

# Patchy: A Variegated Field

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please have a seat. Let's pray together. As we've just sung, Lord, that is our humble prayer.

That you would speak to us in a way that we cannot ignore. In a way that we cannot dismiss. In a way where we hear your voice and are changed by it.

Speak, Lord, and give us ears to hear. For Jesus' sake, glory and honour. Amen. So we're starting a new series.

We finished 1 John last week. And for the next four weeks, we're going to be looking at Matthew 13. This great chapter. Right in the middle of Matthew's gospel.

A chapter full of parables. And today we're doing something ever so familiar. Matthew 13. And this parable of the sower.

[ 0 : 59 ] So I want you to listen really carefully. I want you to listen really carefully to the story that I'm telling you. It's Tuesday.

The 3rd of July. And it is a very hot day in Edinburgh. Nearly 25 degrees Celsius. It's 11 a.m. And you are on platform 5 at Waverly Station. You are holding a skinny, wet, extra hot, extra shot macchiato in your left hand.

The Scott Rail train arrives two minutes late. And you press the open door button before letting seven passengers board in front of you. You embark the train at Carrad C as the engineer. There are 136 people on board the train.

At the first stop, 43 get off and 12 get on. At the second stop, no one gets off and 25 people get on. At the third and penultimate stop, 14 people get off and 29 people get on.

[ 2 : 10 ] As the train pulls into the station, here's my question. What was the name of the engineer? O'Neill in your case, I guess.

He got on the train as the engineer. Listening carefully is vitally important. Every husband knows the awkwardness of being in a conversation but not really in a conversation with their wife.

And you're so conscious that... I'm so conscious that my wife stopped talking, asked a question and I have no idea what we're talking about.

To which the answer is, of course, whatever you think, dear. Every parent, I guess, knows the difficulty it is to get a child to listen.

And then once they've listened, to get them to obey. And every preacher knows the difficulty of getting a congregation to listen.

[ 3 : 17 ] And not just going mentally AWOL. And letting the words brush over you as you think about lunch or work or holidays. Or Wales.

Listening very carefully is very important. And in the opening parable in Matthew 13, listening is the topic that Jesus is particularly addressing.

In fact, in just 23 verses, he uses the phrase, hear, ears, listening, hearing, 20 times. It is the absolute focus of all that he's trying to tell us this morning.

So could I invite you in your Bibles to turn to Matthew 13? And once you've got there, please would you stand? And... That same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.

Such loud crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parable, saying, A farmer went out to sow his seed.

[ 4 : 39 ] As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up. Some 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 and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil

where it produced a crop 160 or 30 times what was sown.

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. The disciples came to him and asked, Why do you speak to the people in parables? He replied, Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given to you, but not to them.

Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables.

Though seeing they do not see, though hearing they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. You will be ever hearing, but never understanding. You will be ever seeing, but never perceiving.

[ 5 : 45 ] For this people's heart has become calloused. They hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them.

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people long to see what you see, but did not see it.

And to hear what you hear, but did not hear it. Listen then to what the parable of the sower means. 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 hearts.

This is the seed sown along the path. 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. 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.

[ 6 : 54 ] 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 160 or 30 times what was sown.

Now Jesus says the whole of Matthew 13 while the people are standing up. But I'll let you have a seat. Matthew 13 is the probably second most famous parable that Jesus says behind probably the good Samaritan.

And Matthew 13 forms the third major discourse in Matthew's gospel. Matthew arranges his gospel around five discourses. Around five bits of prolonged teaching.

And the parables of the kingdom form the middle one and they're quite unique because at least at the start Jesus is talking to the entire crowd and not just his disciples.

Jesus told around 40 parables. That is, depending on your definition of a parable. They make up about a third of all his teaching.

[ 8 : 08 ] And Matthew 13 is not the first time he's preached in parables in Matthew's gospel. We had the wise and foolish builder at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. We had this simile parable about clothes patches and wineskins in the middle of Matthew 9.

But Matthew 13 is the greatest cluster, the most concentrated arrangement of parables in the whole Bible. In fact, we get eight parables, two interpretations and one explanation of parables in this single chapter alone.

And the Sunday school definition of a parable you cannot beat. In Sunday school, if you went, if you listened, you would have heard that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Let's all do that together. We've already stood up, now let's do some actions. An earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Great. You can't really improve on that.

