

### 3. EARS ARE FOR HEARING

Jesus began his developed use of parables in a situation of division and conflict. Disciples were coming to him, and opposition to him was mounting. The parable of the sower stands at the head of the story-type parables, as it lets us know what is going on with all of Jesus' teaching and ministry with regard to God's saving kingly-rule, and shows us the way in to receiving it.

#### A Situation of Division and Conflict

Jesus had already begun to use parable word-pictures in his teaching, as disciples gathered to him. It was his characteristic mode of utterance (Matt. 5:13–16, 23–26, 29–30, 38–41, 45; 6:2–3, 19–20, 22–23, 26, 28–29; 7:3–11, 13–20, 22–27; 8:11–12; 9:12, 15–17; 10:29–31). As opposition mounted, some of his picture-sayings reflected this conflict (Matt. 11:16–19, 30; 12:11–12, 25, 29, 33–37, 43–45). It was after this opposition came out into the open (Matt. 12:14), that Jesus began to use developed story-parables (Matt. 13; Mark 4; Luke 8). We will look at the first of these, as a way in to the others.

#### Hearing and Not Hearing

Matthew 13:1–3: 'he told them many things in parables'. See Matthew 13:34; compare Mark 4:33–34: 'as they were able to hear it'. Everyone can appreciate a story, and identify with it. Part of the appeal of Jesus' word-pictures is that they were always part of everyday experience, immediately accessible to those who were listening. They are not too hard to understand—everyone can imagine a picture when it is put into words. No one has an excuse for not understanding.

Why then Mark 4:10–13? *Do these two passages contradict each other?*

It seems Jesus spoke in parables not just to reveal, but also to conceal. To understand a parable, the connection between the parable and what it refers to must be made by the hearer. If the hearer does not want to join the dots, then the parable will remain an unsolved puzzle to them. So parables, in a situation of opposition, not only reveal for those who want to receive, but also have the function of concealing the meaning from those who are unwilling to understand.

This is not new: see Matthew 13:10–17, quoting Isaiah 6:9–10 (seen in the context of that whole chapter). Alec Motyer's commentary on these verses:

if hearers are resistant to the truth, the only recourse is to tell them the truth yet again, more clearly than before. But to do this is to expose them to the risk of rejecting the truth yet again and, therefore, of increased hardness of heart. It could even be that the next rejection will prove to be the point at which the heart is hardened beyond recovery. The human eye cannot see this point in advance; it comes and goes unnoticed. But the all-sovereign God both knows it and appoints it as he presides in perfect justice over the psychological processes he created (*cf.* Ex. 4:21). It was at just such a point that Isaiah was called to office. His task was to bring the LORD's word with fresh, even unparalleled clarity, but in their response people would reach the point of no return.<sup>1</sup>

This was a constant dynamic in the ministry of Jesus and his gospel: see John 12:37–43; Acts 28:23–31. Hence Mark 4:21–25.

'For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.' *Is this fair?*

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993, p. 79.

While this may appear to be contrary to ‘natural’ justice in a closed universe, it is a reality for those who are open to the lavish giving of God in His kingdom-action (see above on 13:4–8). Those who have an appreciation of God’s saving kingdom-action come in Christ will have more than they could ever think of or ask for (see 1 Cor. 2:7–16; Eph. 3:14–21), while those who close themselves off to it stand in danger of losing the little they are trying to hold on to (compare Matt. 10:37–39; 19:27–30)<sup>2</sup>.

Hearing and understanding Jesus’ parables takes a certain attitude or condition of heart. Jesus draws a clear distinction between those who know the secrets/mysteries of the kingdom of heaven and those who do not. The kingdom-authority of God is asserted by saying that in either case it ‘has been given’ or it ‘has not been given’—by God.

### Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:3–9. *What are the first and last words of the parable?* This tells us what it is all about.

