

How Do You Hear? (Matthew 13:1-23)

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[0 : 00] for our stomach. Thank you, Isaac, for the tunes and thank you, Venus, for leading and just announcing things for us.

Really appreciate just this time with everyone and if you are visiting whether for the first time or maybe a few more times, just thank you so much for coming along in person or online.

So yes, as Venus said, we are going to spend the next month, really in the rest of this month, just four sermons in Matthew chapter 13 and so we'll get to see a range of parables and we'll see what God has to teach us through this.

So those of you who don't know me, yeah, I'm one of the pastors here at PCBC. Yeah, come say hi to me afterwards and yeah, we'll get to know each other a little bit better. My family is on live stream as well so I'll just wave to my kids just so they know that it's really me.

Right, let me do something a little bit different. I'd love to tell you a story. So once upon a time, there was a sower. No, not a guy with a needle but someone who wore a hat possibly and maybe had a lot of seed in his hand.

[1 : 18] And look, the sower, he goes out to sow some seed on his farm and some of the seed, it just goes everywhere, right? But some of it, some of it falls along the path.

And you know what? That seed that falls along the path, it just sits there and then about two minutes later, the birds come and they devour it for breakfast. And then some of the seed, it falls into the soil, right?

But this is a different kind of soil. This is a very shallow kind of soil. Initially, the seed grows quickly into a plant, okay? Looks pretty good. But because the soil was quite shallow, there was no depth of earth and actually, suddenly, the sun comes in and starts to shine on these plants and then they shrivel up and they die.

Other seed, they fall into thorn bushes that had already been growing there and there's just not much space. There's a bit of competition for light and these seeds, they grow but there's nowhere to go.

It's all choked up and there's no way they can bear much fruit. But some fell on good soil where they produce fruit a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold.

[2 : 44] That's the parable of the sower, all right? A little bit of my spin on it. Hey, I love that parable. Do you love that parable? Okay. I'm going to try this again.

Okay, let's rewind. I'm going to try and retell, storytell the parable. I want you to take your Bibles out though because I want you to check that what I'm saying is actually there. So, I'll give you a moment. Take your Bibles out. Okay.

I want you to look at it on your phone. We won't put it up because I want you to hear it but see it too. Okay. So, I'll give you ten more seconds. Look it up. Matthew chapter 13 and the parable itself starts from verse 3 and it goes like this.

A farmer went out to sow some seed and some seed look it fell on the path and and the birds came in and devoured it.

Other seed fell on rocky soil and and look they initially sprang up really quickly but then because the ground is shallow did not have depth of earth and it did not take deep root.

[3 : 51] and then the sun comes out and then it all shrivels up and dries up. Other seed fell in thorn bushes where they were just choked up and they were not able to bear much fruit but some fell on good soil where they produced a crop a hundredfold sixtyfold thirtyfold.

If you have ears to hear you should hear this. How's that? I don't want to rate it out of ten. Was it accurate? Accurate? Yes? Not so?

Did I add a bit? Okay. Well it doesn't matter because now number three this is your turn. I want you to turn to someone next to you. Okay. And you've heard it twice now right?

So you should really know this parable. Turn to someone next to you. Don't be shy. You can introduce yourself first. I want you to try and retell the parable of the sower. to the person next to you.

Alright. So introduce yourself if you haven't already. Have a go. Don't peek into your Bibles. Try it. Try and tell the story of the sower. Have a go. Don't cheat.

[5 : 09] Have a go. Have a go. Have a go. Okay. Just do it.

Yeah. Risk it. Tell the parable. If you get stuck maybe your friend can help you out. Nice.

I'm hearing it. Going. That's good. Yeah. You can do this at home too on live stream. All right.

Not too bad. Not too bad. Okay. Yeah. I hope you could hear the parable of the sower as you told it to each other. He who has ears to hear let him hear.

All right. Now that we've heard this parable shall we pray and ask God to speak to us. Father these stories they're simple but deep. They're interesting but challenging.

