

**Matthew 13.1-23** MGVHoffman translation

*By the time we reach chapter 13 in Matthew, Jesus has been active teaching and performing miracles. He had shared the Sermon on the Mount with its blessings and message of love and right behavior. He had healed many people, restored a girl to life, exorcised demons, and even calmed a storm on the sea. Despite all this, in the chapters just before today's reading, he had been engaged in controversies with his own family and the Jewish authorities leading to the beginning of plans to kill him. How can it be that someone who is so wise and has done so much good generates both fervent followers and haters? In chapter 13, for the first time, we hear Jesus use a form of speaking that becomes characteristic of his teaching: parables. Parables are intended to provide insight and inspiration rather than simply information. As Jesus says, "Whoever has ears to hear had better listen."*

Matthew 13.1-23

<sup>1</sup> On that day Jesus went out of the house [apparently in Capernaum] and sat down alongside the sea.

<sup>2</sup> And large crowds gathered around to him,  
so that he got into a boat to sit,  
and all the crowd stood on the shore.

<sup>3</sup> And he spoke to them about many things in parables, saying,  
"Look here! The sower went out to sow.

<sup>4</sup> And as he was sowing,  
some *seeds* fell alongside the road,  
and the birds came,  
and they ate them all up.

<sup>5</sup> Still others fell on the rocky places where there isn't much soil,  
and immediately they sprouted up  
because there wasn't any depth of soil.

<sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up,  
the *plant* was scorched,  
and because it didn't have any root,  
it withered away.

<sup>7</sup> Still others fell on the thorny places,  
and the thorns grew up  
and choked them out.

<sup>8</sup> Still others fell on the good soil,  
and they were producing a harvest,  
some a hundred times as much,  
in another case sixty times as much,  
in another case thirty times as much.

<sup>9</sup> Whoever has ears *to hear* had better listen."

<sup>10</sup> And the disciples went *to Jesus* and said to him,  
"Why are you speaking to them in parables?"

<sup>11</sup> So he answered and said to them,  
"Because to you it has been given  
to know the mysteries of the dominion of the heavens.  
But to them, it has not been given.

<sup>12</sup> For whoever 'gets it,'  
more will be given to them, and even given in abundance!  
But whoever doesn't 'get it,'

even what they do 'get,'  
that will be taken from them.

<sup>13</sup> That's why it is that I'm speaking to them in parables,  
because seeing  
they do not see,  
and hearing,  
they do not hear,  
nor do they understand.

<sup>14</sup> And the prophecy of Isaiah is again fulfilled with them,  
*when he declares God's message* which says,  
'With hearing,  
you will hear and completely misunderstand.  
And when seeing,  
you will see and completely fail to perceive.

<sup>15</sup> For the heart of this people has become dull,  
and they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes,  
lest they should  
see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand in their heart  
and turn around...

And I would heal them.'

<sup>16</sup> But as for you,  
blessed are your eyes,  
because they do see  
and your ears,  
because they do hear!

<sup>17</sup> For I'm telling you, truth is,  
many prophets and righteous people longed  
to perceive what you see  
and they did not perceive *it*,  
and to hear what you hear,  
and they did not hear *it*.

<sup>18</sup> You, then, hear the parable about the sower.

<sup>19</sup> When anyone who is hearing the word about *God's* dominion and not understanding *it*,  
the evil one comes and snatches what has been sown in their heart.  
This is *the case with* the one sown alongside the path.

<sup>20</sup> Now the one sown on the rocky places,  
this is the person who is hearing the word and immediately receiving it with joy.

<sup>21</sup> However, they don't have root in themselves,  
but are only good for a while,

so then, when trouble or persecution happens because of the word,  
immediately it causes them to fall away.

<sup>22</sup> Now the one sown in the thorny places,  
this is the person who is hearing the word,  
and cares of the world, and the seductiveness of wealth, these things choke out the word,  
and they don't produce a harvest.

<sup>23</sup> Now the person sown on the good soil,

this is the one who is hearing the word and understanding *it*,  
the one who indeed is producing a harvest  
and is yielding

in one case a hundred times as much,  
in another case sixty times as much,  
in another case thirty times as much.

