

Sermon: The Parable of the Sower

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MATTHEW 13 CONTAINS eight parables about the kingdom of heaven, that is, the saving reign of God that has broken into human history in Jesus Christ. These parables are divided into two sections of four parables each. The first four (the parables of the Sower, the Weeds, the Mustard Seed, and the Yeast) are spoken in public to the crowds that were following Jesus. The last

four (the parables of the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, the Net and the Teacher of the Law) are spoken to the disciples when they were alone with Jesus. Taken together they compose the third of five major teaching sections in Matthew's Gospel (cf. Matthew 5-7; 10, 13, 18, 24-25). By this arrangement Matthew is most likely presenting Jesus as someone greater than Moses in that he fulfills the law and the prophets, or what we know as the Old Testament scriptures.

Nothing in Matthew's Gospel is superfluous and this amazing cluster of parables is no exception. To understand them we must see

that they are related to Matthew's overall portrait of Jesus. In his Gospel, they come after Jesus' words regarding the fickle response of the crowd to John the Baptist (11:1-18), and his subsequent judgment on the unrepentant cities in which most of his miracles were performed (11:19-24). But all is not judgment. At the end of Matthew 11 Jesus speaks about things which are hidden and things which are revealed according to the sovereign good pleasure of the Father (vv. 25-26), and the necessity of divine revelation if anyone is to understand what is going on (v. 27). He then invites the weary and burdened to find rest in him (vv. 28-30).

In Matthew 12 Jesus presents himself as the Lord of the Sabbath against the backdrop of bitter opposition on the part of the Jewish leaders, thereby illustrating the truth articulated in the previous chapter that unless God gives light and rest not even the religious elites will understand who Jesus is and take refuge in him as God's Messiah. So blind are Christ's contemporaries that he calls them "this wicked generation" (12:45), and chapter 12 closes with a thinly veiled warning that natural family ties are not enough when it comes to the kingdom of heaven. What is required is a

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new relationship to the heavenly Father that is revealed by obedience to his will, and this, in turn, identifies the obedient as the brothers and sisters and mothers of Jesus (12:46-50). This prepares the way for the parables of Matthew 13 which explain Jesus and his relationship to the kingdom of heaven from another perspective as well as the opposition that he is experiencing.

Although there has been much debate about the nature of Jesus' parables, they are best seen as *simple stories designed to teach spiritual truths*. Consequently, we must be careful that we don't read too much or too little into them. In this regard we must be particularly careful with the parable of the Sower because the parable itself is more detailed than most and it receives more extensive exposition by Jesus than the other parables.

At the most basic level the parable of the Sower is about hearing the word of God. Jesus says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear" (13:9). This is a vital matter because according to the parable how we hear the word of God, particularly the word spoken by Jesus, determines our destiny. The knowledge of the kingdom of heaven has been made known in Jesus, and through his inspired apostles, in a way that surpasses anything in the Old Testament. Great mysteries have been revealed; mysteries that prophets and righteous men longed to see (13:17) but were unable to see because of their location in redemptive history. With the coming of Christ, the veil has been pulled back and the truth of God has been revealed. However, this new clarity means increased responsibility. We are responsible to take to heart what we hear and to put it into practice. If we don't, we will be judged just as the people in Jesus' day were judged.

The parables in Matthew 13 not only reveal the great truth that God has begun to rule in Jesus, they conceal it as well. The truth is concealed from those who really don't want to hear it, but it is revealed to those who want to listen. The judicial function of parables is often overlooked. Jesus is not merely telling parables as stories in order to

show how to communicate with a basically illiterate crowd.

When asked by his disciples why he speaks to the people in parables he replies, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Those who have will be given more, and they will have an abundance. As for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand" (13:11-13). According to Jesus his use of parables fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah which speaks of a judgment of hardening because the people refused to believe what God had revealed down through the years.

