

# “A Parable about Parables” // Matthew 13:1–23 // Listen #1

I’m so encouraged by hearing how God is working in and through our college students...the vision of our college ministry is not any different than the vision of our church: to make disciples who go and make disciples. **By the power of the Holy Spirit**, I pray we never get tired of seeing God work miracles among us. **Amen?**

**Open your Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew—Matthew 13** Today we begin a series on the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, and **the series is called “Listen.”**

**Listening, of course, is a critical life skill.** One of our campus pastors told me this week that he was **at home working in the yard** when he got a phone call from his wife, who told him she was at the mall in a store he’d never heard of called West Elm. She told him **she wanted to buy a ‘credenza’** that cost \$1400 and asked if it was ok.”

**He said:** *“First, I had no idea what a credenza was. I thought it was a cooking book. Second, because I was working in the yard and not paying much attention I heard ‘\$40 to \$100.’ So, I said, ‘sure.’”*

*Frankly, I was surprised how grateful she was. She just kept saying over and over, “Thank You! Thank you!” For the life of me I couldn’t imagine what was so exciting about a cookbook, but I was glad she was glad.*

Works Consulted:

“Kingdom Seed,” Ian Nelson

“The Good Soil,” Joby Martin

“The Seed and the Soil,” James Boice

Matthew 13, J.C. Ryle and Helmut Theilicke

“The Seed of the Kingdom,” Tim Keller

*A few days later when West Elm delivered our credenza I said, ‘Wow! You got this for 40 to \$100?!?!?’ And she said, ‘No!? \$1,400.’ My jaw hit the floor and I was distraught.”*

**Again, listening is a critical life skill.** And, whenever Jesus told parables, he would say, and you’ll hear it today, *Listen*.

**Today, we’re going to look at a parable Jesus told about why he told parables—which, I know sounds like a biblical version of Inception: a parable within a parable about parables.**

**But this one is absolutely fascinating.** I was always taught that parables were “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning” where Jesus used simple, every-day analogies to help people understand profound truth.

- **It’s kind of like today when we say,** “It’s like that movie...” or “Do you remember that scene from *The Office*?”
- **Had Nic Cage been** around in Jesus’s day, he would undoubtedly have featured frequently in Jesus’s teaching.

And that’s true. But this parable shows us that there was more to it than that. In fact, in a twist of irony, Jesus tells us that he sometimes told parables to obscure truth rather than illustrate it.

**And I know that sounds confusing, but today is going to answer a lot of questions for some of you, I think.**

- It will explain to you why some people, even though they are really smart, can’t seem to see the truth.
- And why **so many** people interpret the Bible in different ways.

I'm also going to explain today why some of you have such a hard time paying attention in sermons, and why some of you get drowsy the exact moment I stand up here to speak. And I'm going to explain why a bunch of you middle and high school students suddenly have to use the bathroom the moment I start speaking.

- From up here it's like watching a parade.

**By the time I am finished today** I think I will have convinced you that having to use the bathroom while I am preaching is sign of demon possession. **If someone gets up during the sermon**, maybe you should cross yourself or hiss at them when they walk by. **Just kidding.** But I am going to explain a lot of different spiritual forces that are work when I am up here preaching.

### The Parable: Matthew 13:1–23

**13:1** On that day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. <sup>2</sup>Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore. There were so many people Jesus had to get into a boat and **push out to shore to create** some space. This was **his version** of overflow lobbies and satellite campuses. (BTW, I've been trying to get our elders to buy me a boat so we could be prepared for this if it happens, but they keep saying that is **not a valid application of the text**. But I think they are just being hard-hearted—it is the plain meaning of the text)

<sup>3</sup>Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "Consider the sower who went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn't have much soil, and it grew up quickly since the soil wasn't deep. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it. <sup>8</sup>Still other seed fell on good ground and produced fruit: some a hundred, some

sixty, and some thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup>Let anyone who has ears to hear, **listen.**"

<sup>10</sup>Then the disciples came up and asked him, "Why are you speaking to them in parables?"

