

Parables: Jesus the Storyteller, Matthew 13:1-23, 6/13/21

We start a new series today that we will be exploring throughout the summer called, [Title Slide] "Parables: Jesus the Storyteller." What is a parable? An earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The 19th century poet, Elizabeth Barret Browning, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God: but only he who sees, takes off his shoes, the rest sit around, and pluck blackberries."

Jesus used ordinary every day earthly things like lamps, doors, vines, weeds, sheep, seeds and soil to explain that every common bush was afire with God. To him common characters like a son, a judge, a builder, a bride, a watchman, and a thief are used to tell the cosmic story of the kingdom of heaven.¹ Matthew uses this phrase 32 times, in fact he tells his disciples in Matthew 13:11 this is what the parables are all about, the redemptive reign of God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, culminating in his return. We sometimes think of these parables as cute little children's stories, but they are stories about a revolution, a new king and his kingdom. Rome didn't try to kill people like Mr. Rogers that sat around telling cute stories about sheep and goats...the sheep says baah, baah...no these aren't nursery rhymes. Rome killed leaders who told subversive stories that shifted people's allegiance from Caesar to Jesus as the king of a new kingdom, as the true emperor. The Jewish Pharisees were attempting to silence and destroy a game-changer that was disrupting the religious status quo. The reason I gave my life to Christ, the reason I have gone all in for Jesus with my whole life and purpose is not because it's some cute little story, some feel good faith that keeps us busy. Jesus flipped the world upside down. These stories he is telling challenge every part of our lives, our society and our future. His kingdom is counter-cultural to the world in every way- sexuality, money, purpose, power, how you think about your work. OK, does that make you more interested in listening? I hope so, that has everything to do with the reason Jesus spoke in Parables.

The disciples asked that question- Matthew 13:11-13

¹¹ He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them."

¹² Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

Parables had a dual purpose- to conceal and to reveal. Just like Browning poem- Some will see a common bush and sit around picking blueberries from it, and not see the supernatural, not see God's deeper meaning. Some will hear, but they really won't hear. Some will be entertained, some will be puzzled but never bother to be drawn deeper, some will be dismissive- the ramblings of a mad man. But others will see that the bush is afire with God. They will hear the

¹ Douglas Sean O'Connell, Preach the Word Commentary, Matthew

story and be drawn into the spiritual realm, into the kingdom of God. Just like the same sun that melts wax hardens clay. So it is with the parables. So we need to set aside our nostalgic connection with these parables from the flannel graphs, forget what you think you know and try to hear them fresh this Summer because Jesus asking you- are you taking off your shoes or just here to pick blueberries? Are you listening? These parables are meant to reshuffle your life. Because these parables are not about how I preach, they are about how you hear. Pray.

In essence this first parable of Jesus, the [Title Slide] Sower and the Seed from Matthew 13 is an apt illustration of everything I just said, you'll see what I mean shortly.

³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Some heard this story and thought it was just a cute lesson about how agriculture works. But, Jesus gives us the story behind the story in v.18-23. Let's make sure we understand the characters and then place ourselves in the story.

The Seed: Word of God- specifically v. 19, the gospel of the kingdom. And seed is a great way to describe it. Seeds- at first glance look vulnerable and weak and underwhelming. And the gospel begins what would appear to be a weak message- A king came from heaven, looked quite ordinary, nowhere town, nobody people, he was tortured and killed in relative obscurity. It's a seed...and the way it works is completely backward of most kingdoms and religions which conquer by political or military force. Most kingdoms are more like a bulldozer to a field, but Jesus' gospel is a seed that works from the inside out, upside down. Jesus himself was like a seed. His body is buried, but life springs anew. Jesus resurrects with power. He offers forgiveness of sin and a new life that never ends with God through his death and resurrection. His followers, though few, begin to have their lives completely transformed and turn the world upside down. And that's how the gospel works in our lives, it gives life.

The Sower: farmer isn't told to us, but we might well assume it is Jesus himself or disciples who share the gospel. We scatter seed when we share God's Word, when we share the gospel with neighbor, friend, co-worker, family member, those on mission's trip. Paul in 1 Corinthians tells us the job of the sower is to spread the seed. God makes it grow. But really this parable isn't so much about the sower or the seed. We might as well call this the parable of the soils: **These 4 soils represent 4 heart conditions.** Remember, the goal of the parable is to reshuffle your life.

Place yourself in the story honestly, which character are you? We aren't the seed, at times we may be a sower...but everyone of us can relate to the soils.

Hard Heart:

¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

This represents some of us in here. Word goes out, you've already made up your mind you don't believe any of this. You are here for other reasons. Someone you are dating, parents dragged you here, you like the music or it feels good, but you are unaffected by the word. Don't misinterpret me, I am so glad you are here and you are welcome here. Jesus wants you here- notice that Jesus scatters the seed on the path. Now I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like a particularly good farmer. I'm no expert, but I think that one is pretty obvious. But I think it tells us two things: one about the heart of Jesus and the other about our hearts. Jesus doesn't want anyone to miss the opportunity to hear the wonderful news about the kingdom. Bible says he doesn't want anyone to die without the opportunity to be with Him forever. But it also says something about our hearts- hard hearts can become soft hearts. This isn't determinism (well I'm hard soil and it will always be that way, NOPE!) We might start out as hard soil, but we may end up as soft soil. I was hard soil. The enemy, like a bird, wants to take these words and snatch them out of your heart. But you can pray- "God, please if this is true, soften me so I can hear it. If you exist, I want to believe in you."