Jesus' words underline the fact that it a great privilege to hear the word of God, and particularly the word of God as it is now illuminated by the ministry of Jesus. This privilege is not taken seriously enough in our day. We cannot assume that there are churches where the word of God is faithfully preached in every town and city across the country and around the world. There are many churches, but there are not many places where the word of God is carefully expounded and applied to the listeners.

Where churches exist that honor the word we should praise God and do our best to support their ministries. And if we have the privilege of being in such a church and sitting under that kind of ministry we should take full advantage of every opportunity to hear the word of God. The parable of the Sower ought to shake us up and stir us from our lethargy and move us to ask God to give us ears to hear what he is saying, because *how we hear the word of God determines our destiny*.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

In this parable Jesus makes use of a common image in the first century in the Middle East. He speaks of a sower, or farmer, with a bag of seed slung over his shoulder going out into his field to scatter seed. The farmer scatters freely and is

very generous with his seed. He does not test the soil first to see whether it is worth the effort, but instead he casts the seed in every direction.

And so it is that, as he scatters the seed, some fell along the path, on soil that was packed down by those who used it to get from one place to another. Because of the pounding of many feet the soil was hard and the seed just lay on the surface, unable to penetrate the ground. This exposed seed did not escape the notice of the birds who are always looking for food at sowing time and when they saw it they swooped down and had a free meal at the farmer's expense.

Other seed that was sown fell on rocky places. We should not imagine that the farmer is throwing seed on large outcroppings of bare rock. The rocky places describe shallow soil covering a shelf of limestone rock a few inches below the surface. This type of soil provided a varied environment for the seed. At first the shallowness did not adversely affect the seed. In fact, it initially provided what we could call "an accelerated growing environment." In the shallow soil there would be a combination of moisture and warmth that would foster quick germination. And so in the beginning things would look very promising for the young plants, but with the passage of time, the same sun which heated the shallow soil soon dried it out. Without the ability to sink its roots deep into the ground because of the underlying rock, the young plant that showed so much promise withered and died.

Still other seed fell among thorns, that is, on ground that was infested with the root systems of thorny plants. When clearing the land the farmer had cut down the thorn bushes but had not pulled out the roots. At first the seed started to grow and the plants looked healthy until the thorns began to grow alongside them. Then the plants found themselves fighting for moisture and nutrients that they could not win and eventually they were choked and died. Weeds and thorns grow naturally in the soil of this world and they are extremely hardy and adaptable. But plants that are good for food must be carefully cultivated or they will not grow to

maturity and provide nourishment for the farmer and his family.

Still other seed fell on good soil. It was not hard like the path, or shallow like the soil covering the rock, or infested with the root of thorns. Rather it was deep and nutrient rich, and it had been ploughed and made ready to receive the seed. The new plants could sink their roots down into the soil and draw out the moisture and nutrients they needed even during the heat of summer. There was no competition with other plants for space or food and so the seed germinated and grew, and at the appointed time produced a crop. Jesus says that it produced a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. This is a remarkable yield given reports in some of the literature of only a fivefold or sixfold return in Italy and Sicily, and seven or eightfold return in Egypt depending on the kind of crop sown. The abundance of the return makes up for the failure of the seed on the hard, shallow, and infested ground, and the farmer has an abundant return on his labors.

THE INTERPRETATION OF JESUS

One of the unique characteristics of the parable of the Sower is the detailed interpretation given by Jesus and recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8). The other parables in Matthew 13, with the notable exception of the parable of the weeds (13:24-30; 36-43), contain very little exposition. Some skeptics believe this is because the interpretation of the parable does not represent the teaching of the historical Jesus but the later ideas of a religious community. But there is no good reason to hold such a position. In Mark's account, when Jesus is questioned about the meaning of the parable by his disciples, he says to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (4:13). This would seem to indicate that there is something about the parable of the Sower that we must understand if we are to unlock the meaning of all the parables. This vital aspect of the kingdom of heaven requires further, more

detailed explanation if the original disciples, and if we, are to understand what is going on. And so, there are perfectly sound contextual reasons why this parable receives more extensive treatment from our Lord, and there is no need to turn to other explanations that call into question the integrity of the biblical text.

