

Matthew 13B

- Jesus is ready to begin His Kingdom Program training, and we're all enrolled in that class
 - In this training program, Jesus must teach His disciples about the nature, the course and the purpose of the Kingdom Program
 - These men will carry the program forward, establishing the New Testament Church and authoring the NT canon
 - So naturally, they must understand how the Kingdom Program differs from a literal, physical Kingdom on earth
 - Because the work of the Kingdom program will be very different from the experience of living in the physical Kingdom to come
 - So starting in this chapter, Jesus is teaching Kingdom Program 101, about how the Lord will build a spiritual community out of the world
 - That community will be established and grown by God, not by men, yet God will use His disciples to reach people
 - But our work will be opposed by the enemy at every turn, so His disciples must be prepared to suffer in the course of their work
 - We accept these truths plainly, but Jesus' disciples often struggled to understand them
 - And to make matters worse, Jesus taught in a way that concealed the truths from the unbelieving masses
 - Jesus taught the crowds exclusively in parables, which often left His disciples in the dark too
- So what follows in Matthew 13 are a series of parables about the Kingdom Program, and each parable describes some aspect of that program
 - Before we look at our first parable, let's consider the setting in which Jesus delivers it

[Matt. 13:1](#) That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea.

[Matt. 13:2](#) And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.

- Jesus gets into a boat on the shore of the Galilee and sits down to teach while leaving the crowd stranded on the beach
- Jesus has placed a barrier between Himself and the crowd intentionally so they can't reach Him physically
- Those crowds were attracted to Jesus principally for one reason: to be healed; most of them held little interest in Jesus' message
 - So Jesus sits in a boat a short distance from the shore to ensure that the crowd has no choice but to listen to His word
 - Had Jesus remained on land, the crowd would have pressed Jesus for healing and prevented Him from teaching
 - So Jesus holds them at bay (literally), because He's intent on delivering a more important ministry: His word
- It's a beautiful picture of how Christ prioritizes our spiritual needs over our physical needs during this time on earth
 - As much as the Lord desires to heal our physical bodies, He is far more concerned with healing our souls
 - And the solution for what ails us spiritually is to hear the word of God
- Which is why sometimes Jesus won't give us the materials or physical desires we request, at least not for a while
 - I believe He does so in order to ensure we have incentive to remain engaged in listening to His word
 - And in the long run, His word will heal us and bless us in ways beyond the limited earthly ways we requested
- So knowing Jesus wants the crowd to hear His message, He begins to teach with His first parable

[Matt. 13:3](#) And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow;

[Matt. 13:4](#) and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.

[Matt. 13:5](#) "Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil.

[Matt. 13:6](#) "But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

[Matt. 13:7](#) "Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out.

[Matt. 13:8](#) "And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.

[Matt. 13:9](#) "He who has ears, let him hear."

- Since this is our first parable in the Gospel of Matthew, let's take a moment to understand how parables work in general
 - A parable uses ordinary circumstances from everyday life to represent more complex spiritual truths
 - Being familiar with the ordinary situation allows us to work out the meaning of the deeper, spiritual truth
 - In that way, a parable is a method of packing a lot of meaning into a simple story
 - For those reasons, parables have a paradoxical quality
 - They obscure truth, which is something Jesus was trying to do, but at the same time, they simplify complicated ideas
 - And like solving any puzzle, interpreting a parable properly requires making sure that all the pieces fit together
 - If they don't, then it means we have gone wrong somewhere
- Turning to our first parable, we notice right away that it's constructed in four parts or conditions
 - Across these four conditions we find some details varying while others remain the same
 - Let's start by considering what stays the same across all four conditions: each condition has the same farmer or sower
 - We don't have four different farmers each sowing a different field
 - No, there's just one guy in the story sowing as he moves along
 - And that farmer is clearly a lousy sower, as sowers go