[6 : 39] So do help us not just today but the rest of this month as we journey through Matthew 13 to have ears to hear what you have to say to us. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen. Well done team. This kind of storytelling right we've been practicing is actually what used to happen all the time. Right. This is one version of the parable of the sower that we have recorded in Matthew chapter 13 and most of us will have journeyed through Matthew's gospel since chapter 1. Right. We started it kind of sometime last year or the year before and now here in chapter 13 where we're going to spend the next few weeks this is the first time in the gospel of Matthew we hear a parable.

Now the word parable actually has no real helpful meaning for us. Okay. It's kind of like if you told me a Cantonese word and I just spelled it out for you in English that's exactly what we have.

Parable it's actually just a Greek word and what does it mean you might ask.

Well the simplest way to explain what a parable is is this. Parables are stories or sayings with a point. Parables are stories or sayings with a point.

[7 : 49] I wonder if you know the story in Luke chapter 4 Jesus is preaching to his hometown synagogue and then he quotes a three word saying he talks about how hey physician heal yourself.

Luke calls that a parable so it can be as short as something like that. Or it could be a really long story there was one time people were expecting God's kingdom to appear immediately and in response Jesus tells a rather long story about a ten servants waiting for their master to return and how they should invest their talents.

He calls that a parable too and so really the broad meaning if you want to ask or if your friend asks what is a parable? What are you looking at this month? Parable is a story or saying with a point and stories with a point are not unique to Jesus' culture right?

We tell stories all the time to make a point. Who has heard of the story of the boy who cried wolf?

Yeah? Okay? A story with a point. Or maybe if you come from a more Asian background maybe you've heard a relative kind of quote to you a four line poem or four line thing proverb or maybe a story about someone who didn't do something right and you should follow that instruction or that warning.

These are stories with a point. These are parables. Even when Neo sacrifices his life to save the Matrix right? In the original trilogy. Perhaps that's a 21st century parable as well.

[9 : 17] A story with a point. They come in all shapes and sizes and all cultures and times. And now when Jesus taught this particular parable many many years ago you see it was in front of a large crowd of onlookers.

You see that right? in verses 1-2 of that chapter in your Bibles. And they were standing on the shore what was once off for some of us out at Shelley Beach standing on the shore wondering what's going on whether the tide will keep going out.

Look, this happened all the time outdoor preaching in Jesus' public ministry. right? If he didn't get permission to teach inside a synagogue he'd just take it to the streets.

He taught outside wherever he could. Do you remember chapter 5-7 of Matthew's Gospel? It was a sermon on the mount. That's right. As Jesus then went from town to town he was teaching outside.

As he walked through the grain fields Matthew 12 he would teach anywhere he could. And among the crowd at the lakeside here in chapter 13 were some of his disciples.

[10 : 32] And as soon as they hear this parable verse 10 says the disciples came to him and asked why do you speak to the people in parables? Recall how Jesus' preaching ministry has looked like so far.

If you were to summarize what Jesus was like as a preacher how would you describe it? Well maybe we go back to his very first words in his first proclamation Matthew 4 17 where he says repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And then next chapter he stands on a mountain and he teaches his followers what life in this kingdom of heaven looks like. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And then later on as we heard last year through 8 to 12 of Matthew we walked with Jesus didn't we? As he demonstrated what the kingdom of heaven looked like.

He would show them that the kingdom of heaven looks like the lame walking the leper cleansed the dead raised to life physically spiritually.

[11 : 46] So you see all throughout Matthew's gospel so far there was that pattern right? Jesus announced the kingdom of heaven he's taught about it about life on this kingdom of heaven he's shown what it looks like the goodness and power of this different kingdom and so imagine you've heard all this and now there's a crowd gathered really eager okay this is not just any normal crowd it's a big crowd and they want this kingdom to start right now and then Jesus tells a story from the farm what's up with that if you've been sleeping rough maybe tenting camping trying to follow Jesus wherever he goes all this time if you're one of his disciples you would be confused too I think hang on rabbi look we've got a crowd now now's our moment can we start this kingdom already why do you speak to them in parables now why make it so confusing so we need to answer this question that they posed in order to understand these stories over the summer otherwise it'll just go past us or even worse we'll put our own spin on these parables we need to know why

