

Expecting the Unexpected

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Date: 16 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, that is the great hope in which we're saved. We're going to read about that now in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13. And Andy is beginning a little series in this chapter and in these parables of Jesus, often called the parables of the kingdom.

And so we're going to read this evening in a number of places in Matthew 13, beginning with verses 1 to 23, and then we'll skip on to verses 44 to 46, that little section, and then 51 to the end.

So we read at Matthew chapter 13 and verse 1. On 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, saying, a sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they didn't 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.

[1 : 22] Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

He who has an ear, let him hear. Then the disciples came to him and asked 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 the one who has, to him more will be given. 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 is grown dull. With their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed.

[2 : 38] 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.

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. 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. 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.

[3 : 46] And it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good ground, 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. In verse forty-four, Jesus says, The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, hidden in a field, which a man found, covered up again.

Then, in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant, insert of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went out and sold all that he had, and bought it.

Verse fifty-one. Have you understood all these things? They said to him, yes. And he said to them, therefore, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new, and what is old.

When Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his home town, he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished. And they said, where did this man get his wisdom, and these mighty works?

[5 : 18] Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? Are not his brothers James, and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? Are not all his sisters with us?

Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown, and in his own household.

And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. Amen.

May God bless to us his word. Well, please do have Matthew 13 turned up in your Bibles, and as you find out, let me just pray for us all.

Father, as that hymn says, Lord, we need you to renew our minds. So often we find ourselves slipping into confusion, becoming disheartened about your kingdom, not knowing how it's at work in this world.

[6 : 31] And we just pray now, Father, as we open up your word and see your teaching, that your Holy Spirit would reveal truth to us, that we might leave here rejoicing.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. It's so very important to get your expectations right in life, isn't it?

If you have the wrong expectations, then you're going to end up very disappointed. If you think life is going to be all roses and sunshine, then it will be a big shock when suffering comes along, or some struggle.

A personal example from my life, having children. When we decided to try and have children, I'll admit I was somewhat naive. Ever the idealist, I imagined that parenting would be idyllic.

Quite literally, a walk in the park, with a pram there with you, with a baby fast asleep in it. I envisaged spending endless hours cooing and smiling over my newborn, and going to bed with a deep sense of satisfaction as the child slept silently in the Moses basket beside us.

[7 : 42] I know. I was a fool. And I don't actually know why nobody told me it wasn't going to be the case. And yes, our children are a real blessing to us, but those first few weeks, when they pop into your world, well, they're really difficult.

The sleepless nights, the unrelenting crying, it really wears you down. You end up looking more like an extra from a zombie film than that doe-eyed model family you expected.

We had the wrong expectations about parenting when we went into it first time, and it hit us really hard. Many tears were wept, as expectation did not match up with our reality.

And it's no different with the Christian life. Jesus' disciples had signed up to follow him because they were convinced that he was the promised king come to restore Israel.

They thought that Jesus would bring about the perfect kingdom that had been promised by the prophets. And if they'd got Jesus' identity right, and what he had come to do right, well, then they expected everybody to welcome him with open arms.

[8 : 55] Surely everyone would declare him as king, and eventually the whole world would bow the knee to Jesus. But that wasn't what was happening.

In fact, right from Jesus' birth, rather than win everyone over, he divided people instead. Wise men came to worship him, but Herod came to kill him.

He divided people throughout his later life and ministry too. He was a bit like Marmite. People either loved him or they hated him. But as consistent as that pattern was, in chapter 12 of Matthew's gospel, the opposition really rockets just before Jesus teaches these parables.

Jesus heals a man and casts out a demon, and the religious leader's response to him. And the religious leader's response to him is to say that all that was the work of the devil, say it was a great evil, and then pledge to murder him for it.

The hatred and the opposition was palpable, and that really rocks the disciples, I imagine. The disciples' expectations were being seriously challenged.

[10 : 09] Jesus was facing so much opposition. So Jesus teaches these parables to give them, and those in the crowd who are willing to listen, the right expectations about what his coming kingdom in this world will look like, so they might avoid becoming disheartened and give up on

following him and serving him altogether.

And he's doing the same thing with us today, isn't he, as we sit here 2,000 years later and open up these parables together. We, like the disciples, often have the wrong expectations about what God's coming kingdom should look like.

And so we find it ever so disheartening when the church faces opposition, or we share the gospel with someone and they don't respond positively. So we need Jesus to reorientate our expectations, for only then will we be able to serve him with endurance and joy rather than give up.

So let's delve into the passage, shall we? Our first teaching point for today is God's coming kingdom always produces a mixed response, but the message isn't at fault.

And we'll look at the parable of the sower and the explanation following. I wonder if you have had the experience of telling someone the gospel with great enthusiasm only for it to be met with flat-out apathy.