Evidently, a **bunch of the people were confused**—which might be **good news for a bunch of you** who get confused during sermons—you probably would have made a pretty good disciple of Jesus.

So, Jesus's disciples are like, "Jesus, why don't you just come out and tell us what you mean?"

I'm going to suggest that you have probably asked this same question at some point—you've asked why, if Jesus is true, he wasn't more straightforward and definitive about it. **It comes out like:**

- **God, if you really are the author of the Bible, why not prove that to everybody?**
  - Why not have a little angel hover over the Bible when people reading it saying, "This stuff is true?"
  - Or, why not **make it so that whenever you hold it up** you it's like one of those Magic Eye pictures where you see a figure skater come out whose movements somehow symbolize your life's journey?
  - Or, why doesn't every time one of your professors denies the truth of the Bible God put a Darth Vader strangle-hold on them?
- **Do you ever ask things like that?**
- **Some Bible critics** use Jesus's lack of straightforwardness to try and suggest that Jesus didn't even believe he was God; that was something later Christians added on to him.
  - Bart Ehrman over at UNC points out, for example, that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, **Jesus doesn't seem to aggressively put forward his deity**—he doesn't come out that often and say, "I am God."

- **Now, in the Gospel of John he does, and that shows, Ehrman says,** that that was something John added in later. Jesus didn't believe he was God; later Christians under John's influence added that."
- **Ehrman says, If Jesus really was God, surely he would have talked about it more directly**—he'd have come out of Mary's womb with a solved Rubik's cube saying, "Good morning everyone, I'm God! Now, watch me levitate."

**So that's the question:** *Jesus—you really are who you say you are, and if this really matters as much as you say it does—why weren't you more straightforward and definitive in your claims. Why leave any room for doubt or confusion?*

Jesus's answer is as follows:

<sup>11</sup> He answered, "Because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them.

- **1. Insight into truth is a gift of the Holy Spirit.** No matter how smart you are, you can't understand without God's help.
  - When Peter made his famous confession in response Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," **Jesus didn't say, "Gold star for you, Peter. The reason you figured that out is you are smarter than everyone else.** He said, (*what?*) "*Flesh and blood (i.e. your brain) have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*"
- Paul says in **1 Cor 12:3, "No man can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit."**
- **You see, sin makes our heart so naturally dull** and slanted against God that we can't see spiritual truth without his help.
  - **Think of it like this: You ever met someone who is so biased that they can't see an issue clearly?** They so dislike a group of people they twist anything and everything that person does.

- You see this all the time in politics. Democrats think that everything that Republicans do is wicked and shows their wicked, evil intentions and *vice-versa*.
  - Or, think of it in reverse—Do you ever see someone so biased by love that they can see no faults in someone? **Hank Murphy, one of our WP's,** so loves LeBron that no matter what he does Hank sees it through a positive lens.
    - If **Lebron has a low-scoring game** and Hank says, "What an unselfish player to let his other teammates score."
    - **If Lebron goes 0-15 from the field Hank says,** "Only an elite player of incredible confidence would keep shooting after missing 14 straight shots."
    - If **Lebron punches another player in the face,** Hank says, "He's just got such passion for the game and touch is his love language."
    - If you **want an hour of entertainment,** just go up to Hank and say, "*I really think Stephan Curry is an all-around better player*" and then cancel your plans for the rest of the afternoon.
  - **Well, our sinful hearts are like that, but in reverse.** Our sinful hearts are so jaded against God that we can be blind to evidence when it is right in front of us.
  - **LISTEN:** It is a MIRACLE of regeneration for anyone to see the truth about Jesus.
    - **So, honestly, stop congratulating yourself for coming to see the truth about Jesus.** It wasn't your intelligence or righteousness that led you to understanding, **it was grace.** Eph 2:8
    - And **when you find someone who isn't convinced** like you, don't talk down to them like they are stupid, pray for God to extend it to them just as he did to you.
- Vs. 12 gives us the 2<sup>nd</sup> reason Jesus was not always straightforward, which goes hand-in-hand with the 1<sup>st</sup>:** <sup>12</sup> **For whoever has, more will be given to him, and he will have more than enough; but whoever**

does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. (IOW, what you do with the truth you have determines whether or not God gives you more insight into truth)<sup>13</sup> That is why I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand.<sup>1</sup> (which is a reference to Isaiah) and it gives us the second reason he spoke in parables: **2. Insight into truth is as much a matter of the heart as it is of the head.**

