

The Parable of the Sower

Matt. 13:1-23

Intro. As the master teacher, Jesus used many analogies to convey spiritual lessons. Who could fail to understand the impossibility of a camel trying to crawl thru the eye of a needle? Or how could anyone fail to grasp what is meant by a man attempting to remove a speck from his brothers eye with a beam stuck in his own eye? Or who could doubt the effect of having a millstone hung around your neck and being thrown into the sea? Jesus spoke of white-washed tombs / cups cleaned only on the outside / the effects of yeast / a house built on the sand / and a fruitful grape vine. Each of these analogies and many others were used to teach concepts that were less familiar. This may be one reason why **Mk.12:37** says, **the common people heard him gladly.**

But starting at the time reported in **Matt.13**, Jesus began to teach the people exclusively by parables. The Greek word translated **parable** is *parabolos* which means to *lay by the side of or to compare*. A parable is a story that utilizes ideas which are common and familiar in order to teach spiritual lessons that are unknown. The specific lessons taught in **Matt. 13** concern the **Kingdom of Heaven**. On the back of the sermon notes, I've provided a chart of the eight parables in **Matt. 13** and their meaning. I've also included several helpful rules for interpreting parables.

The parable of the Sower is the first among eight parables of the Kingdom because it concerns the origin of the Kingdom. The **Kingdom of Heaven** signifies the rule of Christ over mankind. The kingdom is subject of many OT prophecies. Still today, it's the expectation of the Jewish people. But having rejected God's King, which is clearly shown to be the case in **chap. 12**, Jesus began to explain how His rule would progress until hearts in Israel are changed to receive Him. In other words, Jesus explained the nature and progress of His kingdom in its mystery or spiritual form...the Church. By this parable Jesus answered the question, "*How does the Kingdom of Heaven progress in the world*"? As we'll see, this parable is the key to understanding the other seven parables.

According to **vs.1, 2**, the setting for this first parable was the seashore near Capernaum at the northern end of Galilee. Multitudes had gathered to hear Jesus. He spoke to them from a fishing boat anchored a short distance offshore. If you were to visit this spot, you'd understand how this worked. The shoreline of Galilee forms a natural amphitheater which enabled Jesus to speak to hundreds of people without anyone missing a word. According to what was customary, the teacher sat and his audience stood. (Beginning next Sunday I think we'll try this. We're a Bible church yet we've had this backwards for years!) As Jesus began to speak, He might have pointed to a farmer scattering seed in a distant field. Drawing on this visual, He began to speak.

This first parable in **Matt. 13** is organized this way...**vs.3-9** reports the parable spoken to the crowds. **vs.10-17** report the disciple's question and Jesus' answer. Then **vs.18-23** provides the interpretation or parable's meaning. This explanation was given to the disciples only.

I. The Parable - vs. 3-9 - Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."

Though few of us would classify ourselves as farmers, most of us know the basics about gardening: We know that weeds grow extremely well without any assistance or support. Amen? / We understand the principle that insists, "*You reap what you sow.*" Nobody planting spinach expects to harvest

turnips! And nobody planting lima beans will harvest anything good to eat. We know germination, growth, and maturation, depend on temperature, light and rainfall. We also know the quality of the soil is essential. These simple gardening facts are universally known. Drawing on principles like these, Jesus created this first analogy or parable. In **v.18** He called it **the Parable of the Sower**. Let's consider the four types of soil and their relation to the seed that was sown.

1. **Hardened soil** - **v. 4** - In the Middle East, it was common to find footpaths crisscrossing fields of grain. (sort of like cart paths on a golf course) As the seed was scattered, some fell on these foot-paths where the soil was compacted and hard. The seed that fell on the path was stepped on and crushed by all who used that path. Since it couldn't penetrate the hard-packed soil it, became food for the birds as soon as the farmer was out of sight. The wasted seed meant the farmer's purpose for planting that seed wasn't achieved.
2. **Shallow soil** - **vs. 5, 6** - Stony soil doesn't refer to soil mixed with stones. It refers instead to a thick layer of limestone covered by a thin layer of soil. Because the soil was so shallow, the roots of a germinating seed couldn't grow very deep or far. Without a root system to nourish and sustain the plant, it soon withered away and again the seed was wasted.
3. **Crowded soil** - **vs. 7** - Somebody in the know said this... *"It's not enough for a gardener to love flowers and vegetables...he/she must also hate weeds!"* Weeds are relentless usurpers. They spring up without any encouragement or support. A successful gardener must be willing to do battle against organisms that would grab the light / water / nutrients / and space needed by the crops planted. The soil described here is crowded with worthless things that choke the seed and prevent normal growth and fruitfulness. Once again, the seed is wasted.
4. **Good soil** - **v. 8** - When compared to the three previous types of soil, the fourth is called **good**. It represents soil that is cultivated and prepared by the farmer's plow. This soil was nutrient-rich and it had depth. Weeds and thistles were removed. It was prepared soil...ready to receive the seed that was sown. Consequently, the seed in this good soil germinated, grew, and bore fruit in varying proportions.

