

Series: ***The Parables of Jesus***

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:3-9 (ESV)

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.*

Introduction

Last week we began a new series on the parables of Jesus. I offered four reasons for doing such a series and I would like to remind you of them once again. We you please pray these with me? Would you pray that the Lord would grant these four requests?

Four Reasons For A Series In The Parables

- 1) So that we might know more of Jesus and His kingdom (Matt 13:11).
- 2) So that we might experience the realities of the kingdom of heaven in our daily lives.
- 3) So that our eyes might be opened to very practical and natural ways of sharing spiritual truths with those around us by using common human experiences.
- 4) So that He might save those who are lost.

A Definition of Parable

Recall that the Greek word for ‘parable’ comes from two Greek words *para* and *ballō*, which together mean, ‘to throw alongside.’¹ It means to compare two things. It means taking one thing and laying it along side another thing for the sake of a comparison.

James Boice defined parable as “a story taken from real life (or a real-life situation) from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn.”²

¹ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. Second edition (Victor Books).

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Parables of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1983) p. 14.

If we look up the Greek word *parabole* as defined in a Greek dictionary, we find, “an illustration, a comparison, or an analogy, usually in story form, using common events of every day life to reveal a moral or spiritual truth.”³

Just keep in mind that core to the definition of parable is the idea of a comparison. One of the questions that we should continue to ask ourselves as we come to each parable is, ‘what is being compared?’

Why Did Jesus Speak In Parables?

Last week we focused on the disciples’ question found in **Matthew 13:10**, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” We noted that the word ‘parable’ first appears in Matthew here in 13:3. Up to this point in Matthew’s gospel Jesus had not spoken or taught in parables. So His disciples wanted to know what the change was for.

Reason #1) To Reveal Secrets of the Kingdom to Those Who Received Him

Jesus answered by offering two reasons. First, the parables were a means of revealing the truth of the kingdom to His disciples (i.e. including all who are following him, and not only the twelve).⁴

Matthew 13:11a, 12a

11 And [Jesus] answered them, *To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven...* 12 *For to the one who has more will be given...*

Jesus chose to use the parables as occasions to reveal the secrets (i.e. mysteries⁵) of the kingdom to those who received him (the twelve and others). Jesus explained the meaning of the parables to His followers. This further reinforces the fact that understanding divine truth comes through gracious revelation of God and not by any innate human wisdom.

Reason #2) To Conceal Secrets of the Kingdom from Those Who Rejected Him

The second reason Jesus spoke and taught in parables was to conceal the secrets, or mysteries, of the kingdom from those who had rejected Him. Jesus did not explain the parables to the crowds. He only explained the parables in private to His followers.

Matthew 13:11b, 12b

...to them [on the outside⁶] *it has not been given.* 12 *...from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*

The Pharisees and the crowds had been following Jesus and witnessing all manner of miracles⁷ and yet they had rejected Him and attributed His power to Satan rather than God. So in the face of this blasphemous rejection of Him, Jesus quoted **Isaiah 6:9-10**. This passage indicates that a continual

³ Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) p. 16.

⁴ See Mark 4:10.

⁵ Greek *mysterion*, meaning that which was previously concealed but now has been revealed by God. See Paul 1 Cor 2:6-10; Eph 3:3-6.

⁶ See Mark 4:11.

⁷ In the immediately preceding chapter, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Matt 12:9-13), “all” who were sick (Matt 12:15), and a demon oppressed man who was blind and mute (Matt 12:22).

rejection of God's undeniable presence and activity results in a continual hardening of the heart, and a closing of the eyes and ears.

The Parables: A Kind of Judgment

In this sense, then the parables were a kind of judgment on the hard-hearted stubbornness of the people. Since they had refused to accept the obvious truth, Jesus would no longer teach truth in so obvious a manner. Since they had rejected the plain truth, the plain truth would no longer be so plainly offered.

Clear Water or Cloudy Water

It's like a waiter who comes offer the customer water having two pitchers on his tray, one with clear water and the other cloudy. The waiter naturally offers to fill the customers glass with the clear water. The customer looks at the pitcher with the cloudy water and says, "Don't I get to choose which pitcher I want to drink from?" The stunned waiter says, "You don't want that water. It's cloudy." The customer replies, "Oh, but I do." The waiter protests but finally gives in to the ridiculous requests of the stubborn customer. After repeatedly offering the customer clear water and every time having it rejected in favor of cloudy water, soon the waiter simply stops offering the clear water and only offers the cloudy.

