

Main Idea: According to Jesus in Matthew 13:1-23, there are four kinds of hearers with four kinds of hearts listening to God’s Word.

- I. Jesus tells parables (1-9).
 - A. A farmer sowed seed (3).
 - B. The seed fell on four kinds of soil (4-8).
- II. Jesus tells us why He tells parables (10-17).
 - A. He told them to *reveal* truth.
 - B. He told them to *conceal* truth.
- III. Jesus tells us the meaning of the parable of the sower (18-23).
 - A. Some people listen with hard hearts (19).
 1. This person hears the Word.
 2. This person loses the Word.
 - B. Some people listen with shallow hearts (20-21).
 1. Trials will strengthen a true believer.
 2. The same trials will expose an imitation believer.
 - C. Some people listen with crowded hearts (22).
 1. This person “adds Jesus” to his life.
 2. In reality, this person still loves something more than Jesus.
 - D. Some people listen with prepared hearts (23).
 1. This person hears God’s Word.
 2. This person retains God’s Word.
 3. This person keeps exhibiting the fruit of God’s Word.

Make It Personal: What happens when I hear God’s Word?

New Series: This morning, we’re launching a new series on the King’s parables in Matthew’s Gospel. I’m not sure we realize just how radical it was for a Jewish man to speak about another kingdom in the days when Rome ruled, but that’s what this King did. *The kingdom of heaven is like*, He said again and again. Eleven times we see the word “kingdom” in Matthew 13. The king has come, and He wants everyone to know about His kingdom. Or does He? Why does He tell these stories?

We’ll begin to find out today. It’s my joy to give the first message in this series and then hand off the baton to a team of brothers who will preach while Sherry and I are on a sabbatical break.

Sabbatical schedule: Thank you so much WBC family for this gracious gift. Sabbath rest is important. The Lord Himself rested on the seventh day. He commands us to rest as well. Paul exhorts Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.” It is the *on yourself* part of that command that a sabbatical seeks to address.

Sherry and I are not burned out, nor do we believe our ministry at WBC is finished. Yes, we are willing to serve wherever the Lord desires to use us, and we believe He has wonderful things in front of us at WBC. But to use an analogy from archery, it’s important to unstring the bow at times. And so, for the next three months, from April 28 through July 27, we’ll seek to do just that. My ministry will be to my wife, our daughters and sons in law, and four grandchildren. We’ll do some traveling, extended family time, and some home projects, with plenty of open time to experience whatever the Lord brings our way.

You will be well cared for here. Our pastoral team (Matt, Douglas, Michael, and Rex, and myself) as well as our combined board (led by our deacon chairman Dave and

^{**} Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a look at a parallel passage, see Mark 4:1-20 in the Mark series in 2004 and in 2022.

our trustee chairman Dennis) have been working hard to prepare for this season. It will not be a time of coasting, but moving forward.

On Sunday mornings in May, you'll be hearing a team of different men preaching through the parables in Matthew. Then in June, Rex will preaching through the book of 1 John on Sunday mornings. On Sunday evenings in June, we have asked our missionary Steve Stairs to deliver a four part series, "Learning How to Talk about Significant Theological Differences: A Comparison of Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology."

You'll be hearing from Preachers in Training on the second Sunday evenings, in a new series in 2 Peter. On Wednesday evenings, we'll be hearing from our missionaries and supported ministry leaders once again. And there's more. If you want to see the preaching calendar, it will be posted on the bulletin board in the hallway.

Our pastoral team and board members will be caring for the shepherding needs of the body. If you have pastoral needs, Pastor Matt will be the go to person in May, Rex in June, and Michael in July.

I am excited to see what the Lord will accomplish in and through you when I am not here. Jesus loves His church and He has wonderful purposes to accomplish as He continues to add new people to this church and grow each of us more into His likeness.

And now to Matthew 13. We're going to begin our series by listening to the King tell a parable that addresses a vital question. If He is the King, how do you explain why He received such mixed responses to His message, and ultimately why His message was rejected, and He was crucified? You might conclude that there's something deficient about this King and His Word. And if you did, you would be severely mistaken. As His first parable makes perfectly clear. Let's listen to it, and ponder it carefully.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 13:1-9

There are four kinds of people sitting in church this morning. This church. Every church. I'm not talking about age categories, or gender or social distinctions, either. I'm talking about heart conditions that people bring with them to auditoriums like this one.