This is the natural and familiar side of the parable. So far everything Jesus said was readily understood by His audience. In **v. 9**, He drew their attention to the point of His parable. **He who has ears, let him hear**. In other words, **be careful how you hear**. *"Don't allow My words to be ignored or wasted on you."* As we'll see in a moment, the degree to which the soils received the seed is parallel to the ways His listeners responded to His message...the living words He was speaking.

II. The Disciple's Question and Jesus' Answer - vs. 10-17 - The disciples came to Him and asked, **"Why do you speak to the people in parables?"** He replied, **"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.**

The disciples quickly recognized a change in the teaching style Jesus used. They came to Him and asked **why** He was now speaking in parables. In these verses Jesus gave three reasons:

1. *First, Jesus indicated that teaching by way of parables continued the process of revealing truth to His disciples.* When Jesus said **you**, He referred to His disciples...those whose hearts were open to receive Him and His message. To those who believed He was their Messiah, Jesus said these parables revealed the **secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven**. The Greek word *musterion*, translated **secrets** or **mysteries**, refer to spiritual truth revealed for the first time. In other words, Jesus was giving them information otherwise unknown.

But notice Jesus also made reference to a class of people He referred to less personally. Notice in **vs.11, 14, and 15**, the repetition of **them, they** and **this people**. The third person pronoun **them** refers to the unbelieving Jews who were rejecting Him. In the previous chapter Israel's leaders had accused Jesus of being in league with Satan. They believed Jesus was an imposter and were conspiring to destroy Him. Though more difficult to understand...

2. *The second reason Jesus spoke in parables was to hide certain truths from unbelievers who were rejecting Him.* In other words, there was a judgmental aspect to His use of parables. Unbelievers were not privileged or blessed to know or understand the pearls of truth concerning His Kingdom. The parables are impossible riddles to them. But they had no one to blame but themselves! Belief is a choice and they had chosen to ignore the revelation given them.

The principle in **v.12** is important. Jesus said, **Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.** When a person takes God at His Word, their faith enables them to receive more. (It's like the rule at the family supper table. You can have more when you eat what's on your plate.) But if you refuse to receive and obey truth set before you...no more will be given to you and you will lose the little you have. This was Israel's situation at that moment in time. They had not responded in faith to the truth and light they had already been given. This same willful ignorance continues today.

3. *The third reason Jesus gave for speaking in parables was to fulfill Isa.6:9-10 - Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.* God told Isaiah that those who heard His message would not receive or understand it. This same prophecy was now being fulfilled when Jesus spoke to the crowds. Most of the people didn't have hearts or minds to receive His message. The hearts of many were like the three types of soil in the parable. Their hearts were *hardened, shallow, and too crowded* with other things.. They were disobedient to the Law of God, insensitive to the message of the prophets sent to them, (including John the Baptist), and now indifferent to of the glory of their Messiah, Jesus.

But notice **vs.16, 17**. Jesus turned from the nation to His little band of believing followers and said, **"But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.** Unbelief had not blinded the hearts of these men. They had not turned a blind eye to Jesus or a deaf ear to His message. Their eyesight and hearing was blessed!

Can I ask you this...when you read or hear God's Word preached, do you believe it? Does that Word germinate and take root in your heart? The kingdom progresses in this quiet and personal way.

