

If You Have Ears (13:1-23)

Great to see you guys this week. My name is Kent if we haven't met, I'm one of the pastors here. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Matthew 13**. If you're new around our church, we've been walking through the **book of Matthew** together. And specifically in the section of the book we've been in **lately, we've been looking at** the various *responses* people have to Jesus and his message. Today, we're going to *continue* focusing on that, but we're gonna see Jesus **adjust his communication method** just a bit.

Beginning in chapter 13, he starts *speaking* to people using something called **parables**. If you're newer to the bible, parables are basically these short stories Jesus tells from time to time. And they're all a bit different: sometimes they have one character in them, sometimes they have several. Sometimes they consist of multiple scenes and contain drama and surprise and intrigue; sometimes they're literally one sentence long. But one way or another, they all communicate something to us about the kingdom of God. And here in **chapter 13**, we get the **heaviest concentration** of parables that we've encountered so far in Matthew's gospel. Today we'll cover the *first* parable, and for the next month or so, we'll cover the rest.

But **before we get into** all *that*, it seems worth talking a little bit about *why* Jesus chose to speak in parables in the first place. And conveniently, that's the exact question the *disciples* ask him in the middle of our passage for today. So we're gonna start there to get some context. Pick it up with me in v. 10:

[10] The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

So the disciples don't understand why Jesus chooses to speak in this way. A **large crowd shows up** to hear Jesus speak, and the disciples are undoubtedly expecting him to drop some word bombs about who he is and what his movement is, cast some vision, motivate some people to become a part of it. And rather than doing that, he just starts telling these random hypothetical stories about seeds and soil and fish and bread, and then *not explaining* what they *mean* to the crowds. You've gotta think the disciples are going, "Jesus, what are you doing? You're wasting a perfectly good opportunity to tell people clearly what you're all about. So why instead are you telling them cryptic stories—why are you speaking to them in *parables*?"

And **isn't that the question a lot of us have** for Jesus, as well? As we've worked through the gospel of Matthew, have there not been times where we've gone "okay Jesus—that was about the most cryptic, unclear, indirect possible way to say what you just said."

Why not be *direct*? If he really *cared* about people hearing and understanding his message, why wouldn't he try to be *clearer* about it? Why leave your words subject to misinterpretation and confusion? Why would you ever say things *indirectly* that you could say *directly*? Wouldn't it be more *effective* for Jesus to communicate *differently*? That, in so many words, is the question the disciples have for Jesus: "why speak to the people in *parables*?"

And the **answer is what Jesus gives next** in the passage, but it's also what he's going to **elaborate on in the parable** we'll look at here in a few. But look first with me back in v. 11 at his *answer*:

[11] He replied, "**Because** (here's why:) *the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you* (the disciples), *but not to them* (the crowds). [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.*"

Okay, so **here's our answer:** **Jesus speaks in parables because people receiving his message isn't ultimately about how direct or clear he is. It's not ultimately about how effective of a communicator he is** (after all, he's the son of God—his communication skills are just fine...and yet *plenty* of people still *rejected* his message). **At the end of the day, people's receptivity to his message isn't about his communication style; it's about the condition of their hearts.** How people respond to the good news of the kingdom depends entirely on whether they have the ability to *hear* it for what it is. Which explains why Jesus ends so many of his parables with that famous expression of his, "if you have ears, let them *hear*."

Now, Jesus continues to unpack this idea by **quoting from the prophet Isaiah** in the Old Testament. Keep reading with me in v. 14:

[14] *In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. [15] For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."* [16] *But (talking to his disciples now) blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. [17] For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

Have you ever wondered why two people can have the exact same experience, and respond completely differently to it? Like, for instance, I personally know for a fact that the restaurant Chivo over on Gay Street has the best tacos in Knoxville. Don't @ me. It's a cold hard fact. #Undeniable. They're delicious. But other people I know can go to that same restaurant, eat the same exact tacos I eat, and think they're not good. Now, they're obviously wrong—that's an example of unrepentant sin in their heart—but that is their genuine response. Same experience, different response. Have you ever wondered why that is? How can two people experience the exact same thing, and have completely different responses to it? Well I would say it has every bit to do with the condition each person is in. Each person is coming to the table (pun intended) with a certain set of expectations and assumptions about what a taco should be or taste like. The state or condition we're in, often dictates our receptivity to various things.

