

A Receptive Heart

Matthew 13:1-23

Introduction

Misunderstanding: Have you ever wondered why we seem so wired for denial? What is the first thing Adam and Eve do when they sin and are confronted by God? **Deny!** E.g., kids with chocolate on face or make-up, etc. Psychologists have long studied the phenomenon of denial. Why, when faced with overwhelming truth, do we deny reality? Sometimes because we don't want to process difficult emotions, sometimes to maintain the status quo (e.g., fear of change), sometimes just tribalism and familiarity (we don't want anything to challenge our existing beliefs). It's why two people can watch the same play in a sporting event but see different things if they're rooting for different teams. "The same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay." In the text today, we see that different people respond to the truth of the gospel differently and we should be careful to understand God's word (e.g., conform to it rather than adjust it to fit our pre-existing desires).

We must be diligent to make our hearts receptive to the word of God.

Recap: Catch us back up in Matthew. Promises of God, ministry of Jesus, kingdom coming, teaching the sermon, opponents!!! We've been in the Gospel of Matthew, off-and-on, making our way through the story of the story of Jesus. Matthew, if you'll remember, is describing the coming of Jesus as the promised and long-anticipated Messiah, who brought the kingdom of God to earth. At the beginning we see how Matthew carefully explains Jesus' identity, his place as the true king of Israel, the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham (last week). Jesus demonstrates his identity with powerful miracles and authoritative teaching. But, many (especially the religious leaders of Judaism) refuse to accept who he is and, instead, oppose him. It is against this backdrop of opposition (watch previous sermons) that Jesus begins explaining and instructing his followers using a new method. **Jesus is going to start teaching his followers in parables.**

¹ 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. 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, let him hear." 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. 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. 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. 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.’ 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.”

1. A switch in teaching styles (vv. 1-9)

¹ 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. 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, let him hear.”

Great Crowds: ¹ That same day¹ 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. Jesus is no stranger to “great” or large crowds (4:25, 8:1). They’re actually not always so great. Why does he gather such crowds? Because he does things (i.e., miracles) and teaches in such a way that people want to see him. He’s done the miracles, he’s done the promise fulfillment, he’s done the powerful preaching

- Jesus’ own ministry makes it clear that “large” crowds are no guarantee of spiritual fruit (e.g., way is narrow, specific, Jesus alone).

¹ Jesus’ switch to teaching in parables is directly connected to the opposition he received from a number of people (but especially the Pharisees) in chapter 12.

The crowds want Jesus for themselves (e.g., Luke 4). In Jesus' healing ministry we know that in places like Capernaum, there was hardly a sick person left (Lk 4:40): "Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them." The crowds often gathered to receive a personal miracle or witness the great teacher for themselves. **Too often we don't see in Jesus the Kingdom of God on earth but an opportunity for our personal benefit** (e.g., he can fix my relationship, finances, etc.). We love the benefits of God but *do we love God?*

- "Jesus isn't interested in big religious crowds. He already had one, and it crucified him. He wants disciples" (Steven Lawson).

Popularity vs. Purpose: There is a huge difference between **popularity and purpose**, and we see that in Jesus' life and in the lives of those who truly follow him. Popularity values acclaim, material success, and personal prestige. Purpose values the mission. Jesus enjoyed popular acclaim (e.g., "great crowds") but he was unwilling to use that for personal comfort. He came for a mission, "to seek and save the lost." Everything that Jesus calls us to he also demonstrates. The parable today is all about producing fruit for the KoG. When he calls us to pursue faithful, deep-rooted, gospel commitment rather than the comforts of this world, **he does the same**.

- Some, maybe even some in this room, might ask why we patiently work to plant the seed of the gospel deep in the hearts of our friends and neighbors. It might seem that there are easier ways and better places to draw a crowd. We believe when the gospel goes deep it will eventually go wide. So we labor faithfully, with integrity, to cultivate the soil and sow the seed.

Diverse Crowd: So how does Jesus teach those who are true disciples while the crowd is filled with opponents or half-hearted miracle seekers? ³ And he told them many things in parables

The Parable: "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. The story is pretty **straightforward** and would make a lot of sense in an agrarian society where farming, planting, and harvesting were a regular part of life. There's a sower and seed. Various settings prevent the seed from growing (3 of the scenes) but in the last scene, the soil was good and the result was an abundant harvest. The real question is, what do all of the elements of the story represent? We'll get there in a second.

What Do Parables Do? We'll see **in this series** that Jesus often uses these stories to explain the nature of the KoG (e.g., 13:24, 31, 33). In one sense, these are metaphors to explain the Kingdom. But these aren't simply "earthly stories with heavenly meanings."