III. The Meaning of the Parable - vs. 18-23 - "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the

word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

When the crowds went away, Jesus explained the parable to His disciples alone. His parable contains 3 basic elements...**the seed / the sower / and the soils.**

1. *The Seed* - Jesus identified the seed as the message about the kingdom and the Word (of God.) Seeds contain the miracle of life. They appear lifeless when you put them in the ground, but within a short time the miracle of germination begins. From that lifeless looking seed, a living organism emerges. In a similar way, the Word of God is called **living and active** in **Heb.4:12**. Despite its appearance, the Bible is no ordinary book...it's the Word of God. Even as seeds produce fruit, so the Word of God produces spiritual fruit in the lives of those who receive it. **Gal. 5:22** identifies some of that fruit this way...**"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control..."** Yet other fruits produced by God's Word as well.

Just as seeds remain dormant in a seed packet, the Word of God must be planted in the human heart. The act of sowing or planting requires a Sower and that leads us to consider the His identity.

2. *The Sower* - the primary reference to the Sower is to Jesus Himself. Whenever Jesus spoke to His disciples or to a large audience, He was sowing the Word of God. Later Jesus would continue to speak through His Apostles. **Heb. 2:3** - **...how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.** Today, we who believe are called to be His spokesmen, His sowers. Some, like myself, are called to preach the Word vocationally. But each of us who know the truth are called to pass it on...to reproduce the faith by sowing the precious seeds of truth we've learned about Jesus and His power to save. As we do this, we are to understand that God is the One who makes things grow. **(I Cor. 3:5-8)** So our work of sowing is the continuation of the work Jesus began when He was here.

3. *The Soil* - Here we find the central point of the parable. The four types of soil represent four conditions of the human heart. Just as seed requires soil that is properly prepared, hearts must be prepared to receive God's Word. And listen, our hearts were designed with a capacity to receive the Word. Like bacon and eggs, the two are made for each other! Yet the unfortunate reality is that germination and growth doesn't automatically occur when Gospel seed is sown. For this reason, **Jas. 1:21** says, **Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.** Once again, the determining factor is the soil or condition of the human heart.

Can you see how this first parable applied to everybody gathered on that Galilean hillside? No matter what their age / occupation / or status in life...the issue that decides who enters Christ's Kingdom is a matter of the heart. Everyone has a heart condition of one sort or another. This first parable is like a spiritual EKG...a lesson that gets down to basics. And God has preserved this parable through the centuries because the same lesson is essential for us today. So how is it with your heart? Do you have the kind of heart required to enter Christ's Kingdom? Is the Word of God profitable to you or is it wasted? Does it produce change / growth / and fruitfulness in your life, or is it just information soon forgotten and lost? Are you eager to hear from God or is church just something you think you ought to do? These are some personal questions raised by this first parable.

Before we examine the four heart conditions, notice the grace involved in the actions of the Sower.

- *First we see the sower as the initiator. v.3 - A farmer went out to sow his seed.* Here God is seen going to the field (the world) and broadcasting His truth. The sower didn't remain in the confines of some nice protected garden or private hothouse where conditions were ideal. He went to a place where much of the soil was hard packed / lacking depth / and choked with weeds. In other words...He scattered His seed in *the* real world rife with spiritual indifference. In the same way, the Bible says **God sends His rain on both the just and the unjust..**
- We also see that the seed of His Word was *sown freely and liberally...almost wastefully.* It landed everywhere regardless of the condition of the soil it fell on.
- We also see *God laboring to produce a harvest.* Here is God at work. His intention is to produce something worthwhile...something fruitful that will reproduce after its kind.
- Finally, the parable shows *God suffering loss.* Only 1/4th of the soil His seed fell on is in the condition necessary to germination, growth, and fruitfulness.

Now listen...if you are saved and a member of Christ's family and kingdom, it's because the Divine Sower invaded your heart and mind with His truth. God's truth was delivered to you and God's Spirit prepared your heart to receive it. That's sovereign grace at work. But sovereign grace is held in balance with human responsibility by the invitation to seek the Lord. In **Matt. 7:7**, Jesus said, "**Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.**" So the condition of a heart is the result of sovereign grace working with human responsibility.

And this parable is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago when Jesus first uttered it. Entrance into His kingdom demands a humble heart, a child-like heart. **Matt. 18:2, 3** says this...**He called a little child and had him stand among them. And He said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** As we observed not long ago, children are simple, humble and trusting. People like this don't argue with God's Word, they believe it and obey it. How we respond to the Gospel determines whether or not we can be saved. But then after God saves us, our ability to grow and bear fruit is determined by our relation to God's Word. The point of the parable is **v.9** where Jesus said, "**He who has ears, let him hear.**" In other words, "*Be careful how you hear. Make sure you really hear!*"

But as we finish, consider the heart conditions illustrated by the four types of soil.

