

Matthew 13:1-23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 March 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 13 verses 1 to 23 Matthew chapter 13 Then the disciples came and said to him,
- Why do you speak to them in parables? 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. 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. 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.
- Indeed, in their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says, You will indeed hear, but never understand. You will indeed see, but never perceive. 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. But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.
- [2 : 0 1] 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.
- Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy. 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- [3 : 1 0] At the beginning of Matthew 13, Jesus leaves the house, and sits down beside the sea. At this point, a crowd is gathered, or more literally, synagogued to Jesus, and Jesus goes out into a boat, sits down, and teaches from there, while the crowd is on the beach.
- The setting here is probably significant. In the Gospels, the sea plays an important symbolic role. It's associated with the realm of the Gentiles, and the world beyond Israel, and a boat is a part of the land, taken out to sea.
- Maybe we're supposed to pay attention, to this particular detail, that's mentioned in other Gospels as well. Jesus teaches the people in parables, and many people are unclear, about the sort of thing that parables are.

Many believe that they are illustrations, something that helps understanding, and maybe presents a particular concept, in a more vivid form. Others see them as moral fables, with some timeless lesson.

But neither of these things are correct. The parables are parables of the kingdom of God, something that is dawning in history, at a critical moment. And they're things that explain and disclose, but they're also things that bring about changes.

[4 : 17] Something new is happening in history, and the parables disclose this. The parables themselves, are a means by which, the kingdom is simultaneously revealed, and concealed.

The parables are riddles, that expose the mystery of the kingdom, to those with the eyes to see, and the ears to hear. But they're also things, that conceal them, to those who do not.

Great mysteries are being revealed, to those who are able to perceive. And those who have hard hearts, and dull ears, are unable to see anything. The parable closes it off to them.

And so they're performing this double function. At the same time, they're opening things up to some people, and they're closing things off to others. We find examples of parables at a few points in the Old Testament.

They can function as riddles, or prophetic messages. And here they let people in, on the secret of the kingdom of God, of what God is doing, in Israel's history at this time. They take familiar stories, and patterns, and images from the Old Testament, and reorder them often, yielding greater illumination, but also sometimes surprising epiphanies, and shocks.

[5 : 26] This is not the way, that people were expecting the story to go. While many think, that the parable of the sower is obvious, Jesus himself explains it. It isn't necessarily so.

There's more going on here. And it pays to be attentive, to the details. For many, it's a timeless pattern of hearing, and the relationship, between hearing the word, and being saved. It's an illustration, of our doctrines of salvation, maybe helping us to understand, the doctrine of regeneration, and its relationship, with the word of God.

But while those doctrines, may be true in their own place, I don't believe, that that's primarily, what's taking place here. The primary place, to go for understanding, is the Old Testament itself.

That's where we first find, parables. It's where we find, much of the imagery, of the parables. And if we pay attention, to Old Testament prophecy, and wisdom literature, many of these things, will be a bit more apparent, to us than they would be otherwise.

The seed, I believe, is the word of God, that re-establishes, the people after exile. In the book of Isaiah, chapter 55, verses 10 to 13, we read, For as the rain and the snow, come down from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, making it bring forth, and sprout, giving seed to the sower, and bread to the eater, so shall my word be, that goes out from my mouth.

[6 : 42] It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish, that which I purpose, and shall succeed, in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace, the mountains and the hills before you, shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field, shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn, shall come up the cypress. Instead of the briar, shall come up the myrtle. And it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign, that shall not be cut off.

Similar themes are found, in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31, verse 27 and 28. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel, and the house of Judah, with the seed of man, and the seed of beast.

And it shall come to pass, that as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them, to build, and to plant, declares the Lord.

God is sowing the word, that will restore his people. But it isn't being properly received. Indeed, much of the seed, will be wasted, and remain in its exile-like conditions. And the telling of the parable, has something of the effect, that it is describing.

[7 : 53] Those who recognize its meaning, can perceive, that God is finally bringing about, the fulfillment of his promises in Christ. He is sowing his word, he is restoring his people.

But the climax of the story, won't necessarily look, the way that people expected it to. In the climax, Jesus experiences, the negative responses, that previous prophets had received. Not just, the positive response, of fruitfulness expected.

