

Some of you may have heard of a man named Yogi Berra, who was a professional baseball player and manager for the New York Yankees; who won more World Championships than any other baseball player in history – ten as a player and three as a manager. But that being said, many people don’t know Yogi Berra so much as a baseball player, as they remember him more for his ambiguous statements and obtuse expressions that were memorable because - *most of them didn’t make any sense but at the same time they were all true*. His best known phrase is: “It ain’t over till it’s over.” Here’s a few more.

- You can observe a lot by just watching.
- When you come to a fork in the road, take it.
- It’s like déjà vu all over again.
- No one goes there nowadays, it’s too crowded.
- Baseball is 90% mental and the other half is physical.
- Always go to other people’s funerals, otherwise they won’t come to yours.
- We made too many wrong mistakes.
- You wouldn’t have won if we’d beaten you.
- Never answer an anonymous letter.
- The future ain’t what it used to be.
- It gets late early out here.
- It was impossible to get a conversation going, everybody was talking too much.
- If you ask me anything that I don’t know, I’m not going to answer.
- Why buy good luggage, you only use it when you travel.
- You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.

Over the years many of Yogi Berra’s somewhat *muddled phrases of truth* have become known as “Berra-isms” - so much so that many of these kinds of expressions are usually attributed to Berra, even if he never actually said them, as Yogi so perfectly put it: “I never said most of the things I said.” Well, the words and phrases expressed in our text for today are attributed to Jesus, the Son of God, and they should be because he did say them – even though they might seem to be ambiguous and vague of meaning like the words of Yogi Berra, they do reflect the truth and power of the Word of God. We will see that as we walk through Matthew 13 today, as well as over the next two Sundays – as Jesus will speak to us about what it means to live out our lives as followers of Jesus Christ in the family of God in the Kingdom of God – which is the place where Jesus rules and reigns in our hearts, lives and souls.

In our text for today, and over the next two Sundays, Jesus will use parables to teach us what the manifestation of the kingdom of God looks like - when those of us who claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior, truly do surrender our hearts and submit our lives to the crucified and risen Christ as our King. The parables will be looking at over these three Sundays are the means by which Jesus revealed to the world the mystery of the Kingdom of God – the reason and purpose why he came to earth and died on a cross and rose from the dead, and of his expectations of those who trust him as their Savior and King.

This chapter of parables records the events in a day of crisis in the ministry of Jesus Christ. He knew that the growing opposition of religious leaders would lead to his crucifixion - and his confrontation with those religious leaders in chapters 11–12 - culminated with the scene where Jesus pointed to his disciples as his closest family and declared: “*For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*” (Matthew 12:50). Here Jesus blatantly challenged those who rejected and opposed him, by defining those who are truly of the family of God, are those whose relationship with God supersedes every and all other relationships in our lives – including the families we are born into. Last week we learned that the Kingdom family of God is a God-adopted group of people, who are gathered together for the purpose of surrendering their lives to Jesus Christ, united in heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not born into that; we are *born-again* through Jesus Christ into that.

This would not have been received well by the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day, in that they believed they merited heaven simply because they were blood descendants of Abraham. Jesus' last words from last week would have been a stinging rebuke and cast judgment on their beliefs. This was the Kingdom of God that they believed God had promised His chosen people. But Jesus, in being the one true King of the true Kingdom of God, used this moment to define the true Kingdom of God.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables. Matthew 13:1-3a

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus left the crowds to sit down and teach the disciples, but on this occasion he speaks to the crowd in "*parables.*" The word "*parable*" literally means "to place something side by side with another" - or in other words "a comparison." Jesus used parables to place a divine truth of God next to something that we would relate to in life. Prior to this Jesus had already shared several individual parables, but this is the first time Matthew uses the term "*parable.*" But the parable we are looking at today, and all the parables in Matthew 13, are not just ordinary parables - Jesus called these "*the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*" (vs 11). In the New Testament, a "*mystery*" is a spiritual truth understood only by divine revelation." It is a "sacred secret" known only to those whom God reveals it - who then learns from Him, and then surrenders, submits and obeys Him.

In Matthew 13 Jesus used parables to reveal the secret mystery of the manifestation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who came to earth and sacrificed his life on a cross in our place for our sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God, when we put our trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, as he reigns in our hearts and over the Kingdom of God in the world we live in. This had been foretold. In Matthew 13:34-35 we'll read that: "*All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.'*"

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear." Matthew 13:3-9

This parable is traditionally known as The Parable of the Sower. In this parable Jesus places against, compares, equates the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the heart and life of a follower of Jesus Christ with a farmer who went out to sow his seed. Jesus' listeners are well aware of farming techniques, since most of the crowd would have worked the fields of their landlords and their own fields and gardens. Many emphasize who the "*sower*" is in this parable, and while it sure could be any one person of the Trinity, the "*sower*" is not the point here, as the focus immediately shifts to the "*soils.*"

The rest of the parable is about the different "*soils*" into which the "*sower*" sows his "*seeds.*" In Jesus' day, seed was sown "broadcast" style by scattering it in all directions while walking up and down the field - and so the first soil to receive "*seeds*" was the well beaten "*path*" between the fields, where birds would simply swoop down and "*devour*" the seeds. The second "*soil*" to receive the seeds was the "*rocky*" soil. Conditions for farming in many areas of Israel are not very favorable. In many places the terrain is uneven and rocky, with only thin layers of soil covering the rock. Seeds that landed on this shallow soil would begin to germinate more quickly than seed sown in deep soil, but it couldn't put down deep roots and had to collect what little moisture lay in that parched thin layer of earth. The sprouting seed would soon wither and die in the hot sun.