Most of us will spend a lot of time sitting in church pews (or chairs) in our lifetime. As a pastor I see pews from a different perspective than most, since I have the wonderful and undeserved privilege of preach the Word from the pulpit. But over the years I've sat in the pews as well. I figured it up that with four years' worth of daily college chapels and then another four years of seminary chapels, that's over 1,000 times of sitting under the teaching of God's Word.

Have many sermons have you heard in your lifetime? I'd like to share a personal observation. It comes from time in the pews and in the pulpit.

When it comes to hearing God's Word, not everyone is hearing that is hearing.

You say, "What does that mean?!" Simply this. Just because I've "heard" a sermon doesn't mean I've really *heard* it. Here's the reason. When it comes to hearing the Word, the most important organ isn't the ear, but the *heart*. The ear can be functioning quite well, but that doesn't mean I will hear God's Word well.

So, I repeat. There are four kinds of people sitting in churches today listening to God's Word, with four kinds of hearts. That's not just my opinion, either. This is what the King says in Matthew 13:1-23.

There are three movements in this text. First, Jesus tells parables (1-9). Second, Jesus tells us why He tells parables (10-17). And third, Jesus tells us the meaning of the parable of the sower (18-23).

I. Jesus tells parables (1-9).

Matthew presents Jesus as the King. He gave the King's genealogy in chapter one and recorded His kingdom manifesto in chapters five through seven. He demonstrated the King's power by recording several miracles in chapters eight and nine. But he shows there's opposition to the King too, which Matthew documents in chapters eleven and twelve. We hear questions too, even by someone as loyal as John the Baptist. And at the end of chapter twelve, Jesus seems to distance Himself from His own family saying, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother (Matthew 12:50)."

And then we come to chapter thirteen. Jesus is about halfway through His three-year public ministry. Matthew mentions that great crowds have gathered. That's significant. The King's popularity is soaring, and the people can't get enough of Him.

Notice verses 1-2, "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach."

It's not the first time He taught by the Sea of Galilee (Mark 3:7), nor will it be the last. Due to crowd size and the opposition of the religious leaders, Jesus can't minister in the synagogues any longer as He did previously.

It's worth noting that Jesus embraces new methods when necessary. When the door shuts to the synagogue, He takes His preaching ministry to the open air. His message never changes, but His methods do. Some of us struggle with this.

Barclay gives a helpful example, "John Wesley was for many years a faithful and orthodox servant of the Church of England. Down in Bristol his friend George Whitefield was preaching to the miners, to as many as twenty thousand of them at a time, in the open air; and his hearers were being converted by the hundred. He sent for John Wesley. Wesley said, 'I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit.' The whole business of open air preaching rather offended him. He himself said, 'I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way—having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.' But Wesley saw that field preaching won souls and said, 'I cannot argue against a matter of fact.'"²

Jesus was the Master at making the most of teachable moments. Here He employs a floating pulpit to address a huge crowd packed on the shore to hear Him.

And then He employs another change in methodology. Verse 3 says, "And he told them many things in parables." Literally, parable means "throwing (*bole*) alongside (*para*)." A parable is a story of comparison. This wasn't Jesus' first parable either (see Mark 3:23), but it did mark a significant increase in His use of parables. Matthew emphasizes, "And he told them *many* things in parables (3)." Mark 4 records at least four parables. In Matthew 13, there are at least six. Altogether, we find thirty-plus parables in the synoptic gospels.

But why parables? There are several reasons. For starters, a parable gets people's attention. Keep in mind, open air preaching is different from conventional preaching. In the synagogue people are pretty much forced to listen all the way to the end. Even if you disagree with the preacher, you seldom get up and leave in the middle of his message. But in the open air, people are free to walk away at any time. And that's what they'll do unless the preacher grabs their attention and holds it.

It's hard to walk away from a story and here's one of the best. We commonly refer to it as the parable of the Sower, but it's really not so much about the Sower as the soil. It's the parable of the *four soils*, for as we'll see, the problem in the story is not with the

² Barclay, p. 84.

Sower, nor with the seed. The problem lies with the soil.

