

## Introduction

In recent messages, we covered the purpose of parables in Matthew 13, which is threefold, to manifest kingdom presence, to conceal kingdom truth, and to reveal kingdom truth. Now we are in a good position to take up the parables themselves.

We begin with the parable of the sower and the soils.

**And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear."**

Interestingly, though there is no explanation attached to the parable, there is a command to understand and obey: **He who has ears, let him hear** (v. 9). Matthew indicates that explanation comes a bit later, but at first, Jesus gave the parable and called for understanding and obedience. What is the interpretation of the parable? How do we obey its teaching? These questions set out our job of interpreting and applying the parable of the Sower and the soils (or perhaps better, the Sower, sowing seed). As we go, the order is important: sower, purpose of parables, and explanation.

We can summarize the basic thrust of this parable in two propositions that will become the two main points of the sermon today. 1) Christ establishes His kingdom gradually, instead of suddenly. 2) Christ establishes His kingdom by preaching in spite of unhearing ears.

### 1A. Christ establishes His kingdom gradually instead of suddenly

We might add that Jesus establishes the kingdom of God promised in the OT gradually and inwardly instead of outwardly and suddenly. This may seem like a very general way to understand the parable, but, as we shall see, it goes to the very center of things. To make this point stick, let us consider what the central significance of the parable is not, and then we will see what it is more clearly.

#### 1B. What the central significance is not

Although there is force to the impression we get regarding various soils in relation to the seeds of the sower (along the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil), the central significance of the parable is not the risks involved in listening to preaching or the various responses to gospel proclamation. Granted, the seed is the word of the kingdom (13.19), and Jesus elaborates on different responses to that word:

**Hear then the parable of the sower: <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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."**

Two observations (hints) should make us look more carefully for the core teaching of the parable that contains the idea of various responses, but goes beyond it. First, we are not to miss the forest because we concentrate on the trees. In other words, the point of the parable is not in the details of the various soils. Instead, the point is in the story as a whole in the Sower sowing seed in relation to various soils. Second, we know that the parable is about the kingdom of God, that is, the mysteries of the kingdom formerly hidden in promise and now manifest in fulfillment. Per Matthew 13, the purpose of parables to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom comes right after the giving of the parable without explanation (v. 3, a sower...v. 10, why...parables), and the disciples had great difficulty understanding the parable. Luke tells us that when the disciples inquired as to why Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds, they also inquired about the parable of

the sower: “they asked him what this parable meant” (Lk 8.9; “this parable” refers to the Sower in view in 8.4-8). In Mark’s account, Jesus indicates their lack of understanding in His question, “Do you not understand this parable...” [i.e., the sower, 4.13-20]. Therefore, we have to understand the parable in a way conditioned by the place of the disciples in the history of redemption. Their position relative to the realization of the ancient promises is at the heart of the difficulty they have in understanding, and this realization is the central point.

2B. What the central significance is

The word that signals realization is “mystery” (or secret). Again, for clarity sake, it is important to remember that a mystery is not some kind of esoteric knowledge that few can understand. It refers to what was hidden in promise and is now revealed in fulfillment. What does the sower sowing seed represent? The seed is the word of the kingdom (13.19; per Lk 8.11, the seed is the word of God). Sowing seed is preaching.

What, then, is so difficult about this parable? The difficult point is the astounding point that the kingdom of God hidden in His purposes and promises from the foundation of the world is now coming to realization in a sower sowing seed. That is astounding: the kingdom comes by words, by God’s word. The kingdom promised to Israel, whose history is a parable, is now present in the sowing of the word of God like sowing seed. The kingdom comes in a way unexpected by the multitudes and by the disciples. They like John the Baptist, expected sudden cataclysmic fiery judgment to accompany the coming of the kingdom (Mat 3.11-12). They looked for deliverance from the oppression of Rome. After the resurrection, the disciples continue to look for a national-political restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1.6).

Therefore, the parable points us to the conclusion that our Lord establishes the kingdom of God gradually by sowing seed, by preaching, rather than by outward and sudden force, whether that force is directly supernatural or through military or political means. The kingdom comes by a gradual sowing and reaping process. It comes by the preaching of the word of God, by the gospel of the kingdom.

That the kingdom comes by means of the gospel is both marvelous and puzzling. The Almighty God, Creator of the heavens and the earth, establishes His saving rule over the hearts of sinners by communicating a message to them, by giving His word to them. The kingdom does not come by the sword of David or the pomp and glory of Solomon. It comes by a Sower, sowing seed. The great king brings sinners under His saving rule by the word of God. His saving rule comes by the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of His disciples then and now (cf. Mat 10, until the Son of Man comes).