Jesus uses these parables for them and for us and you know what thankfully Matthew records for us here two reasons look with me verses 11 to 12 he replied the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you but not to them whoever has will be given more and he will have an abundance whoever does not have even what he has will be taken from him this is why I speak to them in parables did you notice when he starts explaining why he uses the word given right twice the repetition I think is deliberate it's intentional for those of you here who are Christians if you know the good news of Jesus you know that it was given to you it was a gift free and undeserved as we've been singing you did not earn it and so

I think the first reason Jesus teaches in parables is to reveal those who have genuinely been given God's grace grace to reveal who have genuinely so we've said already the phrase the kingdom of heaven has gotten a lot of air time so far right in Matthew's gospel no surprise but here he says this phrase again right did you notice that the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you I mean it sounds a little bit spooky right knowledge secrets what's Jesus trying to get at here I want you not to be thrown off by the word secret here though secret here in my translation it's just a translation right the original word is the Greek word mysterion does anyone remember talking or thinking about this word mystery or mysterion before yeah any guesses which book we looked at it in just call it out don't be scared

Ephesians that's right yeah Ephesians we looked at it even a few weeks ago actually do you remember Ephesians 3 chapter chapter 3 verse 6 said this this mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel members of one body share us together in the promise in Christ Jesus in the Bible the mystery a mystery is something that was once hidden but now revealed to everyone the mystery of the gospel is something hidden before but now revealed in Jesus and so likewise right same word here when Jesus talks about the mystery of the kingdom of heaven this cannot be some kind of exclusive secret knowledge that you need to kind of do months of secret study to get to it cannot be because that's not what the context is no the kingdom of heaven is an open secret it's like KFC's secret recipe right you can google it and try it yourself it's a happy surprise it's hidden but now revealed to all that's that's the mystery of the kingdom of heaven so remember that but then you might still ask why does why does

Jesus then still say this knowledge has been given to his disciples and not to the crowd right why is it still in a sense kind of a mystery to some people well this is what Jesus addresses as the second reason for giving the parables right this is another the second reason why Jesus speaks in parables we see in verses 13 onwards have a read of it with me I'll read it from verse 13 this is why I speak to them in parables though seeing they do not see though hearing they do not hear or understand in

them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah you'll be ever hearing but never understanding you'll be ever seeing but never perceiving 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 I would heal them so why parables right first to show who are true followers who have truly been given

[17:37] God's grace but secondly also to reveal those who have sadly hardened their hearts to heaven's kingdom it's another use of these parables it really shows who would not care about Jesus' kingdom at all what Isaiah foretells here right this quote this prophecy hundreds of years ago it comes to fulfillment when Jesus preaches at the beach crowds of people come in here God's Messiah the promised king speak and yet they misunderstand him they reject him they see him yet don't truly see him I mean why didn't Jesus just give a four point gospel presentation right simple direct come on Jesus why didn't you just say it out straight God is good we're broken Jesus me saves repent and believe imagine if Jesus just did that right

Matthew 13 then we wouldn't be worrying about parables wouldn't that be nice clear logic a direct invitation but he chooses stories and stories they work at a deeper level in us don't they they take time and effort to even tell each other right to even know what's going on to draw the connections we have to step into the sower's shoes we have to be willing to imagine what it's like where the seed falls run the scenario in our heads over and over again and Jesus says if you do that if you're willing to do that and work it out those who genuinely see and hear these parables verse 16 it says blessed are your eyes blessed are your ears because they hear and it's the same with us today we may not be where Jesus was but if we won't even engage in a story about God's kingdom if in our minds we are already on Twitter on Insta on whatever is capturing our hearts right now it doesn't matter if we explain the parable or describe life in it it doesn't matter if

Jesus shows the power of his kingdom you're still in don't know don't care mode right but don't blame God the Bible says it clearly it's your hardness of heart that is blocking you right now from the kingdom of heaven so how do you hear honestly if you're here have you dulled your heart to God's goodness and his grace have you shut yourself off from his living water then perhaps these kingdom stories over the summer are just what you need for Jesus to reveal your heart I mean look at verse 17 too right this is a fascinating point that you know I was thinking about it says here for I tell you the truth 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 think about that verse so many people longed to be in that crowd to see

