

**The Unconverted “Believer” (11):
The Parable of the Sower (1)**

Let us turn to Matthew 13, in which we consider probably a very familiar parable to most of us, the parable of the sower. I expect we will examine this parable of our Lord for the next couple of Sundays. Let us read Matthew 13:1-23.

On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. ²And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

³Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: “Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. ⁶But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. ⁷And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. ⁸But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

¹⁰And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

¹¹He answered and 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. ¹²For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. ¹³Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;
¹⁵For the hearts of this people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.’

¹⁶But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; ¹⁷for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

¹⁸“Therefore hear the parable of the sower: ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. ²⁰But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. ²²Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. ²³But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

There are two reasons that I would like us to consider this passage. The first reason is that the parable of the sower underscores our assertion that there may be many who profess to be believers in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior but who are still in their sins, for they have never been truly converted. Of the four

soils that our Lord described, three represent “believers”, but only one of these three, the good soil, represents the believer with true, saving faith. And so, two out of the four kinds of soil that our Lord described, represent unconverted believers; they had faith, but they did not have saving faith.

The second reason for addressing this passage is that it underscores what we asserted last time, that the gospel of salvation of the Bible is frequently, even primarily set forth to be the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. All of the parables of Matthew 13 support this assertion. The gospel is the good news that Jesus is both Lord and Savior, with all that is implied and involved in that truth. Those who claim to have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, but who do not live with Jesus Christ as their Lord, are still in their sins.

The parable of the sower is the first, the longest, and the most detailed of the seven parables of this discourse. It is set forth in two parts, in that first Jesus told the parable in public to the gathered crowds, and then, secondly, Jesus explained the parable in privacy to His disciples. Between the initial telling forth of the parable (vs. 1-9) and the explanation of the parable (vs. 18-23), there is a word of Jesus regarding the purpose of parables in general and why He taught them (vs. 10-17). We will address this passage by working through these three divisions of the first 23 verses of this chapter.

I. Jesus told the parable before the crowds in public (13:1-9)

Again, we read:

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²And great crowds gathered about Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And He told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹He who has ears, let him hear.”

This parable Jesus taught the crowds on this occasion is so commonly known in our language as the “Parable of the Sower” that it will never become associated with a name that is more conducive with its subject, such as the “Parable of the Four Soils”, or as “The Four Kinds of Ground” (as it is commonly known in the German language). This would be the more correct title in that it points to the major subject of the parable and to the central idea. But to change the name of the parable would probably result in more confusion than clarity.

At this stage of His ministry in Galilee Jesus had great crowds following Him. They desired to be near Him in order to see the miracles He performed and to hear the words He taught. He spoke differently than the religious authorities they heard frequently in their synagogues. As one once expressed, “A certain divine authority, strangely combined with the tenderest human sympathy, marked His discourses sharply off, as entirely different in kind from all that they had been accustomed to hear in the synagogue.”¹ The manner and the content of His teaching was very pleasing and appealing to the people, for “the common people heard Him gladly” (Mark 12:37). Of course not all who heard Him did so gladly. His own family thought that He was beside Himself; they did not believe on Him until after His resurrection. And everywhere He gathered a crowd and taught, the Jewish leaders, both religious and political, did not hear Him gladly, but heard Him with suspicion, with animosity, and with evil designs.

On this occasion “Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea” (v. 1). Possibly He was desiring to get away to rest, but it may be that He intended to go to an open space where He could speak to the people. Great crowds gathered, so that He found it expedient to get into a boat and cast off from shore, from which He could better speak to the large assembly. He would instruct the people on the nature and the difficulties of being one of His true disciples, one who would receive salvation through faith in Him.

¹ William Arnot, **The Parables of Our Lord** (T. Nelson and Sons, Paternoster Row, 1893), p. 44.

Perhaps there was within sight a plowed field on the hillside above the shoreline. Maybe there was a farmer sowing his seed in that field. Whether or not there was visible to the crowd a farmer sowing seed in his field is not stated. But it would have been an image commonly displayed before all who were present. The sower having a bag of seed hanging from his shoulder, would walk down a furrow with measured steps. He would reach into his bag with his hand and cast the seed in front of him as he walked the length of his field. When He came to a portion of the field near a pathway or near the side of the field where weeds and thorns grew, he would not change his cadence or motion lest the seed not be spread evenly on all the good soil near those byways. The seed that fell on hard ground was either eaten by the birds (v. 4) or trodden down by those walking on the path, a scenario that Luke proposed (Luke 8:5). Some of the seed fell in soil where weeds grew. That seed would not bear fruit, just as the seed on the roadway. And some seed fell on shallow soil that had stones or a rocky ledge just under the surface. Seed sown there would also be unfruitful although at first there was hope for its fruitfulness. But good seed would be scattered into good, prepared ground, which the farmer knew would one day bear fruit due to his labor.

