**Eyes that See and Ears that Hear**

November 18, 2018

Matthew 13:1-23

Key Verse 13:16 “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.”

As we studied in the last chapter, Jesus diagnosed his generation as wicked and adulterous (12:39). The religious leaders were its representatives. Despite the clear evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, they rejected him irrationally. They resisted the kingdom of God and became instruments of the devil. There seemed to be no hope for that generation. But Jesus found hope in his disciples. In chapter 13 he began to focus on teaching his disciples about the kingdom of heaven through parables.

Look at verse 3a. “Then he told them many things in parables.” What is a parable? Parables have been called “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” Jesus used what was familiar on earth to reveal unseen spiritual reality. The kingdom of heaven is so mysterious that we cannot understand it with our own reason or human wisdom. We can understand it only by revelation from God. Jesus wants to reveal the kingdom of heaven so that people may understand it according to their capacity (Mk 4:33). However, the secret of the kingdom is revealed only to those who sincerely seek the truth.

What is a secret of the kingdom of heaven? We call it the mystery form of the kingdom. Mystery simply means something that was hidden and is now revealed. The Old Testament prophets did not know it. They only saw the Messiah coming and setting up his kingdom. But they did not know that the kingdom of God will be in the hearts of men, but the King will be absent. Only when King Jesus comes again, he will bring the kingdom of God on earth. We call this the interim phase of the kingdom. The parables in chapter 13 are about this interim period; What it will be like when the King has been rejected and the kingdom postponed until he comes again to set up his kingdom. Each parable starts with, “The kingdom of heaven is like…” We will study it next week in detail.

Let’s look at the parable. Verse 3b says, “A farmer went out to sow his seed.” The kingdom of God begins by sowing seed. Without sowing seed, nothing happens. The one who sows is the farmer; he represents Jesus. Verses 4-8 describe four different soils the seed fell into, and what happened to the seed in each soil. Some fell along the path. This path was as hard as concrete. The seed could not penetrate at all and just sat on the surface. Then some hungry birds swooped down and gobbled up the seed. Some seed fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched (5-6). As we know, the sun is absolutely necessary for plants to grow. However, the intense energy of sunlight causes plants without roots to wither and die. Other seed fell among thorns (7). It took root and began to grow. But the problem is that thorns grew with it, and developed more rapidly, and finally choked the plant. Still other seed fell on good soil (8). It took root, drew energy from the sun through photosynthesis and grew. It finally blossomed and produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

After Jesus finished telling the parable of the sower, many people were disappointed and commented, “That was too simple. I walked all the way here for that?” But the disciples were different. They wanted to know why Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables (10). Until now, Jesus had taught directly and plainly, as he did in the Sermon on the Mount. They knew he must have a good reason for using parables, and they asked why. We can learn from the disciples. When we do not understand Jesus, we should not just ignore what he says or does. We should realize that it is important and ask why. Jesus was pleased to answer. He said, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.” (11) The disciples, who were committed to Jesus like family members, were given the secret of the kingdom of heaven. But the casual and uncommitted were not given the secret. Only friends share secret with friends. We never share secrets with casual acquaintance.

Jesus told us how we can grow in spiritual understanding in verse 12: “Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” In everyday terms, we say, “Use it or lose it.” Jesus applied this principle to the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven. Those who listen to the word of God and try to understand it will receive strength and wisdom from God. Such people are full of grace and thanks and joy and peace and the love of God. There is a song in their hearts always. On the other hand, those who take God’s word lightly become spiritually ignorant. Then their souls dry up and they become weary. Even a joy and amazement they experienced at the beginning will be taken away. In the spiritual world, everyone either grows or degenerates; no one can remain as they are. Those who have spiritual desire can grow into spiritual giants. Those who have no spiritual desire will lose whatever understanding they had and fail to bear any fruit.

In this parable we can see that where the seed was planted was important. The seed itself has power to grow and produce fruit, even 100 times what was sown. But the seed needs nutritious soil, enough water, and the sun. Only the seeds on good soil actually became fruitful. Like the seed, the message of the kingdom is life-giving. But to bear fruit, it needs proper conditions. Jesus concluded in verse 9, “he who has ears, let him hear.” To those with spiritual ears, Jesus’ parable would be deep and meaningful. To others, it would be a mere story about farming. In verses 16-17, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” God promised to send the Messiah through many prophets such as Isaiah. They longed to see Jesus’ day, yet they did not see it. However, Jesus’ disciples saw the Messiah and heard his message. They were more blessed than Isaiah. For example, Matthew, the former tax collector, was an incorrigible sinner. But when he accepted Jesus as his Savior and King, and heard the message from him, he was transformed into the light of the world. This was not just for his disciples, but it is for anyone who accepts Jesus as their Savior and King; they can be healed and become useful to God.

