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Matthew 13:18 - 13:23



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this insightful presentation, Steve Gregg discusses the parables of Jesus found in Matthew 13:18-23. He explains that while some people may not comprehend the message of the kingdom, others may understand it superficially, yet not be truly converted. Those who are distracted by worldly possessions and cares may also struggle to maintain their faith. Gregg emphasizes the importance of having an honest and receptive heart to receive the Gospel and bear spiritual fruit.

Transcript

Today we're turning to Matthew chapter 13 and we'll be looking at the explanation that Jesus gave to the first of the parables found in this chapter. This chapter is composed largely of a series of parables, depending on how you number them. Some say there's seven, some say there's eight.

But it's hard to know because some of the parables seem to be composite. But in any case, this parable, the first parable in the bunch, was the parable of the sower. And while really we come to today the verses that explain the parable, I think it would be good if we began by reading again the verses that contain the parable.

And that is the opening verses. In verse 3 especially, Matthew 13.3, Jesus said, Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside, and the birds came and devoured them.

Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth. And they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Now, in the verses that immediately follow this parable, the disciples asked Jesus why he used parables as he did. And he explained that these parables were a device for

revealing the mysteries of the kingdom of God to the disciples, and at the same time concealing those same mysteries from people who were not disciples and might not be friendly toward his program. So they were a teaching device that instructed the instructable and concealed truth from those that had no right to know it, or whose knowledge of it would be undesirable.

And yet the disciples themselves did not instantly understand the parables either. They were in fact as much in the dark as were the non-disciples when Jesus told the parable, and so he had to explain the parables to them. But that's exactly what he did.

That's what he intended to do right from the beginning. He didn't expect that the disciples would somehow have some kind of intuitive awareness of what the parables meant that others did not have. But rather, as it says in Mark chapter 4, verses 33 and 34, it says, And with many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it, but without a parable he did not speak to the multitudes, and when they were alone he explained all things to his disciples.

So Jesus explained all these parables to his disciples so that they would not be ignorant of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. And that's what these parables are about, the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God as it is sometimes called in scripture. And Jesus had come as the Messiah to initiate the kingdom of God.

And there were things about the kingdom that people did not understand. The Jews did expect the kingdom of God to come, but their ideas were of a political kingdom, of an ordinary sort, sort of like David's kingdom a thousand years earlier. But Jesus was pointing out that his kingdom is of a different sort, and this first parable is one of the ways that he reveals that.

For example, in verse 18, he says, Therefore hear the parable of the sower. Now that means he's going to explain the meaning of the parable that we just read. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.

This is he who received seed by the wayside. Now this verse immediately gives us some bearings in the parable. In the parable, some of the seed fell on the wayside on hard ground where it did not penetrate, and the birds of the air came and picked it up and ate it.

Now Jesus said that picture of the birds eating this seed is fulfilled in the life of the person who hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it. That is, of course, he hears the word that Jesus is preaching, but it doesn't penetrate his understanding. And therefore we see that the seed that Jesus speaks of that doesn't penetrate the soil is the word of the kingdom or the message of the kingdom, which does not penetrate the hearts of some people.

And when it does not, because they don't understand it, he said that the enemy comes, Satan comes, and he steals away that word. So this is the first category of soils, and we can see right now a paradigm for interpreting the whole parable. We now know what the seed represents.

That was not self-evident, but Jesus gives it to us. Here he equates the seed with the word of the kingdom. Now in Mark and in Luke, the same parable is found with the explanation.

It's found in Mark chapter 4 and Luke chapter 8. And I believe in Mark it just says the seed is the word, and in Luke it says the seed is the word of God. So we have, although slightly different interpretations of the— or slightly different wording of what the seed represents, all three gospels tell us that the seed is the word. It's just that in Matthew it's called the word of the kingdom.

In one of the gospels it's simply called the word, and in another it's called the word of God. The point is that Jesus was preaching the word of God. He was like a sower sowing seeds, and some of that seed was not penetrating some of the soil, which means that of those that heard Jesus preach, there were some that before they could even contemplate his message because they did not understand it.

That's what Jesus said. And this is a very important thing. When someone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in the heart.

That is the birds of the air which took the seed off the ground before it could penetrate. Those birds represent Satan coming and stealing from the heart the message that could have saved them if it had penetrated, but it did not penetrate. And what was it that prevented it from penetrating? Jesus said they heard it, but they did not understand it.

And therefore we understand that the mind as well as the spirit and the heart are necessary for the receiving of the word of God. Now, if a person only understands the word with his mind, he has not necessarily been converted. You can understand the truth without embracing it in your life and without embracing it in your heart, but you can't embrace it in your heart at all if you don't understand it in the first place.

The entryway for all truth is through the mental processes, through the rational mind. And when we read the scriptures or hear the scriptures, if we don't understand what they mean with our mind, then we cannot embrace them rightly with our heart. I do believe, of course, that there are people who do understand the scriptures and in their mind they do not rebel against it necessarily, but in their hearts they never really receive it planted deeply.