- The condition of our hearts, not a lack of clarity in the evidence, keeps us from seeing the truth.
- **The same sun that softens the wax hardens the clay;** the difference in effect comes not from differences in exposure to the sun but differences in the material it shines upon.
- So, Jesus obscured truth so that only those who are pure of heart could see it.

I went through my Bible this week and compiled a list of things that keep us from seeing the truth about God that have nothing to do with intellectual capacity.

#### A. **Unwillingness to change\***

- If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. John 7:17
- **Submission to God precedes knowledge of God.**
- **We say, "God show me and I'll consider following."**

#### B. **Cherishing sin in our hearts**

- "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Psalm 66:18
- Some of you are seeking God but you have unconfessed, cherished sin in your heart and that's why you can't see.
- **"Blessed are the pure in heart,"** Jesus says earlier in Matthew, *for they shall see God.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Then, vv. 14–17, Jesus quotes a prophecy from Isaiah 6:9–10 that says the same thing.

#### C. **Apathy**

- **Jeremiah 29:13–14**—"When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, (like me playing hide and seek with my kids) **says the Lord.**"
- **Some people never see simply because they don't give this question the weight it deserves.**
- **I think of college students who say,** "I'm not sure if there's a God... but, I don't really think much about it." You're having too good a time...
- **Pastor Curtis** was telling me about a guy he's shared Christ with who listens, asks questions, but just doesn't take it that seriously. He tells Curtis, "There's no shot clock on this decision."
- **If there is a chance this is true—that God came to earth and was tortured and died for you—seeking that knowledge out is the most important quest** you'll ever go on and deserves your most fervent attention.
- **Only when you seek him with all your heart and soul will you know...**

*Here's another one...*

#### D. **Hating others**

- "How can he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, love God whom he has not seen?" **1 John 4:20**
- Hating others clouds our ability to see God.
- **God, you see, doesn't just want to be known; he wants to be loved.** And if your heart is filled with hate and bigotry so that you will use your knowledge of God as a weapon against others, God will keep you from the knowledge of him.
- And **the condition of your heart** is shown by how you love others.

*One more...*

<sup>2</sup> Matt 5:8.

### E. Giving others' opinions more weight than God's

- How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? **John 5:44**. Jesus is saying you *can't perceive truth* when other people's opinions matter more to you than God's.
- **I think of this when I see a high school student who goes off to college and stops believing in God.** But here was the thing, when they did believe in God, the opinion of their friends mattered more to them than God's opinions, and that is why they got led astray from the knowledge of God in college.
  - **Their unbelief was not a matter of their heads;** it was a matter of their heart—what they gave glory to. (WEIGHT)
  - An idolatrous heart always leads to an unbelieving head.

Do you see my point? I'll say it again: **Insight into truth is as much a matter of the heart as it is of the head.**

So, Jesus sometimes spoke in parables, so that those with a heart to know God could see it, and all others would be confused.

Paul said the same thing this way: **"We are the pleasing aroma of Christ to those who are being saved, and to those who are perishing we are the stench of death."** (2 Cor 2:15)

- How many of you know what **durian** is? **PIC**. Signs in hotels in Singapore. If I cracked it open up here, you could not only smell it at the back of the room, but also at Alamance CC! **When I got to Indo: the best.** Armpit/Captain Crunch.

**Durian is like the gospel:** it's repulsive to some and attractive to others.

**The same durian that repulse some smells delicious to others. The same sun that softens the wax hardens the clay;** the difference in

effect comes not from differences in exposure to the sun but differences in the material it shines upon.

