

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “It’s Like...: The Word of the Kingdom”

Dr. Jay Howell

Matthew 13:1-23

October 16, 2022

We’re in the second week of our series “It’s Like...”, going through one particular chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew 13. Matthew 13 finds Jesus in teaching mode—it’s one of a handful of longer discourses that Matthew includes—but in this one he focuses on one particular teaching style: parables.

That’s what we talked about last week when we kicked off this series. We dropped right into the middle of the chapter when Matthew takes a short break to tell us why Jesus taught this way, and if you were with us you’ll remember that these parables, these short, often very short stories or illustrations were used to draw a point of comparison, especially to something that defies understanding. The word parable itself means “Something hurled alongside,” as if Jesus were saying, “It’s kind of like this,” or “It’s kind of like that.”

So this week, we go to the beginning of this particular body of teaching from our Lord, in which he offers a story that’s come to be known as the Parable of the Sower. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. <sup>2</sup> Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> Let anyone with ears listen!’*

*<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ <sup>11</sup> He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup> For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>13</sup> The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.” <sup>14</sup> With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:*

*“You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.  
<sup>15</sup> For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them.”*

*<sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. <sup>17</sup> 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.*

*<sup>18</sup> ‘Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup> yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. <sup>22</sup> As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>23</sup> But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’*

*Matthew 13:1-23*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then to me.” Sounds poetic, doesn’t it? If we have any Shakespeare fans in the house, you might recognize where that comes from. It’s from the play *Macbeth*, in one of the early scenes. Three witches appeared to Macbeth, then just a Scottish lord, along with his friend, a man named Banquo. The witches—these are the “Double, double, toil and trouble” witches by the way—have just told Macbeth that he would become king, but they haven’t said anything to Banquo. So he gets a bit indignant, and addresses the witches directly, saying, “Hey, tell me something too,” but it sounds better than that. Instead he says, “If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then to me.”

Because no doubt, that would be a good trick, a good ability, to be able to tell what would bear fruit, and what wouldn’t, to have that foresight. But I suppose the whole point of that play is just how tragic and fickle a thing like fate can be, so maybe we don’t read into it too much.

Nevertheless, it speaks to the frustration, maybe even the fear, that can come with not knowing what will happen and with at times just how random or arbitrary things can look.

In this parable, Jesus uses similar imagery, of seeds being sown here and there, all over the place. He's out by the lakeshore, and a great crowd gathers, so he goes out into the water a little bit, just to be seen and heard by everyone, I suppose, and begins teaching in parables, and this is the first one he offers. A sower goes out sowing seed, seemingly just flinging it everywhere, or it just falls out. But Jesus lists four landing zones. First, the path, where it just gets eaten up by birds. Next, rocky soil, where the seed can't take deep root, so once a heat wave comes along, it withers and dies. Then, among thorns, where the seed grows but quickly gets choked out by the thorns. And finally the good soil, where it bears fruit, as much as a hundredfold.

Now a common way of understanding this parable is then to ask, well, what kind of soil are you? And that kind of goes along with what Jesus does next. He turns to his disciples and explains things a little more. That's something he'll do often enough. One teaching for the crowds, but then more detail, more explanation for his disciples. But he turns to his disciples and shares a bit about why he teaches in parables, and it kind of follows what we talked about last week. That Jesus is teaching about things that are impossible to fully grasp, so he uses parables for those who, "indeed listen, but never understand."

And then Jesus actually offers a bit more about the meaning of this parable. He does that from time to time too: explain a parable. The seed falling on the path is like those who do not understand, and thus the word of the kingdom is snatched away. The seed falling on rocky ground is like those who embrace the word eagerly, but the second hardship comes around, it falls away. The seed falling among the thorns is like those who hear the word but are ensnared by the cares of the world for the word to bear fruit. And finally, the good soil, like those who hear and understand and bear fruit.

And a common way of thinking about this parable might be to ask, "Well, what kind of soil are you? Are you the path? Are you the rocky ground? Are you the thorns? Are you the good soil? It's a good question to ask, a powerful question to ask, and one I hope you'll keep asking yourself.

But that's not really what I'd offer for us to focus on this morning, because I'm not sure Jesus was *only* giving us a sort of personality test. You know, like those you can do online, like which Hogwarts house would you be sorted into? Which soil are you? I think Jesus is getting at something more than that.

There's something in the backdrop of this parable, really in the backdrop of all the parables we'll talk about, and I suppose you could argue in the backdrop of every single thing Jesus ever

taught: the kingdom of heaven. He references it all the time. (Sometimes he calls it the kingdom of God, but same thing.) It's how he opened his public ministry to begin with in Matthew. He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And in fact, every other parable in this chapter begins with something like, "The kingdom of heaven is like...."