And though the stakes are much higher than tacos, it's actually similar with the message of the kingdom. People come with all sorts of expectations and assumptions about what the kingdom of God is going to be like, and often, those assumptions dictate how they respond to the message. Jesus knows that some people are going to respond positively to his message (i.e. his disciples). And he knows some people are going to respond negatively to it (i.e. the Pharisees, the scribes, even large portions of the crowd following him around). So rather than sweat the delivery method of the message—how he says it and what communication method he uses and whether it's direct or indirect or somewhere in between—Jesus often focuses more on the state of his hearers. Because that is what makes the difference.

And like I mentioned, that is also what this very first parable from Matthew 13 is about. It's a parable about how people hear the message of the kingdom. How people respond. So let's see what it says. Look up earlier in the passage with me, beginning in v. 1:

[1] That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. [2] Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. [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 (immediately) 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."

So take **note of some of the details**. Two things stay the *same* throughout every part of the story: the sower and the seed. *Those* don't change. And that's because, as we're going to see in a moment, Jesus (represented by the farmer) and his message (the seed) are always the same. **The only thing that *changes*—the only *variable* in the different parts of the story—is the *type of soil that the seed falls on***. Are you with me so far? And *that's* because, as we're about to learn, the soil in the story refers to the four different types of people or *responses that people have* to the message of the kingdom. The four different types of *heart postures* people have towards the message.

Now, just to make them easy to remember, we'll **give them some names**. In the parable, Jesus highlights (in this order) **the hardened heart, the shallow heart, the divided heart, and the receptive heart**. These are four different types of heart postures people have, and therefore four different ways they *respond* to Jesus' message. We'll spend some time on each one. You guys ready? Okay. First up...

The Hardened Heart

[18] *“Listen then to what the parable of the sower **means** (in other words, Jesus is now about to go back through and **explain** this parable to his disciples):*

[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.*

So the first soil represents the type of person **who hears about Jesus**, his message, his way of life, and *immediately* **responds with “nope**. That's ridiculous. That's closed-minded. That's superstitious. That's offensive. That's regressive.” It's the person whose heart is set against even *considering* the message of Jesus. But notice that Jesus tells us there is something *more* than just logic or cynicism or skepticism going on with people who respond this way. He says the core of the problem is that *“the evil one comes and snatches away”* the message. Do you see that? In other words, he is saying that **there are actual spiritual forces at work behind doubt and disbelief**. There is an enemy that has a vested interest in people rejecting the message of Jesus.

Maybe you're in the room today and you would say that sounds like you. Maybe you believe that the whole Christianity thing is a bit far-fetched or oppressive or silly or unnecessary. ~~First off, if that's you, we're glad you're here. We want you to know this is a safe place to be honest about all that—none of us are gonna be shocked or offended if you tell us that.~~ But *if* that's you, here's all I would challenge you with. There are people in the world—likely quite a few people—who are much *smarter* and more *logical* and more

cynical than you—who have still decided to follow Jesus. Now you *could* just write that off and just assume that they all have blindspots in *their* thinking that you somehow *don't* have...*or* you could investigate why they've decided to follow Jesus *despite* all that. You could go have a conversation with them if you know them, you could read a book that they wrote about it. And to *me*, that's worth doing, if you truly are an open-minded person. And in that process, you might just discover that there is something deeper going on than the message of Jesus just not "making sense" to you. You might start to discover that there are forces bigger than any of us that have a vested *interest* in you not believing. But **that's the first category** of soil: **the soil that immediately rejects the message of Jesus.**

