

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-23

Key Verse: 13:23

“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.”

Chapter 13 marks a transition in Matthew’s gospel. The religious leaders have opposed Jesus publicly, saying that he was demon possessed. Jesus rebuked their sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus was on a collision course with the Pharisees. Yet it was not just a personal matter, it was the collision of two kingdoms—the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the devil. This conflict would continue for many generations. So Jesus prepared his disciples to live and work in an atmosphere hostile to the kingdom message. Jesus called them to a commitment thicker than blood. Jesus taught them how the kingdom of heaven advances and how to work for it by the use of parables.

Chapter 13 contains seven parables which seem to be progressive in nature. They all teach us about the kingdom of heaven. In the first parable, the parable of the sower, Jesus teaches us how he spreads the kingdom in this world. It is by sowing the word of God in people’s hearts. However, Jesus’ act of preaching the word does not guarantee a good harvest. The heart that receives the word must respond well. As we think about Jesus’ words we can examine our own hearts. If we are honest and repentant, we can gain a great spiritual blessing from this study. May the Spirit of truth guide us.

First, Jesus told them many things in parables (1-9).

Look at verse 1. “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.” Jesus had just faced some tough opposition. Jesus must have been exhausted. Anyone else would have been completely discouraged. An ordinary man would have resigned from being Messiah and looked for another job with less stress. But Jesus was different. Jesus got up and went out of the house. It was to make himself available to God’s sheep. It was to teach the word of God to God’s sheep. Jesus was ready to welcome and eager to serve them. Jesus wanted to make them God’s family members through the living word of God.

The people knew Jesus’ heart like children know their parents’ hearts. They could sense Jesus’ welcoming spirit. They knew that Jesus loved them and wanted to help them. So they came to him in large numbers without hesitation. Look at verse 2. “Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.” To manage the crowd was not easy. People were gathering and pressing around Jesus. If Jesus were claustrophobic he would have panicked and run away from them, forgetting his desire to help them. But Jesus found a way. He got into a boat and put out a little from shore to prevent people from crowding around him. Then as the people stood on the shore, Jesus began to teach them. According to tradition, this happened in the Cove of the Parables, a natural amphitheater shaped like a horseshoe. Jesus’ voice carried across the water to be heard by the crowd.

Verse 3 begins, “Then he told them many things in parables....” Jesus told them many things. The people needed a lot of instruction in many ways, such as how to study hard and live in harmony with one another. Jesus taught them about the kingdom of heaven. This would give real comfort to suffering people; it gave real hope to those who were in despair. Jesus had preached the kingdom of heaven from the beginning of his ministry. Yet, this time was different. This time, Jesus taught through parables. What is a parable? Simply speaking, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. We like stories, right?

Let’s listen to Jesus’ parable. Look at verses 3b-8. “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.” To the people of Jesus’ time this story would have been quite familiar and easily understood, for many were farmers. This particular method of sowing was called the “broadcast” method. The sower scattered seed generously, far and wide, letting it fall on all kinds of soils. It is interesting that today the word “broadcast” describes the sending of radio,

television, satellite and phone signals. The signals bounce around all over the coverage area. They are captured by those who have proper receivers. But those who don't have a proper receiver cannot catch the signal. Moreover, a tremendous amount of the signal just dissipates, like many of the seed in this parable.

Jesus' parable seemed like a simple story. But when Jesus finished, he said in verse 9, "He who has ears, let him hear." Jesus gave a clue that there was more to the story than it seemed. Jesus indicated that there was a spiritual meaning that was not immediately obvious.

Second, Jesus explains why he speaks in parables (10-17).

The disciples were surprised that Jesus spoke in parables. It was a sudden alteration in his teaching method. They might have worried that Jesus was abandoning gospel preaching in order to give gardening tips. They asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

Look at verse 11. "He replied, 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.'" The kingdom of heaven is a secret. It cannot be discovered by human reason or scientific research. We cannot go to a special store and buy the secret with money. It can be known only when God reveals it. This is a gift of God. God had given the secret to the disciples. But he had not given the secret to the crowd. The disciples had a great privilege of knowing the secret of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, they had a basis for understanding spiritual truth that the crowd did not have.

We might wonder why Jesus gave his disciples the secret of the kingdom of heaven. It is Jesus' prerogative to share his secrets with whomever he wants to share them. But in the context of Matthew's gospel, we can understand that Jesus blessed his disciples for a reason. Jesus' disciples had made a life commitment to follow him. Jesus recognized them as his family members and shared his family secrets with them. Jesus had taught them to ask, seek and knock (Mt 7:7-8). The Holy Spirit helps those who seek him. They can understand the spiritual meaning of the parables. To them the parables are spiritual food that nourishes their souls and gives them the wisdom of salvation. But to those who are indifferent toward God, Jesus' parables can be simple stories and no more. Through the same parable, God can bless those who seek him, while hiding himself from those who despise him. God speaks to us constantly. If anyone does not know God, it is not because God did not speak to him. It is because he does not want to know God. God follows a spiritual principle in giving revelation. Jesus said in verse 12: "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." Those who know God through his word can grow in the knowledge of God until they reach the full measure of God's glory. But those who despise the word of God will forget even the concept of God.

Jesus' teaching in parables was deliberate. It is characteristic of God's way of working throughout his history. Look at verses 13-15. "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."'" When a people's heart has become hard, their other faculties are useless. Nevertheless, Jesus still taught the word of God to them. So many people heard the word of God from Jesus. But so many went away without really knowing what it was that they heard. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples understood.