Very important thing for us to remember, not just this week, but throughout this series, and really if you read much of Jesus' teaching at all. When Jesus says, "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God," he is not talking about a heavenly destination after you die. That's a common misconception. Jesus does talk about heaven sometimes, about what lies beyond, about eternal destinations and all that, but he talks about this "kingdom of heaven" much, much more. And what does he mean by it? Well, it's hard for us to understand, first of all. That's why he's using parables to begin with, but it has something to do with God's reign, God's reality breaking out in the world around us. "On earth, as it is in heaven," he teaches us to pray. "The kingdom of heaven has come near," he says.

Well, how exactly does it come near? How exactly does this kingdom of God emerge around us? It seems that might be a bit of what Jesus is talking about in this parable. Along with inviting us to take stock of what kind of soil we might be, he may also be inviting us to take a step back and consider on a large scale how the kingdom of heaven might be like a sower casting seed on all manner of soils, to all manner of outcomes. And those outcomes are, well, mixed.

I was blessed growing up to be in a wonderful youth ministry at my old church in Nashville, led by a faithful and wonderful pastor to youth and their families, name of Mark DeVries. But I heard this story about my old youth pastor. One day early in the morning, one of the youth staff got to the church early, only to find Mark in the old Chapel. The youth director kind of snuck in the door so Mark didn't know he was there. But Mark was in there up at the front, alone, on his knees, weeping, crying out in prayer and frustration at all the young people that for one reason or another, just had not been receptive to the word of grace and life in Christ Jesus that he had so passionately been trying to convey.

This is a guy who, by the grace of God, built a vibrant, sustainable youth ministry impacting hundreds, thousands even, of young people over a 25-year ministry—and I consider myself one of them; my own path to faith and ministry is inseparable from the influence of this man—a guy whose books about youth ministry became some of the go-to resources for other churches' youth ministries, and who, later on, goes to other churches to offer guidance about their own youth ministries, including our church. I think he was here something like five or six years ago.

And yet he is up at the front of an old chapel, alone, weeping, praying for guidance that a few more might be reached. It's like Banquo said in *Macbeth*: "If you can look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then to me."

And that image of my old youth pastor kneeling up at the front of that chapel is the sort of confusion, maybe even frustration that this parable might be speaking to. The seed is sown here and there, far and wide, all over the place. And if this is what the kingdom of heaven is supposed to be like, why, then, why do the results seem so mixed? Why does it seem like some patches of “soil” are so hopeless?

Maybe you’ve felt that same frustration. Could be in your own life, and you’ve wondered why it’s so difficult for you to embrace a walk of faith, why things never seem to take root. Could be in the lives of those you love, and you’ve wondered why no matter what you do, no matter how hard you pray, no matter how fervently you hope that something might change in the heart of someone you care about, things never seem to go anywhere.

That frustration, even exhaustion I think is part of what this parable is talking about, acknowledging that yes, sometimes the seed falls on hard soil, and nothing will happen then, but also the promise that good soil is out there, and when it bears fruit, it does so in ways that will amaze you. And that, it seems is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

There’s this old French story, some say it’s based on a true story, about a young man who came upon a tucked away valley in the French Alps and dying of thirst, encounters an old shepherd. It seems the valley had been abandoned, scattered with old, crumbling buildings, and nothing much grew there except wild plants and herbs. The shepherd then told the young man that after the death of his wife, he had set about the lonely work of planting acorns all throughout this valley, to cultivate a forest in this place that, to everyone else, had seemed a lost cause.

The young man left that place and was drafted into the French army and served in the First World War. The young man is scarred by the war, as I suppose most are in any war. But when we consider images from that First World War, I try to think of “soil” that has become harder than that. The emergence of “No Man’s Land” in between the trench lines, the ground that is pummeled by artillery, littered with fallen soldiers, still haunts the soil today. Have you ever seen pictures of what some patches of No Man’s Land looks like today. It’s still scarred: the grim reminders of trench warfare, machine gun fire, poison gas, you name it.

That’s what the young man encountered, and he left the war shell-shocked. He made his way back to the valley, and upon arriving he realized that since he had gone, young saplings had started to grow and streams had started to run. He reconnected with the old shepherd there and then his soul started to heal.

Over the years, the young man would come back from time to time, noting how the old shepherd continues to plant acorns and nurture the saplings as they grew, and noting how the

valley started to transform from the inhospitable place that had nearly taken his life to something like a Garden of Eden, something that the locals thought to be some kind of miracle.

Eventually the old shepherd had to stop planting trees, and the valley had been changed into a lush place of growth and peace, with thousands of people now settled there, none of whom were aware of the reason why that soil had become so good. They only saw how it had born this amazing fruit, that in a world that could at times be so harsh and unforgiving, a sign of something good.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.