

“PARABLE OF THE SOWER” MATTHEW 13:3-9; 19-23

We are beginning a section in Matthew’s Gospel in which Jesus teaches almost entirely in parables. Parables are simple, relatable, down-to-earth stories from everyday life. But while they are simple, they are packed with dynamic spiritual truth about the kingdom of God. This truth is explosive, and so these are subversive stories in that they were intended to overthrow the prevailing theological notions in Jesus’ day about the kingdom and the Messiah who would rule over it. These parables challenged listeners’ existing beliefs and assumptions and forced them to come to terms with truths that were outside their theological construct.

But many of Jesus’ listeners did not come to terms with these truths, not merely because they were stubborn and set in their ways, not merely because they didn’t like Jesus and didn’t *want* to learn from Him, but because they *couldn’t* come to terms with these truths. In fact, when asked by His disciples why He taught the crowds in parables, Jesus said *“To you [the disciples] it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them [the crowds] it has not been given.”*

God has given the gift of understanding spiritual truth to some, but He has withheld that gift from others. And parables are a means by which those who do understand can learn even more truth about the kingdom, while those who do not understand will know nothing at all. He told stories in order to reveal truth *and* to conceal truth, and the same story would have one of those two effects on everyone in his audience.

Jesus’ first parable in this discourse is the story of the sower, and we don’t have to work too hard to understand its meaning, because after a brief conversation with His disciples, Jesus interprets the parable for us, so that we can be certain about what it means. Look at **verses 3-9**.

³ And He told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ 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, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear.”

Parables come directly from the everyday experiences of the listeners, and all of these listeners were familiar with farming techniques, since most of them took care of their own fields and gardens or worked the gardens of their landlords. If they didn’t farm themselves, they had certainly seen it done by others. The method of sowing seed in this day was known as the “broadcast” style of sowing. The farmer would fill up a pouch or the fold of his robe with seed, walk up and down the field, grab a handful of seed from the pouch, and throw it in a 180-degree radius as he was walking. Experienced farmers learned how to release the seed from their grip so that it would scatter evenly.

It was common in first century Palestine (and it is still practiced in some places today) for the farmer to sow his seed first and *then* plough the ground afterward to bury the seed. In this method of sowing, it is not difficult to understand the seeds falling into a variety of soil conditions that had diverse effects on the seed and the crop. In this story, Jesus gives us four scenarios which reflected the common experience of Palestinian farmers who used this method of sowing.

Verse 4, *“Some seeds fell on the path.”* In those days plots of ground did not have fences around them, and, in order to get from point A to point B the fastest, people would typically cut through fields rather than go around them, creating hard-packed paths that went directly through the middle of someone’s garden. When the sower was scattering his seed, it was inevitable that some of it would fall on such paths. Since there was no soft soil there in which the seeds might sink, they remained on the surface where they made a wonderful snack for birds.

Verse 5, *“Other seeds fell on rocky ground.”* There is an ancient Yiddish proverb that says: “In six days God created the world, and on the seventh He threw rocks at Israel.” Israel is not only covered with rocks, but many areas have just a thin layer of soil covering bedrock, making it impossible to farm. When seed is scattered on these thin layers of soil, plants spring up quickly because the shallow soil warms quickly and facilitates rapid growth. But because the soil is so thin, because the bedrock doesn’t allow the roots to go deep, the plants are not able to mature.

Verse 6, *“but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.”* Sunshine is great for plants—it is necessary for their growth and for healthy production. But if plants are growing in a thin layer of soil, the hot sun will scorch those plants and cause them to wither and die because their roots don’t have any room to go down into the soil and protect them from the heat. Plants that grow in rocky places seem fine at first, but because they cannot develop a healthy root system, they are not equipped to withstand hot weather.

Verse 7. *“Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.”* In this third scenario the seeds that were sown fell among thorns. Jesus makes it sound like the thorns were already present when the seed fell among them, which gives credence to the idea that the soil had not been plowed before the seed was sown. As you know, thorns are sturdy, aggressive, fast-growing, and far more robust than stalks of grain. So, the seeds that were sown found intense competition for the nourishment in the soil, and the thorny plants overpowered them. They *choked* out the new plants by preventing them from getting the nourishment they needed.

Verse 8. *“Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”* Finally, we come to the seeds that fell on good soil. What makes this soil *good* is that the seed germinates and becomes a plant that grows to full maturity, producing an abundant crop. In this story the yield varies from *a hundredfold* down to *thirtyfold*, which would have been considered an extraordinary yield in the ancient world. A hundredfold was almost unheard of, and even thirtyfold was exceptional. Most crops yielded tenfold, and, in a good year, twentyfold. So, Jesus is intentional about inflating the numbers in this story. He wants His listeners to know that the seed the sower plants on good soil is extraordinarily productive.