- He's throwing seed indiscriminately, randomly, without care or precision, seemingly without concern for where it lands
- It's as if he has an unlimited supply of free seed
- Moreover, the farmer does no work to ensure the success of his planting
 - He isn't preparing the ground or watering the seed or pruning or removing weeds, etc.
 - He just leaves the outcome to nature
- Based on that observation, we quickly conclude that the sower isn't the focus of Jesus' parable
 - A parable about sowing must have a sower, of course, but the sower is incidental to the story, he's not the point of the story
 - The focus of the story is clearly elsewhere and the farmer's lack of care and skill makes that clear
- Which brings us to the other detail that is consistent across the four conditions: the seed
 - The seed for each condition is the same...every kernel has equal potential to grow, equal ability to produce fruit
 - So if the seed is the same and the sower is the same...then what varies between the four conditions?
- There are two major details that vary from condition to condition: the type of soil and the outcome of the planting
 - In fact, some call this story the parable of the four soils, because that's the most prominent detail of the parable
 - Each of the different soils produces a different result and it's the interplay between soil and outcome that drives the narrative
 - So let's take a moment to examine each soil and its corresponding outcome
 - In the first condition, the seed falls on a hard-packed road
 - A seed falling on that kind of ground has no chance to embed itself in the soil

- It just sits exposed to the world and as a result, birds see the seed and swoop down for an easy meal
- There's no growth, and in fact there's no life at all
- In the second condition the seed falls on rocky places, begins to grow but soon withers and dies
 - Rocky ground is a type of soil common in the mountain regions of Palestine
 - It's the same type of ground common to South Texas...thin topsoil atop a layer of limestone rock
- When topsoil is thin it remains loose, making it easier for the seed to enter easily
 - Also, moisture easily penetrates loose soil, so a seed that falls in that environment can easily germinate overnight
 - Notice in v.5 Jesus says the seed sprang up immediately
- But the thin soil and rock conspire to bring an end to the plant
 - Jesus says in v.6 that when the sun rises the plant can't survive the heat of the day
 - Because the root can't go deep and the moisture evaporates quickly, once again we're left without life
- In the third condition, the seed falls on soil that's very capable of sustaining life
 - In fact, it's so accommodating that it's already supporting a host of harmful weeds
 - Jesus says in v.7 that the third soil has weeds and thorns, and as these grow up with the seeds they choke it off
 - To choke off doesn't mean to die, in this context, it means to not produce fruit (which would be more seed)
 - So the third soil is the first condition where we end with a living plant, albeit a plant that is struggling in the midst of competition
 - It may be alive, but all its energy is directed toward its survival
 - Which leaves no energy remaining to reproduce itself
 - Finally, we have the fourth condition, which is clearly the ideal outcome

- Jesus calls the fourth soil “good” meaning it’s loose and deep and free of contaminants
- As a result the seed takes root, grows and produces a great crop
- We can see how the simple story of the parable is easily understood, but the spiritual meaning is outside our reach, at least at first
 - Yet Jesus expected His disciples in the crowd to understand it, but how could they?
 - Notice what Jesus says in v.9..”he who has ears, let him hear”
 - We first saw Jesus use that phrase in Chapter 11, and I told you then it would become a common phrase
 - Jesus is saying that not everyone will understand what He’s saying, so He’s addressing only those who are able to hear
 - And the Lord determines who is able through the ministry of the Spirit

1Cor. 2:11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

1Cor. 2:12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,

1Cor. 2:13 which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

1Cor. 2:14 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

- Just as your spirit knows your inner thoughts, so the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God
- And the Spirit is given to us to teach us spiritual truth
- When we speak spiritual truth to a fellow believer, the information comes in the form of human words, Paul says
- But in reality, it’s a spiritual transmission from God to the teacher to the student and every step is directed by the Spirit of God
- But because unbelievers do not possess the Spirit of God, spiritual truth lies beyond their grasp

- Notice in 1 Cor 2:14 Paul says that a natural man (unbeliever) does not accept things of the Spirit (spiritual truth)
- Moreover, Paul says they cannot accept these things because they require the Spirit to reveal them
- So the universal decoder ring of spiritual truth is the Spirit of God, and only the children of God possess the Spirit's insight
 - Which is why Jesus says only those with ears may hear His message...He means only those with the Spirit can understand what He says
 - The unbelievers in that crowd and unbelievers who read Matthew 13 today can't appreciate the meaning of these things
 - While Jesus' disciples in the crowd, and His disciples today, will understand the truth as the Spirit explains it
 - Maybe not at first but in time the truth will be revealed
 - Jesus' obscuring of the truth was a result of Israel's rejection, which Jesus states plainly in the next passage

Matt. 13:10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

Matt. 13:11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

Matt. 13:12 "For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.