But apparently after our Lord told this parable, He did not explain the meaning of the parable to the crowd, or at least so that He was easily and widely understood by them. And so, rather than His parable rendering His teaching illustrative, informative, and applicable, it seems that He left the crowds ignorant and rather confused. His disciples must have sensed the response and reaction of the people, which lead them to ask a question of Jesus when they were alone.

II. Jesus answered the question of His disciples concerning His teaching in parables (13:10-16)

When our Lord first told His disciples the parable of the sower, it prompted their questioning Him. Here are verses 10 through 13:

¹⁰And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

¹¹He answered and 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. ¹²For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.

¹³Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

It would seem that the disciples themselves had difficulty understanding the meaning of the details in Jesus’ parables. And if they did not understand, who were with Him daily and heard Him teach frequently, what must be the confusion of the crowds who heard Jesus teach them! Jesus responded to His disciples by saying that His purpose for teaching in parables was two-fold--to disclose truth to His disciples but to disguise that truth from the Jewish crowds. He desired that His disciples understood the “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven”, but he did not desire everyone to understand these spiritual realities.

Matthew records that Jesus used the term, the kingdom of heaven. What does this mean?

A. The meaning of the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven”

It is commonly acknowledged that Matthew organized his Gospel around five recorded discourses, or speeches of the Lord Jesus. Matthew 13 contains the third of these five speeches. The speech itself contains seven parables, each addressing different aspects of the “kingdom of heaven.” The word, “kingdom”, appears twelve times in this chapter. Among these twelve occurrences, the word is used eight times in the phrase, “kingdom of heaven.” Matthew used this phrase, the kingdom of heaven, rather than the common expression, kingdom of God, which is found in the parallel passages in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Matthew was writing principally to Jewish readers, who avoided writing and saying directly the name, “God”, due to their reverence for Him. In its place they would refer to “heaven” as the abode of God rather than identifying God directly. The phrases in the Gospels, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God,

are identical in their meaning.² Through these seven parables regarding the kingdom of heaven, our Lord instructed His disciples in the true nature of the kingdom of God, which is the realm of salvation from sin unto everlasting life.

All of the people of Israel who listened to Jesus were anticipating the arrival of the promised Messiah and His re-establishment of the kingdom of David, in other words, the kingdom of God (heaven). The ancient kingdom of David was the manifestation of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament. The kingdom of Israel was to be the place in which God's people were to live according to God's laws, in a relationship in which God was their King and the Israelites were His people.

God was the true King of ancient Israel. We see this expressed in many places throughout the Old Testament. One clear example was on the occasion that the Israelites desired and demanded to have a king like the other nations. In doing so they rejected Samuel the prophet and judge who ruled over Israel on behalf of God. We read of God's response to Samuel when the people desired a human king:

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the LORD. ⁷And the LORD said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but *they have rejected me from being king over them.*" (1 Sam. 8:4-7)

As the true king of Israel, God would call and appoint human kings to rule on His behalf over His people. When David was king, David ruled Israel as "a man after God's own heart", that is, he reigned as king on behalf of Israel's true king, God Himself. David's throne on earth was the earthly throne through which God would rule over His people from His throne in heaven. Figuratively speaking, David was sitting on his throne at the right hand of God ruling Israel on behalf of God. Although David was a good king, he was not perfect. And those kings that came after him never rose to the quality of his reign. Later, after God had punished Israel for having broken its covenant with Him, God promised to restore the kingdom over which He was king.

Again, the physical kingdom of Israel was the manifestation of kingdom of God during the times of the Old Testament. Or perhaps stated better, physical Israel was the Old Testament "type" of the New Testament "antitype", which is spiritual Israel that Jesus Christ inaugurated through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the throne of God. God had promised that He would restore the kingdom of David and enthrone David's greater Son as its King. We could cite a number of passages, but here is a very familiar one, again, from the pen of Isaiah:

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end, on *the throne of David and over His kingdom*, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness *from this time forth and forevermore.* The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:6f.)