But why does Jesus start speaking in parables? In Matthew 13, it's very clear in verse 3.

[ 9 : 23 ] Then he told them many things in parables. Why now? Why parables? And that's what's going to occupy our time for the first bit of this morning.

Why does Jesus start speaking in parables? The purpose of parables. And he tells us in that middle section between the parable and the interpretation in Matthew 13, verses 10 to 17.

He told them many things in parables. Verse 34 of the chapter. Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables. He did not say anything to them without using a parable.

This seems to have been a very deliberate seismic shift in Jesus' approach to move from teaching normally and didactically to now start speaking in parables.

Using stories, using earthly stories with heavenly meanings. And I think it is really significant as we get up to speed in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew chapter 4, verse 17, Jesus starts his public

ministry with these words, Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.

[10:37] The kingdom of God has come near because God's chosen, anointed king, Jesus Christ, has come near. That the kingdom is here because the king is here.

Well, you'd think that would be the end of the gospel, wouldn't it? Chapter 4, verse 18 of Matthew should say, well, everyone got in line, lined up and sang the national anthem. Even Jeremy Corbyn. King's here. Let's all sing. But actually what we find is that there's a great variety, a great range of responses to Jesus.

From the end of the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 7 to the beginning of Matthew 13, the reaction to Jesus is increasingly varied and increasingly hostile.

After the healing of the paralyzed man, we read this of the crowd. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe and they praised God who had given such authority to man.

[11:42] After the healing of the blind and mute man, just 25 verses later, the crowd was amazed and said, nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. But the very next verse, but the Pharisees said it is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.

One group amazed, the other group saying he's actually a cultic. Even John the Baptist in chapter 11, verse 3, are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?

Even John the Baptist, the one who's described as the greatest born among men. And he's not quite sure. Chapter 11, verse 19, the crowd call him a drunkard and a glutton.

Chapter 12, verse 15, aware of this, a large crowd followed him and he healed them all. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Chapter 12, verse 23, all the people were astonished and said, could this be the son of David? The very next verse, but when the Pharisees heard this, they said, it is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.

[13:04] People are seeing the same thing. They're hearing the same thing, but the reaction to Jesus is incredibly varied. That's just to keep you awake and keep you listening.

Some people, you're the son of David. Some people, I'm praising God and I'm amazed. Some people, we need to kill him. Others, he's possessed by a demon who gives him this power. He's a drunkard. He's a glutton. Do you see? The spectrum is enormous. It is at this point where the reaction to Jesus is at its most varied that Jesus starts to speak in parables.

And parables are more than just sermon illustrations. They're actually an incredible rhetorical device employed by Jesus to reveal truth to the faithful and conceal truth from the hard-hearted. They do this double thing. Those who get it get more. Those who don't get it are left bamboozled. And they get nothing. It is more than just simply a sermon illustration.

[14:14] It is a rhetorical device. So those with ears to hear, hear clearly. And those with ears that are blocked and hearts that are hard don't get anything.

The use of parables perplexes those on the outside but to those on the inside. It gives them greater insights. There is an in and an out.

See verse 11. Because the knowledge of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But not to them. There is a them and an us. There are insiders and outsiders.

And a parable makes that divide even wider. Because those that are in get more and those that are out get less. See that it's divine sovereignty.

Verse 11. And he replied because the knowledge of the kingdom, the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given to you but not to them. This word secrets, the Greek word *mysterion*. A secret that cannot be known unless it's revealed to you.

[15:22] So what Jesus is saying is the reason you understand is because God has given you insights. God has revealed to you the secrets of the kingdom. But see, there's human responsibility as well.

Verse 12. Whoever has more will be given more and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken away from them.

That God reveals the secrets but if you do nothing with them they'll be taken away from you. We all know what this is like in life. I came back from sabbatical last September.

I'd taken up running. I was the fittest I've ever been. And yet, I missed one run. And then another run. And then a week of runs. And then a month of runs.

And I can tell you I haven't actually been running since March. And my fitness level, I live on the third floor and I'm exhausted by the time I get to the front door. Fitness, if you have it, but don't use

it.

[16:22] It's taken away if you play a musical instrument. Quickly gone if you speak a foreign language but don't use it. You quickly get tongue-tied. And then Jesus quotes extensively from Isaiah chapter 6 in verse 14.