2A. Christ establishes His kingdom by preaching in spite of unhearing ears

The difficulty that presents itself is essentially this, “Can the kingdom come while those to whom it comes, and *for whom* it comes, close their eyes and stop their ears?” The Lord anticipates this difficulty, focuses our attention on it, and explains the purposes of God hidden in Israel’s history both past and present (cf. Mat. 13.34-35).

Thus, we can say that the central point of the different soils is not simply to itemize the fact of different responses to gospel preaching. Instead, the central point here is that given the various negative responses, and despite them, He nonetheless establishes the kingdom promised to Israel and purposed from the beginning. Moreover, He does so with a harvest-like abundance: **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 (13.23).**

In this light, we can now comment on the details of the parable per our Lord’s explanation. These are details regarding the diverse responses to the word of the kingdom *as it triumphs* in its coming.

1B. First, consider the negative responses (where the soil is not good)

There is the wayside hearer, the rocky ground hearer, and the thorn-thatch hearer.

1) The wayside hearer

Jesus tells us about the seed sown along the path (v. 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.**). There are two components to the description of the wayside hearer. He does not understand the word. He takes no interest in it, and not appreciating its value, he gives it no further reflection. The word of God goes in one ear and out the other. His response is parallel with the forgetful hearer of the book of James (1.22-25), who looks in the mirror of Scripture, then goes away, and forgets what it tells about himself. Thus, one component is that he does not understand and the other is that his memory of kingdom truth is weak, so weak, and so blank, that it is as if there were no seed ever sown there in his heart.

Surely, it is one of Satan's devices to rob us of kingdom truth by blocking the memory. Birds keep seed from taking root by snatching it away (Mat 13.4). How does the evil one (Mat 13.19) keep the seed of God's word from taking root in the heart? In general, he does it by deception. By immersing it in error and distortion, by mixing it with that which is false, he snatches the truth away from view. Thus, he will ask, "has God said?" to cast the word aside.

#### 2) The rocky ground hearer

In the case of the rocky ground hearer, the word appears to take root in the soil and grow, but the growth is superficial. He has joy in the things of God for a season, but when testing comes through opposition to the claims of Christ, he falls away.

**As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup> 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 (Mat 13.20-21).**

In other words, like the wayside hearer, this person has no depth of understanding, no firm conviction of the truth, and no deep-rooted commitment to discipleship. He reveals his true frame of mind by taking offense (stumbling or falling away). As long as his attachment to the gospel of the kingdom brings smooth sailing, everything is fine, fun, and joyful. However, when the stormy winds of suffering for the gospel arise, he departs. When he has to count the cost and pay the price of discipleship, he withdraws (he is parasitic, taking the good as an alien).

#### 3) The thorn-thatch hearer

Jesus says the thorn-thatch hearer is the person who is caught up in the cares of this world and led away captive by the deceitfulness of riches. **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 (Mat 13.22).** In other words, this kind of hearer worries too much about the things of life, what he will eat, drink, and possess. Worry may be a sign of greed, lust (Mk 4), pleasure seeking (Lk 8) or materialism, and those living under the spell of these things are living a lie; they are living in delusion. The cares of this world deceive them; lust for things, preoccupation with things, greed and materialism are deceptive and intoxicating. Thus, they have their place in Satan's schemes, which entice and we fend off by the shield of faith (cf. Eph. 6).

Intuitively, it should be evident that these three hearers are not necessarily three different people or three different categories of people. The same person may at one time be totally oblivious to the gospel (a wayside hearer) and at another time find kingdom truth interesting and even pleasant (a rocky ground hearer). He may take offense at the gospel (at its cost in self-denial and suffering) while at the same time his preoccupation with the cares of this world may choke the word like thorns choking seed until it becomes fruitless.

We might think here about pitfalls that go with hearing the gospel of the kingdom. There is the pitfall of the blocked mind where the word of God has no priority and receives no attention. There is the pitfall of the teased mind that holds the word of God for the pleasure it brings and only as long as personal pleasure is the fruit. There is the pitfall of the diverted mind where the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of money have center stage, and where the word of God is marginalized, and bears no fruit.