So, you see, these seeds that fell on the wayside, they never really got through the crust

of earth on top. There might have been good soil beneath. If they had gotten through the initial crust, they might have found soil and might have grown.

And it's like people who may be listening today to the word of God as we're expounding it here. They hear the word of God, but if it's not made understandable to them, they may even have hearts that could have received it and could have been saved, but the barrier of their misunderstanding is what keeps them from receiving it. And many people who misunderstand the gospel reject it, thinking that they know what the gospel is and they think that they are knowingly and wisely rejecting it.

In my experience, I have found that lots of people are fairly honest and want the truth, but they reject the gospel because they think the gospel is not credible. They have heard arguments against the Bible, which they believe are correct arguments, and because of it they misunderstand the nature of the word of God. This is very common today because we have most of our educational institutions and certainly the media and just the general mood of our age is against the word of God, is against the Bible, and against believing that the Bible is the word of God.

And when people misunderstand this and they don't know that what they're hearing is the word of God, they might reject it even out of honesty, because after all, you should out of honesty reject what you believe is false. However, you know, that's where I think Christian apologetics may come in. It can show people that the gospel that they've heard is false, actually is true and can be demonstrated to be true from historical fact and from other considerations as well.

And once a person has had those barriers to his understanding removed, then he can understand and possibly receive the gospel. It's very important that when we preach the gospel, we are not unclear and we don't give an uncertain sound, because if people don't understand what we're saying, they may reject what we're saying without having ever understood what it was. And, of course, a person who thinks that he has understood something but didn't and rejects the thing as he thinks he understands it, that person is much harder to win because he has to unlearn things.

He has to be disabused of false notions about a thing before he can recognize the truth of it. Now, these people that reject the gospel, or more properly, on whom the gospel seems to have no impact, are those who do not understand. Something fails to really register when they hear the gospel, and therefore they don't think about it very deeply, and the wicked one comes and steals it away, and of course it's no longer there.

They've forgotten it entirely. Now, there's another category. Jesus brings this up in Matthew 13 and verse 20.

But he who receives seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself but endures only for a

while, for when tribulation or persecution arise because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now, in the parable you might remember that some of the seed fell on stony ground and began to grow, but the sun came up and withered it because it had no root in it. The idea here is that there was some bit of good topsoil, maybe an inch or two, enough to receive the seed, and the birds couldn't find it or get it, and enough that it could begin to grow.

But just below this shallow layer of topsoil was a layer of stone or rock, so that when the roots sought to go down, they could not go down very far, and they could not tap into the moisture in the deeper parts of the earth. And without that moisture, they had no way to survive the heat of the sun, and therefore the sun scorched them and burned them up. Now, Jesus said that's like a person who has a shallow reception of the word of God.

Now, it's interesting because the first group had a shallow rejection of the word of God. The topsoil was pounded down, and because the seed could not initially penetrate, you remember, the birds got it. We don't know what might have happened had that top crusty layer been penetrated.

There might have been something good down below. A person who rejects the word of God because he misunderstands it with his mind might still have a good heart and be prepared to receive it deeply, if he understood it correctly. But this group is a separate group.

These ones seem to understand it, and they receive it happily. They're very joyful. With joy, they receive the word of God.

But as the illustration suggests, it is a shallow reception. These people like what they see. They like what they hear.

There are things about the gospel that appeal to them. They like maybe the company of the Christians into which they are brought by receiving the gospel. They might like it because Jesus offers them salvation, something that their hearts were tormented for the lack of.

They might like the gospel because there's initially emotions of joy and peace and security that come to a person when they receive the gospel. These things are real. These things happen in the lives of people.

But in this particular case, the seed didn't go very deep and couldn't because just below the shallow surface of soil, there was this hard layer of rock, and no roots could penetrate. And this apparently is the person who, though he can receive it with his mind, it does not really penetrate his heart very deeply. He can see instantly the advantages of becoming a Christian when he hears it.

He understands, I'm on bad terms with God. That's an unsafe place to be. I'd better get right with God.

Jesus died for my sins and rose again. I'm supposed to believe in him, and he'll forgive my sins, and I'll go to heaven, and I can have security and peace and so forth. I mean, people can understand that with their mind and say, yes, okay, I'll take that.

But their heart is not changed. Their heart is like stone. And really what's going on here, a stony heart is a heart that is unbroken, a heart that is totally committed to self.

You see, brokenness is where you die to yourself, and you live to God. And that's what true conversion requires, by the way. It's not just a mental acceptance of certain truths of Christianity.

The receiving of the gospel for salvation means that you die to yourself, that you renounce all former commitment to living for your own satisfaction. That's what Jesus meant when he said, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself. He means by that, deny yourself as ruler of yourself and put Jesus in that place instead.

You see, many people who seem to receive the gospel are receiving it without any change of heart at all because they're still committed to themselves. They're not committed to God. They're not repentant of their sin because they are grieved that God's heart is broken by their sins.

They are repentant for their sins because it's hurt them, because their sins have brought consequences they do not enjoy. And therefore, they are willing to turn from their sins in order to make their life better so that they can have peace and joy and security and all those things. But they care nothing for God himself.