1. *The hardened heart - v.19* This represents the heart of the unsaved person who cannot receive God's truth. **I Cor.2:14 - The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.** Illus. *The professor's red ink.* Bible preaching and spiritual truth is like a foreign language to the unsaved. It's like speaking Greek to those who speak only English...they just can't understand it. Like the seed that fell on hardened soil, it can't penetrate or take root. It's wasted! The **birds** that snatch away seed that lies on the surface, refer to Satan and the work of demons.
2. *The shallow heart - vs. 20, 21* This heart condition is found in those who initially respond to the truth with enthusiasm. Shallow soil represents an emotional response. This is the California earthquake survivor who tells Billy Graham he's definitely going back to church. This is the person all fired up by an inspirational message or the charisma of a visiting evangelist. Yet in most cases, emotionalism is skin deep. The Word of God never really takes root in the heart of this person. As soon as testing comes, and it surely will...he falls away. Testing is good for the child of God whose life is rooted and grounded in the grace of God. But trials and testing can be devastating to those whose faith is shallow and superficial.

3. *The crowded heart - v. 22* - The third heart condition is found in the person who views Christ and His Kingdom as just another thing among many things that occupy the garden of his heart. In **Matt. 6:33** Jesus said, “**seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.**” God and His Kingdom must be given the first place in our lives. But in the crowded heart **the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth** claim the affection and space the Word needs in order to grow. Growth and spiritual fruitfulness are strangled by these other things. The competition is too great...the seed is choked...consequently, no fruit is produced.

As we see in other NT passages, spiritual fruitfulness is the proof of spiritual life. No fruit can mean no life. Jesus said, **By their fruit you will recognize them. – Matt. 7:16** Then too **Heb. 6:8** says, **But land (or soil) that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.**

In the case of the first three heart conditions, the message of the kingdom had no effect. The first three soils represent heart conditions found mainly in those who are unsaved. The crowded soil may represent the heart of either a believer or unbeliever...we just can't know for sure. But think of it, by the ratio in this parable, three-fourths of men's hearts are unprepared to receive the Word of God. Having rejected the light of God or the common grace made evident and available to them, they are in no condition to receive the Gospel. We shouldn't be surprised when people reject our witness to the saving grace of Christ. Unfortunately, the Kingdom offered to everyone, is not for everyone because not everyone will receive the Words of the King...Jesus.

4. But finally, we come to *the Good Heart*. Again let me say that this heart is termed **good** only in contrast with the other three heart conditions. To the rich young ruler Jesus said, “**No one is good—except God alone.**” Jeremiah said, **Our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked.** The good heart is the prepared heart. It's a heart that is humble and tender towards God. In **I Thess. 2:13**, Paul thanked God for the way the believers in Thessalonica responded to God's Word. **we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.**

Do you know why a heart can be humble and tender towards God? First of all, our hearts were created by God with a built-in desire to know Him. It's a great mystery to consider that same God created both Cain and Abel / Jacob and Esau / John and Judas. But if you believe in Christ today, thank God for the heart he gave you. You were blessed with a built-in desire to know Him. But hearts are also conditioned by environment and the accumulation of life experiences. Many of us were raised in a home where God was revered. Our parents showed us the love and the grace of God. Not everyone has that privilege. Thank God again if you were exposed to people who loved God and sought to be like Him. These factors which affect the condition of our hearts are really blessings from God. They are gifts of His grace. Just as some people inherit heart defects, some are born with a heart inclined toward faith, and some are not. While this is true, the Bible indicates the human will is also involved in determining the kind of heart we have.

In **Heb. 3:12,13** and **4:2**) we see that we can harden our hearts and we each have a responsibility to encourage those around us to not let that happen. By neglect, we can decide to have a shallow heart where God's Word can't take root. Or we can allow our hearts to become so crowded with things that God's Word has no place to flourish and grow. We are custodians of our hearts. To people given the prerogative to decide and choose, the prophet Jeremiah said, “**Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns!**” – **Jer. 4:3** So how does the kingdom progress? It progresses as the Word of God is believed and received in the hearts of people like you and me.