- 3            ‘Listen!’: This sharp injunction alerts us to what this first and seminal parable is all about: the matter of hearing or not hearing ‘the word of the kingdom’ (13:19). ‘a sower’: while our focus may be on the seed and what happens to it in the various types of soil, Jesus’ designation of this story as ‘the parable of the sower’ (13:18) draws our attention to the primary role of Jesus as the proclaimer of the message of the kingdom (compare Matt. 4:17, 23; 9:35), together with his disciples (10:7). This, rather than any general application, is the specific situation in which the comparison is being made.
- 4–8        Those familiar with agricultural practice might wonder at the wastage of seed on inappropriate ground, even, or especially, where the seed is broadcast by hand. The parables of Jesus often contain surprising or unexpected, even comic or exaggerated, elements, which could jolt listeners into an appreciation of the abnormal conditions that pertain to the action of the kingdom-rule of God. Here, though it is not interpreted as such, it could be saying that the message of the kingdom comes to all indiscriminately, ready or not (compare Matt. 5:45; 13:30; 25:6). Equally surprising, especially given such wastage, are the yields Jesus postulates: thirtyfold is good, sixtyfold is exceptional, a hundredfold is unheard-of.<sup>3</sup> Here again, it would be saying that the results of God’s kingdom-action far exceed ‘normal’ expectations.
- 9            Again, the importance of hearing (compare 13:3) is underscored.

Jesus gives the interpretation, and application, in Matthew 13:18–23. Again it has to do with hearing.

- 18         ‘Hear’: The emphasis is still, as in the preceding passages, on hearing; particularly, as we shall see, on receiving and obeying or living by faith in the truth of the word of God’s kingdom.

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<sup>2</sup> Even in the ‘natural’ order it is true that a limb that is used is built up, while a limb that is not used becomes wasted.

<sup>3</sup> In Australia in the 1970s, one bushel of seed per acre (about 65 kilograms per hectare) could be expected in a reasonable season to produce 30 bushels (10 bags) per acre (about 2 tonnes/2000 kilograms per hectare). In a very good season an exceptional yield would be 60 bushels (20 bags) per acre (4 tonnes per hectare). This is after over one hundred years of scientific plant-breeding and fertilizer and soil development—in Israel in the first century it is likely that yields were less than this, such that each of Jesus’ predictions would have been beyond normal expectations. Source: John Skewes, NCTM staffroom conversation, 25th November 2002. (I have heard in this excellent 2016 harvest season of a 100% yield.)

- ‘the parable of the sower’: While we might call it the parable of the seed, or of the soils, Jesus’ designation of it as the parable of the sower tells us that the sower himself—in this case Jesus, with his disciples, as the message is spoken out (see above on 13:3)—is crucial to an understanding of the parable.
- 19 ‘the word of the kingdom’: That which had been and was being announced by Jesus and his disciples (see Matt. 4:17, 23; 5:3; 6:10, 33; 7:21; 9:35; 10:7). Is the seed or the soil identified with the hearer (see also verses 20, 22 and 23)? No clear or direct identification is made—the whole situation is what illustrates the reality.
- ‘does not understand it’: The hearer is responsible to receive and act in faith upon the announcement of God’s kingdom in Jesus’ words and actions (see 7:24–27; 8:10–12; 10:14–15). It is the refusal to do this, through deliberate misunderstanding or misconstruing, that occasions and gives opportunity to the action of the ‘evil one’ (compare 4:1–11; 6:13), who ‘snatches away’ (a violent word, used elsewhere in Matthew only at 11:12) what is sown in the heart, and so deprives them of what they have refused to receive (see 13:12b–15). An instance of this could be the Pharisees in 9:34 and 12:24 (compare John 8:34, 44; 1 John 3:5, 8).
- 20–21 Compare Matt. 10:17–18, 21–22, 37–39; 24:12–13.
- 22 Compare Matt. 6:19–34; 19:16–30.
- 23 ‘bears fruit’: Compare Genesis 1:28; Deuteronomy 30:9; Psalm 1:3; Isaiah 5:1–7; Matthew 3:8–10; 7:16–20; 12:33; John 4:36; 15:1–17; Romans 7:4; Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 5:9; Colossians 1:6. As we saw on 13:8, the yields vary from the good to the unheard-of.

What about its application to us?

The four different kinds of soil are not four different kinds of people, but four ways of encountering the Word of God. One and the same person may be now this soil, now that soil, and we may well find all four kinds within ourselves . . . you become the one or the other, depending on your reaction to God’s Word . . . To live in the Word of God—this is the secret of true life. If we choose to live without it, humanity and human nature wither . . . We live from what we have in our hearts . . . Let us therefore take to heart this Word of God, examine ourselves in its light, bend our will under its power, ask God to help us grow into doers of the his Word who exhibit the nature of the Kingdom. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Emil Brunner, *Sowing and Reaping: The Parables of Jesus*, (1946), tr. Thomas Weiser, Epworth Press, 1964, pp. 14, 17.