

The Parable of the Sower

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Good morning as we start this new series looking at the parables of Jesus. I'm quite excited about it because these parables are pretty epic when you get into them. And this parable of the sower is the first, the one that really kicks them off and helps us to understand the rest of the parables, which Jesus says himself.

Well, as a pastor, I can teach you something that I've learned over years of doing this job. And that is that you can pretty much divide this world into two groups of people. Those who get the Bible and those who don't.

Those who actually understand what it's saying and live in line with it. And those who hear it but don't really get it. And I've seen those two types of people over and over again in my ministry.

I can preach the same sermon to two people who are very similar in their age and understanding and educational level. And yet one will get it and one won't.

And it's not a Christian versus non-Christian thing. I can tell you that there are many people who call themselves Christians. People who come to church and sing the songs and enjoy the sermons.

[1 : 09] But you can see in their lives they still don't get it. It doesn't have any real impact. And maybe you're someone who you've grown up hearing the Bible. And it's nice and all.

And it's got some interesting lessons. But you don't really get why that person that you know, that work colleague or family member, is so sold out about Jesus. And why he's so passionate about the Bible.

And why he always brings it up in conversations. Why does he seem to get it and you don't? And I've also come across people of other religions who have been brought up not believing the Bible, not hearing the words of God, being told that they're corrupted words of men.

And yet they at one point hear it and they get it. They get it so much, like many Muslims who become Christians because they've got the Bible, and turn away from their old religion at the cost of losing their family and losing their status in society.

And many losing their lives because of it. But they got it and that changed them. Well, Jesus in this parable of the sower indicates that that is exactly the case.

[2 : 30] That there are two types of people in this world. Those who get it and those who don't. And right in the middle of this parable of the sower, he tells us that. Have a look in verse 11.

Now the disciples came to him after he told the parable of the sower and they asked him what it meant. And then he replied rather cryptically. The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.

But to those outside, everything comes in parables. So that they may indeed look and yet not perceive. They may indeed listen and yet not understand.

And so here you've got Jesus distinguishing explicitly between insiders and outsiders. Those who get it and those who don't. And the way he describes the outsiders, those who don't get it, is they hear but they don't understand.

And maybe that's you today or maybe it's someone you know. Well, that's why this parable is so important. And that's why I'm really keen to preach it this morning. Because in this parable, Jesus actually answers the question, How can we tell what group we're in?

[3 : 37] And how can we make sure that we get it? So let's have a look at it in a bit more detail. Alright, this parable answers a number of questions to help us understand those two groups of people.

And determine which group we're in. The first question is, how can you tell who's in what group? How does it show up? And the parable itself, the story of the sower and its interpretation, answers that question.

Now, you probably are familiar with the parable of the sower. It's a famous parable. But in case you're not, I'll just quickly run through it again. Jesus uses the illustration of a sower sowing seed. Not a sower sowing clothes. A sower sowing seed. A farmer going and casting his seed. And as he walks, he casts it on the ground. His goal, obviously, is to get growth.

He doesn't just throw the seed for fun. He's got a goal in mind. And the seed falls on different grounds. And only with some of the ground does it bear fruit.

[4 : 39] Does it grow into a healthy plant. But there's also a hard ground path where the birds come and eat it before it can even have any roots. There's shallow ground or rocky ground where it does start to grow.

But then it doesn't have many roots. And then the sun scorches it and it dies. And there's also thorny ground where it tries to grow, but it's stopped from growing.

And it doesn't become a healthy plant. And then Jesus interprets the parable. And he says, well, God's word goes out into this world. And that's the seed. God is the sower, effectively.

And he has sent his word into this world. And we can see that through the history of the Bible. God has been talking. God is not a God who stays quiet. That's the first thing we discover in the Bible is that God has something to say to us, his creatures, human beings.

And through history and through the prophets and through the apostles, he has spoken. He has spread his word into this world. But what we see is that his word, God's word, the truths in this book fall on different types of heroes, fall on different types of grounds and have different results.

[5 : 48] Now, that's essentially what the story is about. But the way it's applied is different depending on who you listen to. So the most common way this story is applied is the preacher will read it and will explain it and then go, And so make sure that you are good soil and that you are not thorny soil or rocky soil.

In other words, look out for the things in life that might choke the word, wealth and persecutions and things like that and tough times. Make sure they don't stop you from listening.

Be good soil, listen and bear fruit. Now, that sounds like a very logical application. But what makes me suspicious of that alone being the meaning of this parable is that that totally ignores this very important middle bit, which is put here right in the middle of this parable to help us to see what it's really about.

You could just read chapter 4, 1 to 9 and then skip 10 to 12 and then read 13 to 20, the interpretation, and take that from it.

But Jesus is adamant on helping us to see something more is going on here. In other words, if we take what he's saying about this insider and outsider group, the people who get it and people who don't, what this parable is actually more likely teaching us is how to determine who gets it and who doesn't.