Matt. 13:13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

Matt. 13:14 "In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;

YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;

Matt. 13:15 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,

WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,

AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,

OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,

HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,

AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,

AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'

[Matt. 13:16](#) "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

[Matt. 13:17](#) "For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

- Last week I introduced this chapter by explaining that in the wake of Israel's rejection of Him, Jesus shifted His approach to ministry in dramatic ways
 - One of the changes was refusing to teach openly, and instead Jesus began teaching in parables exclusively
 - In fact notice in 13:34 Matthew reports that Jesus never taught the crowds without using parables from this time forward
 - This switch was so dramatic that it caught even the disciples by surprise
 - And we see that clearly here, as they felt the need to ask Jesus in v.10 why He has resorted to speaking in parables
 - Jesus responds saying it has been granted to the disciples to know the mysteries of the Kingdom Program but not to the rest
 - God is selectively revealing truth to those who have faith in Jesus while withholding it from those who didn't
 - Which is why Jesus chose to speak in parables, to keep the truth beyond their reach
 - Notice in v.12 Jesus says that whoever has will receive more until they have an abundance
 - He's speaking about spiritual insight, saying those who received Jesus as Messiah will receive far more revelation as a result
 - While those who did not receive the truth of Jesus would lose what little insight and privilege they already had
 - Specifically, the generation that rejected Jesus lost what little revelation and blessing they had received through the Law and prophets
 - They would lose access to Jesus' miracles and teaching in the near future when Jesus ascended to the Father
 - And after that Israel would lose their nation and their temple and their place in the land

- While the disciples who received Jesus gained much more
- They received the Spirit at Pentecost followed by greater revelation in the New Testament canon
- The Lord said this would happen through the prophets, specifically in Isaiah 6
 - The prophet warned Israel that when the Messiah came He would speak in parables to them so that they can't understand what He said
 - This happened because Israel's hearts were dull, and they were scarcely looking or listening to God any longer
 - They overlooked their Messiah, committed the unforgivable sin, and so they lost the opportunity to understand the Kingdom
 - In fact, Isaiah says plainly that had the Lord not spoken in parables, had He explained the Kingdom plainly, Israel would have understood
 - And had they understood, they would have returned to the Lord and the Lord would have healed them
 - Now as we read this, we all have the same reaction...why didn't the Lord allow that to happen?
 - And the answer is simple...because of you and me and the millions of other Gentile believers the Lord has saved over the past 2,000 years
 - The larger plan of God for Israel and for the world depends upon Israel rejecting Jesus
 - Which is why the Lord did not allow His people to return to Him having rejected Jesus as they did
 - But in a future day, the Lord will have mercy on Israel
 - He will lead them to call out for Jesus saying "Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord"
 - In the meantime, by Israel's transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make Israel jealous, as Paul says in Romans 11
- So now it's time for the Holy Spirit to explain this parable to us, through the word of Jesus

[Matt. 13:18](#) "Hear then the parable of the sower.

[Matt. 13:19](#) “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.

[Matt. 13:20](#) “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

[Matt. 13:21](#) yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.

[Matt. 13:22](#) “And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

[Matt. 13:23](#) “And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.”

- In v.19, Jesus gives us the key to decoding the parable
 - He says the seed represents the word of the Kingdom and the soil pictures the heart
 - Luke’s version of this parable makes Jesus’ explanation even clearer:

[Luke 8:11](#) “Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God.