Now let's pause for just a moment here. As I was studying this passage, I thought to myself: **wouldn't it be great** if that were the *only* way to reject the message of Jesus? Like, imagine if this parable only contained two categories: the person who immediately rejects the message of Jesus, and the person who *accepts* the message of Jesus. That would be so much *easier*. **Then it would set all of us at ease—we would go "well I'm not immediately *rejecting* Jesus' message, so that must mean I'm good."** And we would **immediately know where we fell**. The problem is that **according to the parable, there isn't just one way to reject the message of Jesus—there are *three***. **And what's tricky is that the *next two*, at first, don't actually look like rejection at all**. So let's see what *they* are. One is...

The 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.

Okay. **At first glance**, this response looks **polar opposite from the first** one, doesn't it? The first type of person *rejects* the message *immediately*—*this person* at first "*receives it with joy*." Not hard-heartedness; excitement and *eagerness*. **This person hears about Jesus and posts it to their Insta immediately. They tell all their friends about it; they start inviting their friends to church with them. They're *excited* about it. This person hears the message of Jesus and they think "I like this! It makes me feel better about myself. It makes me feel happier. It means God will help me with things...this is great!"**

"But," Jesus says, "when trouble or persecution comes, they quickly fall away." We've talked in recent weeks about how sometimes we struggle to believe in Jesus because life doesn't go like we thought it would as a result of following him. All of a sudden, we

start experiencing *trouble*. *Persecution*. *Suffering*. *Opposition*. **Jesus says there will be people who will respond to the message of his kingdom initially with great joy and excitement, but then when the going gets tough, they will actually change their mind.** Sometimes it takes *suffering* (or at least *adversity*) to expose what we really believe, *and* what we really *trust*.

Or maybe we could **put it this way:** **these people are very excited about what God might be able to *do for them*—what he might be able to *add* to their life—but they're not all that grounded in *who God is*. At the end of the day, they're more excited about the *benefits* of following Jesus than they are *about* Jesus himself. They'll follow Jesus, just so long as it makes life *better* and *easier* and more *enjoyable*. But as soon as following Jesus makes life more *difficult*, or less *ideal...then* they're out.**

- As soon as they realize that being a Christian shrinks the dating pool just a little...they're out.
- As soon as they discover that being a Christian may look like ridding themselves of vices and temptations that they really enjoy...they're out.
- As soon as they discover that being a Christian might make them look foolish or closed-minded to their peers...they're out.

You see, the *shallow* heart is only really in on following Jesus insofar as the *benefits* outweigh the *costs*, from *their* perspective. And so **as soon as it feels to them like God is asking more from them than he is offering them, they go “okay, never mind.”** Which means they were really never in to begin with.

To **put it plainly, it is possible to be excited about Jesus, and not be a Christian.** It is possible to be excited about Christian *things*, and not be a Christian. Because **following Jesus takes more than excitement. It takes endurance. It takes sacrifice. It takes obedience. It is a lifelong process, not just a one-and-done decision.** Does that make sense? Okay, third category...

The 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.

A person with a *divided* heart *also* seems to receive the message initially. Maybe they even make it through suffering or heartache or adversity *intact*. But their *problem* is that **the message of Jesus has some strong competition within their heart.** Their affections are *divided*. They love *Jesus...but* they also really love *money*. *Jesus is ultimate to them for sure...but* their kids are *also* ultimate to them. They want to worship

Jesus with *everything in them*...they just also want to be *married* with everything in them. They want to be *approved* of and *liked* with everything in them. They want to be *popular* with everything in them. We could go on. But they wrestle with this perpetual tug-of-war of affections inside of them. Now, to a certain degree, that is all of us, right? All of us have things that are competing for our attention and affection alongside Jesus. But this group of people has grown *complacent* towards that. To them, it's not really seen as a *problem* to deal with.