That's the point Jesus is making with this parable. The condition of your heart is even more important than the intelligence of your head. **That's good news for some:** *maybe you are not that smart*, but you can submit your heart and God will show you the truth.

So, **listen to Jesus explain the specifics.** Vs. 18, <sup>18</sup> "So **listen** to the parable of the sower: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word about the kingdom and doesn't understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the one sown along the path.

### 1. The Hard Heart (PIC)

- This is the person who is interested in what the Word of God says, but not that much.
- They leave here, and almost immediately, and **Satan, like a bird, snatches away the thought** by planting doubts in your mind, or he just distracts you with something else.
  - **Not necessarily a bad thing**, just something that **takes your mind off of what God says.**
- **Some of you, this will be your experience today.** You're sitting there thinking, *"This is really interesting. I've never really thought about this before."* But as soon as we dismiss you'll think about where you're going to eat and that will be the end of it.<sup>3</sup>
- **Others of you will even start to think,** *"I hope so and so hears this."* But you are not thinking about the implications for **you**. That thought about others might be from Satan!
- **Put your own oxygen mask on before trying to assist someone else.**
- **Distraction sends more people to hell than doubt.**

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Joby Martin, "The Good Soil," from the series *The Storyteller*, preached at The Church of Eleven22 on April 23, 2017.

- “These are not idle words,” said Moses, “they are your LIFE.”

<sup>20</sup> And the one sown on rocky ground—this is one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup> But he has no root and is short-lived. When distress or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he falls away.

## 2. The Shallow Heart (PIC)

- This is the person who hears the message, is initially moved by it, but whatever decision they make doesn’t last very long. The root doesn’t go very deep, so the slightest difficulty makes it wither away.
- I used to see this all the time at youth camp (Illus. students getting convicted).
  - (Here’s what I’ve learned from years of leading people to Jesus: A lot of people aren’t really responding to God, they are responding to a feeling. And when the feeling is gone, they drift away.)
- What is often confusing about these people is that they look so convincing at the beginning.
  - In SAJIYH, I tell a story of a guy I shared Christ with (basketball story...)
    - Witness is an insider word?
    - Baptist—do I look like it?
    - What do you say to that? I had lots of seminary classes, none prepared me for that.
  - I answered with this parable. The **proof of faith is not its intensity at the beginning, but its endurance to the end.**
  - It is true once saved, always saved... Lots of places in the Bible teach that once Christ has truly taken control over your life he will never let you go.
  - **But it’s also true that one of the signs of saving faith is that it endures to the end.**
  - **The way I say it in SAJIYH: It is true that once saved, always saved. It is also true that once saved, forever following.**

- It doesn’t matter how you start, but if you finish.
- I know what you say: Backslide?

<sup>22</sup> Now the one sown among the thorns—this is one who hears the word, but the worries of this age and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

## 3. The Divided Heart (PIC)

- This is the person who hears the word and believes it and wants to follow it but other things “choke it out.”
- **Specifically**, “the worries of this age and deceitfulness of wealth.”
- **Here’s what that looks like:**
  - You are genuinely **interested in what I’m saying in here** but as soon as you get out there you have **bills to pay**, money to make. So **what God’s word is saying to you** takes a back seat.
  - Or, you **like being in the church and hearing the Word of God** but your kid has travel soccer and dance so you just can’t come that much.
  - Or, you’ve **got that new lake house** and you just love your weekends there and God loves us to enjoy nature, right, so you’ll go there rather than devote yourself to being under the Word of God?
  - **For many high school students here, they are listening to this saying, “Yes, this is important,”** but the moment they leave here they look down at their phones and they get consumed with whatever is going on in text message streams or snatchats with their friends. Which are **not bad things** but the “cares of this world” choke out the Word of God.
  - **Some of you won’t follow through on obedience** to God’s word because the cares of this world choke it out.
    - It’s **too inconvenient** to get involved in ministry or go on mission or tell people about Jesus.
    - You **won’t obey God with your firstfruits** and tithe because there is so much other stuff you want but can’t afford.



