

## Spiritual Noise: What keeps you from hearing God's Word?

### The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-23

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me now? These were the memorable questions that came from the Verizon phone company commercial from a few years back. No matter where the Verizon guy was, inside buildings, way out on the ocean, on top of the mountain, with Verizon cell phone service you always got perfect reception. At least that is what they want you to believe. Five reception bars every time, all the time. Well, I'm not here to pedal cell phones this morning, but I do want to ask you a question. But how about spiritual reception? Let me sweat it a bit. How is your spiritual hearing? Unlike our cell phones, our issue is not that God's broadcast isn't good. We have his Word and he speaks to us. Our issue is more about spiritual listening

In the next little while, we're going to look at the parables of Jesus from Matthew first and then in Luke. Jesus' parables have one main concern: spiritual hearing. I'm calling this sermon series "The Parables of Response." You see, Jesus spoke in parables to challenge people to respond to Him. Just like the Verizon guy, Jesus is asking us, "Can you hear me, can you hear me now?" Are you really listening to what I have proclaimed to you?

Today, we're going to look at the parable of the sower. After Jesus told the parable of the sower, he said, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." Of course, everyone has ears attached to our heads. But what Jesus is really asking is our response to Him and His Profound Kingdom message. This parable, found in Matthew 13, is part of a collection of parables right at the center of Matthew's gospel. The parable of the sower is considered one of Jesus' first parables; at least, it is the first time this kind of teaching is called a parable in Matthew. But this parable may also be the key to understanding all the other parables. This collection of parables in Matthew 13 appears to draw together everything that has happened so far in Matthew and looks ahead to what is still to come. In particular, several of the parables warn about the judgment to come when God establishes his final kingdom.

Let's turn to Matthew 13:1-9. There are two parts to this parable; the parable itself and the explanation of the parable that is found in verse 18-23. In between these two parts is Jesus' answer to the disciples question on why he spoke in parables.

### The Parable (13:1-9)

Large crowds followed Jesus that day so Jesus pushed out a boat on to the Lake; Jesus sat in a boat and taught from there. The people stood on the shore to hear him. In that culture, the students would stand and the teacher would sit down. I've also learned that in this area on the north shores of Galilee near Capernaum, there are many inlets where the ground slopes up steeply from the lakeshore creating a natural amphitheater. Jesus was well aware of this and taught in this area so that the crowd could hear him and hear him well. Acoustics was never the problem.

Jesus' audience would have been familiar with farming techniques. After all, many probably owned their own fields and tended their gardens. The parable is straight forward. The farmer spread the seeds broadcast style, all by hand. As he scatted the seed, some seeds fell in places that were not suitable for good growth. 1. Some fell on the hard path so birds picked it up. 2. Some fell on rocky areas, where the soil was shallow. The seeds sprung up quickly, but when the sun came out, the plants were scorched and

withered because it had no root. 3. Other seeds fell on thorns which grew up and choked out the plants. 4. Finally, other seed fell on the good soil where it produced a crop, a bumper crop. So what we have here is really three deficient kinds of soil and only one good kind of soil to grow crops.

Everyone knows, Jesus is not giving us a lesson on how to farm. The issue is not the farmer. He has broadcasted the seeds well. But what does it all mean? The key is where the focus lies; on the soils, not the sower. The crop is only as good as the quality of the soil where the seed lands.

#### The Map (13:18-23)

In this parable we are fortunate to have a map to help us understand this parable. When you go to a large mall as a tourist, you don't know where anything is. Like any good map it tells you where you are in reference to the everything on the map. The map where you stand may say on a red dot, "You are here" Then, it tells you where the food court is, where all the stores are, and the all-important restrooms. Now we can shop in peace.

Well, Jesus has given us an interpretive map that helps us understand where we might be and what his parable is all about. So in verse 18 Jesus says, "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means." Once again, the emphasis on hearing is clear. "Listen." He says. You heard my parable now listen closely to my map. Jesus continues, "If anyone hears the message of the kingdom."