[11:32] In those moments, do you not question whether you have told them the gospel right? For if they really did hear about Jesus coming into our world, dying for our sin, and a great act of love, and the promise of life after death, and a relationship being on offer with God the Father, then how on earth could they reject it?

But yet they do. So we ask, Lord, did we do something wrong when we shared the gospel with them? Well, Jesus gathers his disciples and the crowds about him by the sea, verse 1 and 2, and explains to them in the parable of the sower that this is exactly what we should expect to happen. People will always have a mixed response to the news of God's coming kingdom, but that doesn't mean that you have done anything wrong. And I think that is wonderfully liberating to know. If we understand what Jesus is saying in these parables, then it's a real guilt demolisher. No longer do you have to carry around the weight of the world on your shoulders for the salvation of everybody in Glasgow.

Jesus' teaching here is very realistic. It matches up exactly with our reality as we share the gospel with people. Jesus gives us a parable about one sower with one type of seed who goes out to sow.

[12:54] The seed falls on different types of soil and the outcomes are very diverse depending on what soil it lands on. Some fall on the path, verse 4, and before the seed even gets a chance to root itself into the soil, a bird comes along and snatches it away.

And when Jesus explains this in verse 18, he explains that some people won't understand the gospel at all when we speak it to them. It just will not sink in and it will not take root in their lives at all because the evil one snatches away before it even has a chance to.

Now that's probably the response I certainly see most often. And I imagine it might be the most common response you see too when you share the gospel. When I share the gospel with my friends or my family, I'm often met with that dreaded, vacant stare.

The gospel just does not seem to have registered at all. And it's not that they're stupid or don't have the capacity to understand. They're bright people.

It's just that the evil one doesn't give them the chance to. He snatches the truth away before it can really take root in their lives. So it isn't necessarily because your presentation of the gospel was defunct that they didn't believe.

[14:14] But notice the same seed that was sown on the path was sown on the good soil too in verse 8. And that did bring about the desirable result that we all long for. So you don't have to then keep going over and over what you've said again and again, beating yourself up, saying, if perhaps I'd said something slightly differently, they might have responded more positively.

The message you proclaimed might have been absolutely fine. And the same is true of the other soils, isn't it? The seed falls on. The rocky ground in verse 5 and amongst the thorns in verse 7. There is no suggestion that the sower or the seed are at fault. Rather, the response the seed generates is different because the soil is different.

And sadly, none of the first three soils have the desired result we look for. Look with me at the rocky ground in verse 20, the explanation we get. The hearer receives the word with great joy, but it doesn't sink deep enough into the soil to establish good roots.

So when difficulties come, verse 21, when the sun rises and scorches the earth, what seemed to become established shrivels up and dies instead.

[15:32] And we see plenty of that today too, don't we? Especially in my line of work, working with students and young adults. So many people make proclamations of faith before coming to

university.

They get involved in the Christian union, throw themselves into church life. They even spend some of their time serving tea and coffee to drunk students outside nightclubs. So you know that they're keen.

But it sadly doesn't always last. It just takes one calamity and they're ready to pack it in. They say things like, a good God wouldn't let this happen to me.

So I've had enough. Or more common is the response from the seed sown amongst the thorns, verse 22. The seed begins to grow, roots delve down, but the cares of the world sprout up and seem to get people in a chokehold and they tap out.

I think this is particularly a big problem, sadly, for unmarried women in the church. Some women in the church understandably really want to get married. It's a natural and good desire.

[16:41] But sadly, there aren't as many men in the church as there are women. So some women, rather than counting the cost and staying single, will look for spouses outside the church with the hope that they might come to know Jesus.

But that's very rarely what happens. Their love for their husband ends up trumping their love the King Jesus and they end up falling out of the kingdom. It's tragic.

But it's not just unmarried women of a certain age this is a problem for. No, you could substitute the non-Christian relationship with anything worldly. Living for money and success, that can lead to people to giving up on church life and giving up on Jesus.

Even good things like children's education, if you over-prioritize it, can lead to them leaving the church because you spend all the time sending them to extracurricular activities but not bring them along to Friday night to hear the gospel, to be with God's people.

But isn't it so easy to despair when we see this happening before our eyes and we feel like there's nothing we can do about it? But Jesus is what would say to us, don't be alarmed.

[17:53] My coming kingdom is really coming though you're seeing a mixed response. What you experience now is exactly what you should expect to see.

The disciples might have expected Israel to be carried along on a wave of adoration for King Jesus but that was never to be expected in his first coming according to Jesus.

For only when Jesus returns will every knee bow and tongue confess that he is Lord. Until then it will be a mixed response. We'll face a lot of rejection and many who seem promising will come to nothing.