A. A farmer sowed seed (3). At the end of verse 3 Jesus says, “A sower went out to sow.” Farmers of course didn't use John Deere tractors. As in this story, a common first century farmer used the primitive method of broadcasting his seed. He held a sack of seed over his shoulder, walked through a field and scattered the kernels of grain. What happened to the seed?

B. The seed fell on four kinds of soil (4-8). Jesus identifies the first in verse 4. “And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.”³ Everyone could picture the scene. They could visualize the field. They knew that around the field and perhaps through the field were walking paths. They knew that people trampled on these paths, and so did their wagons and animals.

And they all knew what this traffic did to the soil on the walking paths. It packed it down and made it hard. So hard, in fact, that the seed that fell there could not penetrate the soil and thus could never germinate. Jesus said it simply became bird feed.

He describes a second scenario in verse 5. “Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil.” The second type of soil is rather deceptive. It’s “stony ground,” as the KJV puts it. There’s soil, but not much. From the surface it looks okay. You see dirt. But what you don't see is that the topsoil is only an inch deep. That's enough dirt for a seed to germinate, but it's not enough dirt for a young plant to establish its root system.

So the plants popped their heads out of the rocky ground. Did they last? No. Why not? According to verse 6, “But when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.” No root, therefore no fruit. Keep this in mind.

*Fruitage is always connected to rootage.*⁴

Then comes the third soil in verse 7. “Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.” It reminds me of the time I planted my own garden when I was in the sixth grade. I was all excited, worked the soil, marked out the rows, and dropped in the seed. That was in the Spring. Baseball was also in the Spring. So were a lot of other things a sixth grade boy likes to do. Guess what happened to the garden in the next couple of months? You guessed it. You could barely see the plants for the forest of weeds.

Seed doesn't have a chance if you don't get rid of the weeds. The problem is not with the seed. The seed will germinate, take root, and even start to grow. But the weeds will sap the life out of the good plants.

There is a happy ending to the story in verse 8. According to Jesus, “Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” Finally! There was no fruit from the packed soil, nor the rocky soil, nor the thorny soil. But some of the farmer’s seeds landed on good soil. And the result? A crop, that was thirty, sixty, even one hundred times more than was sown!⁵

So there’s the parable. To summarize, there’s one farmer who broadcasts some seed, and the outcome is that the seed lands in four types of soil.

1. The first three produced no lasting fruit. The second and third showed some initial promise, with some limited growth. But no fruit.

³ In Mark’s account we’re told, “As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path [KJV, ‘by the wayside’], and the birds came and ate it up.”

⁴ Observation by J. D. Jones, p. 93-4.

⁵ In Mark’s account it says, “And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

2. *The fourth produced lasting fruit.*⁶ And not just fruit, but lots of it, up to a 100-fold increase! According to R. A. Cole, "...even a tenfold return was good in Palestine; here the good soil yielded a hundredfold."⁷

Having concluded His story, Jesus gives the punchline in verse 9. "He who has ears, let him hear." Don't miss that. This is what this story is all about. *Hearing*. How a person hears. How he hears what? We'll see the answer in a moment.

But at this point, the text takes an unexpected turn. We would expect Matthew to tell us the interpretation of this parable, but he doesn't. Not yet. That comes in verses 18-23. But there's another question that Matthew wants us to ponder first, which he raises in verse 10. "Then the disciples came and said to him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?'"

Why parables, Jesus? Not just this first parable, but all of them.

II. Jesus tells us why He tells parables (10-17).

Mark's account gives another detail (NIV), "When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables." So two groups came to Him. There were the Twelve, that is the apostles. And there are "others around Him," referring it seems to other disciples of Jesus as distinguished from the Twelve.

Why parables? they want to know. Again, it's plural, "parables." Jesus had already spoken other parables and is about to tell more. Why? It's that question that the King proceeds to address. This is His purpose for these stories, not just the parable of the four soils, but all of His stories about His kingdom.