- He had already taught the gospel clearly and confronted the Pharisees directly. Now the parables serve a double function of building up the disciples while confounding his

opponents. He'd already taught clearly the nature of the KoG (e.g., Sermon on the Mount) yet many refused to believe him. Or they (seemingly) deliberately misunderstand. So, Jesus says, ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."

- The parables create a paradox. They explain more clearly the KoG to those who understand it but they are not easily understood by those who don't believe.
 - As I was thinking about how different people respond to the gospel, I was reminded of an article I read in the Atlantic about the myth of learning styles.² We've grown up hearing about different styles of learning (e.g., visual, kinesthetic, aural, etc.). But the evidence overwhelmingly says this isn't true (you can't, for example, visualize a French accent). We have different abilities and habits but certain things can only be learned certain ways (e.g., you can't learn to paint well from merely hearing description). I think there's a corollary to the gospel. There is only one way to gospel understanding: faith in Jesus. There's not one way for the Pharisees and one way for the disciples. There's not one way for you or one way for me. We see four "types" of soil but only one is fruitful: receiving the word of God.

This parable is unique in that it not only explains the nature of the gospel but it also serves as a **parable about parables** (Jesus is a master teacher) an explanation of how parables will be explained but also serves as a parable about the parables, an explanation of how the very words Jesus speaks about the KoG are received by various audiences.

2. The Blessing of Understanding the Gospel (vv. 10-17)

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. 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. 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. 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.' 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.

Not Just Illustrations: Now that Jesus has *told* the story about the sower and the seed, the disciples come to him. ¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Parables can't just be sermon illustrations (e.g., Jesus used illustrations, you should too "preacher boy"), or they'd be bad ones, because the disciples understand that they seem to confuse as much as illuminate. They're asking: why are they so cryptic? Why not spell

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/04/the-myth-of-learning-styles/557687/>

it out more clearly? Part of what the disciples are noticing in the response of the people is something common: some people hear the words of Jesus and respond with joy. Others hear the words and respond with dismissal.

- How can two people hear the Bible, or listen to the same sermon, and come away with completely different understandings? I was talking to someone a few weeks ago who referenced *my sermon* saying something I didn't mean or say. How do I know? **I said it.** What happened, is they heard what they *wanted* to hear.
- How can I read the Bible and see life and someone else read the Bible and see nothing but history, or morality tales, or worse?

Two Types of People: 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." There are two types of people here, (1) the disciples who understand and (2) the crowd who doesn't. Understanding the message of the Kingdom is only accessible to those who are followers of Christ. It is not information that is jealously guarded but simply the explanation of how spiritual knowledge works.

- This is a simple fact: there are those that understand the truth of the gospel and those that don't. And the understanding involved is not based on some esoteric skill or hidden meaning.
- "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).

Knowledge via Trust: Knowledge usually comes via trust. In fact, until you trust (the person, the authority, the process) you're not able to learn (e.g., trust the teacher). Even though you've forgotten, you didn't wake up one day and realize $1+1=2$. Someone (your parent or a Count puppet on Sesame Street) taught you. Think about it, even science is based on a "trust" of a particular history of thought and method of inquiry. The Bible sometimes speaks of the "knowledge of salvation" but how do you gain that knowledge without first trusting in God?

Thinking is essential to the Christian faith. But it is essential as a **response of worship** to the revelation of God's character and salvation (e.g., "love God with your mind"). **Theology** is essential to the Christian faith as an **act of discipleship**, as we "think God's thoughts after him." But we don't "think" ourselves into faith. We "faith" ourselves into correct thinking (e.g., faith is the pair of glasses that allows you to see clearly).

All or Nothing: 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. Discipleship (we've discussed before) is all or nothing. Following Jesus is "all or nothing." And that has a bearing on our understanding of the gospel.

- Believe = parables illuminate
- Reject = parables obscure

If you approach the gospel with skepticism (you'll find a frustrating puzzle), if you approach it with trust (not avoiding serious issues or skepticism) you'll find treasures of life and joy.

Seeing without Seeing: 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. What does it mean to “see but not see” or “hear but not hear”? Does this mean “physically” being able to see but not spiritually? More likely, it’s the idea of “seeing partially” but not “seeing the full picture.”

- When I used to take students to summer camp I would always say as part of my pre-camp spiel “camp is what you make it. You get out of it what you put into it.” Have you ever been in a situation where you have a terrible time *because* you’re determined to have a terrible time. The gospel is not true *only* if you believe it is true *but* you won’t see it’s truth unless you are willing to see it. It’s not *just* about your attitude but it is about your attitude.

Isaiah: 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.’ The situation in Isaiah, referred to by Matthew, is a people whose hearts are unable and unwilling to receive the message of God (like a person whose hearing goes bad when they listen to loud music). The gospel is clearly illuminated but they just can’t see it.

