

The Parable of the Sower
Matthew 13:1-23
Key Verse: 13:23

"But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

This parable appears in all three synoptic gospels, and is well known to us. We tend to think a lot about the different soils in the parable, and try to find which one we may be. This is valid. Yet, the main point of the parable is to express Jesus' hope for his disciples. Jesus had hope in spite of the dark times. As we studied in chapter 12, Jesus diagnosed his generation as wicked and adulterous (12:39). The religious leaders were its representatives. Despite the clear evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, they rejected him irrationally. It was because they had an evil intention. They opposed Jesus in order to maintain the status quo, in which they found security. In doing so, they resisted the kingdom of God and became instruments of the devil. There seemed to be no hope for that generation. But Jesus found hope in his disciples. In chapter 13 he began to focus on teaching his disciples about the kingdom of heaven through parables. It was through them that the vision of the kingdom would be realized. As we see in our generation, Christian influence seems to be waning and wickedness seems to be increasing. People are becoming more and more ungodly. There seems to be no hope. But today we learn from Jesus, who has real hope through a handful of disciples. Let's find hope in Jesus today.

I. The parable of the sower (1-9)

Jesus taught the word of God in many places: in the synagogue (4:23), on the mountainside (5:1), in Peter's house (8:14), etc. Now he sat by the lake. Jesus taught the word of God wherever he was, and at any time. It was because the word of God gives life to our souls (Jn 6:63). As Jesus sat by the lake, many thirsty souls gathered around him. So Jesus got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people sat on the shore. The boat must have rocked back and forth, the waves providing a gentle rhythm for Jesus' preaching. Jesus could enjoy a kind of wind-surfing as he taught the word of God. Rising above the gentle whisper of the waves, Jesus' voice was like the sound of rushing waters which quenched the thirsty souls of listeners. As Jesus spoke, even the fish jumped up to listen. It was a most beautiful scene in the world.

Look at verse 3a. "Then he told them many things in parables...." What is a parable? The word literally means "to set beside." Parables have been called "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning." Jesus used what was familiar on earth to reveal unseen spiritual reality. The kingdom of heaven is so mysterious that we cannot understand it with our own reason or human wisdom. We can understand it only by revelation from God. Jesus wants to reveal the kingdom of heaven so that people may understand it according to their capacity (Mk 4:33). However, the secret of the kingdom is revealed only to those who sincerely seek the truth. Jesus told many parables, beginning with the parable of the sower. These parables are marked by brevity, simplicity, reality, and profound mystery. Jesus' words are truly amazing. The parable of the sower lays the foundation for understanding all of the parables. It teaches us how to bear good fruit and be happy.

Verse 3b says, "A farmer went out to sow his seed." The kingdom of God begins by sowing seed. Without sowing seed, nothing happens. The one who sows is the farmer; he represents Jesus. Verses 4-8 describe four different soils the seed fell into, and what happened to the seed in each soil. Some fell along the path. This path was as hard as highway I-94. The seed could not penetrate at all and just sat on the surface. Then some hungry birds swooped down and gobbled up the seed. Some seed 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 (5-6). As we know, the sun is absolutely necessary for plants to grow. However, the intense energy of sunlight causes plants without roots to wither and die. Other seed fell among thorns (7). It took root and began to grow. But the problem is that thorns grew with it, and developed more rapidly, and finally choked the plant. Still other seed fell on good soil (8). It took root, drew energy from the sun through photosynthesis and grew. It finally blossomed and produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

In this parable we can see that where the seed was planted was important. The seed itself has power to grow and produce fruit, even 100 times what was sown. But the seed needs nutritious soil, enough water, and the sun. Only the seeds on good soil actually became fruitful. Like the seed, the message of the kingdom is life-giving. But to bear fruit, it needs proper conditions. Jesus concluded in verse 9, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." To those with spiritual ears, Jesus' parable would be deep and meaningful. To others, it would be a mere story about farming. We can learn from Isaiah that our spiritual hearing opens when we meet the holy God personally (Isa 6:8).