The seed sown on the path represents those who hear the message of the kingdom but do not understand it. According to Jesus the seed is the “message of the kingdom” or what we know as “the gospel,” which tells of God’s reign in Christ in the hearts of his people. In Mark 4:18 and Luke 8:11 respectively, the seed is directly identified as “the word” and “the word of God.” Those represented by the hardened path are those who hear the gospel but it makes no impact on them because they do not see its significance or relevance to their lives. Consequently it lies exposed on the surface of their hearts, and when the evil one sees it sitting there he swoops down like a vulture and snatches it away.

This reminds us that Satan and his fallen cohorts are present where the word of God is proclaimed. Their aim is to keep the word from having its intended impact. They know the power of the word even though they do not bow in submission to it, and they know that their best chance of blunting the force of the word is to keep it from falling into the human heart. This explains the sense of oppression that we can feel on such occasions. Sometimes, one of the most difficult parts of the Christian life, is to read the Bible. As believers we love the Bible, but, even so, it can be difficult to read it with understanding, or to stay awake when reading it, or to retain its contents as we go about our lives. Some of this difficulty is the result of our sinfulness but some of it is most certainly the result of evil spiritual influences and personages that try to snatch away the word as quickly as it is sown.

What Jesus says here about Satan provides yet another reason we need God’s help and the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit if we are to profit

from the word. God is not only the ultimate author of scripture but he is the one who must bring it home to our hearts with saving and sanctifying power. At the very least this means that we should pray that God would bless his word whenever it is read and preached. If the word merely lies on the surface of our hearts it will not do us any good.

The seed falling on the rocky, shallow soil represents those who hear the word of God and receive it with joy. At first they seem so promising. There is an enthusiastic response and everyone is encouraged. The Lord seems so real to them and they speak freely of his love and grace. They get involved in a church and are willing to serve everywhere. They turn their backs on their old way of life and for a time everyone is talking about what has happened to them and is praising God.

But this effervescent stage only lasts a short time. When trouble or persecution comes into their lives because of the Word, they quickly fall away and everyone is left shaking their heads. What has happened? Why are these hearers of the Word so easily disillusioned? They fall away because they have not heard and received into their hearts the whole gospel message. When the gospel is proclaimed they latch on to the message of forgiveness or belonging, or peace, or satisfaction, or joy, or love, which are all a legitimate part of the gospel. But as wonderful as all these things are, they do not represent the whole gospel. Along with the promised blessings of the gospel we are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-38), we are told to gouge out and throw away right eyes and cut off and throw away right hands (Matt 5:29-30), we are told to be holy because without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14), we are told that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22), and many other similar challenges. Those represented by the shallow soil only hear half the message. They have not counted the cost of being a disciple of Christ and so what starts well, ends in disaster.

Unfortunately, this scenario is far too com-

mon, and it is sometimes made worse by unbalanced ideas about assurance that fail to stress that true faith perseveres and produces discipleship. When this happens false hopes may be generated in the temporary convert, their family and the Christian community. Then instead of challenging them to repent and believe the gospel they are merely viewed as backslidden or as carnal Christians, which only aggravates the situation. The temporary believer can then become more difficult to reach than before because they may mistakenly believe that they are saved and secure even though there is no visible evidence in their lives. Such a mistake may prove fatal in the end, and from a pastoral point of view is irresponsible. We need to tell people the whole truth about the kingdom of heaven. In itself this will not guarantee that no one will defect because Jesus plainly teaches that some will, but at least we have fulfilled our responsibility to them, and we have not twisted or distorted the gospel in an attempt to justify or excuse their behavior.