² Dispensationalists, those who believe the Bible speaks of two separate promised kingdoms, distinguish between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. C. I. Scofield stated, "The kingdom of God is to be distinguished from the kingdom of heaven in five respects" [**The Scofield Reference Bible** (Oxford University Press, 1909, 1917), p. 1003]. The editors of **The New Scofield Reference Bible** modified the original comments of Scofield, but still advocated this idea: "The expression, 'the kingdom of God,' although used in many cases as synonymous with the kingdom of heaven, is to be distinguished from it in a number of instances" [(Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 1002]. Charles Ryrie agrees with this errant view of two different kingdoms. Of the kingdom of heaven he wrote, "This is the rule of heaven over the earth. The Jewish people of Christ's day were looking for this messianic or Davidic kingdom to be established on this earth, and this is what John proclaimed as "near"... The rejection of Christ by the people delayed its establishment until the second coming of Christ (25:31)" [**Ryrie Study Bible; Expanded Edition** (Moody Press, 1986, 1994), p. 1462].

The truth that we underscore is this: ***the kingdom of God of the New Testament that God inaugurated through the ministry, death, resurrection, and enthronement of the Lord Jesus, is the promised kingdom of David of the Old Testament.*** When Gabriel revealed to Mary that she would bear the promised child, he said to her:

³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. ***And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David,*** ³³and He will reign ***over the house of Jacob forever,*** and of ***His kingdom there will be no end.***” (Luke 1:31-33)

The Lord Jesus was that promised Son of David who brought to pass all that God had promised to His people. The emphasis of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God and that it is vitally connected with biblical salvation underscores what we emphasized last time³: ***the gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of the kingdom of God.*** To preach the gospel is to preach the good news that God has enthroned Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God, to reign over the kingdom of God. As Peter had declared to the Jews gathered on the Day of Pentecost, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

But what God had promised and purposed to establish for His people and what the Jewish people had anticipated respecting that kingdom were very different from one another. The Jewish people of New Testament days expected a restored earthly kingdom with the physical borders of the ancient kingdom of Israel in which all ethnic Jews would be citizens. But they were mistaken, for God had actually promised ancient Israel that He would form a kingdom that was spiritual in nature.⁴ The reason for this was that their true real problem before God that brought an end to Israel’s kingdom in the Old Testament was spiritual in nature. The physical enemies of Israel, their defeat of Israel, and their subsequent oppression, all that Israel had experienced, were God’s just punishment upon Israel for their sins. Israel had broken its covenant with God. The promised kingdom of David would be spiritual in nature in which God would bring forth the remedy to their backsliding and sinful rebellion. The Messiah would secure the forgiveness of sin of believing Jews restore to them the promised kingdom. But this kingdom would also encompass believing Gentiles (Isa. 52:9-15; Isa. 49:5, 6). All of those whom the suffering Servant redeems would enjoy the spiritual and eternal blessings of God in a new covenant relationship with Him in His kingdom. The reigning Son of David would secure the obedience of His kingdom citizens through their conversion and by imparting to His people the Holy Spirit who would insure their faith and obedience to their King.

Verses could be multiplied in our hearing to further substantiate what we are saying, but again, the point we wish to make is this:

The message of the gospel of our salvation involves the good news that God has inaugurated His promised kingdom in the reign of Jesus Christ and that sinners are granted entrance and citizenship in this kingdom through repentance and faith. In this spiritual kingdom of God they enjoy the forgiveness of sins, fellowship with the Lord and His people, and in which they may live with joy, in peace, and righteousness in this age and in the age to come. The heart of the gospel message is “Jesus is Lord”, that is, He is the once crucified, but now risen and enthroned Sovereign Ruler over the entire world.

³ Sermon FBC1081 given on April 4, 2021.

⁴ Dispensationalists are mistaken today regarding the promised kingdom of David, just as the Jews were in the days of our Lord’s ministry. Jesus never intended to establish on earth a political kingdom of Israel, that is, a restored Davidic kingdom identical to that of the Old Testament. The Davidic kingdom of Israel was an Old Testament type of what is the New Testament antitype, the spiritual kingdom of God over which King Jesus presently reigns. This spiritual kingdom, the kingdom of God, is entered through spiritual birth, not physical birth. His kingdom citizens are citizens of heaven, not citizens of a country in a physical land with physical boundaries. True people of faith of the Old Testament, like Abraham, looked for a heavenly city of Zion, not the earthly city of Jerusalem as its capital (See Heb. 11:8-16).