This is much like what Jesus did. It's almost as if He said, "If you don't want clear truth then I will give you concealed truth." Concealing truth from those who refused to receive Him is the second reason Jesus spoke in parables.

The First Parable Told (13:3-9)⁸

This leads us to the first recorded parable Jesus ever told. You are now the crowds to whom Jesus spoke. There were so many people pressing in around Him, that He got into a boat and the crowds gathered around Him on the beach listening to Him. He lays a parable before them.

- 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.*

Some questions come to mind. Why begin with this parable? Whom did He primarily have in mind as He told it? What did He hope would be the outcome? What is being compared?

A Sower Went Out to Sow (13:3)

Jesus used a common illustration as the subject of the parable. Everyone would have been familiar with the sight of a sower sowing



⁸ See parallel in other gospels Mark 4:1-20 and Luke 8:4-15.

seed. He or she would carry a large bag over the shoulder filled with seed. As he would walk through the field he would reach into his bag and pitch the seed out in all directions. He would cast the seed in a very broad fashion. This concept is the origin of our term ‘broadcasting.’ Jesus then discusses four different locations where the seed lands.

Some Seeds Fell Along the Path (13:4)

First Jesus discusses the seed that falls along the path. Palestinian fields were outlined with the hard packed dirt of well-used footpaths. The paths served as dividing lines to separate one field from another as well as firm footing for getting where one wanted to go. These paths were baked hard in the constant sun.



Some seeds fell along the path. As soon as the sower’s back was turned and he moved away from the path, the birds flew down and feasted upon the seeds.

Some Seeds Fell On Rocky Ground (13:5)



Jesus goes into greater detail about this second location. This seed falls on rocky ground where there was “not much soil.” There was some soil, but it was not very much. The seed then “*immediately sprang up, since it had no depth of soil.*” The soil appears to lay over top a layer of rock so the only place for the plant to go is up. It cannot go down because rock is below preventing it from going deep. So up it sprang up really quickly. This is like the onion my daughter found yearning upward for life while hidden under the sink. There is much sprouting upward, but no root going downward.

Then the sun begins to rise high in the sky and blaze with all its intensity. The plant needs liquid and moisture however, it has no root so there is no way for the plant to be sustained with needed moisture from the root, so in the heat it slowly withers and wilts away.

Some Seeds Fell Among Thorns (13:7)

The third group of seeds fell among thorns. They do grow but they grow along with thorns. As the plant grows the thorns grew also. There is competition for sunlight and for the nutrients in the ground. In the end the thorny plants choke out the life of the other plants so that they died.



Some Seeds Fell On Good Soil (13:8)



The fourth location of some seeds was good soil. These seeds found fertile ground with plenty of moisture and nutrients. So they grew and produced a good crop of grain, some seeds produced a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty, but all the seeds that fell on the good soil produced grain.

Jesus then concludes this parable with a command, “*He who has ears, let him hear*” (13:9).

If you were in the crowd that day, this was all the parable that you heard. You did not hear Jesus offer a public explanation. On that same day, Jesus went on to tell them six more parables.

This leaves you with the nagging sense that there is something more to the story, doesn't it? If you heard this for the first time, you tend to think, "OK, you just told us what we already knew and each of us has witnessed a hundred times. Why did you tell us this? I know you probably have more to say about this little story but you're not saying it. Why? And why did you say at the end, 'He who has ears, let him hear?' Of course we all have ears! What are you driving toward?"

Observations About the Subject(s)

What is this parable about? The sower is referred to twice in this parable, once in verse three and once in verse four. However, 'seeds' are referred to either directly or indirectly sixteen times.⁹ The focus of this parable is overwhelmingly upon the fate of seeds.

Go To Jesus To Get Answers

The question is, what do you do with that nagging, unsatisfying feeling in the pit of your stomach? How do you get rid of it? The answer is, you do what Jesus' followers did. You go to Him and you ask Him for help (13:10).

The Parable of the Sower Explained (18-23)

Matthew 13:18

18 *"Hear then the parable of the sower:*

Hear This Parable

Jesus begins explaining the parable in verse 18. Jesus commands His questioning followers to *"Hear..."* this parable. He wants them to listen to this. Remember He finished telling the parable to the crowds with the command, *"He who has ears, let him hear."* Mark's gospel records Jesus beginning the parable to the crowds with the command, *"Listen!"* (Mark 4:3).