They only care about what he can give them. And this is the shallow reception of the word of God. Their hearts remain stone.

Their hearts have never been penetrated with the claims of Christ. And therefore, when persecution and tribulation come because of the word, that is when their commitment to Jesus and to his gospel begins to bring trouble from friends and relatives and enemies, they don't like that. You see, the reason they accepted God in the first place was because they wanted something positive for themselves.

And when this brings tribulation and persecution, that's not a positive experience for themselves. Now, only if a person has really been broken and has a God-centered relationship, then that would, of course, cause you to endure persecution. If you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, then you will not deny him under pressure.

But if you only love yourself and you have accepted the gospel in a shallow way because

it seems good for you, then as soon as it doesn't seem good for you anymore, you'll reject it. As soon as you get persecuted or it becomes uncomfortable instead of reassuring and comfortable, then, of course, you bail out. And that's what the second category of seed represents.

And then Jesus said this in verse 22, Matthew 13, 22, Now, he who receives seed among the thorns is he who hears the word and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and he becomes unfruitful. Now, the seed in this part of the parable fell into good ground and it grew well enough. But it was not alone.

There were other things in that ground that grew up and killed it, thorns and thistles, weeds. And Jesus said this is like a person who receives the word of God. And it's not a shallow reception.

It's not like he has a heart of stone. Actually, his heart is broken over his sin. The root of the claims of Christ digs deeply into his heart and he becomes a true Christian.

However, there are other loves as well. Or at least they arise, even if they weren't there initially. The seeds of them were there.

And those seeds grow up into cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. Now, what this means is that a person might have a genuine conversion. He's not like the seed or the soil that received the seed and wilted when the sun came up.

And he's not like the one who the bird stole the seed away, but he is like somebody who had a good start. He was converted. The life of God began to grow in him.

But he got distracted. The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches became a distraction to him. And I dare say that there are a lot of people listening to this program right now of whom that is true.

You can look back to a time. It might be 5, 10, maybe 20 or 30 years ago when you turned to God and you really loved God. And you read the scriptures and you told your friends about Christ.

And you might have even endured persecution for Christ's sake. And done so happily because you loved the Lord. However, by little stages, there grew up in your heart concerns for other things.

Comfort, security, maybe a house. Maybe it happened when you got married. I don't know.

Maybe it happened before or sometime later than that. But what you can see now is that all your life is a tangle of concerns about paying a mortgage, paying rent, buying food, getting a new car every few years, having every kind of entertainment system available,

staying on the cutting edge of all that stuff. All of that is what your heart's into.

You've been swallowed up. You've been choked by the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. Now, let me just say to you, if you're in that condition, you don't have to stay there.

You can repent of those things, but it's much more difficult because your heart is wrapped up in these thorns and thistles of riches and possessions and the cares of this world. You would have to make a very, very strong resolve to pull those weeds out if you're going to be fruitful for God again. And let me just say, if you are in that condition, it is worth the pain to do so.

I would make a radical surgery immediately because we're not living in a time where it's safe to play games with God and to pretend to be a Christian or to be a backslider. You need to get rid of those things that will hinder your salvation and press on toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Remember what Jesus said about your eye or your hand.

If it causes you to stumble, get rid of it. Now, don't do that with your literal eye or your literal hand, but you may have possessions and commitments and all kinds of things that are presenting a stumbling block to you in your Christian life. If so, let me urge you to be rid of them instantly, if not sooner.

There's one optimistic note in this parable. There was some good seed on good ground. It says in verse 23, but he who receives seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, unlike the first category, who indeed bears fruit and produces some hundredfold, some 60, some 30 fold.

Now, in Luke's parallel, it says that the good seed is the man who receives the word of God with a good and honest heart. That's somebody who recognizes what the demands of the gospel are, what the claims of Christ are. That person realizes in all honesty that Christ really deserves to rule his life and that he has destroyed his life by not letting Christ rule it up to this point.

And that he's hurt God and grieved God as much as he's hurt himself and others. And that person is truly grieved with the grief that God puts in his heart. And it leads to true repentance.

And that person perseveres, even in trial. And he does not allow the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches to choke out that seed. That's the person that's described here.

That person grows up in God and produces fruit. Now, not every good Christian produces the same amount of fruit. Some 30, some 60, some 100.

But 30 is good enough. 100 is great. But the important thing is that the person in question is totally devoted.

They have received the gospel deeply. They are not going to be shaken. Their roots are in the gospel.

And they are not going to be pulled out. And you need to be that person because we're living in times where I'm not a prophet and I'm not prophesying. But I believe it's going to soon be very, very difficult to stay loyal to God in this country.

We are facing, I think, harder times than we have known in the past. And you'd better make sure that your conversion is genuine, or as Peter put it in 2 Peter 1, give diligence to make your calling and your election sure. So there are different ways to receive the word of God.

You've heard the word of God on this program today. I've read it. How are you receiving it? Are you receiving it fully and deeply? Are you committed to it? I hope you are.

We've run out of time for this program, and so I hope you'll tune in again day by day as we continue our study through the gospel of Matthew, and particularly in these parables of the kingdom.