You have both of those things, alongside each other. We find the imagery, of failed ground, elsewhere in the New Testament. For instance, in Hebrews chapter 6, verses 7 and 8.

For land that has drunk the rain, that often falls on it, and produces a crop, useful to those, for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless, and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burnt.

In that context, I believe he is referring to, the Israelites, who rejected the word of God. Which is the same thing, as Christ is referring to. These are people, that had received all the blessings, had received the sowing, of the word of God, and yet had not produced fruit.

[9 : 02] They had failed, in that respect. And they were being prepared, for being burned, as a result. They were suffering judgment, in that generation. The same imagery, of sower and seed, is found elsewhere, in literature, of the same sort of period.

We find it in, for Ezra for instance, chapter 8, 41 following, For just as the farmer, sows many seeds, in the ground, and plants a multitude, of seedlings, and yet not all, that have been sown, will come up in due season, and not all, that were planted, will take root.

So also, those who have been sown, in the world, will not all be saved. And then, for Ezra 9, 30 following, Hear me, O Israel, for I sow my law in you, and it shall bring forth fruit in you, and you shall be glorified, through it forever.

But though our ancestors, received the law, they did not keep it, and did not observe the statutes. Yet the fruit of the law, did not perish, for it could not, because it was yours. Yet those who received it, perished, because they did not keep, what had been sown in them.

Jesus seems to use, the imagery of the seed, and the sower, in a very similar way. The parable of the sower, is especially important, because, in many respects, it is, the parable, about parables.

[10 : 16] It is in the context, of this parable, that Jesus teaches, concerning his use of parables, more generally. It is also, arguably, the first of the parables, and like many of the other parables, it is a parable, about growth.

We will find it, very difficult, to understand, the parable of the sower, unless we see it, against the backdrop, of the verses, that Jesus quotes, from Isaiah chapter 6.

The point of Jesus' use, of Isaiah chapter 6, is not just, to explain none response, but to provoke, faithful response. Jesus is, giving this word of judgment, that Isaiah has, at the beginning of his ministry, to provoke people, who hear that, not to be like that.

Jesus draws, a strong comparison, between his ministry, and that of Isaiah. And this is a comparison, that is quite pronounced, in a number of the gospels. For instance, it's developed, all the way through Luke, leading up to the climax, of Acts chapter 28, where that verse, is brought forward again.

In verses 25, to 28. The Holy Spirit, was right, in saying to your fathers, through Isaiah the prophet, go to this people, and say, you will indeed hear, but never understand, and you will indeed see, but never perceive.

- [11 : 27] 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 will heal them.

Therefore, let it be known to you, that this salvation of God, has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen. This is, the very end, of the book of Acts. It's a programmatic statement, for Acts, and for the book of Luke.

It helps to address, the question, with which the book of Acts begins. Are you going to restore, the kingdom to Israel, at this time? As a more general principle, of interpretation, it's important, when we hear an Old Testament passage, quoted, referenced, or alluded to, to consider the context, that it originally comes from.

And the latter part, of Isaiah chapter 6, is all about hearing, and not hearing. And it ends, on a key note, about the remnant, as the holy seed.

It's by God's sowing, of his word, and the hearing, of that word, that the promised remnant, is planted. And Isaiah brings, those themes together. And we won't understand, the melody, as it were, of Matthew chapter 13, unless we hear it, alongside the harmony, of Isaiah chapter 6.

- [12 : 44] Those two things, played together, bring to life, what's taking place here. The verses, after the verses, Jesus quotes, read, Then I said, How long, O Lord?

And he said, Until cities lie waste, without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many, in the midst of the land.

And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. So Jesus is comparing his ministry, to previous ministries, of prophets such as Isaiah.

But he's also presenting himself, as the one who is sowing, the seed of the restoration, the seed of the remnant, that will restore God's people, as the prophets had all promised.

In Hosea chapter 2, verse 21 to 23, for instance, we read, And in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel, literally, God will sow, and I will sow her for myself, in the land, and I will have mercy on, no mercy, and I will say to, not my people, you are my people, and he shall say, you are my God.