Christians are ones who believe this truth and live accordingly, while living with Jesus Christ as their Lord/King, they await and anticipate the future full realization of that kingdom when Jesus Christ returns in glory.

Because our Lord Jesus would establish a spiritual kingdom far different than the earthly, physical kingdom the Jewish people anticipated, He was cautious how He revealed Himself to them. He was also careful how He instructed His disciples in the nature of the kingdom. He did so in primarily two ways. **First**, as we have related a number of times, He referred to Himself as “*the Son of Man*”, a title that the people did not know or comprehend. Had He declared Himself at once and openly as the promised Messiah, the people, including His own disciples, would have imposed their wrong expectations upon Him and His ministry. He described Himself as the Messiah by the cryptic title, Son of Man, so that He could over time instruct His disciples as to the true nature of His person and work. In time they came to recognize that He was the promised Messiah-King, but by then they understood the true nature of His kingdom. And **secondly**, the Lord taught His disciples about the nature of His kingdom through the use of *parables*. In answer to His disciples’ question, Jesus explained in detail the reason He taught in parables. But before we address His use of parables, we need to say a few words about the expression, “*the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*.”

B. The meaning of the phrase, “*the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*”

Not all of the English translations express this phrase in the same language. Here are the major renderings:

ESV: “And He answered them, ‘To you it has been given to know *the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*, but to them it has not been given.’”

NIV: “He replied, ‘The knowledge of *the secrets of the kingdom of heaven* has been given to you, but not to them.’”

KJV: “He answered and said unto them, ‘Because it is given unto you to know *the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*, but to them it is not given.’”

NASV: “And He answered and said to them, ‘To you it has been granted to know *the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*, but to them it has not been granted.’”

NKJV: “He answered and 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.’”

The Greek text uses the word, *ta musteria* (τὰ μυστήρια), from which we get the English word “mysteries.” The Bible uses this term, mystery, to describe a doctrinal truth that had previously been hidden from man’s understanding, but which God would then reveal to His people. The Bible records a number of these “mysteries.”

- 1) The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:3-50)
- 2) The mystery of Israel’s (the Jews) blindness during most of this church (Rom. 11:25)
- 3) The mystery of the translation of believers at the Second Coming of Christ (1 Thess. 4:14-17)
- 4) The mystery of the “church” in which believing Jews and Gentiles comprise one body (Eph. 3:1-11)
- 5) The mystery of the church as the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:28-32)
- 6) The mystery of the indwelling Christ in the believer (Col. 1:26f)
- 7) The mystery of God incarnate in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:2)
- 8) The mystery of how God causes a sinner to become like Christ (sanctification) (1 Tim. 3:16)
- 9) The mystery of iniquity that exists in the fallen world (2 Thess. 2:7)
- 10) The mystery of the seven stars (Rev. 1:20)
- 11) The mystery of Babylon (Rev. 17:5, 7)

By revealing the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus was explaining to His disciples the spiritual nature of the kingdom that God had intended to bring His people, in contrast to the physical kingdom which they had anticipated. Our Lord corrected the wrong understanding that His disciples had concerning the kingdom, by instructing them and them only of the true nature of the kingdom.

In this passage of Matthew 13, Jesus included in the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” all seven parables contained in this discourse. The parables of Matthew 13 include the following:

- 1) The parable of the sower (13:1-9, 14-23)
- 2) The parable of the wheat and the tares (13:24-30; 36-43)
- 3) The parable of the mustard seed (13:31-2)
- 4) The parable of the leaven (13:33)
- 5) The parable of the hidden treasure (13:44)
- 6) The parable of the pearl of great price (13:45f)
- 7) The parable of the dragnet (13:7-50)

And so, Jesus used the expression, “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” to describe the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven (God) through the course of this age. He explained to His disciples through these seven parables that the kingdom of God (heaven) is spiritual in nature, that it will exist in a world in which there are both believers and unbelievers. He taught His disciples that though the kingdom would begin quite small and insignificant, it would encompass the whole world. But Jesus also illustrated to His disciples the great value of this kingdom and the great privilege of being a citizen of this kingdom. And yet, He also gave warnings and exhortations of the costs and the difficulties to live as kingdom citizens in this fallen world.

Let us now consider...