The seed falling among the thorns represents those who hear the word of God and receive it into their hearts to some degree, but they eventually prove unfruitful because the word is choked by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. At first these look promising, but they disappoint in the end because there has been no deep and thorough work of repentance. The roots of materialistic desires, thoughts, hopes, and dreams—which, if left unchecked, will choke the word—have not been pulled out of the heart. There is an attempt to serve the Lord and the things of this life at the same time. The two specific things mentioned—the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth—may seem relatively benign in themselves, but they can be just as deadly as the most notorious sins. The “worries of life” distract from what is most important and deny the Lord the exclusive loyalty that he demands. The “deceitfulness of wealth” lies in the promise of a good, carefree life based on accumulating possessions only to discover that we cannot

serve both God and money or buy our way into the new heaven and earth.

Those represented by the infested soil do not realize that true spirituality is like an exotic plant that must be carefully cultivated, whereas sin is like a weed that thrives on its own. The real tragedy is that these dead people often remain planted in their pews for years. In fact, they may be as completely dead spiritually speaking and yet continue to teach Sunday School, serve on church boards, attend services, sing hymns and songs of praise, mouth words in prayer, and otherwise go through the proper motions. But in the end they are as useless to the kingdom of heaven as dead plants in a farmer’s field.

Radically dealing with all known sin including the more socially respectable sins like anxious worry, greed, and material idolatry is not optional in the Christian life. These thorns must be rooted out if we are to benefit from the word of God proclaimed to us. In this regard, we need to pray for one another and encourage each other in our Christian walk. And we must be willing to confront each other in love when it comes to laziness, coldness of heart, or the presence of improper ambitions, knowing the eternal issues that are at stake if these are allowed to take hold in our hearts.

The seed falling on the good soil represents those who receive the word and allow it to impact their lives, not just for a short time but for a lifetime. In the words of Jesus they (1) hear the word, (2) understand it, and (3) produce a crop. Some think that “crop” refers to other converts that are produced as a result of sharing of the gospel. While I would not want to rule this out completely, I think the primarily fruitfulness is that of personal holiness, or the reproduction of what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23) in their lives. The good soil represents people who have been renewed and transformed by the life-giving, life-changing power of God. They are not perfect, and will not be until they see Jesus in glory, but by God’s grace they do make a difference where God has placed them.

This is the only proper and saving response to the word of God. The other three responses are inadequate. It is important to understand that the three inadequate responses do not indicate a problem with the quality of the seed sown by the farmer. The seed in every instance is the good seed of the word of God. Nor is there a problem with the sower, who in this case is the Lord Jesus himself. He is not stingy when it comes to sowing the seed and will settle for nothing less than a harvest. Where the word is sown and people reject or ignore it, he will eventually come in judgment.

The question is this: Do you and I have ears to hear? The parable of the Sower highlights our responsibility as human beings to respond to the word of God and to receive it into our hearts. We must make sure that our hearts are not hard and insensitive, or shallow and superficial, or thorny and inhospitable to the word of God. We must break up our hard hearts, and remove the rocks and weeds that hinder the word from growing and bearing the fruit of conversion and Christian character in our lives.

But fortunately that is not all that the Bible says about human hearts or about the sower. If it was, we might despair. Anyone who has tried to make their bad heart good knows that it is impossible without God's powerful intervention. The Bible tells us that the great sower himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, has the power to transform the human heart. He can break up our hard hearts, he can remove the rock which keeps the word from growing deep, and he can remove the roots of sin which contaminate our hearts and eventually choke the good seed of the word.

In short, he can transform hearts that are unfit to receive the word into good hearts in which the word will grow and produce the fruit that only the divine word can cultivate. And so the parable of the Sower ought to drive us to him. It is a kingdom parable that speaks of God's gracious intervention in Jesus and it reaches its climax at the cross where Christ died to save his people from their sins. He died and rose again that we might live new lives in

the power of his Holy Spirit, and he will perfect what he has begun when we see him face to face. Therefore, if we understand the parable properly as part of Matthew's portrait of Jesus that does not reach its conclusion till the end of his Gospel, it will teach us to make our way to him and ask him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. No one need despair. There is help in Jesus.