Jesus closes the parable by saying, **verse 9,** *“He who has ears, let him hear.”* This isn’t the first time Jesus made this statement (11:15). Jesus is certainly inviting His listeners to ponder what He has said in this story. But we know from what He says to the disciples about why He is speaking to the crowds in parables that there are many in the crowd who do not have ears to hear...for two reasons. One, they haven’t yet been given the gift of understanding by God. And two, their hearts are hard toward Jesus and they refuse to take his words seriously.

As I said, when Jesus finished this parable the disciples asked Him why He taught the crowds in parables, presumably because they knew the crowds would have difficulty

understanding them. After Jesus' explanation (an explanation we looked at last week) He then told them the meaning of the parable of the sower. Look at **verses 18-23**. ¹⁸ *"Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ 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.*

Jesus makes it clear in these verses that the act of sowing is preaching or teaching, the seed is the "word of the kingdom," and the soil is the way people respond to the message. He does not specify that He, alone, is the sower—that He, exclusively, is doing the preaching and teaching. So, I think it is likely that Jesus was making a general statement about the response to the preaching of the kingdom, which later, I believe, became known as the gospel. It is easy to see how these four responses to the gospel can be applied to people of every culture in every generation.

In the story, the first response to the gospel is the seeds that fell on the path and was eaten by birds. Jesus says this represents anyone who hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it.

We often use a figure of speech to describe a lack of understanding. We say, "It hasn't sunk in." Jesus is describing someone who hears the gospel but, for whatever reason, it hasn't sunk in. He hears what is said but has no comprehension; she hears the story but does not perceive its spiritual truth, he hears a doctrine but cannot make sense of it.

When this happens, the devil becomes active. Like a bird, the evil one swoops down and snatches the seed that has been sown in a person's heart that hasn't sunk in. Why? Because the devil knows that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. And when people *understand* the message, they are able to cross over from death to life, from darkness to light. So, this is an urgent matter for the devil. He wants to keep people from understanding so they don't defect to the other side. So, he snatches the seed away before it does sink in.

Notice, Jesus says that this seed (which has fallen on the hard path) has been sown in the heart, and the verb *sown* is in the perfect tense, which suggests that it even though it is on the surface and hasn't taken root, it *is* embedded to some degree in the person's heart. The *heart* refers to a person's innermost being, so the implication of this is that Jesus is speaking of something more than merely hearing His words without any response. The fact that it is *in the heart* accompanied with the perfect tense points to a certain receptiveness to the word.

So, it might refer to someone who ponders the message and even appreciates it. But since he does not act on it, he soon finds that what he heard is lost. And the failure to attend to the message and to comprehend what it means results in *total* loss, first of the message and ultimately of the hearer.

Jesus goes on in **verses 20-21**. ²⁰ *As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ 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.*

Remember, Jesus is referring to the thin layer of soil that covers bedrock, which is the soil where the plants sprout first because the sun warms the bedrock causing the seeds to germinate quickly. But because the soil is shallow, the roots cannot go deep and so the hot sun scorches the fragile plants and they wither. Jesus says that this rocky ground stands for the person who receives the word immediately and with great enthusiasm. This is the person in the audience who is sitting on the edge of his seat, who is nodding her head, who is shouting "Amen!" This is the person who goes up to Jesus after the teaching says, "Wow! I

loved your sermon! It really resonated with my spirit! I thought your stories were awesome!"

But despite the initial excitement, it turns out to be nothing more than an impulsive, emotional outburst, for soon afterward the enthusiasm fades and the interest dies.

In verse 21 Jesus describes the problem in two ways. First, the person *has no root in himself*. Like the seed in that thin layer of soil covering bedrock, which prevent the roots from going deep, he lacks depth. He has a shallow and superficial understanding, evidenced by a temporary emotional response, but not a response that penetrates deep into his heart and produces an enduring transformation.

Second, he *endures for a while*. He lacks staying power, he lacks commitment. And this becomes evident when he encounters tribulation and persecution—something that will inevitably be experienced by Jesus' disciples. "When trouble of this sort comes to the shallow enthusiast, the pretty bubble is burst and the profession of loyalty is exposed for the sham it is" (Morris, PNTC). Jesus suggests that before he can even get hurt by the persecution he "falls away."

Look now at the third soil. **Verse 22.** *22 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.*

The thorny soil represents a person who listens to the word but is ultimately distracted and overpowered by competing interests. As with the rocky soil, this type of heart has the potential for productivity, for the life in the seed begins to develop. But the competition from the thorns is too much, and the tender stalks of grain are choked out.

Jesus specifies two things that especially preoccupy the person whose heart represents thorny soil. The first is the cares or worries of the world. By the way, these kinds of cares are not necessarily evil or sinful. They are the kinds of things that all people who have responsibilities *must* think about to some degree. The cares of the world in Jesus' day would be such things as finances, health, business, home maintenance, the well-being of one's children and livestock, the weather and how it is going to affect the crops, etc. As you know, most of these things are in a continual state of flux, and when they are on the downside it can create stress. In this illustration of the thorny soil Jesus is describing someone who hasn't yet put the kingdom above the things of this world, and so the things of the world preoccupy his mind and heart to the degree that the gospel doesn't get sufficient attention. The gospel is choked out and eventually dies in his heart.

