

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND

Matthew 13:1-23

Key Verse: 13:23

“But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

In chapter 13, Jesus tells a series of parables to explain what the kingdom of heaven is like. The kingdom of heaven is so vast, deep and wide that it cannot be described with just a few words in limited human language. How would you describe the Pacific Ocean? It has so many aspects that require many years of study. Even then, we cannot fully understand it. How much more difficult it is to understand the kingdom of heaven! Jesus really wanted people to grasp the truth about the kingdom. He began his public ministry with the message about the kingdom (4:17). The Sermon on the Mount is considered the constitution of the kingdom. Now, Jesus reveals the secrets of the kingdom through parables. Simply speaking, parables are earthly stories that reveal truth about the kingdom. In Matthew’s Gospel, we can find 16 parables; seven of these are in chapter 13. Through each different parable Jesus teaches a specific aspect of the kingdom. When we combine all the parables, we can get a big picture of the kingdom.

Why did Jesus keep talking about the kingdom? It seemed too idealistic and unrealistic. There were many urgent social and economic issues in his times. It seemed like Jesus was just going around storytelling. However, the message of the kingdom is the most important to any people in any time. It is because people’s real need is for a restoration of the kingdom—that is, God’s rule in our hearts and society. When God reigns, we have real peace and justice. The first parable is known as the parable of the sower. The key word is “understand” (13,14,15,19,23). Why is it so important to understand? What blessings come to those who understand?

First, the secrets of the kingdom (1-17). After an intense spiritual struggle with the evil religious leaders, Jesus needed rest and refreshment. Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake (1). But after taking a few deep breaths, Jesus found himself surrounded by a large crowd. So, he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore (2). Then he told them many things in parables. This may have happened in the place now known as

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND

“Parable Cove.” It is a natural amphitheater in which one speaker can be heard by thousands very clearly. Jesus’ first parable was about a farmer sowing his seed (3). This would have been understandable to Jesus’ audience. But to some of us, farming is unfamiliar. Outside the Chicago city limits we can find corn, wheat and dairy farms, orchards, fruit fields and the like. These days, seeds are planted by machines in a very neat and orderly way. But in Jesus’ time, farmers scattered their seed by hand and it fell on all kinds of soil (4).

Some seeds fell along the path. The path was so hard that the seed could not penetrate at all. These days, “Angry Birds” are popular cartoon characters. Birds become angry when they are hungry. Perhaps it was such birds as these that swooped down and gobbled up the vulnerable seeds. Some seed fell on rocky soil (5). Many of us like gardening. We know that we must remove all kinds of rocks to make the soil good for planting. Otherwise, the soil is too shallow for the plant to take root. Though the plant springs up quickly, it soon withers and dies because it cannot bear the heat of the sun (6). The sun is necessary for plants to grow. The problem is not with the sun or the seed, but the soil, which is so rocky that the plant cannot develop roots. Other seed fell among thorns (7). Seeds planted in thorny soil seem to grow well for a while. But also growing are many kinds of thorny plants, such as bull thistles and oyster thistles. These thistles are strong and invasive; they choke other plants and keep them from producing fruit. Still other seed fell on good soil. They say that good soil is made up of 10% coarse sand, 45% fine sand, 20% silt, 15% clay, and 10% organic matter. It is free of rocks and thorns, rich in nutrients, well-watered and exposed to the sun. In this soil, the seed grows strong and healthy until it produces a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown (8).

After telling this parable, Jesus said, **“Whoever has ears, let them hear”** (9). When one hears the parable of the sower, it is easy to dismiss it as a simple farming story that is so obvious it needs no further reflection. Some people may be offended, thinking they are being treated like kindergarten kids. Others may be bored, wanting a more exciting story. But Jesus warns us not to ignore his teaching in favor of our own thoughts. Rather, he wants us to grasp the meaning of what he has spoken. This requires humility, patience and deep respect for Jesus. Failure to listen is a serious problem. It leads to

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND

misunderstanding and can even break relationships. Let's really listen to Jesus' words.

Jesus' disciples must have been surprised at his parable. They realized that he changed his teaching method and they asked, **“Why do you speak to the people in parables?”** (10) Jesus gave two reasons. First, Jesus reveals truth about the kingdom to those who accepted him as the Messiah. Jesus said, **“Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them”** (11). The word “secrets” comes from the word for “mystery.” It implies knowledge about something very valuable that is hidden. What is that? It is that Jesus has come as King of the kingdom of heaven. However, many Jewish people did not recognize him even though they had long expected the Messiah. They referred to the Messiah as **“the Son of David.”** They expected a Davidic kingdom in which their enemies were conquered and the nation Israel prospered. It was nationalistic and earthly, excluding the Gentiles and the marginalized. But the kingdom of heaven is not like that. It is made up of people from every tribe, language and nation. It is not a geographical location. It is where Jesus reigns over people who accept him as their King. Jesus had demonstrated this by taking care of all kinds of sick people and public sinners. However, the nation Israel, under the influence of the religious leaders, did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. So, they crucified him. Only those who followed him wholeheartedly, like his disciples, recognized who he really was. To them the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom was given. Anyone who accepts Jesus gains access to all the secrets of the kingdom. Apostle Paul described Jesus as **“the mystery of God in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”** (Col 2:2b-3). As Jesus said in verse 12a, **“Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance.”** They grow more and more in understanding Christ and his kingdom. They become more and more fruitful; their joy is ever increasing and they live with a sense of wonder and awe; their lives are abundant. On the other hand, Jesus said in verse 12b, **“Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”** Those who reject Jesus wither more and more as time passes by until they finally perish.