The third “soil” to receive the seeds was the soil under some “thorn” bushes. The plants battled for nutrients from the soil, and the wild thorny plants were well adapted to rob whatever they needed from the soil. As the thorny plants grew up with other plants, they choked out the less hardy plants. The fourth “soil” to receive the seeds was the “good” soil. This would have been the fertile soil, where seeds germinated and matured, which yielded a range of a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. Jesus ends this parable by saying: “*He who has ears, let him hear.*” Up to this point those who were listening to Jesus may have thought he was giving them an agricultural seminar, but when he said, “*He who has ears, let him hear*” they would have clearly understood, something much more significant than planting and sowing and gardening was being said here. It’s here his disciples ask him what he means.

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” 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. For 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. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, 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. For 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.” But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For 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.” Matthew 13:10–17

As Jesus finished sharing the Parable of the Sower with the crowd, Jesus’ disciples approach him and then ask him why he had been speaking to the crowd in parables. The distinction between the disciples and the crowd is crucial here in order to understand Jesus’ purpose for speaking in parables. In both cases, Jesus used the parables to cause the listener to make a decision about the kingdom of God. But Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables because God had given him “*the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*” for the disciples, not the crowd, to know. Jesus’ message from the beginning had declared that the Kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven had arrived, but it hadn’t always been apparent to those who were just observing. Jesus gave to his disciples an understanding of that kingdom as it is now, and will be, operating in them and in the world. The kingdom is here now, but not in its fully manifested power.

About this Baptist pastor and theology professor George Ladd writes: “The mystery is a new disclosure of God’s purpose for the establishment of his Kingdom. The new truth, now given to men and women by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that the Kingdom that is to come finally in apocalyptic power, as foreseen in Daniel, has in fact entered into the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among humans.” The *secret* mysteries of the Kingdom of God are not that God will establish his kingdom, which was a well-known prophetic hope within Israel, but *that the Kingdom of God had arrived in a form different from what was anticipated*. This was the secret being revealed in veiled speech to Jesus’ disciples. So, on the one hand, the parables revealed to the disciples the arrival of the Kingdom of God and of how the kingdom of God will operate in this world before its final, powerful manifestation. But on the other hand, the truth that is revealed to the disciples is concealed from the crowd - *because of their lack of spiritual responsiveness*. The initial understanding of the secrets of the kingdom that the disciples were given by God through Jesus, are still being revealed, so that we might all have a full understanding of that. But whatever understanding the crowd had, even that will be taken away. In other words, not only do the parables *not reveal truth* to the crowd; they even take away what the crowd already had known. “*For 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. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand*” (Matthew 13:12-13). The clause rendered “*because seeing they do not see*” indicates that the power of the parables’ blinding force is a result of the crowd’s own spiritual hard-heartedness.

Jesus supports this by quoting Isaiah 6: 9– 10 to indicate that even as Israel had a long background of unbelief and rejection of God’s prior prophets, so the crowd is now hardened against Jesus. *“You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For 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”* (Matthew 13:14-15). The crowd had a mixture of heart attitudes toward Jesus. Some were leaning toward becoming his disciples, others were leaning toward following the Pharisees and opposing Jesus. Still others were riding the commitment-fence. But Jesus insisted there be no middle ground. The crowd needed to make a decision, and the parables forced the issue. Jesus knew those who would harden their hearts against him, so he used his parables to sovereignly harden the person’s heart to the point, where eventually they would not be able to respond. But Jesus also sovereignly knew and empowered those who would respond to the message of the gospel, so for them the parables elicited a positive response to come to Jesus, ask for an explanation and become his disciple. Thus, both sayings balance the empowerment of God’s divine sovereign grace with each individual human’s responsibility to choose or reject God.

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For 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” (Matthew 13:16–17). Here Jesus turns to his disciples and affirms that, as his followers, they are blessed to be members of the family of God in the Kingdom of God, with spiritual eyes and ears that see and hear the reality of the Kingdom of God. This an affirmation of Jesus words to the crowd: *“He who has ears, let him hear”* - as his parables are designed to test the spiritual “eyes” and “ears” of the hearts of those who see and hear him. Parables test the heart of the listener. They are spiritual examinations, prompting a response from the listener that will indicate whether the person’s heart is open to Jesus or hardened against Jesus. While even true disciples are not perfect in understanding, they still possess the desire to see and to listen to Jesus, so they might more joyfully surrender and humbly submit to Jesus.