And here's His answer. He says in verses 11-12, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

In his commentary on Mark's account, Wessel acknowledges, "These verses are among the most difficult in the entire Gospel."⁸ Why did Jesus talk in parables? The answer has to do with what Jesus calls in verse 11, "the secret of God's kingdom." The Greek word for "secret" is *mysterion*. It appears only here (and in the parallel accounts of Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10) in the Gospels, but Paul uses it twenty-one times in his epistles. And John uses it four times in the Book of Revelation. We must not think of "mystery" in the sense of some Agatha Christie mystery novel. It basically refers, again citing Wessel, to "God's disclosure to man of what was previously unknown. It is proclaimed to all, but only those who have faith really understand."⁹

Jesus said He told parables for two reasons.

A. He told them to *reveal* truth. But not just reveal.

B. He told them to *conceal* truth. Listen to His words again in verse 11, "To you it has been given to know the secret of the kingdom of heaven (Mark 4:11 says "the kingdom of God")." Who is *you*? The "you" refers to Jesus' followers, to those whom Jesus has chosen to be His followers. He says that those who have followed Him are entitled to know the secrets of the kingdom.

⁶ James Brooks says, "Because of the primitive agricultural methods, an average harvest in ancient Palestine was probably no more than seven or eight times the amount of seed sown, and a good harvest probably was about ten." Brooks, J. A. (1991). *Mark* (Vol. 23, p. 79). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁷ Cole, R. A. (1994). *Mark*. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 957). Inter-Varsity Press.

⁸ Wessel, p. 648.

⁹ Wessel, p. 648.

And don't miss the passive verb. Jesus says, "It has been given to you." In other words, you didn't seek it, or earn it, or figure it out. You're not smarter than other people, nor more deserving.

Do you remember how these men became His disciples in the first place? We find the answer in Mark 3:13. "And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him." Indeed, *it has been given to you* based on the sovereign and gracious purposes of the King Himself.

"But to them it has not been given," says Jesus at the end of verse 11. In Mark's account Jesus says (NIV), "To those on the outside [that's those who haven't followed Jesus and are thus on the outside of His kingdom] everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

Mark devotes three verses to the question, why parables? Matthew devotes *seven* verses to that question. The why question is a big deal to Matthew.

I think when most people hear the word parable, they think, "Oh, yes. Nice little stories to help people understand complicated truth." But that's too simplistic. These stories are meant to conceal truth as much as reveal it.

Why would Jesus hide truth? And from whom? Jesus tells us in verses 13-17, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: " ' "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive."¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them."¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

You say, "Jesus makes it sound like there are some people He doesn't want to understand this truth." You are exactly right. He says He is using parables to conceal truth about His kingdom. He makes it clear that He is not interested in giving people more truth about His kingdom if they don't intend to heed the truth He has already given them.

Jesus is not caught off guard by the crowd. He is not frustrated by their resistance and therefore trying to simplify His message with stories. In this private conversation with His disciples, He makes it clear that He (the King) is using parables for two reasons. To *reveal* kingdom truth. And to *conceal* kingdom truth.

My friends, Jesus told the stories we're considering to *reveal* kingdom truth to His followers AND to *conceal* the same truth from those who refused to follow Him. We might say that "talking in parables" is kind of like "talking in riddles." Those who possess the key *get it*. Those who don't possess the key *don't get it*.

You say, "What's the key?" It's not *what*, but *who*. I'll put it simply.

1. *If you don't know the King, His kingdom is off limits.* The key to the kingdom of God is the King Himself, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

2. *If you want to understand kingdom truth, you must receive the King.* Jesus is the key to the parables. Indeed, He's the key to life itself.

Matthew Henry put it this way, "A parable is a shell that keeps good fruit for the diligent but keeps it from the slothful."¹⁰ That's helpful. So is this observation by R.

¹⁰ In J. D. Jones, p. 83.

Alan Cole, “His parables are designed to test rather than to illuminate, and to test, not the intelligence, but the spiritual responsiveness of His hearers.”¹¹

It’s interesting, isn’t it? Here we are today listening to a 45 minute “talk” from a book written two thousand years ago, and we do it every week. We delight in hearing the words of this book because we want to know the person who gave us this book. If you don’t share that desire, you will not understand the parables of Jesus, for He gives the understanding, and only to those who intend on implementing what they learn.

My friend, if you find listening to God’s Word to be boring, here’s what I recommend. Pray this prayer. Pray it earnestly. “Lord, please give me a teachable heart, for it is dull and distracted. Please give me a heart that wants to know You and the Book You’ve given us.”

Now we’re ready for the climax, the third movement of our passage.

