the shore to provide natural amplification. Tradition places the scene at the “Cove of Parables.” The sloping land around the cove formed a natural amphitheater, allowing Jesus’ voice to carry so even those at the back of the crowd could hear Him. Modern scientists have tested the acoustics of this area and found them suitable for hearing Jesus’ parables. What can we take from this? The very Creator of the world designed this spot not only so people could see the beauty of His creation but also so they could experience the power of His teaching.

Vs. 3-9

Here is the parable of the sower. Perhaps one of the easiest parables to interpret, because Jesus provides the interpretation. In (Rom. 10), Paul explains how people are saved by trusting in Jesus. In (Rom. 10:17), Paul writes, “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ.” This parable focuses on hearing. The key to the Gospel is less about how it is preached than how it is heard. In fact, the word “hear” appears over 400 times in the New Testament.

Today, we spend a great deal of time trying to figure out how to preach more creative, better sermons. You see some pastors driving cars on stage, swinging from ropes in front of the crowd, and all kinds of crazy stuff. The reason is that we are trying to figure out

Personal Notes

how to preach messages that people want to hear. The problem is that it is not just an issue of preaching; it is an issue of hearing. All the creativity in the world will not change the fact that some people are just not going to listen to the Gospel.

Jesus ends the parable with His familiar tagline: “Let anyone who has ears listen” (v. 9). Today, we would say, “If you get it, you get it. If you don’t, you don’t.” It also points to those who are the “good ground,” those who hear and respond to the Gospel.

Vs. 10-17

The disciples were probably like, “Yeah, if you get it, you get it; if you don’t, you don’t.” Then, after everyone has gone, the disciples turn to Jesus and say, “We don’t get it.” The Disciples pull Jesus aside after the crowds leave and ask: “Why are you speaking to them in parables?” (v. 10).

Jesus explains that the “secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know” (v. 11). The Greek word used here is “mystērion” (μυστήριον), which refers to divine plans for the future that God sovereignly reveals to His people. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah to show that the crowds’ hardheartedness fulfills prophecy; they are spiritually dead, hearing without perceiving. In fact, Jesus uses parables to “weed out” those who are not truly listening to the Gospel message but are there for show. Yet He encourages His disciples, saying, “Blessed are your eyes because they do see, and your ears because they do hear” (v. 16), and commissions them to continue this gospel mission.

Vs. 18-23

Now Jesus interprets the parable. The seed is the Gospel, and we are to cast it far and wide. We are not responsible for how people respond; we are only responsible for sowing the seed! However, we must be careful in how we judge people’s responses to the Gospel. We may be the sower in the parable now, but we were once the soil.

As Jesus interprets the parable, he shows that the ultimate key to evangelism is not merely how creatively the gospel is preached, but how it is heard. First, the seed that fell on the path (v. 19) represents the “careless hearer,” the hard-hearted. Because they lack true understanding, the evil one immediately snatches the sown message away from their hard hearts.

Next, we have the seed that fell on rocky ground. The seed sprouts quickly in shallow soil but lacks deep roots. This person seems to hear and outwardly believe the Gospel. They get excited about the things of God, but soon that excitement fades. When difficulty comes, it reveals that their faith was not real to begin with.

Personal Reflection

1. In what ways have I settled for superficial “drive-by” evangelism in my relationships, and how can I intentionally be a patient gardener to disciple someone in my life?
2. Looking honestly at Timothy Keller's three tests, where might I currently be harboring a hard, shallow, or divided heart toward the things of God?
3. Jesus explicitly warns that the worries of life and the deceitful allure of wealth can choke the Word of God in our lives. Which specific worldly busyness or “golden snares” are currently competing for my affection and threatening my spiritual growth?
4. Since faith comes from hearing the Word of God, how intentionally am I cultivating my heart to ensure I am not just a “careless hearer” but someone who truly understands and holds fast to the Gospel?
5. The defining characteristic of good soil is that it yields an abundant crop of good works and growing obedience to God's will. What tangible, recent evidence of this spiritual fruit can I point to in my daily life?

Commentaries

Expositor's Bible Commentary
(Abridged Edition): New Testament
Edited by Kenneth Barker

NIV Application Commentary:
Matthew by Micheal Wilkins

Matthew by John MacArthur

Mt. Zion's Mission

Mt. Zion Baptist Church exists to
MAKE, MATURE, and MULTIPLY
disciples of Jesus Christ.

When the scorching sun of persecution rises, this hearer's fake passion withers.

Thirdly, we have the seed that fell on thorny ground and was choked by weeds. The gospel is choked out by the intense competition of life's worries and deceitful wealth. As Puritan Thomas Watson noted, “The world is a golden snare.” What people often excuse as busyness, Jesus identifies as lostness.

Lastly, we have the seed that fell on good ground and produced fruit. This is the heart that receives the Word, understands it, and yields an abundant crop of fruit. In other words, only a faith that produces fruit is true faith; it is faith that has responded to the Gospel.

As we survey the landscape of Matthew 13, the ultimate question for both the sower and the soil is fruitfulness. The hearer represented by the “good soil” does not simply make an emotional decision; they produce a “crop,” an abundant yield of good works that result from a growing understanding of God's will and obedience to it. True reception of the gospel always yields tangible evidence: an outward change, an authentic relationship with the Savior, and a desire to obey His commands.

Before we look at the world's lostness, we must first allow the Word of God to examine our hearts. As we evaluate our spiritual condition, theologian Timothy Keller offers three vital tests for how we hear the message of Jesus: “Beware of a hard heart: It is entirely possible to be in regular contact with the Word of God without it ever penetrating your heart. A theoretical understanding of Jesus is insufficient; you must experience the truth personally. Beware of a shallow heart. Do not listen to Jesus merely out of self-interest, viewing Him as a cosmic service provider. Your primary problem is not that you are a sufferer, but that you are a sinner in need of grace. Beware of a divided heart: Do not let the duplicity of worldly pursuits crowd Christ out, leaving absolutely no room in your life to bear fruit.”

For those of us called to evangelize (which is every believer), this passage is profoundly liberating. It is immensely comforting to know we do not control the results. Our fundamental responsibility is obedience. We are called to love broadly, avoid the pitfalls of superficial “drive-by” evangelism, and patiently disciple those around us by demonstrating the gospel in our words and actions. God is the Lord of the harvest, and He will handle the rest.