- [14 : 02] This is the restoration, that was promised, and it happens as God sows a new people. Jesus' statement to his disciples, in verses 16 and 17, make clear that this is something happening, at the fullness of time.

It's not just a timeless message, about how people respond, or don't respond to the word of God. Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear, for truly I say to you, many prophets, and righteous people, long to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

But now, in the fullness of time, God is restoring his people, by sowing his word. He's speaking, and in his speech, he is restoring his word. The parable is, as I've said, a parable about parables, a parable about, the teaching of the kingdom, more generally.

It's a statement of purpose. The promised kingdom of God, is not, as many kingdoms are, a kingdom of military might, and power, a kingdom of political intrigue, and skill.

It's a kingdom of the word. It's a kingdom formed, by the speaking of God, to his people. A word that gives life. It's a kingdom calling, for wise and transformed perspectives.

[15 : 17] People changing the way, that they see the world, God's action within it, and their place within it. And it's working, is not immediately obvious. It's the sowing of a seed.

A seed of a word. A seed of a word. And that word, finding root, or not finding root. And the way that it responds, or doesn't respond. And that is how, the work of the kingdom, is taking place.

This is not, what we would usually, think of as a kingdom. But here, Christ is describing, a kingdom that does not, match our expectations. That surprises us. And this fundamental surprise, prepares us for much, that will follow.

Jesus' interpretation, of the parable, with which our passage ends, highlights different problems, behind the non-reception, of the seed. Satan can stop, people's understanding.

This is the condition, that Isaiah describes. People whose hearts, have become hard. They can't hear with their ears, or see with their eyes. They've become, dulled in their perception. For other people, they fail to persevere, through testing.

[16 : 19] They face the hard situation, of being pushed to the limit. And they realize, that they're going to be ostracized. They're going to lose, their livelihoods. They're going to be, pursued, or maybe their lives, will be taken.

And faced with those prospects, they give up. They do not persevere, through the testing. For others, it's being led astray, by the concerns, of the present age. The deceitfulness of riches, a very powerful way, of describing, how riches can operate.

Jesus has talked, about riches elsewhere, in the Sermon on the Mount, for instance. And spoken about, how important it is, to relate to riches well, if we are going to, enter the kingdom of God.

Reading this parable, in its proper context, is incredibly important. It's important to see, that Christ is declaring, something that's happening, in the fullness of time, through his ministry. God is establishing, a new people.

And he's establishing, this new people, by his word. And there are all these, obstacles to receiving, this word, this word of restoration. It can be seen, in the way that Satan, will dull people's, understanding, or snatch the word, away from their hearts.

[17 : 26] It can be seen, in the way that the cares, and concerns of the world, the wealth that we have, and the way that we become, preoccupied with it. The way in which, we can face persecution, and just not stand up to it.

All of these things, are obstacles. And so people are, forearmed, against these dangers. This word, that Jesus is giving here, is part of the sowing, that it describes. The parable of the sower, is itself, a sowing of the word, in the hearts of people, so that they will respond, as they ought, as they see, the different ways, that they could respond, in an inappropriate way, they are being called, to be those, who bring forth fruit.

Again, the distinction, is not found, in the reception, of the word itself. Some ground, receives the word, and yet, does not, produce proper fruit. The distinguishing feature, of the proper reception, is the bringing forth, of fruit.

There is something, that must be transformed, in people's lives. It must be, something that reveals, this new character, of the kingdom, that has been sown, in their hearts, in their lives, in their communities.

A question to consider. Parables are, as it were, riddles of the kingdom. And throughout, this particular passage, there is an emphasis, upon hearing, and understanding.

[18 : 45] We have this, repeated expression, for instance, he who has ears, let him hear. Blessed are your ears, for they hear. And then, hear, the parable of the sower.

And then, Jesus' conclusion, of the interpretation, as for what was sown, on good soil, this is the one, who hears the word, and understands it. This emphasis, upon hearing, is not just, found in Jesus' words.

It's also seen, in the words, of Isaiah the prophet. Taking this, great emphasis, upon hearing, that is at the very, beginning of Jesus' teaching, in these parables. How might our, more typical, understandings of hearing, be challenged, and changed, by what Jesus is teaching, concerning hearing, here?