II. The purpose of the parable (10-17)

After Jesus finished telling the parable of the sower, many people commented, "That was too simple. I walked all the way here for that?" But the disciples were different. They wanted to know why Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables (10). Until now, Jesus had taught directly and plainly, as he did in the Sermon on the Mount. They knew he must have a good reason for using parables, and they asked why. We can learn from the disciples. When we do not understand Jesus, we should not just ignore what he says or does. We should realize that it is important and ask why. Jesus was pleased to answer. He said, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (11). The disciples, who were committed to Jesus like family members, were given the secret of the kingdom of heaven. But the casual and uncommitted were not given the secret. Jesus gives the secret to those he chooses.

Understanding the secret does not come from intellectual prowess; it is a gift from Jesus. It is given to those who put their faith in Jesus. So St. Anselm regarded true theology as "faith seeking understanding." Faith comes first, then understanding.

Spiritual understanding is not dry and static; it is dynamic. Jesus told us how we can grow in spiritual understanding in verse 12: "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." We can see the truth of this principle in many ways. For example, when Mother Barry was in Korea, she had a great desire to master Korean and learned it well. Native Koreans recognized her as an excellent Korean speaker. However, since leaving Korea,

she has spoken Korean less and less. Now she confesses that she has forgotten many Korean words. In colloquial terms, we say, "Use it or lose it." Jesus applied this principle to the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven. Those who listen to the word of God and try to understand it will receive strength and wisdom from God. Such people are full of grace and thanks and joy and peace and the love of God. There is a song in their hearts always. On the other hand, those who take God's word lightly become spiritually ignorant. Then their souls dry up and they become weary. In the spiritual world, everyone either grows or degenerates; no one can remain as they are. Those who have desire can grow into spiritual giants. Those who have no desire will lose whatever understanding they had and fail to bear any fruit.

In verse 13a, Jesus said, "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'" Jesus went on in verses 14-15: "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.'" These verses may give an impression that God does not want people to know the secret of the kingdom of heaven. However, God's heart's desire is for all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1Ti 2:4). When Jesus quoted Isaiah he had in his mind the wicked generation. Though they had seen the obvious evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, they rejected him deliberately and irrationally. They did not repent of their pride. God wants us to use our ears, eyes and minds to understand his word. But they closed their ears, their eyes, and their minds. It was because their hearts were hardened. If they had turned to the Lord, he would have healed them. God is patient with people, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance (2Pe 3:9). God spared the people of Nineveh, who were wicked and sinning greatly against the Lord, when they repented at Jonah's short and reluctant message. An evil king Manasseh spent 55 years sinning against the Lord greatly. But when he repented, God forgave him and accepted him (2Ch 33:12-13). God is ready to forgive those who turn to him. But those who harden their hearts will remain spiritually blind and deaf.

In verses 16-17, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it." God promised to send the Messiah through many prophets. They longed to see Jesus' day, yet they did not see it. They longed to hear Jesus' message, but they did not hear it. However, Jesus' disciples saw the Messiah and heard his message. They received salvation in their souls and their eyes and ears were healed. They were really blessed. For example, Matthew, the former tax collector, was an incorrigible sinner. But when he accepted Jesus as his Savior and King, and heard the message from him, he was transformed into the light of the world. This was not only the case for his disciples, but it is for anyone who accepts Jesus as their Savior and King; they can be healed and become useful to God. Jesus' purpose in speaking in parables was not only helping people understand the word of God; it was to help them accept Jesus as their Savior and King and to turn to him in repentance and be healed.

