

## Ears to Hear – Parables 1

### INTRO

Imagine you're a **first century peasant**, living in a village on the coast of the sea of Galilee. Life is pretty normal. You're just trying to survive - trying to take care of your family.

When all of a sudden, word spreads through your village that a **traveling rabbi** has come to town who's got some pretty radical teachings about the kingdom of God. AND he can heal people.

You drop what you're doing and you join the crowd to hear him teach. You're excited, because your life has been hard, and **you could use some good news** that things might actually change around here.

This rabbi gets into a boat, and this is what he says:

"Listen up! A farmer was out scattering seeds in his field.

Some seeds fell on the footpath, and birds ate them right away.

Some seeds fell on rocky ground. They sprouted quickly, but didn't have deep roots, so they wilted in the sun.

Some seeds fell into some weeds, and they couldn't compete. The weeds stole all the sunlight.

But some seeds landed in good, fertile soil, and they spouted and produced a huge crop - food to eat and lots more seeds for next year.

**The end. If you've got ears to hear, you should listen and understand."**

Um... what? I thought this guy was talking about the kingdom of God. What was that all about? You head home confused, but intrigued. Something about this rabbi's teachings struck a chord with you, and you want to know more...

## SERIES INTRO

Welcome to the interesting, thought-provoking, and often confusing world of Jesus' parables. It's what we're talking about all this month in our new series, "Ears to Hear."

It's a **BYOB series** - Bring Your Own Bible" - where we help you understand how to read and understand different parts of Scripture.

This month? The parables of Jesus. Let's dive right in.

Now, put simply:

**parable: a short story or illustration conveying a deeper truth.**

Aesop's fables are parables. Or Grimm's fairytales (why German children are so afraid of forest witches in their candy houses).

Parables often work well when they're **based on everyday life**. The illustrations Jesus uses are almost entirely based on the sights and sounds of an ancient agricultural society: gardens, vines, flocks, fishing, harvesting, scattering seed...

One obvious reason for this is that most of Jesus' audience was made up of farmers and shepherds and fishermen... He was **speaking to what they knew**.

But there were other reasons he used this kind of imagery to teach which we'll get into.

The main question I want us to answer today is **why Jesus taught in parables**. Why not just speak directly?

I know some of you are thinking, "Oh, because stories are easier ways to get across moral truths. Like the boy who cried wolf teaches you not to lie..."

Right? You've just got to look for the 'moral of the story.'

You'd think that, but the reality is that many, if not *most*, of Jesus' parables don't have a moral lesson. They're not about childhood behavior modification.

Like, here's a parable of Jesus: "the kingdom of God is like **treasure a man found in a field**. The guy was so excited, he sold everything and bought the field. THE END."

What are you supposed to do with that? What's the moral of *that* story?

Or this one: "you know how **trees sprout leaves** before the summer? Same thing with the kingdom of God."

Even if you lived in the ancient world, and trees and fields were a normal part of your life, these parables would probably still leave you scratching your head.

So what *was* Jesus up to when he taught in this way?

Well, the gospel of Matthew actually tells us the answer. As it turns out, the parable of the four soils is actually **a parable about parables**. So let's take a look.

## SECRETS OF THE KINGDOM

Turn with me to **Matthew 13:11** and we'll pick up right after the parable of the farmer scattering seed. [house Bibles, comment on video]

### **Matthew 13:11-17**

*His disciples came and asked him, "Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?"*

*He replied, "You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little*

*understanding they have will be taken away from them. That is why I use these parables,*

*For they look, but they don't really see.*

*They hear, but they don't really listen or understand.*

*This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that says,*

*'When you hear what I say,  
you will not understand.*

*When you see what I do,  
you will not comprehend.*

*For the hearts of these people are hardened,  
and their ears cannot hear,*

*and they have closed their eyes—  
so their eyes cannot see,*

*and their ears cannot hear,  
and their hearts cannot understand,*

*and they cannot turn to me  
and let me heal them.'*

*"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but they didn't see it. And they longed to hear what you hear, but they didn't hear it.*

Ok. I think the key here is in verse 12. "To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given... to those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away."