This parable is surrounded with admonitions by Jesus to "listen, and hear" what is being said. Jesus tells the crowds to listen, He says, "He who has ears to hear¹⁰, let him hear," and as explains this to His disciples He tells them to "hear." There is much of great importance to be heard, but must attend to it. We must focus our minds on what Jesus says and pray the will give us 'ears to hear.'

The Parable of the Sower

Note that Jesus calls this **the parable of the sower**. Some people have called this the parable of the soils, but this is not what Jesus calls it. Remember to understand the meaning of the parable we must ask who or what is being compared.

1) The Seed Sown Along the Path (v.19)

Matt 13:19

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.

The Seed? The Sowing? The Soil?

This verse answers many questions. What is the seed? What is the sowing? What or where is the

⁹ Vs. 4 – 2 times, vs. 5 – 4 times, vs. 6 – 3 times, vs. 7 – 2 times, vs. 8 – 5 times (2+4+3+2+5=16).

¹⁰ See Luke 8:8.

soil? The seed is **the word of the kingdom**, this is the gospel, the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand and that God forgives those who repent and heals the sick (Matt 4:17; 9:35).

Jesus mentions, “hearing” again. Hearing the word of the kingdom is represented by the idea of sowing seed. The **proclamation of the gospel is the sowing**, the casting out of the seed as the message is ‘broadcast.’ The real question is how and where does it land and what is its result. We learn that the **soil represents the hearts of the hearer**. The word is sown in the heart. But what happens to it. *Jesus offers four different responses of the heart to the seed*, which is ‘the word of the kingdom.’

The Word Is Not Understood: Seed Sown Along the Path

Jesus tells us first about the seeds that land along the path. In this case, the word of the kingdom is not understood. The Greek word translated as ‘understood’ is νοεω¹¹ (noeo). It derives from the Greek word for mind, nous. Noeo means to perceive with the mind, to understand, to consider, or to ponder.¹² The word of the kingdom is not understood, considered, or pondered. The hard-packed dirt of the path corresponds to the hardened heart that refuses to ponder or to consider **the word of the kingdom**.

Snatched Away By Satan

This refusal to think deeply about what is being said provides an opportunity for **the evil one**, that is Satan, to come quickly and snatch away what has been sown in the heart. The last thing Satan wants you to do is to think! Satan is opposed to thinking. God is not.

Paul told Timothy, “*Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything*” (2 Timothy 2:7). Satan would rather you dismiss this idea of the gospel as foolishness rather than have you thoughtfully consider all the claims of the gospel. He would come and say, “Don’t think about this. This nonsense is not worthy of your mental energy.”

When the gospel is told, sometimes the person who hears it is too hard hearted to think deeply about what is being said. What is heard is not easily understood and so Satan comes quickly to the end that no further thought or investigation is given and so the hardened heart does not receive the gospel. ***This is that which was sown along the path.***

2) The Seed Sown On Rocky Ground

Matthew 13:20-21 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.*

Immediate Reception & Immediate Rejection

The second heart response to the word of the kingdom Jesus likens to seed sown on rocky ground. Notice the immediate reception and the immediate rejection. There is an immediate response of receiving it with joy. Matthew this response is a quick response but only a surface response. There is no depth. There is no depth of thought going into a deliberate pondering of the gospel message. “Sure, I don’t have to go to hell? OK, I’ll take that!” If that is all there is, there is no counting of the

¹¹Ephesians Four Group, Greek Dictionary, electronic ed., 2.

¹²Ibid.

cost that Jesus calls for.¹³

Jesus says this response **has no root**. This response is merely superficial. The truth of the gospel is not internalized into the depths of the heart, but is only welcomed in the most superficial way. This response can only be sustained for a while. The time of testing reveals the true nature of this heart response.

When the blazing sun of adversity arises, this heart fails. When tribulation or persecution because of the word of the kingdom, i.e. the gospel, intensifies there is no depth of root to sustain this heart and so it **immediately falls away**. There is no depth of love for the word of the kingdom in this heart and so it quickly gives way under the heat of intentional pressure that arises specifically because of the gospel.

