

Sermon – Matthew 13:1-22 – Tregear 18.7.2021 – Mission made impossible?

On that day, after Jesus went out of the house, he sat by the lake. And such a large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat to sit while the whole crowd stood on the shore. He told them this story: “Listen! A farmer wanted to sow some seeds. Before he sowed, he had decided to use his oxen to till the soil and clear the land. In his clearing, he ripped up the soil so that the seed would land in the soil. He took away the rocks that would block the seeds and ripped up the thorns that would stop the seeds from going in. Finally, he had created the ideal soil before he sowed. The soil then sprang forth crop, some more and some less: a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. The one who has ears had better listen!

So listen to the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches. This is why the sower had to rip up the soil to keep seeds in the ground. As we all know, rocks can keep the seed from taking root. If a man has no root in himself and does not endure; when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he falls away. Therefore, the sower had to take away rocks in his clearing the land. Other problems could occur. Worldly cares and the seductiveness of wealth, like thorns, could choke the word, so it produces nothing. The sower also ripped up the thorns. After all the preparation, the soil had become acceptable and friendly ground for the seed. The friendly ground is the person who hears the word and understands. He bears fruit, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”

I can hear you saying, Hey Dave, wait on. What are you talking about? That’s not what Jesus said, you’ve changed it around.

You’re right.

But if you were a farmer listening in to Jesus you would have been thinking – what is Jesus saying? The sensible thing was to plough the field, take away the obstacles. Don’t waste the seed by sowing it randomly on any land! If you prepare the soil right then you’ll have a good harvest. If you get rid of the obstacles everything will be fine, there won’t be the opposition and Jesus’ movement will have an easily paved road on which to follow. Jesus’ audience could

choose a better-planned path, but Jesus doesn't tell the story this way. So, what's going on here.

Let's pray

We've come to a critical point in Matthew's gospel. Up till now Jesus has shown by his actions of healing, driving out demons etc that he is someone special. People are saying that he is the promised one. The prophecies are being fulfilled but there is also confrontation. We've seen in chapters 11&12 that as Jesus teaches and preaches in the towns of Galilee that there is a developing opposition from the religious leaders.

So we come to chapter 13 which is the third big teaching segment in Matthew. There are 7 parables gathered together. And they're all about the kingdom of God. We've noticed, haven't we, that there's a lot of teaching about the kingdom of God so far from Jesus. What exactly is this kingdom? Well Jesus is going to tell us more about the kingdom in this chapter. Today we just look at the first parable.

But before we do that just a few things about parables. Parables were used by rabbis and teachers of Jesus' day. But they used them differently – to explain or illustrate the meaning of the OT law. Jesus used parables to give new teaching. Parables are only used by Jesus in the Bible. There are one or two in the OT but basically it's just Jesus who uses them. The word parable literally means "to throw alongside". Jesus is using them as illustrations, but he's doing something more, he's throwing them alongside his teaching, to help explain a deeper truth.

And there's something else. Jesus often adds the words, "he who has ears to hear". Like he's saying, "You need to listen to this carefully and think about it." What's Jesus saying? It's not just about hearing but it's about obeying what you hear. These parables are often uncomfortable, they are subversive, they get under the skin and begin to make the truth bite.

And just like this first parable, the parable of the soils or the sower, they're unusual stories. They make you stop and think and question. We ask, "What did Jesus mean by that?" They are not merely stories to enjoy; they hold up one reality to serve as a mirror of another, the kingdom of God.

And one other thing. By using a story Jesus is doing something quite different from the Pharisees. You remember how they had all these rules to try and "help" people obey God better. They actually were trying to reduce the requirements of the Law in order to make it easier to obey the law. Well, you remember what Jesus said back in Matthew 5, "You have heard it said....eg do not murder... well, I tell you Anyone who is angry has murdered." Who can keep these commandments!!!? No one – we need a Saviour, someone who can be our champion, who can meet the requirements for us. You will notice in the parables that Jesus doesn't say, "Just do this or that, and you'll be right."

So let's listen to Jesus as he explains the kingdom of God.