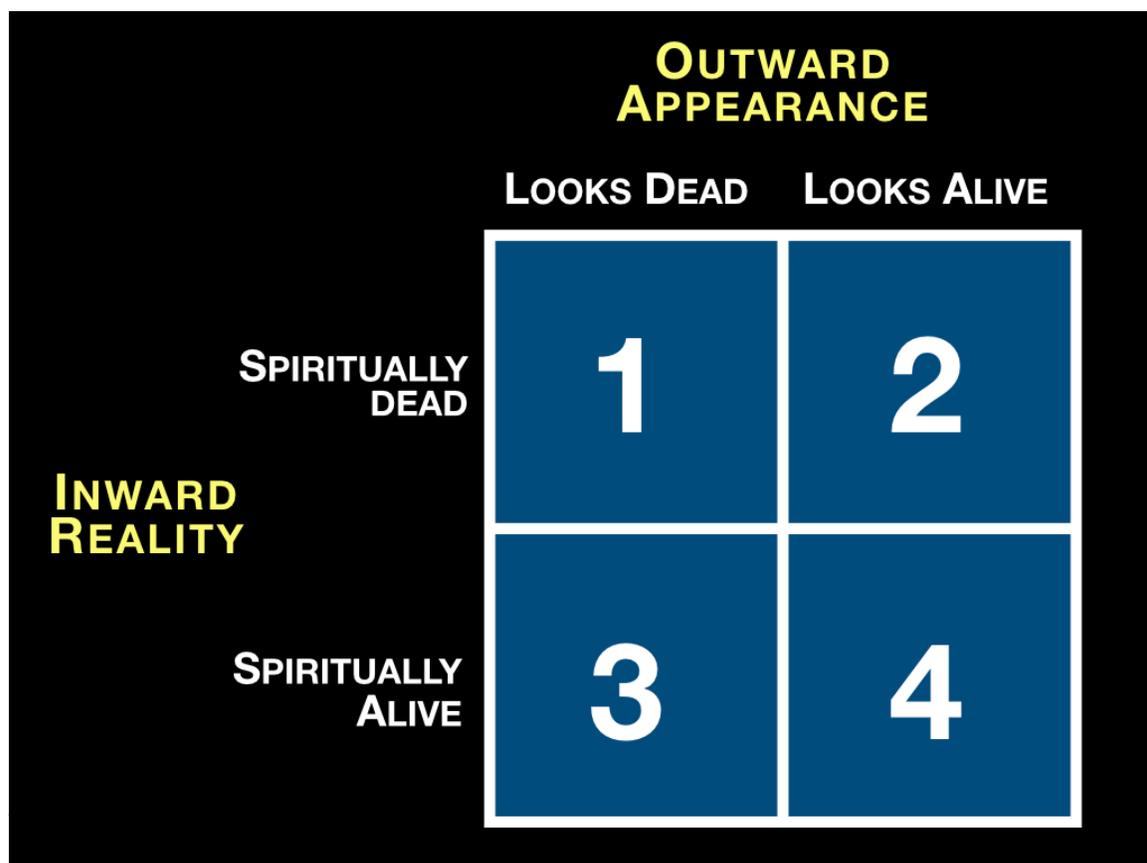
- So the seed represents the spreading or planting of the word of God
- And that seed is “planted” in human hearts, which is itself a picture of our spirit
- So planting a seed in the ground pictures the word of God coming to live and grow inside us spiritually
- And therefore each of the four conditions explains how different people respond to the Kingdom program message, which is the Gospel
 - And based on this parable, there are four and only four possible responses to hearing the Gospel during this age
 - All human responses to the Gospel fit into one of these four conditions, so we need to keep that in mind as we interpret it

- So in v.19 the first condition represents someone who has heard the word but does not understand it and the devil removes it from them
 - Luke makes this situation a little clearer in his explanation

Luke 8:12 “Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved.

- The problem here is the heart...it's so hard, like hard-packed soil, that the word has no chance to enter much less grow
- And the enemy comes along afterward to remove it from the person's attention to ensure that doesn't change
- In the second condition, the seeds enters the soil easily, and so a person might receive the word of the Gospel with joy, or so it seems
 - But as Jesus says in v.21 there is no root, and without a root, there is no life
 - The faith in the word is merely external and temporary, and the moment that faith is tested by trials or persecution, it dies
 - Like the plant that appeared to take hold in the soil, all was not as it seemed
 - And in time, faith dies like the plant, which is to say it never had a true chance
 - Then in the third condition the word of God takes root in the soil of the heart, and it begins to grow as it should
 - But the deceitfulness of the world and attraction of riches becomes a distraction and drain on the individual
 - Rather than investing energy in their spiritual growth and reproduction, they spend their time and energy on fighting to survive
 - And as a result they are unfruitful, spiritually speaking
 - Remember, in this condition the seed has taken root and lives on in the heart, but it amounts to little or no spiritual benefit
 - Finally, in the fourth condition, Jesus says this person hears the word, understands it, and begins to bear spiritual fruit