Let’s listen to Jesus for his explanation of his parable: When Jesus taught the word of God, he found that there were many different kinds of people who responded in different ways. Jesus categorized them into four main kinds (18). Look at verse 19. “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.” This kind of people has a very hard heart, like a path. Even though they hear the message, it does not penetrate their hearts even one millimeter. When they do not receive the word, the devil comes and snatches away. What the devil dislikes most is when someone accepts the word of God and is changed. The word of God has life in itself. Anyone who accepts it will experience its transforming power. They can be changed into a new creation. So the devil works hard to keep as many people as possible under his power. He hates anyone who is listening to the word of God and so he visits them to make them stumble if possible. Where there are the words of God, there the devil will also be looking for an opportunity to devour people. Those who reject the word of God with a hard heart will surely be snatched away by the devil.

“The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (20-21). The good point of those like rocky soil is that they receive the word immediately with joy. They seem to be excellent Bible students. But their problem is that they have no root. In the parable, trouble and persecution are compared to sunlight. Sunlight is necessary for the growth of any plant. Likewise, trouble and persecution because of the word are necessary ingredients to spiritual growth. Through trouble and persecution, false hope is eradicated from our hearts and the true hope of the kingdom of God is purified. Through persecution we can have a deeper and more personal faith in Jesus. A tree in a greenhouse cannot grow to maturity. It must be planted outside and exposed to the sun, rain and wind. Sometimes it will be blown by a strong storm. At such times, the tree can take deeper root and grow all the more to be a giant tree. So trouble and persecution is not the real problem. The real problem is whether we have a root or not. Trouble and persecution because of the word offer a good opportunity to take root. But those whose heart is like rocky soil do not commit themselves to the word of God. They become emotional and then abandon the word of God. Taking root in the word of God is essential in order to grow and produce abundant fruit.

“The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful” (22). This kind of people receives the words of God well and takes root. But growing alongside the word are the weeds of worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. People who don’t have money generally think that money will solve their problem. They worry day and night about their future, thinking they need money most. On the other hand, those with money live in a false sense of security like the rich fool in Luke’s gospel (Lk 12:20). They seek fun and pleasure and fulfillment in the world, instead of living for God’s glory. When the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth come into one’s heart, we should immediately pull them out like nasty weeds. Otherwise, they can choke our spirit and make us unfruitful.

Look at verse 23. “But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” In this passage the word “understand” is repeated five times. This understanding is not mere head knowledge. It is accepted deeply in the heart and becomes part of one’s life. Luke says that it means to “retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (Lk 8:15). It is not enough to understand the words of God in theory. We must understand them through experience that comes from practical obedience. For example, Matthew 6:33 says, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Those like rocky soil hear this word and rejoice because of great expectation that God would bless them. But when things do not go well as they expected, they get angry and abandon their faith. But those with good soil persevere by trusting in God.

Nick Foles is the 2018 Super Bowl MVP quarterback of Philadelphia Eagles. His story is quite remarkable. He had an up-and-down career in NFL. In 2016 when no NFL team wanted him to sign, he seriously considered retirement. But he meditated on 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” He persevered, and Philadelphia Eagles signed him for a back-up quarterback. But he humbly accepted. When the starting quarterback was injured, he was ready, and he won the super bowl. His faith helped him to remain calm. He said, “2 Corinthians 12:9 has brought so much meaning to my heart and in my life. Everyone feels weak at some time in his life, but we have to realize when we are going through that time, God is shaping our hearts and allowing us to grow to become who he created us truly to be.” In off seasons, he is taking online seminary classes, and he wants to become a pastor in order to minister to high school students after his NFL career.

We tend to think about the different soils in the parable, and try to find which one we may be. This is valid. Yet, the main point of the parable is to express Jesus’ hope for his disciples. Jesus had hope in spite of the dark times. Jesus is talking about the reality of preaching the gospel. There will be a rejection and fruitlessness in some people. There will be those who give only lip service to the King. However, there will be a good soil and those good soils will produce 100 times and make up for any loss in the other 3 soils. In the end, the gospel work will be successful. So instead of being discouraged, we should spread the gospel diligently.

When Jesus saw his wicked and adulterous generation, he could have despaired, but he never despaired. Jesus saw God working in the hearts of his disciples. They were like good soil. So Jesus focused on raising them in the midst of many kinds of opposition and troubles. We can learn from Jesus what we should do in our time. Instead of despairing over rejection and apathy by students, we should come to Jesus and hear his word and understand it so that we may produce a fruit 100 times. Jesus has hope for all of us to be influential people of God. We should also have hope for others and engage in disciple-raising.