

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Blessed Lord,  
you have given us your Holy Scriptures for our learning.  
May we so hear them,  
read, learn, and inwardly digest them,  
that being strengthened and comforted by your holy Word,  
we may cling to the blessed hope of everlasting life,  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.

The text for today is a parable and its explanation from Matthew 13, preached in Jesus' sermon from a boat. Sometimes Jesus speaks in parables to help us understand, other times he speaks in parables to hide what should be obvious for those that think they know better. This is the purpose of these group of parables; Jesus wants to communicate a message to those who are willing to listen. Hence the explanation later to his disciples, he wants them to understand. The parable today describes the common farming practice of the day. Jesus gives an explanation to this parable which tells us that it is primarily a descriptive parable, not a prescriptive parable. A farmer broadcasts, that is spreads liberally, his seed. The seeds fall in various types of soil, some conducive to growth and yield, others less productive, and some plain hostile to plant growth.

Jesus gives us four types of soil: the path, the rocky ground, the thorny ground, and the good soil. The seeds, that Jesus equates with the Word, (we will discuss what the Word is later), that fall on the path have no chance at life. Satan snatches that Word away before it can even germinate. The rocky ground receives the Word with joy, but trials and persecutions because of the Word drive away faith. The weedy soil allows for germination and some growth, but the cares of this world, as Jesus says the 'deceitfulness of riches', choke it out. The good soil produces a harvest.

I'm sure many of you are sitting listening and are thinking 'now which soil am I?'. Some might feel justified in claiming that they are good soil, others might feel despair or shame that they belong in one of the unfruitful categories. Perhaps this parable has that effect on us that depending on how we look at it, it can be quite depressing, or it can be a great blessing and freedom. Jesus promises that this parable is descriptive, that is, that wherever the Word is spread, these are the four ways in which it will be received. The purpose of the parable is not to make you feel guilty for failing in your vocation as a Christian, nor is it intended for the self-righteous to feel good about their high yields, the purpose of the parable is to tell us about how God spreads his Word and the different ways it will be received. Some of you might have listened carefully to the Isaiah reading or know it off by heart and be thinking 'this parable in Isaiah must be contradictory.'

<sup>10</sup> "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven  
and do not return there but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

<sup>11</sup> **so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,**

**but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.** Isaiah 55:10–11 (ESV)

If the Word never returns empty, how can Jesus tell us that so many people will reject it or not have it bear fruit in their lives? When we consider Jesus' parable in Matthew there are three different types of soil that yield no fruit, that is three quarters of the seed does not produce a harvest. If you had that seed in your garden, you'd probably throw it out. But, in all four categories that Jesus details, the Word has done its work. Even though some is snatched away, some falls away and dies, and some is choked out, the Word has still been at work. As you sat there and thought about what category of soil you might be, the Word, especially the law, may have been at work, reminding you that you have not always been fruitful in your life. Maybe it made you realize you are often at risk of being choked by the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. Perhaps you understood that at times the persecution and tribulation because of the Word were too much for you and you have turned away. But even the seed that has been snatched away by Satan has been at work on those people that heard it, the law perhaps confirming them in their sin, but they are not willing or open to hear the Gospel.

Let's talk about what this Word is, and here we're going to refer to John:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth". John 1:1, 14 (ESV)

You might have done this activity at school, or if you joined the reconciliation studies I think you may have engaged it there. When you learn about a word from somewhere and you import it into a different sentence. We are going to use John's definition of the 'word' which clearly is Jesus. Jesus is the Word. He is the incarnation of God. We could import Jesus into his own parable about the Word: "When anyone hears **Jesus, the Christ** of the Kingdom and does not understand Him, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. <sup>20</sup>As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears **Jesus** and immediately receives Him with joy, <sup>21</sup>yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of **Jesus**, immediately he falls away. <sup>22</sup>As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears **Jesus**, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke **Jesus (Faith in Jesus)**, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>23</sup>As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears **Jesus** and understands Him. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." Matthew 13:19–23 (ESV)

This parable describes how people receive Jesus. Notice how it is understanding Jesus that is the key to the parable, the key to the fruitful life. Hearers of the parable and hearers of Jesus, however, are unable on their own, to change the category in which they fall. We would love for everyone to fall into the understanding Jesus category, the trusting Jesus category but this is sadly not the case.

It is, however, the Word, Jesus, and his Holy Spirit who change people from category to category. Let's use another growing analogy; suppose you have a patch of solid rock in your garden that you think should become a fertile flower bed. You stand there looking at it and speak to it and tell it 'You will become my new flower bed'. The next morning you come out and it will still be the same rocky barren hill it was the day before because it has no ability to change itself. Should you wish for it to

become a flourishing garden, you are going to have to spend a lot of time and energy to make it change, if it is even possible. Time and money, moving rocks, replenishing soil, eradicating weeds, making it a fertile place to grow flowers. This parable is descriptive, people cannot make spiritual changes of their own accord.

This parable is about Jesus liberally spreading himself by words all over the world, broadcasting himself so that even ground that was once rocky and barren is cleared, fertilized, ploughed, protected and productive. While the example of a rocky garden is extreme, and probably impossible, Jesus is willing to expend the time and effort to broadcast his seed and prepare the soil (that is the heart of people) to receive it. It is his Word; read, spoken, preached, prayed, sung, poured out with the water, even eaten and drunk that does the work of preparing these hearts to receive more of his word and produce a crop.

Jesus tells us those who produce a crop understand him, and his Word. We should therefore quickly attempt to understand what word Jesus proclaims to us. His Word has two parts: the Law and the Gospel, or the commands and the promises. Jesus is both things to us. He points out our sin with his commandments, his parables, his preaching, and his prophets; this is the law or the commands. Then because we now know our place in God's eyes and we are crushed by our own sin, he sets us free with his promises; there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, your sins are forgiven, peace be with you, today you will be with me in paradise, this is my body, this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." Acts 2:38–39 (ESV)

When Jesus is broadcast, he not only produces a fruitful crop on fruitful soil, but he is responsible by His Holy Spirit for preparing that soil to receive him. This is why some people take years to come to faith even though they repeatedly hear the message and have others pray for them, because it takes time for the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts. But it is also why some receive him with joy and then fall away; they thought they understood but the cares of the world distract them, and they forget his gifts. It is also why some are lost under persecution and yet still others are fruitful all their life or from the moment they hear the gospel. Jesus describes exactly what we see all around us, some hear and stay, others hear and leave at different times for different reasons. If you haven't noticed the drift out of the church over the past 60 years, or if you have and have despaired, Jesus here describes exactly what has happened.

God's Word, Jesus, broadcasts himself all over this earth for us to understand and believe. Hearing and receiving of his Word, both Law and Gospel, make barren roads into fruitful fields; it fertilizes, tills, plants and protects. That same Word continues to sow seeds and produce harvests even in the oldest and driest of soils so that we continue to bear much fruit in believing his promise to us.

This parable should be a great encouragement to us that we must and are privileged to spread that Word to those close and those far away. The farmer in the parable doesn't seem to mind that his seed appears wasted, he spreads it anyway and he keeps spreading. We should be further encouraged to cling to Jesus and his Word, to hear it together, receive it together, so that we understand it together and therefore remain fruitful and are able to fight off the attacks of the

world, persecutions, our sinful nature, and Satan. For if we lose our understanding and faith in Jesus, we lose the very thing we are supposed to be spreading and the very things that keep us fruitful.

Brothers and Sisters, cling to Jesus. Be diligent in understanding his Word, let it dwell in you, work on you, build your understanding, faith, and fruitfulness.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.