And in the parable, it says you may be able to convince yourself for a while that things like that can coexist alongside Jesus in your heart. But **eventually one of the two will win out. Eventually those other things won't just be competition for our relationship with Jesus—they'll become replacements for him.** For instance, Jesus back in Matthew 6 put it like this: "you can't serve both God and money." Notice he doesn't say "you shouldn't"—he says you *can't*. As in it is *impossible* for God and something else both be *ultimate* to you. Eventually life will force you to *pick* what is most important. And Jesus is saying here that when that day comes for people with divided hearts, they will pick the "worries of life" and "deceitfulness of riches" and leave Jesus behind.

Now listen: my concern with this one *isn't* just that some of us might *eventually* choose things over Jesus. **My concern is that some of us have already done it, and don't think we have.** Think about the language Jesus uses in the passage: "the deceitfulness of riches." Do you know how to *know* you're being *deceived*? You *don't*. That's the *nature* of deception. If you are being deceived, you're usually the *last* to know, and sometimes you don't know until it's too late. I think we're usually really good at convincing ourselves that things we love aren't interfering with our relationships to Jesus.

And to Jesus' point, I don't think it's any coincidence that America is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, and is simultaneously one of the few countries where the number of proclaimed Christians is *decreasing* rather than *increasing*. Jesus would say that those two things are likely *related*. That many of us are being "choked out" by the worries of life and the deceitfulness of riches.

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So, there are the three ways people ultimately *fail* to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus. By having a *hardened* heart, a *shallow* heart, or a *divided* heart. So let's talk finally about what the *right* heart looks like, a...

Receptive Heart

[23] *But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it.* That word “*understand*” there is far stronger than it sounds in English. It doesn’t just mean to intellectually *comprehend* something, but to put it together with action. The one who does that... ~~*This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*~~

So the final category of hearer is the one who **doesn’t just hear and respond with acknowledgement**, or even with **excitement**—but one who responds with **action**. By **hearing and doing**. And more specifically, by *bearing fruit*. The person who shows real, actual, noticeable *evidence* of the Holy Spirit growing and changing them over a long period of time.

So you might then say, “Okay, **what kind of fruit** are we talking about, exactly?” Well in some ways, we could say that it’s simply the *inverse* of the other three types of soil, right? *So fruit looks like responding with receptivity rather than cynicism, curiosity rather than rejection. Fruit looks like following Jesus even in the moments where it makes life harder for you and not easier. Fruit looks like going to war against anything that you see competing with Jesus in your heart, anything that steals your time and your attention and your affections away from him. And fruit looks like obedience: it looks like doing things you don’t want to do in the moment, because you believe God knows better than you do.* This is what it looks like to hear and *understand* the message of Jesus. It looks like bearing *fruit*.

Now before we wrap up, let’s briefly address **the question that most everybody has** when they read this passage, and that’s *how many of the four types of soil are Christians?* Right? That’s the question we usually ask. Now some of us ask it just because we’re trying to get clarity: we just want to understand better what Jesus was and wasn’t saying in this passage. And hopefully you’ve already seen the answer already: only the final, *fourth* type of soil is a follower of Jesus.

But I also think a lot of people ask that question **from a deeply personal place**. We hear the way the first three types of soil get *described* and we get a little nervous because one of them sounds a lot like us and where we’re currently at. So we ask “okay...but can’t you be the second type of soil and still be a *Christian*? Can you be the *third* type of soil and still be a *Christian*?” Because deep down, maybe part of us wants to know if we can stay where we’re at and still have a relationship with Jesus. Like “what’s the threshold? What’s the bare minimum I can do and still get eternal life?” And *if* that’s you, I would just challenge you not to think that way about your relationship with Jesus.