- Sometimes we assume that everywhere we go with the gospel is fertile soil. It’s not. Many people we talk to do not have “ears to hear.” Sometimes it isn’t until the soil of the heart is tilled (by suffering or difficulty) that someone is willing to listen.

When that is the case, when Jesus is not pursued by faith (e.g., Pharisees), even the good news of the gospel is a stumbling block.

Privilege of Hearing: 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. True knowledge and understanding of the things of God is a gift of God. This idea of a “secret” or a “mystery” (μυστήριον) points to the reality that God unveils or reveals truth. Jesus demonstrates the “unalterable [truth] that [in and] of himself man does not have the ability to turn to God” (Barth). The point of this passage is gratitude that God has opened our eyes. The fact that we know the gospel is purely God’s grace. Be grateful God opens your eyes. If that’s you, you have more than the prophets and saints. We get the privilege of hearing and understanding the gospel.

- Be grateful.

3. Cultivating a Receptive Heart (vv. 18-23)

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. 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. 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. 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.”

The Soils of the Heart: There are a lot of circumstances that keep us from receiving the word of God and, therefore, keeping us from bearing fruit for the gospel.

- **Sower** = (presumably) **Jesus** (but could be anyone who shares the word of God)
- **Seed** = **gospel** (“word of kingdom” or message of salvation).
- **Soil** = **human heart**

1. **A Hard Heart** 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.

This is the person whose heart is hard, the seed of the gospel doesn’t penetrate. As a result, the word is not hidden from the prow of the evil one (i.e., Satan). The word never gets through your thick skull (e.g., stubbornness is not often a virtue). The person that refused to be changed by the gospel (“I do it my way” mentality). A **simple diagnostic** is this: when bad things happen do they make you angry with God or make you run to his arms for comfort? If the former, be careful not to harden your heart. If the latter, be grateful for the grace of the gospel

2. **A Superficial Heart** 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 the person who responds with joy (often exuberant). The “talk a big game.” But their joy is superficial and short lived. The slightest amount of difficulty and they are gone. There’s no depth of root (e.g., planting perennials, chop off the top and let the roots grow). We focus on the flowers and forget about the roots but the health of the plant is in the root. *Focus on the roots.* Flowers may wilt but, as long as the root is healthy, it’ll flower again. Sometimes we see a dynamic response and think it is success (I’ve witnessed this frequently as a pastor, someone comes forward and tells me all the things I *want* to hear). But then they’re gone. Ghosted. As a church we focus on the roots and celebrate the fruit. But we’re not chasing fruit.

3. **A Divided Heart** 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.

This is the person that is partially committed to Jesus. They want Jesus plus comfort. This is the “Jesus is my copilot” mentality (he gets a seat in the car but doesn’t get to drive). Other things matter more. Jesus is nice but he isn’t more valuable than material concerns. When you build your life on worldly achievements, goals, possessions, etc. then you set yourself up for failure.

Earthly possessions promise security they can't deliver. Living for the riches of the world only produces anxiety.

4. **A Fruitful Heart** 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.”

A receptive heart genuinely trusts in God, submits to his plan, finds joy in a relationship with him. Its “satisfaction in Christ alone runs so deep that no pain can shake it and no pleasure can compete with it” (Piper). The result is a life that produces gospel fruit.

Conclusion:

We must be diligent to make our hearts receptive to the word of God.

Gratitude and Faith: If you hear and understand the gospel, then you *must* respond with gratitude and repentance. The point of this parable is not to tell you all the ways you aren't a follower of Jesus but to *invite* you to receive the message of salvation. Jesus is not trying to keep you out but invite you in. He is calling us to trust in him. Trust his words. Trust his commands. Trust his promises.

- The gospel grows in the soil of gratitude and trust.
 - We should check our hearts. Are they hardened to the call of Christ? Is our faith superficial without deep roots? Are our hearts worried or concerned about the things of the world?
- Do everything you can to receive God's word with gratitude and trust.
- How can you tell if you're receptive to the word of God? It multiplies and bears fruit in your life (different amounts for different folks). You start seeing more self-control, more patience, more love, joy, peace, etc.

If you hear this and understand what God is saying, then you should be grateful and respond. Don't presume on his grace. Till the soil of your heart with God's grace. Plant the gospel deep out of reach of suffering. Chop down the entangling sins of materialism, comfort, pleasure.

- You don't need to be worried about the results. God's word will do the work in your life. Just receive it.
- “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; 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” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

Response:

1. **Worship:** sing, pray, and reflect on the message.
2. **Faith:** take the next steps of faith by placing your faith in Jesus or responding as the Spirit of God leads (pastors are available for prayer or counsel).

3. **Grace:** participate in the Lord's Supper (if a baptized believer).
4. **Questions:** stick around if you have any questions