What does Jesus mean here?

Well, first it's important to remember that **not everybody was happy with Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God.**

For example, lots of the religious leaders in Israel thought God's kingdom would come when Israel would finally **get rid of all the sinners** living there. But then Jesus comes and hangs out with tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners and says they're welcome in the kingdom. That didn't go over well.

Others were expecting God to save Israel from foreign occupation by building **a powerful army** which would dominate the Romans. But Jesus described the kingdom of God as a place of non-violence and loving your enemies and turning the other cheek. Not exactly the party line.

His whole message was unexpected. **Imagine if Jesus had gotten up on a platform** and said, “Hey, everyone. So, I’m God. And I’m here to take all human sin on myself and die at the hands of Roman executioners so that I can usher in a kingdom filled with broken, poor, outcast, humble people. Oh, and we’re also going to let the Romans and all other Gentiles be a part of the kingdom too.”

Yeah, that wouldn’t have gone over too well. They would have stoned him to death! As it turns out, **God’s message of salvation was not actually the message many people in Israel wanted to hear.**

He couldn’t just spell it out for people. At least not at first. So he spoke in parables to keep his controversial message from ruffling too many feathers. That’s one reason, but there’s another.

As it turns out, Jesus wasn’t the first person to use parables in the Bible. So did **the ancient prophets**. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel...

In fact, many of Jesus’ parables are based on parables from those books. That’s the other reason he’s using agricultural imagery. That’s how the prophets did it. Vineyards and tree stumps and seeds...

By using that same imagery in his teachings, Jesus is stepping into the role of a prophet of God. Speaking God’s truth to the world. He’s continuing the work they started.

Not just in what he’s saying, but also in how it’s received. If you remember, the Old Testament prophets were **mostly rejected** in their time, even though they spoke the truth. It’s why Jesus said this:

**Luke 4:24**

*I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown.*

And Jesus was no exception. This is why he quotes the prophet Isaiah here in Matthew 13. Look at verse 15: “For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear...”

He’s quoting **Isaiah chapter 6**, where God calls the prophet Isaiah to take his message to the people. God essentially tells Isaiah, “Look, you’re my prophet. I want you to speak my heart to the world. But they’re not going to listen.”

Jesus was a prophet too. But just like Isaiah, **a lot of his words were going to fall on deaf ears.**

Far too often, God’s intentions for the world are *not* what the people want to hear.

This is why Jesus talks about having “**ears to hear.**” Because clearly it’s not just enough to *hear* the message of the gospel. You have to listen and seek to understand, even if it’s not what you expect.

You can’t just have ears. You’ve got to have ears *to hear.*

That’s where parables come in. In these short stories and illustrations, Jesus takes **the wild and unexpected and countercultural message of God’s upside-down kingdom** - a message where the last are first and the first are last, where the poor are blessed and the blind can see - *that* kingdom - and he presents it in a way that only those with “ears to hear” will understand.

That’s why, again in verse 12, Jesus says “to those who are *not* listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away.”

**If you are closed off** to the message of God’s radical salvation and how he upends human cultures and values through his kingdom, then you’re going to

hear stories about fish and seeds and yeast and write them all off as the ravings of a lunatic.

But if you have ears to hear, “more understanding will be given and [you] will have an abundance of knowledge.”

In other words, **if you're open** to the wild and life-bringing teachings of this small-town rabbi - if you're willing to consider God's kingdom as one where the wealthy and powerful and mighty are *not* actually on top - well then these parables are an invitation to understand the mind of a God bringing healing to the world.

- The story of a **landowner** who pays his day laborers far more than they deserve.
- The story of a half-breed **Samaritan** acting more loving than a super-spiritual priest.
- The story of a **shepherd** who leaves his entire flock behind to go looking for one sheep who wandered away.

These are not the values we expect. But with ears to hear these parables, **the truths of God's kingdom open to those who will listen.**

Verse 16. “Blessed are your eyes, *because they see*; and your ears, *because they hear*.”