And for that matter, don't think that way **about any meaningful relationship** you have. Imagine going up to your spouse and asking them, what the bare minimum you can do to still be married to them. That'd be *bizarre*, wouldn't it? Instead, shouldn't we be asking "how can I be the best *possible* partner to my spouse?" So **shouldn't it be the same way** with our relationship with *Jesus*? Shouldn't we be asking not "what's the least I have to do to be a Christian," and instead "how can I allow the redemptive message of Jesus to transform *every single aspect* of my life?" "How do I allow him to infiltrate and impact and grow and change every part of my life that he wants to change?" And that's what it looks like to have ears to *hear*.

So on that note, let's just **land here**. As I was thinking through this teaching the past few weeks, there was **one thing I was very nervous about**. I was nervous that some of us would hear this teaching, we would become *convicted* that our lives look like one of the first three types of soil than they do the last one, and just *panic*. That we would go "oh no—I have a hard heart. I have a shallow heart. I have a divided heart—I'm doomed."

But I really **don't think that's what Jesus wants** you to walk away from this passage with. These categories don't *have to be* static. **These four types of soil aren't like Jesus' version of the Enneagram**. He's not looking at people and going "eh...you're the hard soil...sucks to suck I guess. Good luck in hell!" That's not what's going on here. You see the thing about soil is that soil can *change*. *Hardened* soil can be watered and softened. *Shallow* soil can be excavated and filled in so that the seed can grow roots. Even the soil with the thorns—thorns can be dug up and pulled out.

What I'm trying to say is that **if you're here this morning and you feel like you might be one of the first three types of soil—that doesn't mean you're stuck** there. You're not doomed to die with that posture towards the message of Jesus. **It might be that the Spirit of God has you here, today, in this space, hearing this passage, because he wanted you to be convicted, and wanted you to do something about it. Right? After all, Jesus finishes out the parable with the words, "if you have ears, you should hear." If people were doomed to die where they were at, Jesus could've just chosen to not tell the parable at all. But that's not what he does. He wants people to hear.**

But here's the thing: there's **only one way to hear**. There's only one way to become the fourth kind of soil. And that's by the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is who softens the hard soil. The Holy Spirit is who enables you to dig out the shallow soil and allow it to grow roots. The Holy Spirit is who empowers you to pull up the competition that threaten to choke out the message of Jesus in your life. In Jesus' initial response to the disciples'

question at the beginning, he said that to them the secrets of the kingdom had been “*given*.” As in, *granted*. God via his Spirit gave them the *ability* to hear.

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So here’s what I want us to do: if you’ve got your stuff out, feel free to **go ahead and put it away**. I want us to take just a moment to deal with this if we need to. Once you’ve put your stuff away, bow your heads, close your eyes. And once you do that, I just want every person in this room to ask one question. I want you to ask the question, “do I have ears to *hear*?” Am I responding to the message of Jesus by hearing *and understanding*? Or is it in one ear and out the other?

And the hope is that **for a lot of us** in the room, the response is “yes.” And maybe the Spirit just wants to take this moment to speak over you “this is my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased. This is my disciple, who hears the word and *does it*.” Maybe for many of you, just take a moment to bask and enjoy the approval of the Father, made possible for you through Jesus.

For others, when we ask the question “do I have ears?” the answer we hear might be something more like “not yet.” But I truly believe that the follow-up to that from the Spirit of Jesus is “...but I *want* you to.” And maybe he wants to use this moment, this passage, this teaching right now to *grant you* ears to hear. So if that’s you, if you feel like he’s saying *that* to you, I just want you to say back to him—out loud, quietly to yourself, or silently—“I want it too.” So if you need to say that, say it. I’ll give you a moment or two.

With your heads still bowed and eyes still closed, I want to just read over you a **passage from Revelation 3**, that I think is very relevant for this moment. This is Revelation 3, v. 20. Jesus talking, says:

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone **hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.** To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with **my Father on his throne.** **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says...***

Let’s pray.