III. Jesus tells us the meaning of the parable of the sower (18-23).

Every parable contains one main point or lesson. The parable of the four soils is the foundation to all the others. By giving this parable, Jesus is showing us why there is such varied response to Him and His message.

Jesus begins in verse 18, “Hear then the parable of the sower.” In Mark’s account Jesus says, “The sower sows the word.” In the story, the seed represents the Word, the Word of the King, the Word of God. Who does the Sower (farmer) represent? Although Jesus doesn’t say explicitly, the Sower is obviously the messenger who proclaims the Word.

What do the four soils represent? They illustrate four different responses to the Word. Just as there are four types of soil in the story, there are four types of hearers who listen to the Word with four types of hearts.

There’s an important similarity in Jesus’ story. All four people in the parable “hear” the Word. In fact, they all hear the same words. They all hear the same message from and about the King Himself.

Did you ever wonder how two people can hear the same message from the same Book, and one respond in faith and the other with disinterest or even ridicule? It happens in families. It happens in Sunday School classes, in family devotional times, in Sunday worship services, and even on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. People hear the same message but respond in quite different ways. Is the problem with the message or the messenger? No. What does Jesus say? The problem pertains to the heart.

Allow me to issue a warning. You are about to see a picture of your heart. One of the following descriptions represents you and your heart today.

A. Some people listen with hard hearts (19). Jesus says in verse 19 says, “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 what was sown along the path.”

Jesus says that the seed on the path represents the first respondent.

1. *This person hears the Word.*

2. *But this person loses the Word.* What went wrong? His ears were working. He heard the Word, yes. But there was a breakdown in the communication process. You may have heard the phrase, “Communication is the response you get.” This message did not produce the necessary response of faith.

Why not? Jesus tells us. The person hears but “does not understand it.” I experience this every time I travel to Nepal. I hear people talking. They’re looking right at me. But their words have little effect on me. Why not? Because I don’t understand them.

¹¹ Cole, p. 145.

The first hearer does not understand what he hears, says Jesus. So what's the result of hearing and not understanding? According to Jesus, "The evil one [Mark's account says "Satan"] comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart."

The first hearer does not benefit at all from the Word he hears. Why not? What was his problem? His problem is that he has a hard heart and therefore never allowed God's Word to penetrate his heart.

Have you ever shared God's Word with someone like this? This is the person who hears what you say, but it makes no logical sense to him. Have you ever shared Christ with a skeptic? "Prove to me that the Bible is true," he says. Or, "Prove to me there is a God, and I'll consider what you have to say."

Or she may take a different approach and say something like this. "Listen, if this 'Jesus-stuff' works for you, fine. Just don't bother me. I'm satisfied with my life the way it is." This is the hard-hearted person.

Can God reach a hard-hearted person? Indeed, He can. The fact is, every one of us enters this world with a heart that is calloused to the things of God. But God in His grace is in the business of melting hard hearts.

B. Some people listen with shallow hearts (20-21). Notice verses 20-21, "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."

So there are fossilized people, the hard-hearted. Then there are fickle people, the shallow-hearted. You can talk shallow-hearted people into anything, and out of it, too. They are impulsive.

It's the Fitness Center syndrome. On December 31 your friend urges you to buy a membership at the local Fitness Center. "We can work out together. It'll be good for us." "Great idea!" you conclude. So you work out three times the first week of January, twice the second week, once the third week, skip the next week, and then conclude, "I'm just not the fitness type."

The world is filled with shallow-hearted folks. They go to church, hear the Word of God, are emotionally touched, shed a few tears and quickly announce, "I'm in! I want to follow Jesus!" So they walk the church-aisle this week, join the church the next week, sign up for a ministry the following, and then before long, they're gone.

What's the problem? As they say, "The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart." These are shallow-hearted hearers. They have no root. They make an emotional decision but never grasp what's involved in real repentance and faith in Christ.

Arthur Pink describes a tragic contributor to this problem. He writes, "Sadly most modern evangelistic efforts appeal to produce this type of hearer. The bright singing, the sentimentality of the hymns, the preacher's appeal to the emotions, the demand of churches for quick results produce nothing but superficial returns! Sinners are urged to make a prompt 'decision', then are assured that all is well with them. The poor soul leaves with a false joy."

