

Sermon: Don't miss the point!

Reading: Matthew 13:1-23

Introduction:

Have you ever sung along to a song on the radio and suddenly realise the words you have been singing (maybe for years) are not the actual lyrics? When we sing along to a song with our own misunderstood lyrics, they make no sense in the context of the song. However because we like the tune we sing away anyway, not caring too much if it doesn't make sense! Imagine if we did this with everything else in life! Imagine if we did this with our theology!! We all do it from time to time, we misunderstand or only partly hear what has been said or sing away oblivious to what we are doing. In our reading today we find Jesus teaching on the parable of the sower. Its very familiar to us and I've heard this preached many times and in most cases the explanation given for parables has been misunderstood.

Do you know why Jesus chose to teach in parables? He uses familiar illustrations like farming, fishing, gardening etc for His parable. Many say it was to help people understand Jesus' teaching, by using examples of what was familiar and common to the people! Would it surprise you to know, its actually the opposite. Jesus uses parables not make his points clearer, but in fact to hide them.

Context points first

Today we discover Jesus has been teaching in someones home. As you would imagine the house was packed with so many people not everyone could get in. Jesus mother and brothers were standing outside unable to get through the crowds. A message reached Jesus to tell Him, His mother and family are standing outside and are concerned for Him. Jesus asks 'Who are my mother, who are my brothers?' Then Jesus pointing to those around Him says, 'Here are my mother and brothers, for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'. Imagine Jesus pointing you out in the crowd and saying you are my brother, sister!

Now we find Jesus taking a walk along the lakeside. It must have been a beautiful walk and an opportunity to get some fresh air having been inside the house most of the day, surrounded by so many people. But its not long before the crowds once again gather around Him. In order to address the crowds who were pressing in all around, Jesus climbs into a moored boat and begins to teach. The Scriptures tell us He taught them many things and did so only using parables.

Whats the point of Parables?

Contrary to popular belief, Jesus did not use parables to make His teaching more understandable, nor did He use parables because people preferred stories rather than preaching, because stories are less challenging!! This is an error and is certainly not scriptural. Preaching is central to the mission of the church.

Jesus told parables using simple illustrations to hide a spiritual reality. He used this method to sift out the casual hearer of the word of God against those who have a hunger for God's word, let me explain....

The root word 'Para' literally means to lay alongside, side by side. The word 'Parallel' describes something that lies alongside another, e.g. train tracks are laid parallel to each other, side by side. Jesus' parables were ingeniously simple word pictures with profound spiritual lessons, which were laid alongside the simple illustration. Depending which 'track' we followed, we would either hear a simple message about farming and throwing seed wastefully as in the case of our reading today! Or if we follow the other track, the other train of thought, we begin to see a spiritual truth unfolding which Jesus is conveying.

The casual hearers miss its true message, but the more attentive hearers and seekers of God grasp it. Therefore Jesus says, if you have ears to hear then listen!!

Missing the point?

The disciples were intrigued by Jesus teaching and His use of parables. They knew Jesus well enough to know, He does not say anything without purpose and meaning. They were wise enough to know Jesus was not simply offering a gardeners question time and sharing top tips on farming! After all why would He, He was a carpenter. Always thought it interesting He never used more wood parables! We discover once the the crowds had dispersed, the disciples came up to Jesus and asked Him to explain the parable of the sower for them, as they didn't understand what He was teaching? Jesus said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, BUT to them it has not been given" (**Matthew 13:10-15**).

This hidden kingdom message cuts across most of the preaching and teaching I had ever heard before about Jesus using parables to teach. I thought for many years, Jesus taught this way to make his teachings easy for everyone to understand and yet Jesus here is saying the opposite. In fact, what Jesus is doing is fulfilling prophecy from Isaiah which says, "Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you shall not perceive" (**Isaiah 6:9-10**). Jesus taught in this way to sift out the hearts of those who only wanted to meet with Jesus in a superficial way against those whose hearts were truly seeking Him. This is why Jesus explained the parables to His disciples privately not publicly.

Contrasting to make a point!

Have you ever noticed in Jesus' parables how He compares and contrasts two different things by laying them alongside each other? Consider these.....

The wise and foolish builders!

One built on rock and the other on sand!

The wise and foolish virgins!

The two gates, the great and small!

The two roads, the wide and narrow!

Good tree and bad tree!

Good fruit, bad fruit!

Each of these contrasts are designed to get us to think. When we understand the point of them, we begin to see they have a salvation focus. Here lies the key to unlock the parable secrets. The casual hearer recognises the simple message of not building a house on sand. The casual hearer recognises you don't keep trees in your garden or vines in your vineyard that produce bad fruit! This is the superficial way of looking at the teaching. Therefore if we use the key to unlock the parable, to take the parallel track, we discover the message is essentially about two kinds of people and about judgment and salvation. The casual hearer often misses this, but the seeking heart will find it. So many times Jesus tells us to listen and to hear. The hidden truth within the parable is all about salvation and Jesus offers a choice, a decision which we must make.

Which gate are we entering through large or small?

What type of fruit do we produce in our lives, good or bad,

What type of foundations are we building our lives on?

Are we on a broad path with everyone else or do we walk the narrow way?

Are we striving to enter the small gate?

Are we wise with lamps lit and filled with oil or are we lazy and have not the Spirit?

Can you see the contracts Jesus is making through a kingdom lens, how God sees?

The broad road seems the best route in life because the majority follow this pathway, but Jesus warns the broad road only leads to destruction. A preacher once said, the great blessing of the broad road is we can easily do a 'U' turn and head the other way to find Jesus' way.

