

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 07/16/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, July 16th

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

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The prodigal sower and the soils

This week's lectionary text opens the so-called Parabolic Discourse with the Parable of the Sower, a parable found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. This is a noted turning point in Jesus' ministry. In the early stages, Jesus taught in the Synagogues, the church of his day, but He faced a growing opposition from the religious leaders. This week's text marks the moment where Jesus takes His message from the Synagogues to the temple of the outdoors. The use of parables also marks a change in Jesus' teaching. Jesus' first parable and the shift in his teaching strategy and methods have profound implications for how we do church today.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 Commentary

From 11:1-12:50, there is a growing opposition to Jesus' ministry. In 12:1-45 there are several direct confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. Chapter 13 opens the third of five discourses or teaching blocks in Matthew. The third discourse (13:1-53) is often referred to as the Parabolic Discourse as it provides several parables that reveal the mysteries of the Messianic Kingdom. The identity of the Messiah is then revealed (13:54-16:20).

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.

The prominence of the Sea of Galilee in Jesus' ministry is so evident Matthew simply refers to it as "*the sea*." Nothing is specified about the crowd and its relationship to Jesus, but the disciples see themselves as distinct from the crowds (13:10). One can imagine how a horseshoe-shaped shore could act as an improvised amphitheater with Jesus speaking from the boat. The seated position is the typical position a Rabbi adopts when teaching.

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."

See the note below on parables. The image of a sower going out to sow a field would have been a familiar picture for the crowd. Barclay makes the point how Christ may have looked up from the boat and seen a sower at work in

the background as He taught the crowd.¹ As a modern audience familiar only with industrial farming, there are a few things we must understand about farming in first century Palestine to fully appreciate the narrative. Fields were typically in long strips separated by a right of way where people would walk between the fields. Here the soil would become compressed to make paths. Any seed sowed or blown here would not be able to germinate and end up as food for the birds. Since the region is characterized by a thin layer of earth covering limestone rock, some parts of the field may not have been as deep as others. In such rocky soil, the seed would initially germinate and grow faster due to the heat radiating from the rock at night. Without sufficient depth of soil to develop roots, the seedling would quickly die in the sun. Even though the sower would be sowing in a ploughed field, the sower has no way to tell what thorny weeds may be ready to spring back to life beneath the soil. Like anyone who has any experience of gardening knows, weeds are a perennial problem! Some seeds would thus grow among weeds. The good soil would be deep, sufficiently turned by the plough and without weeds. Seeds sown into this soil would bear a good harvest. The expression in v.9 suggests there is more to this story than a farming lesson.

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

[Verses 10-17 are not included in the lectionary.]

At the prompting of His disciples, Jesus explains the parable to them. The seed represents the Word of the Kingdom, or Gospel, and the different types of soils represent the hearers of the Word. Those with hardened hearts like the Pharisees and scribes are compared to the hardened path. Those who hear the Word and immediately respond with joy but quickly fall away at the slightest hardship are compared to the rocky soil. Those who hear the Word but continue to place worldly concerns over Kingdom concerns are compared to the soil contaminated with weeds that choke the seed. Finally, those that hear the word, understand it and bear abundant fruit are compared to the good soil.

A note about parables

A parable is a unique form of literature that is a true-to-life short narrative designed to teach a truth or answer a question² and thus there are rules which must govern their interpretation. Like allegories, parables are designed to teach spiritual truths by comparing something to spiritual reality. Unlike allegories, parables are realistic (in an allegory, Christ might be compared to a door, or vine). While both allegories and parables have a central theme, unlike allegories that may often teach many truths, parables make one principal point.³ While it is tempting to treat a parable as an allegory and find many meanings, we are not free to impose other meanings, particularly if Christ provides an explanation of the parable Himself. In the case of The Parable of the Sower, the distinction between parable and allegory is not as clear. Christ makes a spiritual application of practically every point of the

¹ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 67.

² Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 209.

³ *Ibid.*, 216.

story (consistent with an allegory). However, the context that follows this parable indicates there is a clear single theme: response to the Word of God. The other spiritual connections within this parable are to support this main theme and we must be careful not to abuse this parable.⁴

Reflections

The central theme of this parable suggests a better name choice would be The Parable of the Soils. When this parable is read in context, it is difficult not to ask oneself the question, "Which soil am I?" If you find yourself genuinely asking this question, it pretty much rules out the hardened soil of the path. Now the choice is narrowed to three. The acid test in this parable is those who are compared to the good soil hear the Word, understand the Word, AND bear abundant fruit. This pretty much cuts to the heart of the truth, as parables do, and for most of us it may be a humbling experience.

The responsibility of the sower is to sow seeds. The sower in this parable is in the field sowing seeds, not judging where the seeds will fall. The sower is not planting one seed in a pot then transferring the seedling to the field, He is sowing the seeds abundantly. We are challenged again to ask, "Am I sowing the seeds of the Gospel abundantly in my words and actions?" To what extent might we be ignoring parts of our field?

Another point to reflect on in this week's text is not so much the teaching as a noun but the teaching as a verb. As the door of the synagogues closed, Jesus found a new and creative way to sow the seed - He went directly to the people. When Jesus was confronted with a large audience on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he used His surroundings to best effect. He got in a boat and preached away from the shore in what would have been a natural auditorium. The traditional ways of doing things did not limit Jesus' ministry.

To continue using the imagery of this parable, historically the local church has played the role of a greenhouse where the growing seeds are nurtured. Many of our greenhouses lie abandoned as church attendance has fallen through the floor. Despite this radically changing landscape, we are holding onto cultivation practices of a bygone era. A church simply being open is no longer enough. We need more than just greenhouses. Jesus was quick to adopt new methods to ensure His ministry was effective. He was not tied to the Synagogues. He took the Word to the people. Just as the sower must go to the field to sow, the local church must do more sowing.

Application

- Which soil type are you?
- How are you sowing seeds of the Gospel through your life?
- How are you defining Kingdom fruit?
- In what ways must the evangelism practices of the local church change?
- What aspects of church might be resisting the needed changes?

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⁴ McQuilkin, 216.