

Bible Nerd Guide

Matthew 13:10-23

Why Jesus Teaches in Parables, What Isaiah Has to Do with It, and How the Word Takes Root

Big Idea

Matthew 13:10-23 is not merely a passage about why Jesus used parables. It is a passage about hearing. Jesus teaches in parables because the kingdom of heaven is not merely information to be processed; it is a reality to be received. Parables reveal the kingdom, but they also reveal the listener. They expose whether the heart is receptive, resistant, shallow, distracted, or fruitful. The Word of the kingdom is good seed. The question is what kind of soil receives it.

1. Literary Context: Where Matthew 13 Fits

Matthew 13 is the third major teaching discourse in Matthew's Gospel. Earlier, Jesus has announced the kingdom of heaven, healed the sick, confronted demons, called disciples, challenged religious leaders, and displayed the authority of God's reign breaking into the world.

But by Matthew 12, opposition has intensified. Some people are amazed by Jesus, but others accuse Him of working by the power of Beelzebul. The conflict is no longer simply misunderstanding. Hearts are being revealed.

That context matters.

Matthew 13 does not appear randomly. Jesus' parables come at a point in the Gospel where responses to Him are dividing. Some lean in. Some resist. Some are curious. Some are hostile. Some hear but do not truly hear.

So when the disciples ask, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" they are asking more than a communication question. They are asking about revelation, resistance, and the nature of kingdom hearing.

2. "Why Do You Speak to Them in Parables?"

Matthew 13:10

The disciples' question is important because it challenges a common modern assumption: that Jesus used parables simply to make difficult truths easy.

There is some truth in that. Parables are memorable, earthy, and concrete. They use ordinary images: seed, soil, bread, weeds, treasure, pearls, nets, sheep, coins, sons, vineyards, weddings.

But Matthew 13 shows that parables are not merely illustrations. They are also acts of revelation and judgment. They disclose truth to those who are receptive, and they expose the hardness of those who are not.

Klyne Snodgrass, in *Stories with Intent*, argues that parables are not merely “earthly stories with heavenly meanings,” as the old simple definition goes. They are stories with intent. They are designed to provoke response, reframe perception, and draw the hearer into decision.

That is exactly what happens here. Jesus' parables are not just explanations of the kingdom. They are kingdom encounters.

3. “Secrets of the Kingdom”

Matthew 13:11

Jesus says:

“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

The word translated “secrets” is the Greek word **mystēria**.

This does not mean “mysteries” in the sense of riddles that clever people solve. In biblical usage, especially in apocalyptic and Jewish contexts, a “mystery” is something hidden that God must reveal. It is not discovered by human cleverness; it is given by divine disclosure.

The “secrets of the kingdom” are not secret passwords for religious insiders. They are the hidden realities of God's reign now being revealed through Jesus.

This is important because the kingdom Jesus brings does not arrive the way many expected. It comes in hiddenness, weakness, patience, suffering, and surprising fruitfulness. It comes like seed scattered in soil, like yeast hidden in dough, like treasure buried in a field, like a mustard seed that seems small but grows into something large.

N.T. Wright often emphasizes that Jesus' kingdom announcement was not a generic message about "going to heaven," but the declaration that Israel's God was becoming King in and through Jesus. Matthew 13 shows that this kingdom is real, but it does not come in the obvious, coercive, immediately triumphant way many expected.

So parables are fitting. They reveal a kingdom that itself often comes hidden before it comes openly.

4. Hearing, Having, and Receiving

Matthew 13:12

Jesus continues:

"For to the one who has, more will be given... but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

At first, this sounds harsh. But in context, Jesus is talking about responsiveness to revelation.

Those who receive the word of the kingdom are given more. Their capacity to see and hear grows. But those who resist the word lose even the light they had.

This is not arbitrary favoritism. It is the spiritual logic of receptivity.

Hearing produces deeper hearing.

Resistance produces deeper dullness.

This fits the pattern Matthew has already been developing. The same Jesus who brings healing and mercy also exposes opposition. His presence does not leave people neutral. It reveals what is already happening in the heart.

5. Why Jesus Quotes Isaiah 6

Matthew 13:13-15 and Isaiah 6:9-10

Jesus explains His use of parables by quoting Isaiah 6:

"You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive..."

This quotation is one of the most important intertextual moves in the passage.

The Context of Isaiah 6

Isaiah 6 begins with Isaiah's vision of the Lord seated on the throne, high and lifted up. The prophet is overwhelmed by God's holiness and his own uncleanness. His lips are cleansed, and he is commissioned to speak to the people.