God's promised king in the flesh but never got to but if you can read English or whatever translation you got in front of you if you can hear this eyewitness account from Matthew and understand it you are blessed if you see this and you see Jesus the true prophet the true teacher your king you are blessed you see you truly hear so how do you hear that's the question do you hear with hard hearts like many in the crowd that day or will you be like the disciples you may have questions why do you speak in parables that's honest that's genuine that's prepared to receive God's grace and what does Jesus say back to his disciples well look he says my stories will point out who truly gets God's grace and my stories will point out who have hearts of stone and it's after explaining the why did you notice that Jesus actually he gives us the answer right to this parable verse 18 onwards so let's hear it together right verse 18 listen then to what the parable of the sower means when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart this is the seed sown along the path the one who received the seed that fell in rocky places is the person who hears the word and at once receives it with joy but since they have no root they last only a short time when trouble or persecution comes because of the word it quickly falls away the one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the person who hears the word but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it making it unfruitful but the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the person who hears the word understands it he produces a crop yielding a hundred sixty or thirty times what was sown this is the word of the

Lord and it's great when Jesus explains his own teachings right so I lucked in so my parables here I'll get the explanation not everyone will get that through the course of this month but we're grateful and did you notice that while Jesus calls it right verse eighteen the parable of the sower who does the explanation focus on or what does it focus on most was it the sower it's more the soils right the soils and how they correspond to different hearts did you notice that and so I think we can

summarize that Jesus explanation is really about the soils of the heart and so I want to help us understand this parable just like with Jesus by explaining three things that we can take away from Jesus explanation three things and I've adapted these three points these three reflections from Craig Blomberg he's a

[24 : 25] Bible scholar he's a parables nerd and so it's good to listen from him as well the first point from Jesus explanation is just a general observation right like the sower God spreads his word widely among all kinds of people like the sower God when he spreads his word it goes everywhere did you wonder in the story why didn't he just have better aim and throw the seed in a better way God doesn't work that way he spreads his word widely you see in this parable the sower doesn't go I need to be strategic traditionally right in the agricultural culture of their time you plow the field you dig it up with a tool you then walk up and down the rows that you've dug up and you scatter the seed you just throw it in but in this parable none of that's mentioned no mention of where to plow it or growth charts or

KPIs or yield maximization procedures or aquaponics or whatever he just sows as he goes that simple and we've seen this play out haven't we already in Matthew's gospel think about it think of everyone who has encountered has had an encounter with Jesus already that's everyone from a high ranking centurion to a paralyzed man to a bleeding woman to a grieving father Jews and Gentiles rich and poor Jesus he does not discriminate as he sows the word right so what does this parable tell us about heaven's kingdom it's a place of justice of peace for all kinds of people not just the select not just the strategic not just the ones who gone into a certain school or have a certain GPA or have a certain bank balance the kingdom of heaven is like a free banquet for the entire community like a sower who sows widely isn't that amazing isn't it amazing

God did not reveal his Messiah to a very secret club nor did he unveil Jesus only to Asian people or to Maori people or to African people no God spreads his word widely to all kinds of people so how about us I mean before kind of Christmas I had to sit down with the pastor and he once shared actually he once actually had to leave his own church because some new Christians were not allowed to join the church and then when asked why not they didn't speak Chinese may this never be at PCBC English but it might not be that may this never be for they're not bougie enough or they don't live around here or yeah they're a little bit out of my comfort zone so widely so widely and look it's not wrong to have a focus right okay remember

Matthew 10 right on that particular mission he sent them off to specifically Jewish families right house to house to the lost sheep of Israel but PCBC English do we follow the sower do we sow widely think about it who would you invite to church next Sunday have you already blocked them off oh yeah not our church maybe another one or do you just sow because the sower does it's not a policy issue it's actually a heart issue isn't it do we have the sower heart Jesus wants all his followers to have his heart to share the gospel widely to hear and see so they can hear and see what heaven's kingdom is like first reflection second reflection a second point from the parable of the soil I think is this like most of the soils we see this in Jesus own explanation like most of the soils there will be a mixed response to his word short of bearing good fruit we see this don't we before