C. The reason that Jesus taught the people in parables

Again, after our Lord had told the parable of the sower publicly, we read of His explanation of why He spoke in parables when He was alone with His disciples.

¹⁰Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹And He answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” (Matt. 13:10f)

Our Lord taught the people in parables for two reasons. First, our Lord intended to teach His disciples “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” Second, the Lord intended to prevent all non-disciples from understanding the spiritual nature of His kingdom. Let us consider our Lord’s words regarding this second reason that He taught in parables. Verse 11 reads, “He answered them, ‘To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’” Our Lord has purposed to teach the truth of His kingdom to His disciples, but He determined not to teach non-disciples respecting His kingdom. Jesus said, “to them it has not been given.”

Here we see that understanding spiritual truth is the direct result of the will of God. Because of sin, no one would be able to understand spiritual truth so as to have his life transformed. God must take the initiative to reveal Himself to the people He chooses, and only they will come to know the truth. But with respect to stubborn, hard-hearted, Christ rejecters, God has purposed to keep them in ignorance regarding the way to recovery from their terrible damned condition-- “to them it has not been given.”

God withholding the hearing and understanding of His Word is a sign of His displeasure and judgment. Consider what God said He would do to Israel:

⁹“And on that day,” declares the Lord GOD,
“I will make the sun go down at noon

And darken the earth in broad daylight.
¹⁰I will turn your feasts into mourning
And all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on every waist
And baldness on every head;
I will make it like the mourning for an only son
And the end of it like a bitter day.

¹¹“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD,
“When I will send a famine on the land--
Not a famine of bread,
Nor a thirst for water,
But of hearing the words of the LORD.

¹²They shall wander from sea to sea,
And from north to east;
They shall run to and fro,
To seek the word of the LORD,
But they shall not find it.” (Amos 8:9-12)

The greatest of blessings is to hear and to understand the Word of God. The greatest curse is to hear the Word of God and not understand it. If you have a measure of understanding of God’s Word so that it has shaped your thinking and it directs your life, you are a most blessed person. “To you it has been given to know” (Matt. 13:11). Consider what Paul wrote:

⁹But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
Nor the heart of man imagined,
What God has prepared for those who love him”--

¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, ***that we might understand the things freely given us by God.*** ¹³And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but ***taught by the Spirit,*** interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and ***he is not able to understand them*** because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:9-16)

Let us return to Matthew 13:12f in which we read what our Lord then told His disciples about God’s resolve to reveal spiritual truth to His disciples but to keep all others in their ignorance.

¹²For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

God is either blessing you with the further acquisition of knowledge of His Word/Truth, or He is hardening you by His Word which will end in your certain destruction. Biblical truth is the means that God uses to both bless and damn. The same Word that saves, condemns, depending on the work of the Holy Spirit either giving understanding or insuring indifference and ignorance.

Our Lord then said that His intention not to reveal truth to those who were not His disciples was a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy. Here is Matthew 13:14f,

¹⁴Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

“You will indeed hear but never understand,
And you will indeed see but never perceive.

¹⁵For this people’s heart has grown dull,
And with their ears they can barely hear,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes
And hear with their ears
And understand with their heart
And turn, and I would heal them.’

God had intended to harden the hearts of many in Israel so that they would not respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord said that the Word of God recorded in Isaiah 6: 9 and 10 was being fulfilled. This passage that Matthew quotes is of the initial call of Isaiah to the prophetic office. There we read beginning with Isaiah 6:8:

⁸Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying:

“Whom shall I send,
And who will go for Us?”

Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”

⁹And He said, “Go, and tell this people:

‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’

¹⁰“Make the heart of this people dull,
And their ears heavy,
And shut their eyes;
Lest they see with their eyes,
And hear with their ears,
And understand with their heart,
And return and be healed.”

¹¹Then I said, “Lord, how long?”

And He answered:

“Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant,
The houses are without a man,
The land is utterly desolate,

¹²The LORD has removed men far away,
And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

¹³But yet a tenth will be in it,
And will return and be for consuming,
As a terebinth tree or as an oak,
Whose stump remains when it is cut down.
So the holy seed shall be its stump.” (Isa. 6:8-13)

Isaiah chapter 6 opens with Isaiah being transported into heaven into the very presence of the holy God (Isa. 6:1-4). Isaiah was immediately struck an awareness of his terrible sinfulness. But then God cleansed Isaiah from his sin (6:5-7). Then God spoke, asking for a volunteer to go and speak His Word to His people Israel. Isaiah responded with courage and boldness.