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Matthew 13:18-23

The Parable of the Sower does not begin with “The kingdom of heaven is like” because it describes *how* the kingdom *begins*. It begins with the preaching and teaching and reading and studying and memorizing of the “word of the Kingdom” - the Word of God – and planting the seeds of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God in the hearts and lives of all people. The “seed” is the Word of God; the various “soils” represent the different kinds of hearts people have regarding God and the Kingdom of God; the varied results show the different responses to the Word of God - and the power of God in a good heart. Why compare God’s Word to “seed”? Because the Word of God is, *“living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart”* (Hebrews 4:12). The Word of God is like a “seed” in that it is *“living and active.”* Unlike the words of men, the Word of God has life; and that life can be imparted into the hearts and lives of those who put their trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The truth of God must take root in the heart, be cultivated and cared for, so it would bear fruit. Take note that the parable tells us that three fourths of the seed did not bear fruit. Jesus did not describe an age of great harvest, but one in which the Word would be rejected. He was not impressed with the large crowds that followed Him, for He knew that most of the people would not accept or receive His Word within and bear fruit.

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.” Here we read of those who have *hard hearts* against Jesus. That hardness prevents the seed of the gospel from taking root, keeping them from knowing its truth. It makes them vulnerable to Satan, the “*evil one*,” who “*snatches*” it “*away*.” In other words, the sharing the gospel of the kingdom will not impact this type of person. They are just like the teachers of the scribes and the Pharisees, who were against Jesus from the start.

“As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.” Here Jesus speaks of those who have *shallow hearts*. He tells us they hear the Word of God with great enthusiasm - but fade away because they’ve embraced a superficial faith that refuses to allow the roots of the Gospel to go deep enough to develop any root. These are like those of the crowd’s today who make a personal commitment to be a follower of Jesus, but the seed of the gospel is not able to penetrate deep enough to change that person’s heart. Such people will struggle, stumble and fall away when they are faced with the troubles and trials of life.

“As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” Here we read of those who receive the gospel, but who are also in love with the world. This is the *thorny heart* that has potential for bearing the fruit of the Kingdom, as the seed of God’s Word is planted in their hearts and begins to grow. But the competition from the thorns is too much, and the young seedling is choked out because the gospel is not able to transform the person into a true disciple *because of their competing secular priorities*. The “*cares of the world*” indicate that that person has not yet placed the kingdom above all else and so tries to manage his or her own life. The “*deceitfulness of riches*” combines with worry to “*choke*” out the life of the Word of God - as they try to manage his or her own life apart from God and is tempted to find the solution in worldly resources. The priorities of worry and wealth choke out the Kingdom of God.

“As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” Here Jesus speaks of those who have *receptive hearts* - who not only hear the gospel but also understand it and allows it to be deeply planted and take full root in the “*good soil*” of his or her heart, so they can produce fruit. This is the heart that hears the word of God *like the first seed*, and joyfully embraces the word *like the second seed*, and lives in the world and is subject to all of its temptations *like the third seed* - but whose roots in the Word of God are so deep, that they survive and thrive and bear supernatural amounts the fruit of the manifestation of the Kingdom of God, in their hearts and lives as true followers of Jesus.

Jesus’ parable of the Sower teaches us that life in the Kingdom of God is rooted in the power of Word of God. The purpose of the parable is not to show how some respond to the Word of God and are converted while others are not - *but rather to show how the kingdom of God is to be advanced*. Each of us who belongs to Jesus Christ is planted by him into the world for the purpose of bearing fruit of the Kingdom of God. But shallow, superficial and the secular hearts do not reproduce and fulfil their created destiny. How does the seed of God’s Word become fruitful? In John 12:24-25 Jesus said: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”* The cost of bearing fruit is death to self - in order that Jesus Christ and his Kingdom might bear fruit through us. The Power of God’s Word is the power to bear the fruit of the Kingdom of God. The reality of this power is that the “*Word of God*” we are talking about is not just about the Bible and the Gospel, but also about Jesus himself. In John 1:1-5 the apostle John calls Jesus the Word of God: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

In Matthew 13:18-20 Jesus declares: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* This is our call to bear fruit for the Kingdom by preaching and teaching and reading and studying and memorizing and living and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God, through the Word of God, who is the person of Jesus Christ. The Word of God is more than speaking or writing on God’s behalf, it is living out the embodiment of the Word of God – so that the world can see the Bible and the Gospel and the person of Jesus in us. The great commission is Jesus’ strategy to reach the world through his people. Jesus plants the seeds of the Word of God into the hearts of his people - so that we would be the seeds of the Word of God planted into the hearts of those in the world who don’t know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We see this in Matthew 13:37-38 when Jesus said: *“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom.”* The Power of God’s Word is the power to bear the fruit of the Kingdom of God. That is why God saved us. That is why we are here today. Hear the power of the Word of God!

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” John 15:1-11

*“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

*“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

*“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

*Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”* Isaiah 55:6-13

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope
of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces
endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to
shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

Romans 5:1-5

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Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church