When I lived in Israel in 1980 one of my jobs was working on the date plantation. One day our Israeli foreman took us to a field where we saw a most interesting sight. There was a row of tall date-palm trees, but the trees had uprooted. A storm had come and toppled them. And there they were, lying on the ground like fallen dominoes.

We asked what happened. In his broken English our Israeli boss told us this variety of tree had been imported and possessed one vital flaw. A weak root system.

And thus it is with the shallow-hearted person. He hears God's Word and even responds to it emotionally. He "receives the word with joy." Not with saving faith, but with a deficient, emotionally charged assent.

Jesus says he has *no root*. What reveals this root system deficiency? *Trials*. Jesus says that when “tribulation or persecution comes” he quickly falls away.

Put a little pressure on a chair and you discover the quality of the chair. Put a little pressure on a person and you discover the true condition of his or faith. Trials are indicators. When trials come there are two potential outcomes.

1. *Trials will strengthen a true believer.* That's what James 1:2-4 says.

2. *The same trials will expose an imitation believer.* It's true. Trials will draw a true believer closer to Jesus Christ. But what do the same trials do to a shallow-hearted hearer? They drive him away from the Lord.

Have you ever met someone who said, “Ah, I tried that Christianity stuff, but it didn't work”? What's that person's problem? He has a shallow perspective of Christianity.

I was a teenager when I saw this firsthand. Three of my buddies came to an outreach event one Saturday and heard about Jesus Christ. At the end of the service, they each made a “decision” to accept Christ as their Savior. I was thrilled! We invited all three to join us for church the next day. Only one came. In a couple of months he too was gone.

I learned a valuable lesson and here it is. It's possible to *profess* Christ and not *possess* Christ. As Jesus warned years ago, there are people who hear with hard hearts, and with shallow hearts too.

C. Some people listen with crowded hearts (22). “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

The crowded-heart hearer is the most baffling to me for this reason. Matthew says this third type of listener “becomes unfruitful” [as the KJV renders it in verse 22]. The ESV says, “proves unfruitful”.

Ponder that. According to Jesus, some people will hear His Word and decide to receive His Word. In our day, we might see them shed a few tears at an altar or raise a hand indicating they have prayed the sinner's prayer. They might even go through a new members' class and join a church.

But they “become unfruitful”. What does that imply? It suggests that you could see fruit in the person's life. He looked like a Christian. For a while. Until what?

Verse 22 says until he or she yielded to two powerful influences. One, the cares of the world. And two, the deceitfulness of riches.¹² In other words, life starts to happen. Kids get sick. The boss offers overtime. Sunday church attendance slips. Life happens.

What happened to the third hearer? He has a crowded heart. There's not enough room in his heart for the world *and* the Word. He's like a chameleon, easily influenced by the world around him. This person never truly grasped that becoming a Christ-follower results in a radical reordering of one's priorities.

1. *This person “adds Jesus” to his life.* However...

2. *In reality, this person still loves something more than Jesus.*

Dear friend, becoming a Christian involves more than an intellectual or emotional decision. It requires a Holy Spirit produced repentance and faith, a desire to turn *from* something *to* something far better, indeed to Someone far better.

One of the most effective evangelistic preachers in the 1800's was Charles Spurgeon. Listen to what Spurgeon said in his book *The Soul Winner*: “If the man does not live differently from what he did before, both at home and abroad, his repentance needs to be

¹² In Mark's account they are described as “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things (NIV).”

repented of, and his conversion is a fiction. Not only action and language, but spirit and temper must be changed..."¹³

This raises the question, was this crowded-heart hearer ever truly saved? For that matter, what about the shallow-hearted hearer?

I'm convinced that Jonathan Edwards is right when he says, "If there is no real and lasting change in people who think they are converted, their religion is worthless, whatever their experiences may be. Conversion is the turning of the whole man from sin to God... What, then, shall we make of a person who says he has experienced conversion, but whose religious emotions die away, leaving him much the same person as he was before? He seems as selfish, worldly, foolish, perverse, and un-Christian as ever. This speaks against him louder than any religious experience can speak for him."¹⁴

Dear friends, this is serious. There are a lot of thorny-soil hearers sitting in churches right now, and even more who used to be sitting in churches. They'll tell you they believe in Christ, even love Him. But the truth is, they love something more than Christ. And in time what they love will choke the Word right out of them.