So, no. The parables of Jesus are not moralistic fairy tales. They are a **glimpse into something far greater**, which I believe can change our lives if we let it, even today.

So that's the focus of this series, and I think the next few weeks are going to be really fruitful as we look at some of these subversive tales of the kingdom.

#### THE FOUR SOILS EXPLAINED

Let's get a taste of that right now, because unlike most of his parables, Jesus actually explains the meaning of the four soils. So let's read what he says,

because I think it's a perfect exclamation point on all we've talked about already.

Like I said, it's a parable about parables, so we're about to get really meta.

### **Matthew 13:18-23**

*"Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds: The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts. The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced. The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"*

Put simply, the parable is about those who have ears to hear and those who don't.

As I said, Jesus' message of God's kingdom was **subversive**. It defied expectations. "What do you mean, the last are first? What do you mean, the poor are rich? What do you mean that sinful, broken people are welcome at your table?"

For some, this message **never takes root at all**. It's just too preposterous. It's bird seed.

Others encounter the kingdom and some part of it draws them in. Maybe it's the incredible grace of God. "You mean all my past mistakes can be forgiven?" Maybe it's the idea of a diverse and vibrant community of love where all are welcome. "Yeah I want some of that."



But the moment things get tough - the moment they have to sacrifice something for Jesus - maybe they get ridiculed for being a part of it... well, their roots are shallow, and **the message of the kingdom shrivels in the heat**. They drift away.

Sometimes the message of the kingdom hits home. A person hears it, they surrender to Jesus, they grow... but then **greed** starts to sneak up. Or **fear**. They hit a rough patch in life, and start turning to themselves to get through it instead of God.

Before long, the message of the kingdom is **completely shaded out** by the allure of wealth and power and comfort and safety and success.

Only some of the seed lands on good, healthy soil, where the message of the kingdom can take root and produce genuine fruit which multiplies for generations. These are the people with ears to hear.

#### EARS TO HEAR

Do *you* have ears to hear?

I want you to wrestle with that right now. I said these parables were an invitation. So I'm inviting you to do some introspection. What kind of soil is in your heart?

When you hear the message of the kingdom of God, when the seed lands on your heart, is it going to produce fruit?

Now I know the easiest thing to do is to say, "Yeah. Of course. I'm a Christian. I'm watching a sermon right now... Of course I'm receptive to Jesus." But think about that parable.

A *lot* of those seeds **took root**. But only some of the seed produced fruit.

Is the message of God's radical, upside-down kingdom going to produce *fruit* in your life?

## QUESTIONS

Let me give you some **questions to help you answer that** which come right out of this passage.

Does your understanding of God's kingdom involve **the radical transformation of the broken world around you**, or does it boil down to you staying out of trouble so you can go to heaven when you die?

In other words, has the message of Jesus changed you so much that everywhere you go, the world looks a little more like his kingdom?

**Is your faith today deeper** than it was a month ago? A year ago? A decade ago? How deep are your roots? Are you **growing** in Jesus or are you going through the motions?

This one is touchy, but I have to ask it. How much of your worldview and opinions right now are shaped by **news networks, social media, protest movements, and angry conversations**?

Is your faith interwoven with a **political ideology** right now? How much of your faith is genuinely shaped by wrestling with the Holy Spirit and the words of Scripture first?

I ask all these questions not to accuse, not to point fingers, but to wake us up. Our job as Christ-followers is not to just exist... it's to **bear fruit so we can multiply** the message of Jesus to future generations.

And we cannot do that if we don't have ears to hear.

But I've got good news. And it comes from my slowly growing experience as a wannabe farmer... **Soil can be improved.**

You can break apart hard-packed dirt. You can remove stones and add organic matter. You can mulch to suppress weeds. Soil can be improved.

**But it takes work.** It takes sweat. It doesn't just happen.

So friends, as we look at the parables of Jesus this month, I'm asking us to commit together to work on the soil of our hearts.

Let's be the kinds of people Jesus talked about:

**Matthew 13:23**

*"...who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"*

Our world needs the message of Jesus right now. Let us have ears to hear it.

[PRAY]