[7 : 15] How to tell the difference between these two groups. And the way to tell the difference is to see when they face difficulty, whether they reject the word or not that they've heard, or whether they're actually bearing fruit.

When they face the temptation of wealth, do they go the way of the word or do they go their own way? See, that, when you see people in those situations in life, determines whether they actually get God's word or not.

Because if you get God's word, you won't fall away in times of difficulty because you realize it is worth suffering for because this is what it's about. This is what life's about. And life does involve suffering, and that doesn't mean that we should reject what God is saying.

If you get God's word, money and the temptations of life won't be attractive to you because there is something much bigger and more important to live for. So if you get God's word, you won't be the bad souls.

You will be the good soul, and you will actually bear fruit. You will live the way God wants you to and do things He wants you to and grow His kingdom by the way you live. And so, do you see, this parable is not so much an imperative to try to be good soil.

[8 : 29] It's an indicator of whether you already are or not. It's a way that you can diagnose your spiritual state. But then what is it that causes the difference? If we don't get to necessarily decide whether we're good soil or rocky soil or thorny soil, what is it that determines that?

And that is why Jesus quotes Isaiah 6. It's very important to understand. When there's a quotation from the Old Testament in the New Testament, it means we have to understand where that came

from and what was going on there.

So let's try that and see what it does. So Jesus says, verse 12, that they may indeed look and yet not perceive. He's talking about the outsiders, the people who don't get God's word.

The people who don't change in response to hearing God's word. They may indeed listen and yet not understand. Otherwise, they might turn back and be forgiven. Now, it sounds a bit harsh.

It's almost sounding like Jesus is saying He speaks in parables so that people won't be forgiven.

But that's not the case. What's happening in Isaiah helps us to understand what He's saying. And in Isaiah, Isaiah was a prophet who was called by God and commissioned to preach to a people who God knew would not listen and turn and be forgiven.

[9 : 45] Because they were hard-hearted. Because they enjoyed their sin too much. Now, some people did hear Isaiah's words and repent. And they were changed by it. But most people didn't.

And it was probably the worst preaching gig you can get. Where right in his application interview, God says, Okay, I accept you.

You've got the job. But by the way, it's going to fail. Well, it sounded like that. It actually didn't fail. It just didn't result in a lot of growth in God's people.

But it didn't fail because it did do its job of dividing Israel between those who were willing to listen and change and those who weren't because of their sin. And so Isaiah's words act as a divider.

So depending on how people responded to them. And they were words, if you read the book of Isaiah, which definitely called for a response and showed the guilt of those who weren't willing to hear.

[10 : 45] And so they did succeed in their job. But it was quite a negative thing that they achieved. But you see, Jesus now says his parables are there to do the same thing.

And that's the shocking thing. The parables aren't there just to give us nice stories, to make things clearer, simple stories to explain spiritual truths. According to Jesus himself, look what he says the parables are there to do.

Verse 11. The secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those outside, everything comes in parables so that they may indeed look but not perceive. The parables of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, when he came to earth to teach, just like when Isaiah came to Israel to teach.

Their purpose is to divide the people listening between those who are willing to hear what God has to say and willing to change and those who are not.

How do they do that? Well, we see in this story, look what happens. Jesus teaches the parable.

And then he stops and he ends with a climactic and rather mystical verse 9.

[11 : 52] Let anyone who has ears to hear listen. And then he walks away. And then he waits. And a few of those people, not a whole lot, but a few of them, come to him and they say, Jesus, we don't know what you're saying.

Can you please teach us? Can you please tell us what you mean? And then Jesus is going, these are the people I'm looking for. These are the people I want. His parables have done their job in dividing his listeners between those who actually want to hear and change and those who don't really.

Because there were a whole bunch of people who carried on sitting on the hills and they just went home. They didn't seek for explanation from Jesus. They didn't come to Jesus to listen to him and to follow him.

Because either they got what they needed from the parable or they just didn't understand it and they didn't care. People who heard it and went, that's a weird story.

Okay. And then they went home because they don't think they really need to hear what Jesus has to say. And people who go, oh, that's an interesting story. Let me see how I can interpret it.

[12 : 56] That will suit my own lifestyle. And then they went home with a boost for the day and a nice interesting story. Let me tell you, those people still exist today whenever God's word is spoken.

You get people who might hear it but go, I don't really need to hear this. My life's fine. I understand how the world is working. I understand what I'm doing in it.

And I've got science and the theory of evolution that answers my questions about origin. So I really don't need God's word. I might come to church from time to time just because I like the music. And then you also get those people who do like to hear it.

But what they do is then they take it and interpret it in a way that suits them. They'll take what they hear and they'll also be quite selective in what they hear. They'll choose certain parts of the Bible because it encourages them and makes them feel good.

And they don't want the other parts, which is politically incorrect and makes them feel uncomfortable. And then they'll interpret the Bible in a way that makes them feel good, in a way that boosts them for the day.