But the message Isaiah receives is strange:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive."

Isaiah is sent to a people whose hearts are already dull. His preaching will not soften everyone. In fact, for many, the prophetic word will confirm and expose their hardness.

That is the background Jesus brings into Matthew 13.

Jesus is not saying, "I use parables because I want sincere seekers to be locked out." He is identifying His ministry with the prophetic ministry of Isaiah. The word goes out. The revelation is real. But the word also exposes the condition of the hearers.

Some hear and receive. Others hear and harden.

The Language of Dullness

Matthew 13:15 says:

"For this people's heart has grown dull..."

The Greek verb here has the sense of becoming insensitive, thickened, or sluggish. The problem is not the absence of sound. It is the absence of true hearing.

Jesus describes people who:

- hear but do not understand
- see but do not perceive
- have hearts grown dull
- have ears hard of hearing
- have eyes closed

This is not primarily about intellectual inability. It is moral and spiritual resistance.

The issue is not that Jesus is unclear. The issue is that some do not want the kind of clarity Jesus brings.

6. Parables Reveal and Conceal

Matthew 13 forces us to hold together two truths:

First, parables reveal the kingdom to those who have ears to hear.

Second, parables conceal or obscure the kingdom from those who are hardened, indifferent, or resistant.

That sounds strange to modern readers because we often assume good communication means removing every possible barrier. But Jesus' teaching does something deeper. It draws out the posture of the listener.

Parables are not vague because Jesus is bad at communication. They are indirect because they require engagement. They invite the hearer to enter the story, wrestle with the image, and respond.

Dallas Willard often emphasized that Jesus was the smartest teacher who ever lived. His teaching method was not accidental. Jesus knew that direct statements alone do not always transform people. Stories, images, and questions can bypass defenses and lodge in the imagination.

That is what parables do.

They get underneath our surface answers.

7. Blessed Eyes and Ears

Matthew 13:16-17

Jesus then says:

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

The disciples are blessed not because they are naturally brilliant, but because they are receiving what many before them longed to see.

Jesus adds:

“Many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it...”

This places the disciples in a privileged moment in redemptive history. The hopes of the prophets are being fulfilled in front of them. The kingdom is arriving in Jesus. The mystery is being revealed.

But again, the blessing is not automatic. They still need Jesus to explain the parable. They are not portrayed as instantly understanding everything. They are portrayed as teachable.

That matters.

In Matthew 13, the difference between insiders and outsiders is not that insiders never struggle. It is that insiders come to Jesus with their questions.

The disciples ask. They listen. They receive.

That is part of what faithful hearing looks like.

8. The Parable of the Sower Explained

Matthew 13:18-23

Jesus identifies the seed as: “the word of the kingdom.”

This is a crucial phrase.

The seed is not generic wisdom. It is not vague spiritual inspiration. It is the message of the kingdom: the announcement that God’s reign is arriving through Jesus and demanding response.

The parable focuses less on the sower and more on the soils. The same seed is scattered, but it is received differently.

The seed is good. The difference is the soil.

9. The Path: The Hard Heart

Matthew 13:19

The first soil is the path.

Jesus says this is the person who hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it. The evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in the heart.

A path is hard-packed ground. The seed does not sink in. It stays exposed.

This represents the unreceptive heart.

The word is heard, but it is not received. It does not penetrate. It remains on the surface.

This kind of hearing may look like indifference, cynicism, distraction, or hardened resistance. The danger is not that the word is weak. The danger is that the heart has become impenetrable.

10. The Rocky Soil: The Shallow Heart

Matthew 13:20-21

The second soil receives the word with joy.

That is worth noticing. This person does not respond negatively at first. The response is immediate and enthusiastic.

But there is no root.

When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, the person falls away.

The problem is not emotional response. Joy is not bad. Enthusiasm is not bad. But enthusiasm without depth cannot sustain faithfulness when obedience becomes costly.

This is a deeply important pastoral warning.

Spiritual excitement is not the same as spiritual formation.

A person can respond quickly, emotionally, and sincerely, but still lack the rootedness needed to endure. Jesus is not condemning joy. He is warning against rootlessness.

11. The Thorny Soil: The Crowded Heart

Matthew 13:22

The third soil hears the word, but the word is choked.