## NOTES

- 4 The seeds do not fall ON the road but alongside it. *παρά* is also used in v1 for Jesus sitting “alongside” the sea.
- 8, 23 FYI... By best estimates a ratio of 10 or 15 to 1 would be regarded as an average or good harvest. 100 or 60 or 30 to 1 are all nearly miraculous yields.
- 9 ὁ ἔχων ὄτα ἀκουέτω. > The one having ears, let him/her be hearing >> “Whoever has ears *to hear* had better listen.” The saying is also used in 11.15 and 13.43, and there are a variety of ways to make it sound natural in English. I’m trying to convey the force of the third person imperative (“let him/her listen”) without it simply sounding as permissive, and so I use “had better listen.” The verb is ἀκούω which is a key term throughout this passage, so I have added the “to hear” part (to compliment the “listen”) in order to keep that verbal link clear.
- 11 μυστήρια = *mystēria* > “mysteries”: Many translations choose to translate with “secrets” instead of “mysteries,” but I think each has different connotations. In my opinion, it is not that God’s dominion has secret knowledge or is secretive, but, and especially in this context, it’s a mystery why responses to it should be so different.
- 14 Matthew is very interested in prophetic fulfillment related to Jesus, and 16 times he uses the verb πληρόω = *plēroō* to express this concept. Here in 13.14 is the only time that ἀναπληρόω = *anaplēroō* is used. The *ana-* prefix is not really an intensive (> “indeed fulfill” as many translations have), but can either suggest “fill up, fully fill > fulfill” or repetition, “refill, fill again.” I have chosen “is again fulfilled” which is faithful to the text and also suggests a more typological reading (i.e., it’s a regular pattern for people to not see or hear, including people today!) rather than a singular prophetic moment (i.e., it’s only this specific instance in Jesus’ time that Isaiah’s prophecy applies to).
- 14 “And the prophecy of Isaiah is again fulfilled with them, *when he declares God’s message* which says...” While many people may understand that God is speaking through Isaiah, it could be heard simply as Isaiah speaking, so I’m adding the italicized phrase trying to make clear that the “I” at the end of verse 15 is God speaking.
- 14 I realize that my translation sounds a little stodgy and ‘biblisch,’ but it hints at the prophetic quotation,
- 14 οὐ μὴ with an aorist subjunctive is a strong future denial or emphatic negation, and it can indicate a temporal or qualitative aspect. I.e., is it that they “will *never* understand... *never* perceive” (temporal) or “will *completely* misunderstand” ... *completely fail to* perceive” (quality)? I think the difference is important. The quotation here is accurately cited from the LXX of Isaiah 6.9, but note that in the Hebrew it is a simple negative and not emphatic: “they will *not* understand... *not* perceive.”
- 15 ἰάσομαι = *iasomai* is a future indicative (“I will heal”) instead of the expected subjunctive (“I would heal.”) I think the context requires the subjunctive sense, but we should also hear the possibility of an unconditional promise.
- 16 “But as for you...”: The pronoun is fronted for emphasis in the Greek which my translation is highlighting.
- 17 ἰδεῖν ἃ βλέπετε καὶ οὐκ εἶδαν”: All three verbs here have to do with seeing. Both ἰδεῖν and εἶδαν are from the ὁράω root and βλέπετε is from βλέπω. In the next phrase, the same verb (ἀκούω) is used all three times, so why are two different verbs used here? (Cf. v14: βλέποντες βλέπετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε for a different but similar construction.) As best as I can figure, it simply has to do with traditionally used verb forms. βλέπω is not used as an aorist infinitive and only 1x (Rev) as an aorist indicative; ὁράω is rare as a present indicative. Still, a distinction was made between the two in v14 which was intentional. What I’m arguing here is against most English translations which just use “see” for all three words, even though that may be accurate enough.

18 τοῦ σπείραντος is usually (and probably rightly) taken as a masculine participle > “the sower” as in the parallel in v3, but since the sower is otherwise not important in this parable, perhaps it could be taken as a neuter > “the sowing.”

19, 20, 21, 22, 23: It is important to realize that the masculine ὁ is used here in the explanation rather than a neuter, since neuter plural forms were used to refer to what was sown in vv4-8. The word for seed is σπέρμα, a neuter noun, but note that it is never used in this parable or its explanation. It is used in the subsequent parables and their explanation (in 13.24, 27, 31, 32, 37, 38, 39), and it is likely that is what is in mind in the telling of the parable. Switching to the masculine singular, however, indicates that Jesus now has people in mind. I.e., in Matthew’s version of the parable (and unlike his Markan source!), the seed is not the word that Jesus speaks. Further, people are not being likened to different soil contexts. The seed and the plant it becomes or not is the person. It seems that Matthew is trying to align this parable with the ones in 13.24-39 (cf. 13.37f!), but there is some tension in making it all work. It is most evident in v19 which is not exactly parallel to the other places where the seed is sown, since no plant even starts to grow. To make things a bit clearer, I have chosen in my translation to use “one” and “person” rather than supply the word “seed.”

Tldr: I hope no one preaches a sermon encouraging people to be “good soil.” (How is that even possible? I can only picture dumping manure on the soil to enrich it! Can a person choose what soil to be?) The people are the plants, and Matthew’s version of this parable both accounts for the rejection of Jesus’ message and the encouragement to be and the promise of being extravagantly productive followers of Jesus.