Some conclude, "Well, he may be backslidden, but he's still a Christian."

Can you support that biblically? The apostle John says, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 John 2:15)." James says, "The friendship of the world is enmity with God (James 4:4)." Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money (Matt 6:24)."

So, the farmer is not doing so well, is he? He's zero for three, no harvest yet. But that's about to change, for although there are people sitting in pews today with hard hearts, shallow hearts, and crowded hearts, Jesus says we have reason to hope.

D. Some people listen with prepared hearts (23). "As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

What is the difference between this hearer and the first three?

1. *This person hears God's Word.*
2. *This person retains God's Word.*
3. *This person keeps exhibiting the fruit of God's Word.*

All four individuals "hear" the Word. Three out of four "receive" the Word. But the fourth person bears fruit. Fruit is the tangible evidence that the Word (what Jesus refers to as the secrets of the kingdom of heaven) have taken root in his or her heart and transformed his or her life.

You say, "You keep talking about the *word*. What word? What's the content of this message that a person must believe to enter God's kingdom?"

I'm so glad you asked. Just keep reading Matthew's gospel. Get to know this person named **Jesus** whom God sent into the world to "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Find out what **sin** is. Sin is trying to serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). Sin is seeking first your own kingdom rather than God's kingdom (Matthew 6:33).

Find out who **Jesus** is. The royal son of David and covenant keeping son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). The Son of God (Matthew 3:17). Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23).

Find out **what Jesus says about sin**. "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48)." And the offer He extends to people who are not perfect.

¹³MacArthur, *How to Meet...*, 83.

¹⁴MacArthur, 24.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).”

And most of all, find out **what Jesus Himself did to take care of our sin problem.** “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).” “This is my blood...which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,” says the King in Matthew 26:28.

This is the King’s offer to you, my friend. He invites you to enter His kingdom.

Who benefits from His offer? The person with a hard heart doesn’t. But neither does the person with a shallow heart. Nor does the crowded-heart hearer. Only those who listen with hearts prepared by the Holy Spirit.

Does this describe you? Has the Lord given you a new heart, and does the evidence prove it? If not, ask Him. And you will receive. That is the King’s promise.

I believe there’s a secondary application that we must address. There are times when good-soil hearers listen to the Word with hearts that are hard, or shallow, or crowded.

“I don’t care what the Bible says. I’m not going to forgive her after what she did to me,” says the woman to herself at the close of a sermon on forgiveness. Can a Christian ever come to church with a hard heart?

“Well, at least I came to church today. And I might even work in the nursery, but I sure don’t feel like listening to a sermon. I’ve got too much on my mind.” What kind of heart is that? Jesus said, “When trouble comes they (the shallow hearted) quickly fall away.”

Bill closes his Bible after the missionary finishes his message. “Wow, I really should give a gift to help that man’s ministry,” he says to himself. “But I need the money for the boat I want.” Jesus said that the “desire for other things” comes in and “chokes the Word” right out of the crowded heart.

Yes, there’s a lesson here for all of us. Every time this Book is opened, we must ask the Lord for a *prepared* heart that is tender and ready to hear and respond to His Word.

Make It Personal: What happens when I hear God’s Word?

Closing Song: #273 “Holy Bible, Book Divine” (all four verses)

Community Group Discussion:

1. Today we are beginning a new series on *The King’s Parables in Matthew’s Gospel*. What is a parable? What was happening in Jesus’ ministry in Matthew 13 that prompted Him to tell a series of stories about the kingdom of heaven?
2. Jesus begins by telling a parable about a farmer sowing seed. Read again this parable in verses 1-9. What stands out to you? What is the point of Jesus’ command in verse 9?
3. Jesus gives a rather shocking explanation as to why He told parables. According to verses 11-13, why does He say He spoke in parables? How does His explanation affect you? Why would Jesus *not* want certain people to understand Him?
4. In Jesus’ explanation of the first parable in verses 18-23, He identifies four kinds of people who respond in four different ways to His Word. What are they? What are the similarities between them? The differences?
5. What practical effect should this parable have on us and the way we treat God’s Word? What do you plan to do this week to implement the meaning of this parable?