The two builders soon discover as the storm hits which one was wise and who was foolish. The one who built on rock will withstand the storm but the one who was lazy and built on sand will lose his house when the storm hits. Only the one built on the rock (on Christ) is sufficient to hold us up in the fiercest storms of life hit.

The wise and foolish virgins, is a parable about a wedding which is about to take place. 10 Bridesmaids are waiting for the groom's arrival, to welcome him. Jesus says the foolish were unprepared and didn't have enough oil in their lamps. (The oil refers to the Spirit of God). For the foolish were casual in their approach and were not ready and found to be unprepared. When night time came and the groom was delayed in coming (referring to Jesus coming), the foolish had no oil in their lamps, therefore had no light to guide them. However the wise were prepared, they had enough oil (Spirit). The foolish not only missed the groom coming, but they were also shut out of the banqueting hall and celebrations.

The parables Jesus teaches are Kingdom related and are there to challenge us to consider where are we in our walk with God? Are we simply a casual hearer of the word of God or are we a doer of the word? Do we listen attentively and apply what we have heard? Or do we only half listen, half commit, half apply? Remember there are those who love to sing the songs with their own lyrics but Jesus is warning them wake up before its too late. Start being attentive to the songs of God and His lyrics (What does the Scriptures actually say). Casual hearing, half committed listeners and non doers of the word makes nominal Christians, or to borrow the phrase from Revelation, 'luke warm' Christians. If the term luke warm is new to you in a spiritual sense be prepared for a shock and read the book of Revelation (**Rev 3:14-21**). Being casual in our walk of faith is something each one of us has to guard against. It can creep up on us without us being aware. When our passion and love for Jesus begins to wane and fade, the light grows strangely dim, passions cool and we are in danger of becoming casual and luke warm. If we feel our lives have strayed in this direction, turn around now, get off the broad road, ask the Holy Spirit to fire us up again, renew a right Spirit within us and point us in the right direction again.

So what the point of the sower parable?

The common theme in the seed parables is all about soil and growth. Contrasting again we discover the seed is sown on two different types of ground.....

1. Poor ground whether it is rocky, shaded, hard or full of weeds where nothing growing will last or produce fruit. These soils are poor.
2. Good ground - Here the seed will produce a good harvest 30X 60X and 100X

The different types ground in today's parable, shallow, rocky, weedy, Jesus is referring to the condition of the heart which receives the seed (word of God). Each of the soil conditions highlight the state of the heart in which the seed was received. Either the seed can't grow well because of the restrictions and conditions of the soil (heart) so produce no or very little fruit. However the seed sown in a heart, a heart seeking after God, attentive, grows and produces fruit in the life of the believer.

Sadly the majority of the field (world) is filled with casual hearers, those with hardened hearts who reject the word of God, so the devil simply takes it away, just like a bird stealing seed fallen on a path. These are the atheist, agnostic and rebellious. Some seeds do fall in places where it begins to grow, the word of God is even accepted keenly, unfortunately because of the cares of life or pleasures of the world the seed has not root. This refers to

the shallow follower who hears gladly but only ever half commits, is half hearted, takes no steps of faith, therefore faith and belief remain shallow and apathy, nominalism and a luke warmness is the response. Satan takes great delight in these people because they become poor witnesses to the saving grace of Jesus. These I believe Satan leaves alone to grow because of their casual commitment, refusing to follow and obey the commands of Jesus, make poor witnesses to God in the church. Most of these will produce little no fruit and eventually fall away. It's a shock to discover three quarters of the seed sown never grows to produce fruit. So let us heed this warning, if the word of God does not find a place in our hearts, when our heart is not stirred by God's word, the Scriptures, prayer and Bible study, maybe we need to be afraid and all the more on our guard because Satan is near, ready to rob what little there is.

The bitter shame

An old hymn takes us through the stages of a seed growing, its worth reading through the whole hymn for yourselves and see if we can identify which verse am I currently living in?

Oh, the bitter shame and sorrow,
That a time could ever be,
When I let the Saviour's pity
Plead in vain, and proudly answered,
All of self, and none of Thee,
All of self and none of Thee

The final verse of this hymn writer reveals a heart in which the seed has found a good a place and was able to root and grow. A heart prepared and ready to receive, the rocks are gone, weeds rooted out, sun and light shining. Good soil enables the seed to germinate and grow and then produce a harvest. Although the farmer may be disappointed with the majority of seed sown, failed to produce anything, he will delight in the seeds bountiful yield at harvest Consider the yield from the good seed, 30X, 60X, 100X. Imagine the interest rates of a bank that guaranteed you this rate of return! For every pound we invested, our yield was £30 or £60 or even £100 for every one pound invested. Now that is a great rate of return. Only those who have encountered Jesus as true bread, manor from heaven, those who have tasted and know that God is good who cry out for more can rejoice with the hymn writer as he says,

Higher than the highest heavens,
Deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, Thy love at last hath conquered;
Grant me now my heart's petition,
None of self, and all of Thee,
None of self, and all of Thee.

Summary

Jesus challenges us in His parables and teachings to check our hearts and our salvation. We must guard our hearts and ensure we are not on the wrong track, singing lyrics to songs that God has not written!! Paul writing to the Christians in Galatia writes about the fruit which should be evident and growing in the Christian life, 'Love, joy, peace, long suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control (**Gal 5:22-23**). We are to keep check on our hearts to ensure they are not becoming, stony, hard, filled with weeds or shallow in our faith and commitment. God's word brings life and His word should be growing inside of us, changing us from glory to glory, producing fruit. At the beginning of this sermon we found our Lord in a crowded house and we watch Him point out those in the crowd who are His. May we see Jesus pointing at us. So let us be careful not to miss the 'point' of Jesus teaching, keep His words close to our herts and let Him transform us all the more into His likeness for His glory. **Amen.**