Shallow Heart:

²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.

²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Let me give you two examples of what this might look like. 6 year old who is told- You can either go to hell, or you can go to heaven where God, where grandma is...you just have to pray this prayer. Really? I'll take the heaven option- You might have prayed to accept the marshmallow man into your heart with those options. You receive it with joy. But then you get to school and your friends don't believe that, or your family, they make fun of you a little and you are like, you know what? I don't really think I'm in for this anymore. It grabbed you for a moment, but it got snatched away. This is one of the reasons that our goal with children is not merely praying a prayer, we are after resilient, lifelong disciples. We do that through relationships, teaching them how to read their Bibles and memorize Scripture, what it really means to follow Christ, even going on mission with him so that the seed has the best opportunity to sink deeper into the soil.

The other scenario I sometimes see is the person who may be coming out of a difficult situation in life- a break up or financial need, health issue- And they hear the gospel and they appear to

receive it with joy, maybe even tears and emotion, it feels like a balm to their wounds. But then the excitement begins to fade. And the heat of the sun comes in the form of troubles, suffering or distractions. They are asked to give up something they don't want to give up. The things they thought they were getting maybe happiness, or prosperity, or an easy life...they aren't getting- they turn their back, "What use is Christianity?". What is revealed is that they never really understood the kingdom, the gospel. They thought they were entering Christ's kingdom, but what they really were trying to do is trying to get Jesus into their own kingdom. They wanted the blessing not the blessing, they wanted a sugar daddy, not a king who would disrupt their life. They were a sufferer in need of a service, not a sinner in need of a savior.²

Divided Heart:

²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

It is pretty easy to see clearly the first two don't appear to be truly disciples and the last one is obviously a true disciple, a Christian but this one is difficult, isn't it? I think it's somewhat ambiguous intentionally. It's not for you and I to judge others, it is for the individual to wrestle with and ask the question, "Does that describe me? Am I truly a follower of Christ? Or am I just going through the motions?" This is the heart that shares control with Christ. One pastor says, "They have too much of Jesus in them to be satisfied in this world, but they have too much of the world in them to just be satisfied in Jesus."³ Their heart is crowded by the worries of this life- focused on positions and possessions. Your money is part of your discipleship- let that wash over you. Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is. We talk about your money because we care about your heart. And just like thorns do with plants, they choke them out, and that doesn't happen overnight, it's a slow chokehold, at first it doesn't even feel like much. "I can follow Jesus and continue with this other thing in my life." But slowly it grips the plant and kills it. That's what a divided heart does. Anything that vies for your heart's allegiance is a thornbush. If money is your thorn, give it away. If the guy you are dating is choking your relationship with God, break up with Him. If climbing the ladder at your company is your thorn, maybe you need to only work 40 hours. Or maybe quit... "Would Jesus ask me to do something that radical?" Yes! He did with the rich young ruler. He did with the disciples. He did with the woman caught in adultery. So what about you? We are talking about allegiance to the King! The king did something radical for you. Now here's how that works- You have thornbushes? It is the gardener's job is to pull them out, not the soil. Go to the gardener- "I have thornbushes choking out my relationship with you, I need you to help me pull them out."

Fruitful Heart:

²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

² Tim Keller Sermon idea.

³ Skip Heitzig Sermon Quote

Now we need to discern what it is that makes this soil “good” because it might not be what you think. Jesus isn’t talking about good and bad people or good or bad hearts in this parable. He isn’t saying the good soil says all their prayers before bed, goes to church and recycles. He’s not saying that being a good, moral or even religious person is prerequisite for being good soil. The Bible is super clear that the line between good and bad runs down the center of every human heart. That the seeds of every sin grow in the human heart- pride being a really big one... it’s not our good doing, it’s our good hearing. Good soil is receptive to the seed, wants and sees that they need the seed. “Hears the word and understands it.” It comes through humility, not pride. Not thinking you have all the answers, but knowing that you don’t have answers for entering into God’s kingdom or living according to his kingdom. You can’t earn your salvation, you can’t do enough good things.

You know the seed has taken root because it produces a crop. Good root, good fruit. The gospel when it is pushed in the soil of our hearts it will disrupt what is there. It will start doing all kinds of things inside us. We will start to love things we didn’t used to love, feel guilty about things that you didn’t used to feel guilty about, start to loosen the grip on possessions and power, want to serve and please God. Tell others about him. Now when the gospel comes into our lives and transforms, it looks different in everyone. Some are fast growers, others are slow growers...some are fancy and exotic flowers, and some more plain and functional. And that’s great, because God loves a diverse garden! We might not know how much we are going to produce, but what if we all aim for 100-fold. What if we all said, “I want to produce!” How amazing would it be if you caught a vision for your life like that here. Plants are sowers. They reproduce. Disciples make more disciples. Have you caught that vision?

4 Heart Conditions: Hard Soil, Shallow Soil, Divided Soil and Fruitful. Where are you right now? Can we be honest? Maybe there are seasons and sections of our hearts that resemble all of these. Jesus can meet us there. Pray