It's very sad. But also it's incredibly liberating to know that that is normative, isn't it? So you don't feel like you're doing something wrong.

Don't think that you've signed up to an inadequate kingdom. It's going to be a slog with plenty of discouragement all through this gospel age until Jesus returns.

[18:53] But one day the things that we hope for the grand expectations we have they will be finally met. And thankfully Jesus keeps us going and trusting in his gospel as we await that day by giving us small encouragements along the way.

For verse 8 Some seed will fall on good soil and produce grain hundredfold some sixty some thirty. And verse 23 this represents people who hear and understand the gospel and they will go on to produce lasting fruit.

In amongst all the discouragements there will be real encouragements where people become enduring disciples of Jesus and spend the rest of the days producing crops for his kingdom sharing the gospel with others disciplining others and as they do so the kingdom grows and as they do so we are reminded that the gospel is not at fault.

The gospel is doing the work Jesus intends it to and that we as his messengers might not be at fault either. And I think that's a real encouragement isn't it to invite a friend around for tea this week and then perhaps follow it up by inviting them along to Christianity Explored on the 27th.

I think it's a great motivator perhaps for studying the word one-to-one with a colleague on New York at lunch break who's maybe shown a bit of interest. Yes they may reject what you have to say they may not want to take you up on your offer but you know they might just do that and they might come to know King Jesus for themselves and end up being a great worker for his kingdom for the rest of their days.

[20:37] So let's keep on sowing the word of God indiscriminately and persevering with it rather than packing it in because the results don't match with our expectations. What we experience in our

evangelism mixed responses is exactly what the Lord Jesus promised and personally I find that very very liberating.

Secondly God's coming kingdom will bring blessings to those who seek it but curses to the willfully blind looking at verses 10 to 17.

In between the parable of the sower and the explanation we get of it we get a very interesting interlude in verses 10 to 17 as the disciples question Jesus' teaching method.

Verse 10 they ask why do you speak to them the crowds in parables? And the answer to that question is perhaps somewhat surprising. I remember hearing when I was a boy in a C of E primary school that Jesus taught in parables so that everyone could easily understand what he was saying. But that isn't what Jesus says in verses 11 and 12. Jesus answered them to you it has been given to know the secret of the kingdom of heaven but to them it has not been given but 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.

[22 : 15] Jesus says that he purposefully teaches in a way that reveals secrets to some who will receive blessing but also in a way that keeps others in the dark who will ultimately be cursed.

In other words when Jesus taught about his coming kingdom it was having two completely different effects on two different groups of people. For those who had humbled themselves and chosen to lovingly following Jesus they would be given clarity and enjoy the blessing of being part of his kingdom.

But for those who remained proud who had no intention to submit to Jesus rule they would not have any understanding and would have everything stripped away from them in the end.

Jesus is teaching brings blessing to some but judgment to others. And I think we find that quite hard to stomach. It sounds quite harsh doesn't it especially if you're in the second group.

Well perhaps not so much if we build up a profile of what they are like. Jesus says in verse 13 this is this is seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear nor do they understand that is they have the capacity to see and to hear but they choose not to they're completely disinterested in submitting their lives to Jesus rule it's not an intellectual problem they have but rather a moral one they're just like the faithless people of Israel Jesus says in Isaiah's day who Isaiah ended up preaching judgment to they had made such a practice of ignoring God that they were now effectively blind and deaf God's word couldn't penetrate their dull hearts verse 15 they were like a toddler who shuts their eyes and puts their fingers in their ears because they don't want anything to do with you

[24 : 21] I think Jesus' teaching method works a bit like this everybody in the crowd hears the message that Jesus speaks but it's impossible to discern exactly what Jesus is saying without his explanation so those who follow Jesus or those who are genuinely seeking in the crowd will come to him for that explanation and as they do so they will enjoy the blessing of being part of his kingdom but those who are only there to fill the seats they want to be entertained but not actually arrive at truth well they'll leave none the wiser because they won't oppose Jesus for that explanation and over time the more they listen to him the more they don't seek explanation they'll become more and more inert unable to respond rightly to Jesus' message and as they become willfully more deaf judgment is compounded against them it becomes increasingly harder for them to respond rightly to

Jesus and on the last day when Jesus brings in his kingdom fully and finally they'll have everything stripped away from them now again just like the parable of the sower that is very sad indeed it's tragic that people would spurn such an amazing opportunity and be so disdainful of Jesus and his teaching it's really disheartening to see people do that sober warning to us too isn't it especially if you're not yet part of God's kingdom because clearly our attitude towards God's word really matters if we continue to disregard Jesus and his teaching not respond to what he says to us rightly then over time we'll slowly slowly slip further away from the light the more we make a habit of not listening to him the harder it will become to enjoy his blessings so it really is important how if we're not a