This response was to immediately receive, but when things get hot, there is immediate rejection. ***This is that which was sown on rocky ground.***

3) The Seed Sown Among Thorns

Matt 13:22 *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 third response endures a bit longer, but in the end is nonetheless unfruitful. There is not the immediate response as is the case of the rocky ground. In this case there is slower revealing of the inadequacy.

There appears to be enough soil for a healthy beginning, but it is not a cleared soil. There are many other issues that are not taken away to give room for the new growth. Two are mentioned; first, the cares of the world and second, the deceitfulness of riches.

There are so many things of the world that demand our attention. In this case, more care and attention is given to temporal things rather than to spiritual things. The attention of this heart is further distracted by the desire to be rich. *Riches promise so much but deliver so little.*

1 Timothy 6:10

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

The heart that is more in love with wealth than with the gospel is slowly choked to death. The cares of the world and the pursuit of riches gradually overshadows any room for the gospel and slowly strangles any hope of spiritual life. ***This is that which was sown among thorns.***

4) The Seed Sown on Good Soil

Matthew 13:23 *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.*

¹³ See Luke 14:25-33.

Jesus now comes to the fourth heart response, the one that bears fruit. The word of the kingdom here takes root and bears fruit. Notice the difference. ***This is the one who hears the word and understands it.*** This is the heart response of the person who thought about she heard. She pondered it, considered it, and received it.

This was not just a superficial response, but one that took deep root. Here are the kind of roots that could sustain it through the heat of persecution and tribulation. Here is the kind of response that cleared away all other competing desires. This response is the kind of response that endures and does not fall away. This heart responds with obedience and thoughtfully considers the cost and still receives the word. The result is **bearing fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.**

What Is Being Compared?

Remember we said that in order to get at the meaning of a parable we must ask what is being compared? So what is Jesus comparing? He is comparing four different responses (of people's hearts) to the word of the kingdom. *Only one response results in fruit.*

Summary

1. The first response (that which was sown on the path) was no response at all, simply a quick hard-hearted rejection resulting in no fruit.
2. The second (that which was sown on rocky ground) was an immediate reception followed by immediate rejection when the heat of persecution came. Again, resulting in no fruit.
3. The third (that which was sown among thorns) was a more gradual and slow rejection also proving unfruitful.
4. Lastly, the seed finds good soil and there is much fruit.

Same Seed Different Response

Notice that the seed is the same in every instance. The same seed is cast out and yet the response is not the same. This difference of response is found in the differences in the hearts. When the gospel is preached there will be one of these responses. It will either be rejected outright, initially embraced but later quickly rejected, embraced but slowly rejected, or received resulting in much fruit. Only one response results in fruit.

John 15:8

By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

We must ask the question, "Is the word of the kingdom producing fruit in my life?"

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control...

If there is no fruit in your life, then which of the other three responses describes your heart?

Jesus called this parable the parable of the Sower. He told us what the seed was, what the sowing was, and what the soils stood for. Jesus explains what happens to the seed in four instances. He does not tell us who the sower is? Why?

In the context since Jesus is doing the preaching it seems reasonable to assume that Jesus is the sower. However, to whom did Jesus explain this parable? He explained it to His followers. I think He did so in order to prepare His followers for what would happen when they would sow the seeds of the word of the kingdom. This also applies to us. This parable can be applied to anyone who will preach the Gospel.

Therefore we should:

- 1) Not be surprised when people reject the gospel. We should expect our message to be rejected. Most people will reject it. Only a fourth part, as it were, will receive it.

Matt 7:13 *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

- 2) We should not be discouraged when the message is rejected. Not everyone will be saved. Not even Jesus’ preaching resulted in the salvation of everyone who heard it, certainly neither will ours.

- 3) Share the gospel with all people because a small number will receive it and bear fruit.

Isaiah 55:11 *So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

- 4) Avoid unhealthy comparisons of one another. We should not expect that the Lord will accomplish the same amount of productivity in each of our lives. We have each been given a measure of faith

Romans 12:3, 6 *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 6 each having gifts that differ according to the grace give to us, let us use them... in proportion to our faith...*

I should rejoice when the Lord through you reaps a hundredfold and you should not be discouraged when He only reaps thirtyfold through me! Let us each use rightly all that the Lord has entrusted to us and may He find our hearts good soil bearing much fruit.