We all know the first bit of Isaiah chapter 6. In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord seated on the throne and the train of his robe filled the temple. We love that bit.

That ends with Isaiah saying, here I am, send me. We love that bit. We all would love Isaiah's commissioning. But none of us would like Isaiah's ministry. Because God goes on to say, they'll be always hearing but never understanding.

They'll be seeing but they will never perceive. Why? Because they've hardened their hearts.

They've hardened their hearts to God's word.

Isaiah's preaching, rather than melt soft, waxy hearts, will only harden hard, earthen, clayey hearts.

[17:26] And so look what it says in Matthew 13 verse 15. For this people's heart has become calloused. They stopped listening.

They closed their ears and their heart became hard. They hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes. They have deliberately turned away from God's word.

And that's said against this glorious God who's looking to initiate and heal. Because if they did turn, the end of verse 15, I would heal them.

A deliberate turning away. A deliberate drowning out of God's word. So the parables act as a filter.

They widen the divide and clarify the camps between those who listen and understand.

And those who only hear and reject what God is saying. It is only those that have been given ears to hear that really hear. This then helps us see why our understanding of these parables is a great indicator of our response to Jesus.

[18:34] That we're invited to be in particularly this parable. And to discern which type of soil we are today. That is the purpose of parables.

So now let's move to understanding this parable. The power of the sower. It is ultra familiar, isn't it?

That I dare say if you were in Sunday school to learn that a parable was an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

You then did some kind of craft involving a piece of paper divided into four and some seeds, right? But it's important that we hear what God is saying to us through it this morning.

There's four types of soil. Some of it compacted paths. Some rocky. Some weedy. And some very congenial like miracle growth. But only one soil produces a crop.

Whilst the other three make varying attempts but are ultimately unproductive. To explain this very varied response to Jesus' word, he tells us a story about a farmer who sows seed.

[19:44] And then he interprets it for us so we can see what we're supposed to be. And so we get the first type of soil. The path. And these people are like Teflon hearers.

You know Teflon that coats your frying pan that makes it non-stick? That's what these people's ears are like. It's non-stick. They hear it and it's in one ear and out the other. There's nothing keeping it there.

There's no absorption. It just sits on the surface. And then it's snatched away. Then the birds come and they eat it up. And it's unfruitful.

It doesn't even get a look in. It's dining day for the pigeons but no production, no fruitfulness in the heart. These people remain blind to the truth about Jesus.

And I wonder how do we hear this morning? How do you hear this morning? I'm not talking about how you heard a year ago or when you became a Christian. How do you hear today? Is it like this?

[20:51] You used to listen intently. You used to read your Bibles and obey. But now it just washes over you and is all too quickly snatched. Is this word just sitting on the surface at a superficial level of your life?

Or are you internalizing it? Because Jesus says don't be a Teflon hearer. Because it bears no fruit in your life. Does this word penetrate and continue to resonate and reverberate in your life through the week?

Or will it be left on the surface and snatched away as soon as the words have dissipated into the air? Don't be a Teflon hearer. Then he talks about the rocks.

And if that was a Teflon hearer, this is a fair weather hearer. Do you see what it says? They received the word with joy. These people really seemed to get it.

They listened and they went, that's amazing. And it grew up fast, which it would do if there was rocky soil. Where the bedrock is just below this very thin surface of topsoil.

[ 22 : 03 ] Because it's warm and it keeps water. And the plants grow very quick. But as soon as they shoot up, they wither and die because there's no roots. And I wonder, how do we hear?

How do we hear? How do we hear? Because it says when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. There's no depth. There's no roots. They hear.

They're excited. But when the excitement fades, the plants die. There's nothing keeping them there. A fair weather hearer, when it's all good, will grow.

When it starts to get tough, I want nothing to do with it. It withers and dies. It's a short-lived spurt of growth. But there's no nutrients, no root system.

So it withers and dies. Receive it with joy. It looks so promising, but it never goes deep. And I wonder, how do we hear? When God tells us things we want to hear, we're like, yes.

[ 23 : 07 ] But when he challenges us or calls us to change or do an about-turn in the way we're living, I don't really like that word that much.

We'll just pretend we didn't hear it. Fair weather hearers, no depth. Don't be a fair weather hearer.

Third type of soil is amongst the weeds.