Jesus names two choking forces:

- the cares of the age
- the deceitfulness of riches

The phrase “cares of the age” refers to anxieties, worries, and preoccupations bound up with life in the present world. The “deceitfulness of riches” points not merely to wealth itself, but to the false promises wealth makes: security, control, status, freedom, identity.

This soil may be the most convicting for ordinary church life.

The person does not necessarily reject the word. They hear it. They may even value it. But the word is crowded out.

The issue is not dramatic rebellion. It is overcrowding.

The heart has too many thorns.

Too much anxiety.

Too much noise.

Too much ambition.

Too much entertainment.

Too much fear.

Too much control.

Too much trust in money.

Too much everything.

Craig Blomberg has often noted that Jesus' parables frequently confront not merely belief systems but loyalties, priorities, and patterns of life. The thorny soil reveals divided allegiance. The word is present, but so are rival powers competing for the heart's attention.

The result is tragic: "It proves unfruitful."

Not absent. Unfruitful.

12. The Good Soil: The Fruitful Heart

Matthew 13:23

The final soil hears the word, understands it, and bears fruit.

Notice the movement:

- hearing
- understanding
- fruitfulness

The goal is not hearing alone.

Nor is the goal merely understanding.

The goal is fruit.

In Matthew's Gospel, fruit is a major theme. John the Baptist calls people to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). Jesus warns that trees are known by their fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). Here, the good soil is known by the fruit produced from receiving the word.

Fruitfulness is not the same for every person: hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold. But all good soil bears fruit.

The point is not identical productivity. The point is genuine reception.

The word of the kingdom, when truly received, grows.

13. The Intertextual Echoes of Seed, Soil, and Fruit

Jesus' imagery draws from a deep biblical world.

Seed and Word

Isaiah 55:10-11 compares God's word to rain and snow that water the earth, causing seed to grow and bread to be produced. God's word does not return empty but accomplishes His purpose.

That connection matters. In Matthew 13, the word is seed. It is living, purposeful, and fruitful when received.

Vineyard and Fruit

The Old Testament often uses agricultural imagery for Israel's response to God. Isaiah 5 portrays Israel as a vineyard that God cultivated, but it produced wild grapes. The issue is not the failure of God's care, but the failure of the people's response.

Jesus' parable belongs in that prophetic tradition. God's word goes out. The question is whether it bears fruit.

Wisdom and the Heart

Proverbs repeatedly emphasizes the condition of the heart as the place where wisdom is either received or rejected. The wise receive instruction. The fool resists correction. Matthew 13 shares that wisdom concern: the same word is received differently depending on the hearer.

14. What This Passage Teaches About Reading Scripture

Matthew 13 is not only about parables. It teaches us how Scripture works.

Scripture Requires Engagement

God often speaks through forms that slow us down: story, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, lament, apocalyptic imagery, and parable. These forms are not obstacles to truth. They are part of how truth gets into us.

Scripture Reveals the Reader

The Bible is not merely an object we analyze. It also searches us. It reveals whether we are receptive, resistant, shallow, distracted, or fruitful.

Scripture Aims at Formation

The goal of the word is not merely comprehension. The goal is fruitfulness. Understanding that does not produce fruit is incomplete hearing.

Scripture Must Be Received, Not Merely Studied

Study matters. Context matters. Linguistic details matter. But Matthew 13 reminds us that the deepest issue is not only whether we can explain the seed. It is whether the seed is taking root.

15. Theological Summary

Matthew 13:10-23 teaches that Jesus' parables are not merely simple teaching tools. They are kingdom speech. They reveal the hidden reality of God's reign, expose the posture of the hearer, and call for receptive, fruitful response.

The quotation from Isaiah 6 places Jesus in the line of the prophets. Like Isaiah's message, Jesus' teaching both reveals and exposes. Some hear and receive. Others hear and remain dull.

The Parable of the Sower then makes the point concrete. The Word of the kingdom is good seed. The question is not whether the seed has power. The question is whether the hearer has become good soil.

Key Takeaways

1. Parables are not merely illustrations. They are encounters with kingdom truth.

2. The “mysteries” of the kingdom are not puzzles for clever people, but realities God reveals through Jesus.
3. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 to show that His teaching exposes the condition of the hearer.
4. The same Word can be received differently depending on the heart.
5. The seed is good. The difference is the soil.
6. The goal of hearing Scripture is not merely understanding, but fruitfulness.
7. Good Bible reading asks not only, “What does this mean?” but also, “What is this text doing?” and “What kind of hearer am I becoming?”