The second thing Jesus mentions is *the deceitfulness of riches*. Jesus is describing a person who attempts to solve his problems or find his sense of security in worldly resources. And this, as it did in the story of the rich young ruler, can also choke out the gospel. Because one of the messages in the gospel is that Jesus is God's sole provision for our security and satisfaction, and that he is the solution to our real problems and needs.

Finally, look at **verse 23.** *23 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."*

Only the fourth soil is called "good." But what makes it good is not a moral predisposition that makes a person receptive to the gospel, but the condition of the soil, which is the person's heart. It's not hard, it's not shallow, it doesn't have those competitive and overpowering thorns. Instead, the seed is allowed to germinate and mature unobstructed. The roots are able to go deep so that it becomes fully mature and produces an abundant crop.

Jesus tells us that this represents the person who hears the gospel message and

understands it. He understands the significance of it—that this is the most important and most consequential issue of life. He understands the urgency of it—that this is a matter of spiritual life and death. And he understands the implications of it—this is truth that will change him. It will change his relationships, his priorities, his loyalties, his ambitions, his endeavors. But after understanding it he's all in—there's no going back.

This soil represents a true disciple of Jesus. Jesus said on two previous occasions in Matthew's gospel that fruit reveals the character of the tree (7:15-20; 12:33-37), and he now declares that if the seed message of the gospel does not bear a kingdom crop, there is no life in that person. There may be varying amounts of yield in each person, but there must be a yield to indicate that there is true life (Wilkins, 481).

Jesus does not tell us what the fruit *is* in the parable. Some think that it refers to converts won to Christ through the believer. That may be part of it, but the context seems to suggest something more fundamental—the transformation of a person who has believed the gospel. Believing the gospel means that one believes that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah, the Son of God. But it also means that one submits to His Lordship as the Sovereign of the kingdom of heaven. In other words, He is one's Lord, one's highest priority, and one's loyalty to him trumps loyalty to any and everything else in life.

The fruit that is produced in this good soil, then, represents the outworking of this relationship with King Jesus. We know from other teaching in the New Testament that fruitfulness comes from staying connected to Jesus. Jesus said, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit...this is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples"* (John 15:5,8). This fruit would be the character of Christ—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—what Paul called the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23). It would also include Spirit produced righteousness and good works. All of this is outward evidence of the inward life of the kingdom.

What do the hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold yields mean? I think it's probably best to interpret this as harvests which are blessed by God. "Seed that is sown on good soil will yield to the maximum what it has been created to produce, with varying amounts that reflect individual potential" (Wilkins, 481).

Okay, what is the application of this parable? How do we interpret ourselves and others and our status as disciples in the light of what Jesus has said in this story?

First, by telling this story Jesus is stating the obvious to His audience. A farmer that sows seed in the typical broadcast style knows that not all the seed is going to produce. But in the final analysis, only those plants that produce a crop count for anything. In the same way, only those who bear spiritual fruit are true believers (Matt. 7:16–17). What counts is not someone's *profession* of faith but one's *perseverance* in faith. Now, I believe all true Christians will persevere, but only by observing who perseveres can we determine who those true Christians are.

True disciples receive the Word, understand it, and obediently fulfill it; others fail to listen because of a hardened heart, a basic superficiality, or a vested interest in riches and possessions. But this parable provides a sober reminder that even the most enthusiastic outward response to the gospel offers no guarantee that one is a true disciple. Only the tests of time, perseverance under difficult circumstances, the avoidance of the idolatries of wealth and anxiety over earthly concerns, and above all the presence of appropriate fruit can prove a profession genuine (Blomberg, NAC).

“Parable of the Sower”
Matthew 13:3-9; 18-23

Main Idea: When seeds of the gospel are sown it takes root and produces an abundance in some but not others, for a variety of reasons

The Sower and the Seed (3)
Who is the sower?

What are the seeds?

The Seed Fall on Four Kinds of Soil (4-9)
Along the path (4, 19)
The problem (4)

Jesus’ interpretation (19)

Rocky soil (5-6, 20-21)
The problem (5-6)

Jesus’ interpretation (20-21)

Among thorns (7, 22)
The problem (7)

Jesus’ interpretation (22)

Good Soil (8-23)
The result (8)

Jesus’ interpretation (23)

Ears to Hear (9)

Application Questions

Matthew 13:3-9; 18-23

1. The parable of the sower describes four types of soil (heart condition) that the seeds (the gospel) falls on? Only *one* of the four soils successfully germinates the seed and produces a crop. Why does Jesus tell this story (i.e. As a warning? To produce anxiety or uncertainty in listeners? To simply state a fact)? What effect does this parable have on your sense of assurance about your salvation? Is there something you can do to be sure about your salvation?
2. Does this parable inform or impact how you relate to professing Christians who presently not living for the Lord or walking with the Lord? In what ways?
3. In thinking about your own spiritual journey, was there ever a time when you could compare your heart condition to one of the three “unsuccessful” soils? What do you think changed?