And again, this has some sort of growth. There is some growth, but the thorns choke it out. They get distracted. They get distracted with two things in particular, the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.

When I read this, I couldn't help but think of only fools and horses. You've got this guy, Del Boy, and Del Boy starts every episode by saying, Oh, I've got this new scheme, this new scam, which always follows with, Rodney, by this time next year we could be millionaires.

But by the next episode it's all gone wrong and he's distracted by another thing and then another thing and then another thing. That's like these hearers. They hear the word and it starts to grow, but they're then distracted and they start thinking about their wealth or their worries.

[ 24 : 16 ] And this word doesn't have a chance because these worries and this wealth become so big in their life that the word is choked out. It's choked out.

It loses the competition between eternal treasure and worldly worries. Things like comfort in the bank account, the possessions and pleasures and pleasures of life.

And we go, I much prefer them today than what you're saying to me, God. And the word is choked out. Don't be a Del Boy hearer. What is it that's getting in the way of you hearing this word?

Of you feasting on this word? What is the dividedness of your heart about? Because there's many thorns and weeds out there that will choke out this word.

And unless we love this most, it will never grow. And we'll never feast on it as we should. And we'll never bear the fruit that we could.

[ 25 : 22 ] And finally, there's the good soil and I love this advert. Heineken hearing and I love Dr. Spock. Do you see what happens to his ears? And what's the Heineken tagline?

Heineken refreshes parts that other bears can't reach. And that's what it seems to do to this, this word seems to do in people's lives. That it gets right down deep.

It's got huge roots. It grows. They've got ears. It's a virtuous circle. They love what they read, so they read it more. And they love what they read, so they read it more.

And it bears fruit. It bears great fruit. It bears an unbelievable yield. In the time that Jesus is writing, one ear of corn would maybe produce six, seven, eight ears of corn.

In our day of GM and all that selective breeding, 30, 60, and 100 doesn't astound us. In this day, it would astound them. And it's a continuous, so it keeps on bearing fruit.

[ 26 : 25 ] This word is the gift that just keeps on giving. If we absorb it, if we assimilate it, if we take it down deep into our lives, it produces a crop of 30, 60, and 100 times.

One type of soil is incredibly fruitful. And what is it that makes that soil fruitful? Are we here?

Whether we really hear, whether we really listen to what God is saying, or whether it sits on the surface, gets choked out, or never develops roots.

John MacArthur writes, fruit bearing is the whole point of agriculture. In the harvest, weedy ground offers no more hope than does the hard path or shallow soil.

All these are equally fruitless in the end. Fruit bearing is the whole point of agriculture, and it is also the ultimate test then of salvation.

[ 27 : 28 ] How do you hear? How do you hear today? And so I want to give you some principles from this parable as we close.

Firstly, the work of the word. It is the word that does the work. It is this word, listened, understand, understood, absorbed into our life, and acted upon that bears fruit in our lives.

It is all about the centrality of the word, and our attitude to the word. Throughout church history, many people have got distracted with many things.

The Middle Ages, the sacraments became the focus of church. And the Reformation comes along, and the thing that they do is they say, no, the Bible is center. Listening to what God says in his word is the point.

Spiritual gifts distract. Social action distracts. Worship and singing distracts. And if we learn one thing from this parable, it is that the word does the work.

[ 28 : 34 ] It is about the Bible having the right place in our church, the right place in our lives, and the right place in our daily schedule. Fruitfulness revolves around the word.

It is God's word that brings life and joy and hope. If we will but hear or absorb. Secondly, we learn about the kind of kingdom.

How does the kingdom of God grow? Well, it grows slowly. It almost develops under the radar. How does the kingdom grow? Well, as the king goes out and sows seed.

It's very unassuming. It's almost overlooked. Just the chapter before, Jesus quotes Isaiah 42 about his ministry.

And this is what it says of himself. He will not quarrel or cry out. What sort of king is he?

[ 29 : 45 ] Well, he's not a triumphant king. This is an Aladdin with Prince Ali going to get Princess Jasmine in the story. With elephants and trumpets and great pomp and circumstance. This is a humble king who sows his word.

And his word is what builds the kingdom. He's a king who understands. He doesn't break bruised weeds or snuff out smouldering wicks. He's gentle and he comes alongside so he might sow his word into our lives.