#### Jesus' Kingdom Message

So now we know that the sower broadcasting the seeds represents Jesus proclaiming the Kingdom message. In the parable of the weeds, the parable for next week, in this same collection of parables, we are told that the son of man sows the seeds. So we know for certain, Jesus is referring to himself. But what is most important in this map or interpretation of the parable is where people are on this map. Before Jesus spoke this parable, he proclaimed the message of the Kingdom and he continued to do so. After Jesus' Baptism and Temptation in the wilderness he began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jews believed that God would bring about his lasting kingdom. They believed their God would bring about a Messiah or a King from the line of David that would restore Israel. They believed that the coming of God's Kingdom would be accompanied by signs and miracles; people would be healed and lifted up. But another part of the Kingdom message was about the coming judgment where God would establish his kingdom once and for all and root out all wickedness. So the people of Israel longed for a day where God's King they would rescue them from their oppressors and their enemies and the wicked would be punished severely, ushering in his everlasting Kingdom reign.

But you see, the people that stood on the shore listening to Jesus from the lake were not all nice tourists with their fish and chips in hand. Jesus had already stirred the pot, so-to-speak. Jesus healed on the Sabbath. When this happened the Pharisees plotted how they might kill Jesus (Matthew 12:14). Jesus claimed to be the one the Spirit of God came upon, according to the words of the prophet Isaiah. When this happened, his own town rejected him. Pharisees used to be the popular teachers in town, but now the crowds came to see Jesus. Jesus was making bold claims that he was indeed that promised King.

Jesus encountered people who responded to Him in different ways. You see, the problem is not with the broadcast. Jesus has spoken about the reality of the Kingdom. There were people who followed Jesus, like his disciples. There were also many that stood on the beach that day that probably already heard Jesus speak. But they pursued Jesus probably because they wanted to hear Jesus preach about the great coming of the Kingdom where their enemies would be locked up and removed. The prophets of the Old Testament even spoke about a crop of fields that would be harvested. This was classic picture

of how God would redeem his people from their sins, rescue them from exile and deliver them from oppression.

But what the people heard on the beach that day wasn't what they expected. It wasn't about God rescuing their lost fortunes but a parable about a failed crop and a good crop. It was about spiritual hearing. It was a map of their own hearts. If you got ears, then hear. "Can you hear me now?" Jesus asks.

You see, Jesus' Kingdom message was really about the fulfillment of what the prophets had proclaimed. Yes, the day of the promised King has arrived. But God's kingdom coming to you through Jesus, is not what you thought it might be. So he gives his disciples an interpretative map to help them understand that the kingdom of God comes to those who will actually take time to listen to the sower. People want Jesus to come in and fix all of their problems. "Forgive me sins. Give us good fortune. Take me to heaven. Punish those who are mean to us. Come Lord Jesus, do it now", they said.

But Jesus comes along with this parable causes us pause and ask themselves, "Do I know where I am on this map? Who are you according to this map? Like any map, it is designed to get you where you where you really need to go and be.

In Jesus interpretative map, He is talking about everything that keeps us from truly hearing the words of Jesus as our King. I call it spiritual noise. Sometimes, as we talk on our phones, we get noise and static. The calls cuts in and out. Calls are dropped. In the same way, in our hearts, spiritual noise is anything that blocks God's Kingdom message to us. Spiritual noise, causes us not to understand or hear God's Words to us. So in Jesus' map of our hearts, He speaks about three kinds of spiritual noise.

- Noise of a Hard Heart

This kind of noise is like the hard path the seed landed on. Jesus' word wasn't even given a chance. The Kingdom message of Jesus was rejected out of hand. Rebellion makes people vulnerable to Satan snatching the gospel from their hard hearts. Jesus said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Repentance admits that we are sinners in deep need of God's help. We admit we can't save ourselves and that even our religious backgrounds can't improve our spiritual status before God one iota. For the religious of Jesus' day, and even today, repentance was offensive. "How dare you say we're not God's people or that I'm not going to heaven. I've been good enough. My family is a good family". All this is the noise of self-righteousness, rebellion, stubbornness and pride. The noise of a hardened heart. Is that you?