- The Greek word for understand means to have insight
 - It's not merely knowing the plain meaning of the word, but rather it means to appreciate the deeper implications of that truth
 - So that the person conforms their life to that truth and begins to live it out...and in that way they produce spiritual fruit
 - And of course, that fruit is more seed...more spreading of the truth leading to more disciples in their wake
- Now clearly Jesus is taking us to some point here, and it's easy to get distracted by trying to understand the kind of person represented by each condition
 - But if we get too absorbed by that exercise, we will miss the big picture here, and to help us see the larger point, let me suggest a simple diagram
 - It turns out that the four conditions of this parable form a structure similar to a Latin square
 - A Latin square is a mathematical array where two or more conditions are crossed to create a set of unique conditions
 - If you remember, we said there are 2 factors that vary across the four conditions, which results in a Latin square that looks like:



- The first variable is the inward reality of the plant...in two conditions we find the plant dead in the end
- And in the other two conditions, the plant remains alive
- Let's call this variable the inward reality of the person's heart: after hearing the word, are they spiritually dead or alive?
 - The second variable is their outward appearance
 - And again, in two conditions the person projects a lack of faith
 - While in the other two conditions, the person projects a faith in the word
- And when we cross these two variables to form the four conditions in the parable, we arrive at the full spectrum of possible outcomes
 - In the first condition, we have a spiritually dead person, an unbeliever, and the person looks like it
 - He's the hardened atheist, the person with no interest in God or religion at all, and he's proud of his unbelief
 - There's no confusing this person for a believer, and unfortunately this is a possible outcome when the Gospel is preached
 - Jumping to Condition #4, we find the opposite situation
 - Here's a person who is clearly born again by their faith in the word and they are alive in the Spirit
 - Moreover, they are producing fruit – they are mature
 - They look like a believer, and have become an outward witness of the truth
 - Back in Condition #2 we have the person who responded to the message as if it had taken root in their heart
 - They responded with joy to the message, perhaps attending church or a Bible study...maybe being baptized even
 - But that initial response had no spiritual root...it was a response that came entirely in the flesh and not in the spirit

- So in time, when persecution or trials came, they quickly changed their mind and fell away
- They ultimately return to who they always were: spiritually dead
- Finally, we have Condition #3, the person hears the word, becomes spiritual alive yet produces no spiritual fruit
 - Jesus tells this parable largely to highlight this particular situation: the Condition #3 Christian
 - We can see that clearly when we look at how Luke ends this parable

Luke 8:16 “Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light.

Luke 8:17 “For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light.

Luke 8:18 “So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.”

- After Jesus told the parable, He makes His own application, and as He does He emphasizes only one of these four conditions: Condition #3
 - In speaking about that person, Jesus says no one lights a lamp and then covers it
 - If you go to the effort to light a lamp, you do so with the expectation of receiving its service
 - Likewise, when the Lord illuminates the truth of the Gospel in your heart, He expects you to shine that light as a witness to His glory
 - But when we allow the cares and worries of this world to distract us, we devote all our energy to surviving rather than thriving
 - And that witness is hidden, our light is covered by a flesh of worldliness and we produce no fruit for the one who planted us
 - His point is that we were saved by the message of the Gospel for a purpose, and that purpose was to serve the Kingdom Program

- And if we are to serve Christ as He expects, we can't allow ourselves to become distracted by the cares and riches of this world
- You'll know if you're in danger of becoming a Condition #3 Christian if you feel you're barely surviving in this world
- Are you weighed down by trial and temptation? Do you struggle to follow the basic disciplines of your faith like regular church attendance, Bible study, prayer?
 - Do you make spiritual commitments to yourself or others but then consistently you break those promises?
 - You promise yourself you'll get serious about Christ but before you know it, something comes along causing you break that promise?
- If that's you, Condition #3 Christian, you need to get spiritual wisdom this morning from this parable
 - You need to see these things with spiritual eyes...the enemy is fighting you, pulling you down, choking you off
 - And you're letting him do it
 - The enemy knows that if you ever got serious about following Christ and started keeping all those promises you're making to yourself, you would become fruitful
 - Not only would you find that joy and promise of life that you've been searching for everywhere else
 - But you would finally fulfill your purpose as a disciple...finally, you would be following Christ
 - That's the first key difference between the physical Kingdom and the Kingdom Program
 - In the Kingdom to come, we will all be glorified and sinless, obeying Christ and His word perfectly
 - But for now during the Kingdom Program, we will struggle against our flesh and against the enemy
 - And the key to serving Christ successfully during this age is to let the word of Christ grow in our hearts

- To make living it out our goal, so that we might be that light to the world