#### 2B. Now consider the positive response

The positive response to the word of the kingdom involves hearing, understanding, and fruit bearing: **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 (Mat 13.23). Mark cites the response of those who hear and accept the word (4.20); they are people of faith. According to Luke, our Lord calls the good soil the good heart (8.15, **they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience**). For me, the best way to understand the good heart is to put some basic facts from the Sermon on the Mount side by side. On one hand, no one is good in himself. Fallen man is an evil tree that brings forth evil fruit. On the other hand, the pure in heart that shall see God are those who come to the word of God with a deep acknowledgment of their spiritual poverty; they face all of God's demands knowing their failure to meet them, but holding fast to Christ (Mat 5.1-11). They are determined people who seize the kingdom of God as a prize (Mat 11.11-12)

Where does this determination come from in the first place for sinners who are corrupt from head to toe? How can we explain the existence of good soil and people who receive the word in honest and good hearts? The good soil is prepared soil. It refers to the triumph of God over the hearts of sinners by the power of His select, gracious, and saving work, giving knowledge to some and not giving it to others (Mat 13.11; placing the purpose of parables in between the parable of the Sower and its explanation guides our understanding of the good soil).

Applications of the unexpectedness but victorious work of Christ as a Sower

1) Preaching is foolishness to blind eyes.

So much lost seed suggests a weak word. Birds devour the word; the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in the heart. Rocks prevent solid rooting. Thorns choke the word so that it becomes fruitless. In the analogy of seed sowing, much seed is wasted.

How do we account for these things? Is God's word wasted?

The reality of unfruitful seed is part of what makes the parable a puzzle. How can it be that the kingdom of God Almighty appears so weak? How can the word of the sovereign God be snatched away, prevented, and choked?

To the eyes of our contemporary world, as in the ancient world, the kingdom of God comes in a way unexpected. Thus, the coming of the kingdom looks like a foolish failure to those who close their eyes and do not look, look again, look diligently, and look with repentance. The parables reveal the wisdom of God and they are foolishness to those who perish. This parable reveals the wisdom of God that comes to expression in preaching that those who are perishing count as foolishness.

2) To those who see, preaching is the power of God unto salvation to Jew first and to the Greek.

Do you understand that this is the way of the kingdom of God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth? If you do understand, it is because your eyes have been blessed, doubly so. Then your eyes have been blessed because *you live in the time of fulfillment*, you are the people upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Furthermore, you are blessed because the fact that you see means that *God has opened your eyes* and unstopped your ears. Otherwise, like our contemporaries, you would see but not perceive, hear but not understand. Your eyes would glaze over at the mention of spiritual things, at the call to live under the absolute and final authority of the risen Christ. In other words, seeing shows that your eyes are blessed:

**But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.** <sup>17</sup> Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it (Mat 13.16-17).

3) Preaching has a high place in the coming of the kingdom. The working of God among men is a process that extends over the ages and across the face of the earth. We have to wait on the Lord of creation to bring forth crops a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown (13.23). So much seed seems wasted, but the Lord multiplies what was sown in diverse and unexpected ways. As we preach, and as we witness to loved ones and friends, much of our sowing seems to be of no avail, to be in vain, and to be fruitless. However, time will tell, and in the end of the great historical process, God will bring an abundance of fruit in His people and to His glory.

We come here to the foundational hope that under girds all of our work. This is the ground of my hope for you in the context of my preaching. This is the ground of my hope in all of my work, and it is the surest ground of hope for you in all of your work. The Lord of the harvest will bring forth a plentiful harvest in the prepared soil of His elect people to whom He reveals the mysteries of His kingdom.

Thus, we have a strong encouragement here for me to preach and not become weary in well doing. This is a strong encouragement for you to attend to preaching, to place a strong priority on attentive listening to preaching. At bottom, we are back to the exhortation of 13.9, which prompts us to preach, listen, understand, and work at love and its fruits: He that has a voice let him speak. He that is a preacher let him preach. He that has ears let him hear, understand, turn, and cultivate good fruits for the glory of Jesus Messiah. Let us do so in light of the promise of multiplied fruit that is in fact ours though we must wait on the timing that the Sower has set for our full harvest. As Paul put it, your labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor 15.58); all that you do, every bit, little or large, will be fruitful in God's time. We may not see it now; much may seem wasted, but He will accomplish His will through the foolishness of preaching and listening to preaching.

**Let us fall down before the majesty of our God who is working all things after the counsel of His will; may we thank Him for the work He is doing in history in ways that appear foolish to the eyes of sinners, but that is marvelous in our eyes. To Him be all glory both now and forevermore, Amen.**