Christian or if we are a Christian how we respond when his word is opened up to us but it's not impossible if you are in that willfully blind group to come to know Jesus and become part of his kingdom but notice there are plenty of encouragements all through this passage to prick up your ears and truly listen verse 9 being a good example of that he who has ears let him hear mercifully if you do not Jesus if you are currently willfully blind the condition does not have to be fatal but I think there's also a great encouragement in this passage for us if Jesus is proclamation about his coming

kingdom produced two types of responses in people then inevitably our proclamation of his kingdom will do the same some people who are generally seeking and willing to humble themselves will respond positively to what we say to them but some will scoff at what we have to say just as people have done for centuries even back to

Jesus and Isaiah's day for when Isaiah or Jesus is teaching compounded judgment on people they personally didn't consider their ministry unsuccessful did they so if that is the case if their ministry wasn't successful for compounding judgment on people then our ministry our proclamation can be seen as successful when people respond badly yes we'd rather people responded positively to what we have to say when people seem to refuse to listen that doesn't mean we've done something wrong that doesn't mean our ministry is unsuccessful if Jesus' ministry is anything to go by the latter the seemingly negative response doesn't mean we have failed we've done what God has asked us to do and it has done a work in their lives that God has intended it to do now that is quite scary having responsibility to proclaim a message over people that can both bless them or condemn them but it's encouraging to know that when people don't respond we haven't failed God might be at work bringing judgment rather than blessing well our final point God's coming kingdom is priceless but not everyone is willing to give everything up to attain it looking at verses 44 to 46 and then 51 to the end look with me at verses 44 to 46 I grouped these two little parables with the parable of the sower and Jesus' explanation about why he teaches and the way he does because I think they're closely linked and the thing that links them is to do with human responses to the coming kingdom and the parable of the sower the hear has different responses to the coming kingdom and Jesus' explanation he says that people will have different responses to his proclamation of his coming kingdom and here in these twin parables about the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price we get another parable about people's response to God's kingdom here we get a picture of the right response to

[29 : 38] Jesus' kingdom but also derivatively I think an insight into why many in Jesus' day and people in our day too don't respond rightly to his coming kingdom these twin parables are remarkably simple but very very demanding of us Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like hidden treasure or a pearl of great value it's something that if you come across in this lifetime will leave you in awe and absolutely mesmerized at its worth if you've understood it is the one thing of real and lasting value that we can find in this life and makes all of the trinkets look rusty and tarnished in comparison so much so that it's worth selling all that you have in order to attain it notice the treasure hunter sells all that he has to buy the field where he's found that buried treasure and the merchant sells all that he has to that is the right response to

Jesus kingdom and if you have that attitude then you prove yourself to be the seed that lands on the good soil too the one that produces a great crop and you'll be the hearer who sees clearly who more will be given to in the end but the opposite is also true do people not give up on the gospel because they deem it of less the 21 year old who gives up on christianity to pursue a sexual relationship thinks that their experience is of more value than belonging to an eternal kingdom the teenager who gives up coming to church on a Sunday to pursue sports they don't realize the treasure that they're giving up the adult who is slowly ground down in the office by mocking comments and abandons their faith for an easier ride is unwilling to count the cost that must be paid to belong to the most valuable kingdom on earth the most valuable enterprise people's mixed and divided responses to

Jesus and his kingdom are often because they think that belonging to his kingdom is a small thing it's a nice add on to life but no more so they're understandably unwilling to give up everything in order to know him and belong to his kingdom if that's true then we have a great responsibility don't we we must ensure that we are living lives like the treasure hunter and the merchant staking absolutely everything on him building lives that show that belonging to Jesus and his kingdom is all that really matters in this life that means that we'll be people who are serving in church not passengers it might mean that we're people who turn down promotions because it means it would drag us away from serving or giving up jobs that would give us a better salary because it would take up too much of our time it will look like us bringing our kids along to youth programs here rather than extracurricular activities that would look good on their UCAS form but if we're doing that if we are doing that well and demonstrating that to the God is the one who decides what happens in people's hearts but notice in verses 53 to the end that even some people who encountered Jesus during his time on earth and heard his teaching first hand

straight from the horse's mouth they still rejected him and his teaching Jesus had demonstrated to these people in Nazareth that he is the great teacher the one who speaks valuable truths rooted in the Old Testament verse 52 these people in Nazareth had seen his whole life play out before their eyes and yet they still rejected him and missed out on the greatest treasure that he was offering father father father god we thank you that jesus teaching is so reconfiguring we find ourselves drifting so often thinking that we must be doing something wrong or message must be at fault but thank you that it isn't thank you that you're in control and thank you that one day all these expectations that we want met now will be met as jesus returns we thank you in jesus name amen