The parable of the soils was simple and straightforward. It mentions 4 soils. Seed is sown on the path, rocky places of shallow soil, thorns, and good soil. Then there is the explanation of the parable in v. 18-23. Each of the 4 responses are responses to God's word.

First, the path represents the one who did not understand the word, and had the word snatched away from the heart by Satan (13:19). Second, the rocky soil represents the one who did not take root because of persecution. Third, the thorny soil represents the one who was so preoccupied with worries of this life and deceitful wealth that the word was choked out. Fourth, the good soil represents the one who would hear, understand, and bear a harvest.

When looking at the parable, it is quite easy to read the story on its own merit, even on Jesus' explanation. From the picture created by the parable, it seems that the sower was randomly wasting seed, without consideration of the soil at all. We're not told why he didn't remove the obstacles. He just did not.

The parable itself does not say that the sower is God. The sower could have been anyone who had the word, whether he was Jesus, the disciples or anyone else, you or me. Jesus focused more on the word and its recipients, he's showing us what happens to the Word when it goes out. It's mostly bad news of people falling away or not responding at all. The climax of harvest provides a bit of good news in spite of largely bad news of wasted sowing. This parable seems more descriptive than prescriptive, as it describes what happened when the kingdom message was sent but not telling us how we should do the spreading (i.e., it doesn't say, "Make sure you choose the right soil!"). Most of the soil was bad anyway. The parable also does not focus on the issue of "who is saved and who is not saved?" It purely describes what happens with the recipients of the word. The parable then is quite limited in its meaning when read by itself. So we need to read it in the light of what else Jesus says. You notice that there are three sections in this passage. There is the parable v.1-9; then there's this Isaiah passage v.10-17 and then there's Jesus taking his disciples aside in v.18-23 to explain the parable to them on their own.

The section of 13.10 –17 seems a strange thing for Jesus to say so we need to look at it more closely. The disciples had asked Jesus why do you speak in parables? And his response seems very surprising – READ v.11-15

Jesus quotes from Isaiah the prophet, writing 700 years before Jesus. They would have remembered the story of Isaiah in chapter 6. Isaiah had had a vision of God; his mouth was burnt or seared by a coal; he's trembling there before God. God says, "Who will I send? Isaiah says, "Here am I send me". So what does God say to Isaiah, "I'm so glad you volunteered. I'm going to make you the most popular evangelist that walked the earth and the crowds will be streaming into the MCG in order to hear every word that comes from your mouth." That's not what God said. Rather he said to him v.9,10 of Isaiah 6 repeated here in v.14 & 15. Isaiah, I'm commissioning you to shut the eyes of the people, to stop the ears of the people, that their hearts may be hardened. Isaiah's mission is simply to be God's instrument of judgement. God would make their eyes shut just as they want. "How long will this go on for," says Isaiah – God says that he will keep a remnant, there will be some who will listen and respond, like the good soil; they will listen to what I say, and have ears to hear.

The message of the Kingdom is good news, but only for those who have ears to hear, only to those who respond. But for those who refuse to listen and respond it is a message of judgement. Because what it is doing is confirming their hardened hearts, distracted minds and rebellious wills – they refuse to believe and receive the message which the King declares. So Jesus tells parables that don't deliberately hide the truth from people but they evoke a response like the disciples later in v.36 – “tell us more, we want to know what you mean.”

The parables point to the fact that the kingdom has come, now, and we can enter it, if we hear, understand and believe. For the disciples, and possibly for us, we expect that the coming of this Kingdom will be earth-shattering. But for Jesus there is a deliberate veiling of the secrets of the Kingdom by the use of parables. We do not yet see the world-shattering effect that the kingdom will have ultimately. When the king returns in power and glory, at Jesus second coming, that will be the cataclysmic upheaval by which the kingdom will be revealed in all its fullness. But these parables are telling us that at this point the kingdom is secret; it is penetrating like salt and light (in the Sermon on the Mount), or like the yeast here, or growing like the tiny mustard seed. It is therefore appropriate that the teaching method of the kingdom should reflect its growth.