Jesus said to them in verses 16-17, "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." By God's grace, the disciples saw the work of God through Jesus. This is what other righteous men of God only longed for and saw from a distance. They heard the life-giving word of God. They received the knowledge of salvation. They were part of the great history of God which included many great prophets and righteous men. Jesus speaks in parables to impart spiritual truth to those whose hearts are right. At the same time, Jesus obscures the message from those whose hearts are not right.

Third, the meaning of the parable of the sower (18-23).

Jesus himself interpreted the meaning of the parable of the sower to his disciples. The sower is Jesus. The seed is the message of the kingdom. The soils represent people who respond to the message differently. Among the soils three do not produce fruit. Only the fourth produces fruit, but it is abundant fruit.

This parable seems to mainly describe the different kinds of soils. Yet Jesus did not call it the parable of the soils, but the parable of the sower (18). Jesus wants his disciples to understand the mind and task of the sower. Soon they would be the primary sowers in the preaching of the gospel message to the world. The farmer scattered his seed generously, and it fell on all kinds of soils. In the same way, those who sow the word of God must also scatter generously by sharing the word with all kinds of people. Among the four kinds of soil, only one kind of soil produced fruit. The sower sows many seeds that bear no fruit at all. This is the nature of sowing work. We should not be surprised when many people do not respond well to the message. We must not automatically assume that there is something wrong with the seed or the sower. In order for fruit to be produced, the soil must be the right kind.

Let's consider the different soils. First the path. Look at verse 19. "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." There is a fierce spiritual battle when the seed of the kingdom is sown. The devil comes like a flying bird to snatch away the word. Those who hear the message, and do not understand it, and then do not take time to struggle to understand, will lose the word that was sown in them. These days the devil flies through the internet, television and movies. If the word is lying on someone's heart the devil will snatch it away to rob his or her chance to gain salvation and eternal life. Many have testified that after hearing the word of God they were inspired and wanted to struggle spiritually. Then they watched television for a little while. Before long, all their inspiration was gone and their desire to struggle was gone. Instead of struggling spiritually, they indulged their flesh and forgot about it. Those who regard the word of God in the same way they regard worldly knowledge will be robbed by the devil throughout their lifetimes until they lose their chance to accept the message.

What makes a person's heart hard? This condition often develops over a period of time. In verse 15 they are described as those who have callouses on their hearts. A callous is a hardening of the skin caused by repeated friction with an irritating agent. When we hear the word of God, it pierces our consciences and irritates the sinful nature. That means it is time to repent. Repentance brings healing. However, if we reject the word, our hearts become hard. Every rejection makes our hearts harder. In time, they will not receive the word. Is your heart hard? Hosea 10:12 says, "Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you." Let's ask the Holy Spirit's help to break up our unplowed ground.

Second, the rocky soil. Look at verses 20-21. "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." This person responds well at first. He understands the message and rejoices. His emotional response is very good. Yet his response is not rooted in the deeper part of his humanity—his character, conscience and will. He cannot follow Jesus to the end with his emotions. Christian life is not easy all the time. Trouble and persecution come because of our faith in Jesus. God allows these things to deepen our faith. 1 Peter 1:7 says, "These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." Those who avoid this struggle will remain shallow mentally and spiritually. They soon fall away. Lot looked like a believer in God when things went well. But his faith was not rooted in his own conscience and will as much as it was the result of Abraham's influence. In times of difficulty he went his own way and did what he wanted to do. On the other hand, Abraham faced difficulties with faith in God's promise. Sometimes his emotions were swirling and it was hard to obey the word of God, such as when he had to send Ishmael away and when he had to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Yet Abraham obeyed God, holding on to his promise, and grew in faith.

Third, the thorny soil. Look at verse 22. "The one who received the seed that fell among thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." The word tries to grow in this person, but it has to compete with thorns of worry: what to eat, what to wear, how to establish future security, and so on. In the flesh, we respond to this by trying to make money. Money whispers that if we just make enough of it, our problems will be solved. But in the course of worrying and making money, a person's life is totally consumed until the chance to grow in faith is lost. To grow in Jesus, we must overcome the thorns of worry. We can

do so by accepting Jesus' word of promise: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." When we trust in this promise, we can follow Jesus to the end.

Fourth, the good soil. Look at verse 23. "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." This person hears the word and understands it. He accepts it as the word of God with an absolute attitude. God once told Noah that he was going to bring a flood judgment on the whole earth. Hebrews 11:7 tells us how Noah responded. It says, "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." Noah responded to God's message of salvation and judgment with absolute obedience and a full life commitment. He also committed his family fully to God's mission.

The message of Jesus is the good news of the gospel. It is the message that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. It is the message that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and rose from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures. Whoever believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and the living hope of the kingdom of God. Whoever does not believe will be condemned. We must believe and proclaim this message.

Those who do this bear abundant spiritual fruit beyond expectation. In the first place, they are changed inwardly into the likeness of Christ. They bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). They become really wonderful people who can please God and be a blessing to those around them. Furthermore, they bear the fruit of raising many disciples. Through one changed person, thirty, sixty, or even one hundred other persons can be changed and raised as Jesus' disciples. In effect, the whole world can be changed by this method. This gives us great hope for ourselves and for the world we live in.

Spreading the message of the kingdom of heaven is a great spiritual battle. We must overcome our own inner problems through daily repentance. We must persevere in proclaiming the message to a world that often does not want to hear the message. But Jesus promises that those who hold on to the gospel message and live by faith will bear abundant spiritual fruit, within and without. Let's hold on to Jesus' promise and live as his coworkers in preaching the gospel message.