III. The meaning of the parable (18-23)

When Jesus taught the word of God, he found that there were many different kinds of people who responded in different ways. Jesus categorized them into four main kinds as he explained the meaning of the parable (18). 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 their heart. This is the seed sown along the path." This kind of people have a very hard heart, like a path. Even though they hear the message, it does not penetrate their hearts even one millimeter. When they do not receive the word, the devil comes and exchanges the truth of God for a lie. What the devil dislikes most is when someone accepts the word of God and is changed. The word of God has life in itself. Anyone who accepts it will experience its transforming power. They can be changed into a new creation. They can be rescued from eternal condemnation and brought into the kingdom of light. So the devil works hard to keep as many people as possible under his power. He hates anyone who is listening to the word of God and visits them to make them stumble if possible. Where there are the words of God, there the devil will also be looking for an opportunity to devour people. Those who reject the word of God with a hard heart will surely be snatched away by the devil.

"The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away" (20-21). The good point of those like rocky soil is that they receive the word immediately with joy. They seem to be excellent Bible students. But their problem is that they have no root. In the parable, trouble and persecution are compared to sunlight. Sunlight is necessary for the growth of any plant. Likewise, trouble and persecution because of the word are necessary ingredients to spiritual growth. Through trouble and persecution false hope is eradicated from our hearts and the true hope of the kingdom of God is purified. Through persecution we can have a deeper and more personal faith in Jesus. A tree in a greenhouse cannot grow to maturity. It must be planted outside and exposed to the sun, rain and wind. Sometimes it will be blown by a strong storm. At such times, the tree can take deeper root and grow all the more to be a giant tree. So trouble and persecution is not the real problem. The real problem is whether we have a root or not. The Bible teaches us that we have to take root in many ways. Jesus said in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Paul also said in Colossians 2:6-7, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." Trouble and persecution because of the word offer a good opportunity to take root. But those whose heart is like rocky soil do not commit themselves to the word of God. They become emotional and then abandon the word of God. Taking root in the word of God is essential in order to grow and produce abundant fruit.

"The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful" (22). This kind of people receive the words of God well and take root. But growing

alongside the word are the weeds of worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. The worries of this life seem to come to those who are lacking, while the deceitfulness seems to come to those who have much. So either way, whether one is lacking or in material abundance, there is a pitfall to be avoided. People who don't have money generally think that money will solve their problem. They worry day and night about their future, thinking they need money most. On the other hand, those with money live in a false sense of security like the rich fool in Luke's gospel (Lk 12:20). They seek fun and pleasure and fulfillment in the world. The love of money pierces them with many griefs and they wander from the faith (1Ti 6:10). When the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth come into one's heart, we should immediately pull them out like nasty weeds. Otherwise, they can choke our spirit and make us unfruitful.

Look at verse 23. "But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." Here those who have a heart like good soil hear the word and understand it. In this passage the word "understand" is repeated five times.

"Understand" means that our perception accurately reflects the reality. This understanding is not mere head knowledge. It is accepted deeply in the heart and becomes part of one's life. Luke says that it means to "retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Lk 8:15). It is not enough to understand the words of God in theory. We must understand them through experience that comes from practical obedience. For example, Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." To truly understand this word we must trust in God in a time of great need. Then we experience that God provides abundantly for us. When we study the Bible, first we need to hear the word humbly, emptying all other ideas. We need to hold on to it until it takes deep root in us and we understand its real meaning. Then we can grow and produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control and so on (Gal 5:22-23). Naturally, our personalities transform into Christ's likeness. Then we can please God and give a good influence to our family, neighbors, classmates, co-workers, and so on. One person who changes in this way can influence the world greatly.

Through this parable we learn Jesus' hope for his disciples. When Jesus saw his wicked and adulterous generation, God's judgment was imminent. He could have despaired, but he never despaired. Jesus saw God working in the hearts of his disciples. They were like good soil. They were the remnant of God. Jesus saw that through them there would be a great work of God in the future and the world would change for the better. So Jesus focused on raising them in the midst of many kinds of opposition and troubles. We can learn from Jesus what we should do in our time. Instead of despairing over the darkness of the world, we should come to Jesus and hear his word and understand it. Jesus has hope for all of us to be influential people of God. We should also have hope for others and engage in disciple-raising.