[14:00] But you see, those are the type of people who aren't the people who get it. Those are the outsiders. As opposed to the insiders who realize they don't get it and they need to come closer to Jesus if they're going to get what this says.

And they're going to get the point of life and what we're doing here. To put it another way, what this parable is teaching us, if we read it properly, is that your attitude to Jesus will determine what kind of soil you are.

What you think about the man Jesus and his teachings will determine whether you actually get this whole Bible and this whole world. Okay, so now we're at the point where we can answer the question, how can you make sure that you get it?

You look around, you see other people who seem to get it, you don't quite get it. Or maybe you think you get it, but this parable has shown you maybe you don't. Because if you look at your life, you don't see the fruitfulness that you'd like.

How do you make sure then that you get this when you open it up and when you hear it? Do you have to have a degree in theology? Do you have to go to Bible college to get this?

[15:09] Well, no, actually you don't. And it's not determined by how clever you are and how good you can work these things out in your brain. There's something else that determines whether you get it or not.

In fact, Jesus in Matthew 11 says this, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants.

See, Jesus is saying even a child can get this. You don't need university qualifications. The only qualification you actually need in order to get this is to realize that you need Jesus.

And that you can't get it without him. That you are sinful and that you are blind by yourself and that you are cut off from God. And the only way you can understand this, his word and what's going on in this world, is if you submit yourself to what Jesus has come to say.

Which is exactly what these people did when they heard the parable and they said, I don't get it, I need Jesus. And they came to him. And they sat at his feet. And they followed him and they listened to him.

[16:12] They became his disciples. As opposed to the other people who just heard but didn't really get it. And they walked away. Which one are you? How do you respond to God's word when you hear it?

And really the question that it comes down to is, does it really bear fruit in your life? Because if it bears fruit, that will show that you are one of those who get it. But if you hear it and you walk away and it doesn't really change your life, it doesn't do anything in your life which is causing you to live more in line with what God made you for and more in line with his plans for this world.

Well, if it doesn't bear fruit and grow his kingdom, which is what bearing fruit is. You know, in this parable, the seed caused more seeds to grow, which grew the crop.

And so bearing fruit means living a life that follows God's agenda and grows his kingdom. Is your life bearing fruit?

In what way is your life growing God's kingdom? And if it's not, and if you struggle to think how your life is actually bearing fruit for God, then maybe you've got to reconsider how you approach the person of Jesus and his teachings, how much you think you need him.

[17:31] Or, to put it his way, what measure you use when you come to him. I refer to another parable that he told a few verses after this one, which is connected to it.

Have a look at verse 24. Pay attention to what you hear. By the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

That's weird. What does he mean? Well, actually, this is really easy to understand. Boys and girls, I'm sure you could even understand it. By the measure you use, will it be measured to you?

He's talking about different types of measures. You get different measures, for example, in a kitchen when you're baking. So here's one. This is a 5 mil measure. Now, imagine, boys and girls,

that your parents said, We've just made some great milkshake.

Come get some. Bring a measure, and we will measure it out to you according to the measure you bring. Not that parents talk that way, but imagine they did. And imagine you brought this measure to get your milkshake.

[18 : 34] Ooh, you get 5 mils of milkshake. Great. That's because you brought this measure. But I don't think you're going to do that. I think you would rather bring a measure like this. This is a 1,000 mil measure.

Now, that is more appropriate for getting some milkshake, isn't it? By the measure you use, will it be measured to you? Jesus is saying the same applies to when you come to Him for life and teaching and knowledge and information about your life and about this world.

How much are you expecting to get from Him? When you open the Bible, and when you come to church, and when you listen to online sermons like this, how much are you actually expecting to get?

What measure are you bringing? Because if you come, just as a distant observer, not really thinking that you need Jesus, but you just want to hear His words because they might give a boost for your life.

If you come not expecting much from Him, not needing much from Him, you're not going to get much from Him. And it's not going to bear much fruit in your life. But if you come to God's word and to Jesus Himself, going, I know that I cannot bear fruit.

[19 : 55] I cannot live the way God has made me to live. And going, I need you, Jesus, to explain these things to me. And you rely on Him totally, not just for your forgiveness from your sins, but your understanding of this life and God's word.

Well, then He will give that to you. And He will bear much fruit in your life. Shall we pray? Lord, we thank You for revealing Yourself to us over history.

We thank You that You caused it to be recorded in Your word that we can read today, that You have not left us without testimony of history and what You have done in this world.

And we thank You for sending Jesus to help us to get it. Lord, I do pray for everyone watching that You would help them and help me to really rely on Jesus, both for living this life and our future hope, as well as for understanding this life and understanding Your word.

As we go into the series of parables in the weeks to come, would You help us all to be reliant on Jesus for understanding? And through that, by coming to Him and relying on Him, would You cause us to get it and bear much fruit in our lives?

[21 : 15] And we pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.