Second, Jesus hides the secrets of the kingdom from unbelievers. Jesus said, “This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand’” (13). The religious

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND

leaders saw Jesus and heard his message about the kingdom of heaven, but deliberately rejected it. Then their hearts were hardened. Their eyes were blinded and their ears deafened. They could not understand Jesus' person or work at all. Jesus said to them in John 5:39-40, **"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."** Whenever anyone rejects Christ, God's truth is hidden from them.

The religious leaders' response has surprised many people past and present. However, it was not a surprise to God. It fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which Jesus quoted about them: **"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them"** (14-15). This prophecy has applied not only in Isaiah's time, and in Jesus' time, but it applies in our time as well. Those who hear the message of the kingdom and ignore it become harder and harder. Callouses grow on their hearts until they become hard that their consciences fail. Though they sin greatly, they have no guilt or remorse. Though judgment is impending, they ignorantly indulge in sinful pleasures. Still, God does not want the wicked to perish in sin. God really wants everyone to repent, be saved, and be healed (1Ti 2:4; 2Pe 3:9).

Jesus' disciples were different from the hard-hearted. Jesus pointed out how blessed they are in verses 16-17: **"But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For 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."** When we see the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, they were all looking forward to the Messiah's coming. They did not receive the things promised, but only welcomed them from a distance (Heb 11:39). But Jesus' disciples actually saw the Messiah and listened to his teachings in person. How blessed they were! Apostle John testified, **"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the words of life"** (1Jn 1:1). They saw Jesus feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish and participated in that miracle. Afterward, many in the crowd demanded

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND

more free bread from Jesus. When Jesus taught that he is the bread of life, the crowd was upset and stopped following him. Then Jesus asked his disciples, **“You do not want to leave too, do you?”** Simon Peter answered, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God”** (Jn 6:66-69). Apostle John wrote, **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth”** (Jn 1:14). How blessed the disciples are! What about us? Though we do not see and hear Jesus as they did, we are still blessed. Through their testimony, we can see and hear Jesus with the eyes and ears of faith. Jesus said to Apostle Thomas, **“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”** (Jn 20:29). Anyone who has faith in Jesus is blessed! Do you feel blessed?

Second, the blessings to those who understand (18-23). To his disciples, who believed in him and asked, Jesus explained the meaning of the parable of the sower. Jesus said that the seed is the message about the kingdom (19). There are so many messages in our world today. Some of them are very helpful; others, harmful. Some are encouraging; others, depressing. Some build up people; others tear down people. Some pierce the heart like a poisoned arrow—especially the words of gossip and slander spoken behind one’s back. Others bring healing and restoration. Among all the messages, the best one is the message about the kingdom. The message about the kingdom comes from heaven. In essence, it is different than all other messages. The message about the kingdom gives us the forgiveness of sins, heals our wounds, restores our relationships with God and others, and gives us the meaning of life and purpose. Furthermore, it gives us true rest for our souls, freedom from the fear of death, peace and joy in our hearts, and victory over the devil. In addition, it gives us eternal life, and living hope in the kingdom of God. What a blessing the message of the kingdom brings!

The soils are the hearts of people, and represent four responses to the message about the kingdom. The first three are unfruitful for different reasons. They have in common that they all hear the word, but none of them understand it. **In the case of the path-like hearts, they are too hard to accept the word of God.** To them, it is irrelevant and outdated. Their own strong idea rules their hearts. They are proud and stubborn. In their ignorance, they

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND

become the prey of the devil, who steals the word from them. Those whose hearts are like rocky soil are very shallow in commitment. They live based on their feelings. At first, they are very joyful and positive. But when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they immediately stop following Jesus. Trouble and persecution is to faith what sunlight is to plants; it is a necessary ingredient for growth (1Pe 1:7). The problem of those with rocky heart soil is that they have no root. When it is time to make a deep commitment, they simply fall away.

Those whose hearts are like thorny soil hear the word, and it begins to grow. At the same time, other things grow, including the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth (22). These worries and temptations are very strong; they compete with the word for first place in one's heart. A power struggle develops. When they hear the word, and look at God they find peace. But as they listen to other messages, they worry about how to make money, survive, and marry successfully. Worries and temptations become bigger and stronger, while the peace and joy of the word becomes smaller and weaker. Finally, the word is choked out completely.

Let's read verse 23. **“But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”** Those like good soil differ from others in that they “understand” the word. What does it mean to “understand” the word? In light of verse 15, understanding comes from the heart, not from the head. It is not just the work of human reason, but comes as revelation from above. It is the gift of God to a humble heart that is willing to learn. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to illumine our hearts to see Christ and his kingdom through the word of God. Our souls are refreshed. We gain the wisdom, comfort and strength to overcome all kinds of hardships.

Most of all, the word of God transforms our inner person and gradually we can bear fruit. This fruit is not primarily outward, but inward; it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit to transform our character. A troublemaker can become a man of peace and a blessing to others. A selfish person can become a sacrificial servant who seeks others' welfare. This fruit comes naturally; it overflows from one's inner being and blesses others. In the course of time, this fruit is visible to others. This fruit is so abundant that Jesus calls it “one

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND

hundred times.” At least, it is “thirty times.” The word of God has power to bear abundant fruit, and it will surely do so whenever it is planted in good heart soil. If a person’s life does not bear fruit, the problem is not with the word of God, circumstances or other people. It is a problem of one’s own heart. If we are humble, learning and obedient to God’s word, the Holy Spirit works to enable us to understand the message about the kingdom and to bear much fruit in our lives.

Some of us here may never have experienced the kingdom of heaven. If so, I urge you to pray for God’s mercy to understand the message about the kingdom. Others need to grow more and more in the fullness of Christ and his kingdom. Let’s all pray to better understand the message about the kingdom of heaven, enjoy all its blessings, and bear good fruit in our lives.