

# Matthew 13.1–23

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## *The parable of the soils*

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### **Listening**

Most of you know that Jess is the eldest of five children (four of whom are girls) going all the way down Bella who is at primary school. When we first started going out she was 7 years old.

It was quite an experience going round to dinner, because most of them talk, most of the time. There were sometimes three or even four different conversations going on. I did my best to listen to all of them – and ended up listening to none of them. I had to zone out, eat my dinner, and let them all chatter happily away.

Active listening is completely different, where you give your whole attention and focus to one person, reflecting back things they are saying to you, thinking carefully about how to give the other person the space they need to share what they want to say.

Then there is background listening, when you have the radio, music or (if you're me) cricket on while trying to work.

Listening is what parables are all about. ‘**Are you listening to this?**’ Jesus says, ‘I mean, **really listening?**’ (9, MSG).

When Jesus explains to his disciples why he teaches in parables, he quotes Isaiah’s prophecy of God lamenting about the spiritual dullness of his people. *The Message Bible* puts it rather well:

Your ears are open but you don’t hear a thing.

Your eyes are awake but you don’t see a think.

The people are blockheads!

They stick their fingers in their ears

so they won’t have to listen;

They screw their eyes shut

so they won’t have to look,

so they won’t have to deal with me face-to-face

and let me heal them.

*Matthew 13.13-15 (MSG)*

It is possible to hear without listening, to let words wash over you. They float in one ear and out of the other. *Really* listening means the words go deep: they make it down into our heart. This deep hearing is like a seed, which has found some good soil, and which grows, slowly but surely, putting down strong roots.

# The parable of the soils

You may know this famous parable as ‘the parable of the sower’. It is certainly one of, if not the best known of all Jesus’ parables. It’s a shame we call it that, because it isn’t really about the sower, it’s about the soil. The parable explains why the good news about Jesus does not impact everyone in the same way: the sower (God) is the same, the seed (the word of God) is the same, it’s the *soil* (the human heart) that produces different results.

Jesus talks about four different types of soil. The first isn’t soil at all, but a path. When seed **fell along the path, birds came and ate it up** (4). The seed wasn’t able to take root.

Jesus explains to his disciples later that the birds stand for the devil, who **comes and snatches away what was sown in the person’s heart** (19). We must beware of **having a heart that is hardened to God, but available to Satan.**<sup>a</sup>

That might sound harsh, or over the top – but Jesus tells us the danger is real. What we do here is – literally – *vital*ly important. So, **are you listening to this? Really listening?**

Second, as the farmer sowed the seed,

Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly.

*Matthew 13.5-6 (MSG)*

As Jesus explains, here he is describing someone who **hears the word and at once receives it with joy** (20). Shallow soil heats up quickly in the sun, encouraging early and speedy growth. In the same way, some people respond eagerly to the word of God – but in a shallow, superficial way: not growing in understanding, not forming the godly character of a disciple.

Without these deeper roots, when troubles come, these people **last only a short time** (21). We must beware of having **a heart open to superficial, emotional influences but closed to a deeper understanding of the kingdom** – such a heart **readily turns from God when troubles arise**.<sup>b</sup>

Receiving the word of God with joy is a good thing – but if we expect our Christian journey to be all joy and no struggle, if we imagine our life will be all rosy and happy as a Christian, as soon as the inevitable troubles come, our shallow faith will fall away.

Third, Jesus says that **other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants** (7). Here the thorns stand for **the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth**, which **choke the word, making it unfruitful** (22).

Friends, how easy it is to be seduced by the world around us. It is so enticing, so immediate, that sometimes it is hard not to be so wrapped up in it that we forget all about God. But wealth, as tempting as it is, is deceitful. It pretends to offer us fulfilment, happiness – if only we had a bit *more: then* we'd be fine.

But as I said last week, the problem with money is that *more* is not the same as *enough*. Money tricks us into wanting more, ever and always *more*. And so it distracts us from what really matters. **A heart that is easily attracted to worldly stature and wealth is a heart that is soon distracted from the kingdom message.**<sup>c</sup>

**Are you listening to this? Really listening?**

Because some **seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown** (8). This is the person **who hears the word and understands it** (23).

The word of God, sown by God, *will* produce fruit when it lands in good soil. That's Jesus' point: whether it produces loads of fruit, or a smaller amount of fruit is irrelevant, what matters is *that* it produces fruit: discipleship. When we hear – *really* hear the word of God, it goes deep into our hearts, and affects how we behave.

This takes time, and effort – *lots* of effort. **Mature discipleship does not happen overnight, since godliness, like fruit-bearing, requires a growing season before there can be a harvest.**<sup>d</sup> It's hard to explain how it works, and there are no easy answers. As we saw in Philippians:

Continue to *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling, for it is *God who works in you* to will and act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

*Philippians 2.12-13 (NIV, emphasis added)*

### **Are you listening to this? Really listening?**

We work out, as God works in. That is how we grow into a disciple. It isn't magic, as if God clicks his fingers and we become a disciple. And it isn't as if we can do it in our own strength.

We work *out*, as God works *in*, both working *together* to grow a whole-hearted disciple.

# Prayer

The main focus of this parable is to explain the different ways that different people respond to the gospel: why some people hear the good news, and it has little or no effect; why others start out so well but drift away.

And so that drives me to my knees, to pray that God would open the hearts of those who don't know him. Friends, the greatest miracle is the one that opens a heart to God – so let's make sure we pray for that in those who don't yet know God!

But the secondary focus of this parable is to remind us how important it is to have a heart that is open and available – but open and available to God. We need to be receptive – but receptive to the word of God.

I would like us to pray in two ways:

1. Let's pray for people who don't know God, and let's pray that he would open their eyes so they can see him, open their ears so they can *really* hear his word, and open their hearts so they can receive him.
2. Let's pray all that for ourselves, so we might be good soil, growing into mature disciples, working out our salvation as God works in us.

Let's *really listen* to Jesus' words this morning, and let those words go deep into our hearts, and begin to change us.

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<sup>a</sup> Turner, *Matthew (BECNT)*, 342.

<sup>b</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>c</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>d</sup> *Ibid.*