From Isaiah's example, we may know that a personal sense of forgiveness and cleansing of sin will produce courage, boldness, and the desire to advance the will of God. On the other hand, a sense of guilt due to one's sin will close one's mouth-- "that all the world might be guilty, so that every mouth may be stopped."

God then gave Isaiah his commission and instruction with respect to the message he was to proclaim. God refers to His people now as "this people." Prior to this verse God had referred to them as "My" people, which is the language of a covenant relationship. The word "this" puts distance between God and Judah. Then the message is set forth. It will be a message of judgment upon the nation.

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

Here is the substance and the tenor of the message which Isaiah was to bear to the people. The time that God had given His people to repent had expired. For this generation of Isaiah's day, the time of salvation was no longer. God would harden this people leading to their just condemnation and destruction.

God can make blind eyes see and deaf ears hear, but He also can render seeing eyes blind and hearing hears deaf to His message so that they continue in their self-destructive ways. God in His judicial dealings with sinful, unrepentant people withholds His mercy and grace and renders insensitivity and ignorance of the way of peace.

It is this passage that our Lord declared was being fulfilled in His ministry, just as it had been fulfilled in Isaiah's day. He quoted Isaiah as a prophecy of those Jews who rejected His teaching during His earthly ministry. Isaiah foretold of their obstinacy and the judgment of God upon them. Their refusal to hear the Lord Jesus was itself the judgment of God upon them. The result of God's judicial action in this case was insensitivity, ignorance, and indifference which will continue until the time of judgment. Thus, their spiritual hearing, seeing, and understanding was to be removed.

The evidence of God's judgment upon a people is their lack of concern, lack of understanding of God and His ways, and an inability to be aroused or instructed in the things of God. For healing to take place, there must be repentance from sin. But for repentance to take place there must be understanding of one's condition and there must be present the concern and desire to change—conviction of sin. If one does not respond to the prompting of God in the day of His gracious dealings, He ceases His gracious workings and renders those whom He is judging incapable and unwilling to turn; thereby sealing their doom when His day of judgment arrives.

God deals with people in this manner today as well. In spite of the repeated prompting of the Holy Spirit, a professing Christian may harden his heart to the things of God, to the need of turning from sin. God will not always strive with this person. That one can grieve the Spirit to such a degree that none of the graces which the Spirit bestows can any longer be experienced; those being peace, faith, love, joy, assurance, hope.⁵ This is not to say that a true Christian can lose his salvation, for that is not possible. But there are, I fear, many who presumptuously think that they are as favored by God as these Jews listening to Jesus on the shores of Galilee, who were actually lying under the guilt and wrath of God for their sin.

We should always be aware that the preaching of the Word of God may produce this kind of effect in our hearers-- a hardening which leads to death (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14-16). The truthfulness of a matter or the proof of God working in and through a message or messenger is not easily determined. Often times the preacher is blamed for not being clear or understandable, and indeed, he may be at fault. But the one hearing the Word is also responsible, and may be more so. There are some who, because of their neglect, indifference, and refusal to respond, have rendered themselves incapable of understanding the simplest of spiritual truths. If

⁵ Remember the man in the iron cage in *Pilgrim's Progress*?

they would have heard and understood so as to respond, they would be converted and healed, but God will see to it that they will not.

Isaiah's thoughts of this kind of ministry were distressing. He had volunteered to bear God's message, but the message was not a pleasant one. He nor his message would be received. And so, he asks in verse 11, "Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?'" Then God answered,

And He said: "Until cities lie waste
Without inhabitant,
And houses without people,
And the land is a desolate waste,
¹²And the LORD removes people far away,
And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. (Isa. 6:11-12)

Isaiah was to preach or bear witness until there was no one remaining to hear; until the time when the land would be desolate and vacated due to the destruction of the land and the deportation of the populace.

But in contrast to the reprobate, whom God determined to condemn in their sins, God had good designs on those He had called to be the recipients of His salvation. Our Lord said to His disciples in Matthew 13:16f.

¹⁶But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

Many godly prophets and righteous people desired to see and experience what you and I enjoy through Jesus Christ. If you desire to know the true God and His Word that He has given, and you delight in your understanding and you are attempting by the grace of God to live accordingly, you are the most blessed of all people. May God be praised for His mercy and grace toward us.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,
To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24f)