Just like Isaiah, Jesus was also the Lord's servant. Both were going on an apparently hopeless mission that would result in rejection. The disciples, too, would be involved in this mission. We continue to be involved in this mission.

Remember last week we finished chapter 12 with Jesus pointing to the disciples and saying this is my family. Within this new family, the disciples would do the will of the Father because the Father was the head of the household. His wish would be their command. What was his command? Based on the parable, most likely the Father's will had to do with sowing the word of the kingdom message. Contrary to the seemingly discouraging message of the parable itself, the whole story became an encouragement. This work regardless of results was the Father's will, simply because God was in charge.

This parable would be a great source of encouragement to the disciples and the early Christians, followers of Jesus. In this parable Jesus is saying to them, “As you go live your new

lives, as you share the good news, there will be difficulties, obstacles, much opposition". But understanding Isaiah 6, that they were in the same line as Isaiah who would encounter hard hearts and people's unwillingness to listen and obey. The disciples could take heart. Their job was to sow the seed. It might seem a futile task but the results were up to God. God would bring fruit, he would have a remnant. It wasn't their job to twist people's arms. But to hold out the truth, to sow the good news of the Kingdom.

It would have been nice if Jesus could have removed all obstacles and made the soil fertile for all the seed. People would have listened to the message, the good news about Jesus, and responded positively. We live in a world, driven by efficiency and statistics. Results must happen yesterday! And if they do not, we quickly try to improve things. The parable teaches that results do not always happen in the way the followers of Jesus expect them. In fact, the results almost seem random, at times, left up to chance. Chance seems to be all that was left when the sower randomly threw the seeds in the parable. Without Jesus' words from Isaiah 6, the Christian faith is a faith of pure chance. With Isaiah 6, however, we see that God is in control, yes it may seem a hopeless cause but we can trust the father as we do his will.

As we finish, there is another thing that comes out of this parable and is worth dwelling on. The sower seems quite random in his work. He did not prepare the soil and figure out his target audience. We sometimes feel we have to have the right way of "witnessing" or we might feel I don't know much so how can I sow the Word, tell others. In his story, the sower just spread the seed on whatever path he came across. While this was bad farming practice, Jesus deliberately used a bad practice to show that not every single work of the word would be neatly methodical. Not every method can prepare people to hear the word. The sower acted like he did not know. Jesus is saying "Just do it". We don't have to know everything, we just have to know Jesus. There are indications elsewhere in the New Testament about how we are to share and witness but this parable has nothing to say about a neatly packaged mission strategy. Jesus' parable basically challenged Matthew's audience to choose to "sow as you go." Wherever you are, sow seeds. We don't know if it will be unfruitful or fruitful soil, but sow. One thing is clear, we as God's people are to be sowers. The emphasis on the word certainly is clear. As Jesus' followers let's keep learning from Jesus. We need to keep in close

contact with the master Sower, Jesus. Learning from him, trusting him. We are not called to just stand still. We are his sowers working with him.

God's way might seem completely different from human convention and utterly hopeless. Sowing on bad soil, unprepared soil, soil with obstacles and thorn bushes, seems silly and counter-productive. Without Isaiah 6, the entire effort seems like a mindless and idiotic gamble. With Isaiah 6, Jesus' message, all of a sudden, gives hope. Just like the final crop would yield a hundred, sixty, and thirty times the original seed, there will be people who will respond. And who is to say that such random sowing cannot yield surprisingly bountiful results? Such is the force of Jesus' parable. Telling others about Jesus, sharing the Gospel, can sometimes seem to be fruitless, a waste of time and energy, much like the parable and Isaiah 6. It seems like an impossible mission. An impossible mission is not necessarily a bad mission.

But we can hold on to the truth from this parable that the seed *is* doing its work, and *shall* produce a harvest. God is at work, and therefore there is the great incentive to keep on sowing even when the outlook seems bleak—Jesus is returning, that is certain. Meanwhile he has called us to sow as we go.

You aren't alone, but you may never be the majority.