- Noise of a Superficial Heart (13:2-21)

Jesus goes on to describe that the seed that falls on rocky soil refers to people who hear the word, receive it initially with great joy. But the gospel of King Jesus doesn't take root, and the initial enthusiasm doesn't last. These are people who experience the noise of trouble and suffering because of the gospel and they eventually, maybe even quickly, fall away. Here is a description of someone who can't hear the full gospel message because they hear noise that goes something like this. "What is with all these problem's I'm facing. Didn't God promise to make my life better? Look at all the fun and joy I see in people who have absolutely no faith at all. I'm not so sure that trusting in Jesus really matters for me anymore. Eventually this noise gets the best of them. It turns out their faith was more superficial than real. Many may claim to have faith in Jesus; but in time, drift away because their faith was never really sincere. And so the noise of the superficial heart blocks out the Word of God.

- Noise of the Thorny Heart (13:22)

Jesus says “the seeds falling among the thorns is about someone who hears the word but the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word making them unfruitful.” This person receives the gospel message of Jesus as the King. But the noise of worldly values desensitizes them from hearing the word of God. People might even go through the motions of a religious life, but the word of God is choked out and dies because as Jesus said, “You can’t serve both God and money at the same time.” The noise of the worries of life is a concern about the things of life; what we eat, wear. It is about a worldly value system that is concerned about image and comfort. But if this noise exists in our life it is really an indication that we have not put Christ and the values of God’s Kingdom above all else. That person is trying to manage his life according to the values of another world. In this kind of life, we fail to grow true spiritual fruit. The plant of our lives can’t grow because it is choked out but the deceitfulness of wealth.

Jesus gave his disciples an interpretive map that is really a map of people’s hearts to startle us and awaken us. “Can you hear me now?” Jesus asks. It isn’t a map to say, “I’ve got you pegged, now you’re in for it.” These parables help us be honest with ourselves and to help us identify where we are really at spiritually. If this map describes you, Jesus is seeking for your response to Him. These are parables of response. Jesus says to you,

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened (that is what spiritual noise does to us), and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29). Repent Jesus says; come to me, the King that wants to reign in your life and in the world.

There is only one kind of heart that can produce a good crop. It is a life embedded in the person of Jesus Christ. This last kind soil is a picture of a person who hears the word of Jesus and gets it. He or she understands that Jesus as King must be above all else. The One life that we live must be about Jesus, for Jesus and led by Jesus. When Jesus is our all, God can produce a bumper crop in our life and through our life. Only a heart without spiritual noise that let’s Jesus take full root in our lives can produce what honors God. So how should we respond to this Parable?

- Begin with prayer

Ask God to scan your heart. Psalm 139 says, “Search me God and know my heart.” Maybe a hard heart needs cultivating, rocks need to be removed, and thorns burnt away. Jesus has already preached a radical dying to our selfish ambition message. Be warned, as you pray, however, because our hearts are deceitful. If an idol is in your heart, it will fight back. Sin keeps you away from the Word of God. Those idols must be removed or we will have great difficulty picking up our Bibles to hear from God.

- Humble yourself before God and dump everything on Jesus

Peter said in 1 Peter 5:6, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

When God exposes your heart and we go through the spiritual process of removing rocks and thorns, we must accept the invitation of Jesus and go to him. Humble ourselves before Jesus as your King and then dump all of our burdens and anxieties on Him. The word “cast” is a powerful word. In this context, it means to “throw upon” or “cast upon.” In other words, in the process of cleaning up your noisy heart, let God take responsibility for the burden and anxieties of your life.

Every Friday morning, the garbage truck comes by my house. Without any guilt, I put all my garbage in those black bins. Feels great. And it feels even better when the truck lifts up the bin and then takes

full responsibility for my garbage. I cast it on you. I dump it on you. Not my problem, anymore. You take it, Mr. Garbage man. Cause I wasn't designed to be a garbage dump.

Why is this important? First of all, Jesus is able to take all of our crap on himself. He forgives and releases burdens. Secondly, with clean heart God produces bumper crops. We listen and He changes your character. He refines your calling, all according to the King's call for you. This will be more clear as you listen and obey God's Word.