I went into full time ministry I worked in the medical advertising industry so I was kind of like a copywriter for doctors and nurses drug companies so the company I used to work for we used to speak of people doctors and our audience in terms of conversions and personas have we retained them have we reached the right people we grouped them actually sometimes we grouped these doctors who were trying to influence with our advertising into categories doctors were either strongly opposed or hesitant or neutral or warm or they were like key opinion leaders we got to really give them lots of our time and attention get them to speak at our conferences I think we miss the point though if we read the parable of the soil this way I think we miss the point if we use this parable as kind of like a tool is this person hard is this person unfruitful as this person whatever because

[29 : 52] Jesus doesn't point that out does he remember who Jesus is talking to he's not talking to the crowds he's talking to the disciples the ones who are actually joining him in the sowing and they're confused and maybe discouraged about several things not least why isn't the kingdom of heaven here yet why doesn't everyone accept when we tell them about you Jesus why is it so hard why do I feel discouraged why am I about to give up you see some of you have prayed for years haven't you right for family members or friends to truly see the goodness of Jesus I know I have the

conversation shrivels up whenever you talk about church or Jesus or God and our heart breaks and the gentle and lowly Jesus of Matthew's gospel of the Bible of God says look let's be real I want to manage your expectations don't think of people this way but let me just tell you not everyone we preach to will accept the kingdom of heaven because some hearts are like thorn bushes too caught up with bank balances mortgages careers to go a different life the worries of this age not a 21st century issue a timeless issue some hearts well they're like shallow soil they seem super keen at the start but then the pressure comes whether it's from a family member a boyfriend or girlfriend friend friend groups that shatter and then their faith shatters with it sometimes happens and

Jesus says some hearts don't even get a shot it seems right has ever happened to you for months you've been trying to chat with your coworker or friend talking chatting and then finally you get your moment and then the phone rings or the boss calls you to a meeting or in my case a few weeks ago a seagull squawks true story do we give up no we don't follow the sower we just we're just called to sow the seed freely know that there's a mixed response but God is reviving hearts because we need this last point right this last point like the fruitful soil there are going to be those who hear and understand with abundant faith like the fruitful soil there will be those who hear and understand with abundant faith you see the crowds that first heard this parable everyone among them they thought they were

God's people okay we got the heritage we got the nice temple built we got all our godly heroes and influences we're okay right we're in the in crowd that would be Jesus audience mostly thinking that right and this is something that the Pharisees the other teachers of the law would perpetuate this is the teaching you are God's chosen and then here comes a dusty rabbi from a backwater town like Nazareth called Jesus and he tells stories about a different kingdom and then when he tells it people are like is this it is this really it are you trying to sell us this no surprise that in some of the other gospels there comes a point when the crowds actually desert Jesus don't they disciples followers leave him by the droves but don't be caught up with appearances and don't be discouraged by failure friends Jesus assures us there's going to be seed that falls on good soil that bears much fruit so keep sowing keep sowing keep sowing let's hear this parable one last time would you hear it with me a farmer went out to sow his seed as he was scattering the seeds some fell upon the path the birds came and ate it up some fell on rocky places where it didn't have much soil it sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow but when the sun came up the plants were scorched and they withered because they had no roots other seed fell among thorns which grew up and choked the plants but still other seed fell on good soil where it produced a crop a hundred sixty or thirty times what was sown those who have ears let them hear so how will you hear with your bibles closed and your hearts already gone apart from your church family to encourage you then you're going to be adrift from help and healing from worship and wisdom glued to your news feed this year then you're going to be choked by culture poisoned by the patterns of this passing world but if this year 2022 you and

I beg God and till that soil of our hearts with the word with prayer with his people through all the means of grace that God gives us this gift with our eyes fixed on Jesus the master storyteller and our Lord and Savior then the seed of heaven's kingdom will have space will have soil to grow us change us transform us bear fruit that brings blessing to this place and beyond perhaps a hundred times or sixty times doesn't matter it's abundant and it's fruitful and it's what we want so let's pray for that now Father we thank you for you are the master storyteller and so amidst our weariness of 2021 may the stories from Matthew 13 capture our imaginations challenge our hearts transform our thinking and point us to

Jesus would you help us to see that and to hear that to believe that and to trust in your son this summer in Jesus name we pray amen you