- It's never a conscious decision to reject God, just that God's Word gets 'crowded out' by other good things.
- **Distraction sends more people to hell than doubt.\***
- I've thought this week about how I get convicted by the Word but then consumed by the cares of this world—obey quickly!

<sup>23</sup> But the one sown on the good ground—this is one who hears and understands the word, who does produce fruit and yields: some a hundred, some sixty, some thirty times what was sown.”

#### 4. The Open Heart (PIC)

- The thing I want to focus on here is how fruitful the seed is in the soil. A typical seed would provide 8 times what was sown, so when Jesus talks about 30, 60, 100 times what was sown, he is hinting at something *miraculous*.
- When the Word of God really takes root in you, it produces miraculous fruit.
- That shows up in how you treat people; in your generosity of spirit, in how quickly you forgive. In your excitement for worship and telling people about Jesus.
- And it is miraculous—which means it is noticeable.
- Listen, God's word is POWERFUL—it was one of God's words that created the entire known universe.
  - In one of the parables right after this one Jesus compares the Word to a small acorn that produces a mighty oak tree (Matthew 13:31–32). Acorn that splits open a concrete slab (PIC)
- If Jesus's word has taken root in you, we will be able to see it.
- Note: I'm not saying constantly compare yourself to others to see if you are a real Christian based on how well you're doing. I find it interesting that Jesus said, “in some 30, in some 60...” which means that some people will always grow more. So, don't say that because you are not as good a follower of Jesus as

someone else you must not be saved. But the point is there will be something in your life, some evidence that Jesus is there.<sup>4</sup>

BTW, TSC, reading this about the power of the Word always gets me excited about sharing it with others. I love watching the Word go to work in people's lives; I love watching that acorn split the cement slabs of depression, addiction, pride, or apathy.

- Woman who came to faith in Christ over Easter. That's power.
- Student who led his dad to Christ. That's power.

(MUSIC)\*

- Don't we want to go everywhere, to every nation, and out to the highways and hedges of our own community to sow that seed!

So, let me ask: which soil are you?

- Are you the kind that gets easily distracted?
- Are you the kind that have let the cares of the world choke it out?

Maybe you are ready to really receive the Word of God

- Maybe you want to come and say, “God, I'm ready. Make my heart the soil for your word to grow!”

Let me raise the stakes a little bit. The seed in this parable—what is it, specifically? The Word of God, yes, but throughout the Gospels Jesus is referred to as a seed, sown into the ground in death for you.

Dare you treat that message lightly?

- Gospel demands a response
- To not decide is to decide. To get distracted about where to eat is a decision...

Are you ready to respond?

<sup>4</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Matthew: The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, 106.

The **message of this parable is so clear**, and I want to do something unusual... I want to give you a chance to respond right now. PRAYER COUNSELORS

## Invitation:

3 different groups:

- **Those ready to receive the Word.** You've never received Jesus, or gotten serious with walking with him, and it's time. And right you are ready to say, *"I'm ready to receive Jesus and ready for him to change my life. Not just a religious emotion, but real life-change."* You come and take the hand of one of our prayer counselors and let us pray with you.
- **Special: Families (or individuals) who realize that you have not been good soil**—you've let the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches crowd out God's word in your family's life. You haven't rejected God's word, but you have neglected it. And **today, you want that to change.** I want to ask you to take the incredibly bold, and humble, step of drawing the line in the sand and saying, **"Today that changes."**
  - You don't have to walk forward to make that decision but it will help solidify it and we'll pray with you.
  - I challenge you to grab your spouse and do that.
  - For some of you, this will go down in your family as a profound moment where your whole family changed.
- **Finally, you have someone to pray for**—someone that you have put the Word in and you want to see the word bring forth fruit 30-fold, 60-fold, or 100-fold, why not come up and boldly ask for that. I believe this a promise God wants us to claim and it's time for you to declare that boldly.

You come. **I'll pray**, then you come.