Thirdly, I think we know what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to scatter the seed. That's what we're called to do. We're supposed to do what the king himself does is scatter the seed. And the seed is the word.

And as the word is scattered, some will fall on rocky ground. Some on the path. Some amongst the weeds. But some will fall in good soil. And it will grow and it will bear fruit unto eternal life.

We're called to faithfulness in the scattering. We're allowed to sow outrageously. The bucket of seed is enormous. And our call is to sow it faithfully and outrageously.

[ 31 : 02 ] We're called to be sowers of seed. Not soil samplers. Oh, they look like they might respond. Oh, here's a little bit. But just sowing and sowing and sowing and sowing.

Fourthly, patchy but profitable. It doesn't seem like a great process, does it? It doesn't seem very effective or efficient. That actually if the soil is a quarter, it's in a harlequin shape.

Only one quarter grows. That seems pretty inefficient. But I think the great encouragement is when it grows, when it takes root, it produces an exponential harvest.

30, 60 or 100 times. Season after season. Harvest after harvest. It's not wasteful. It's not wasteful at all. It's abundant.

And incredibly profitable. And I wonder, is that a reflection of your life today? Bearing fruit. Bearing fruit. 30, 60 and 100 times. And it's the gift that just keeps on giving.

[ 32 : 08 ] As we hear and listen and respond to God's word. Penultimately, the seed is sufficient. Everything needed is in the seed.

We're just to sow it. Just like when you sow your geraniums, the seed is sufficient. You don't need to go out and breathe on it every day. Some of you might sing to it, but that's because you're weird. Sow the seed. Everything needed to bear fruit and life is in the seed. The seed is the gospel, the good news about Jesus who came to give life and hope and bear fruit in our lives forever.

The deficiency is not in the seed. It's the same seed in four places. The difference is in the soil.

Romans 1.16 says, I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

This little seed, this little overlooked word is the power of God. Nothing else is described as the power of God. As Ian started our service talking about the greatness of God in the galaxies, they're never described as the power of God.

[ 33 : 23 ] The lightning we see come to earth in all its drama and noise and light, never described as the power of God. The one thing. This little seed.

This eternal story of a God who entered history, became a man, lived a perfect life and humbled himself to death on a cross, rising again to prove everything that he'd done is true.

That is the power of God. And it brings salvation whenever it's heard and responded to. And then lastly, there's a real duty of discipleship.

Do you see, there's lots, there's lots of seed that seems to grow. But particularly in the rocky soil, what stops it? It doesn't have any roots.

That the person's roots don't go down deep into this word. And so like a bit of wheat when it has no roots, it's quickly shriveled and dies. So it's important that each of us, all the time, are encouraging one another to get our face in the book.

[ 34 : 36 ] To read, to discuss. How encouraging to see a small group report where people are saying, what do you enjoy the most? Discussing God's word. As we hear it and respond to it, there's a real duty of discipleship.

Peter will talk about craving this like pure spiritual milk so that we'll grow up into maturity. I wonder, is that your life today? And if not, how can we help?

What can we do to come alongside so we can all grow together and produce this glorious harvest unto eternal life? How are your ears this morning?

How are your ears this morning? One question as we finish. How many people are on the train? Those who have ears, let them hear.

The answer is 190. Let me pray. And then we'll sing. Father God, we don't want this word to sit on the surface and be snatched away.

[ 35 : 53 ] We don't want it to just spurt for a little while and then shrivel and die. We don't want it to be choked out by worries and concerns and the pursuit of wealth.

And yet, Lord, left to our own devices, Lord, that is what is going to happen. So, Lord, would you send your spirit that this word might be seared on our hearts in indelible ink.

And that we might go from here with a fresh zeal to read, to listen, to obey, to understand, to assimilate your word.

Father, thank you for all the promises surrounding your word. Thank you for what you say through Isaiah in chapter 55, that as the rain comes down from heaven and does not return to you without first watering the earth, so is my word that comes forth from my mouth.

It will not return to me void, but will accomplish everything that I've sent it out to do. And so, Lord, through your word, in each of our lives and our life corporately, would you accomplish great things and great fruitfulness through your word.

[ 37 : 04 ] Father, we ask this for Jesus' sake, in Jesus' name, and for his glory alone. Father, come and may your good seed find the good soil of our lives. Father, help us produce fruit.

Amen.