

The Parable of the Sower
Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8

Introduction

1. I'm going to start this morning with the Great Parable Debate:
 - a. When Dustin and I were discussing our parable for this morning, I was apparently causing him some distress because I kept referring to it as the Parable of the Sower
 - b. Apparently, he's always referred to it as the Parable of the Soils
 - c. So, the obvious question is, Who's right? Is it the Parable of the Sower or the Parable of the Soils?
 - d. To Dustin's credit, he's got some rather well-known scholars on his side, including John MacArthur, so it may SEEM like he's right
 - e. However, in Matthew 13:18 Jesus said, "**Hear then the parable of the sower**" so it appears that Jesus is on my side.
 - f. Sorry, Dustin <grin>
2. This parable is one of the longest, and most complex parables Jesus told, and it's also one of the few for which we actually have Jesus' explanation of the parable:
 - a. Mark 4:34 informs us that Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds but then explained them privately to His disciples
 - b. Only three of these explanations are recorded in the Bible: the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Wheat and Tares (also from Matthew 13), and the Parable of the Heart (Matthew 15)
 - c. There's generally enough in the context surrounding the parables to interpret them accurately, but as you can imagine it certainly helps to have Jesus' explanation

A. The Context

1. This parable is recorded in Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8, which occurred at the mid-point in Jesus' earthly ministry, and it was at a critical time:
 - a. As I noted a few weeks ago, as opposition against Him increased, Jesus began to use parables more frequently and His parables became more complex
 - b. Just prior to this, in Matthew 11, Jesus had pronounced judgment against the cities He had done miracles in because they refused to repent (Matthew 11:20-24)
 - c. In chapter 12 Matthew records four different confrontations by the Pharisees that occur in a single day:
 - 1) One was over His disciples violating their religious traditions
 - 2) Another was over healing on the Sabbath
 - 3) In yet another they accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul
 - 4) In the fourth and final confrontation they demanded to see a sign from Him
 - d. So, the context leading up to this parable is that Jesus had been preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God for a year and a half, but it mostly fell on deaf ears:
 - 1) Most failed to repent
 - 2) Others, like the religious leaders, aggressively opposed Him

2. It was these events that led up to Jesus telling a series of ten different parables that day, all regarding the kingdom of God:
 - a. The first six were told to the crowds, but the final four were spoken mainly to the disciples
 - b. The first, the parable of the sower which we'll examine today, focuses on how one enters into the kingdom of God
 - c. Parables 2 through six, and #9, focus mainly on how the kingdom of God grows
 - d. And three of the last four focused mainly on recognizing the value or worth of God's kingdom and/or the cost of discipleship

B. The Parable (READ Matthew 13:1-9)

1. Jesus' parables were almost always examples taken from real life, and this one is no different
2. It depicts a farmer who goes out into his field to sow seed, but in order to understand the parable we need to know something about farming in Israel during the first century:
 - a. First, farm fields were generally bordered by walking paths rather than fences like we see today; these were hard, compacted soil on which nothing could obviously grow
 - b. Second, the land of Israel is made up of sedimentary rock, mostly limestone but also sandstone, chalk and granite:
 - 1) Due to bending and folding of the rock, in some areas the rock is fully exposed and farming isn't an option
 - 2) In other areas the limestone is covered with varying depths of soil, some suitable for growing healthy crops and others not so much
 - c. Third, due to being a Mediterranean and partly desert country, thorny plants are also common; today there are over 70 species of thistles, brambles and briars and these are a constant threat farmers have to battle to protect their crops
 - d. Finally, seed was usually scattered by hand and then plowed under to cover it and protect it from the birds
3. As the farmer sowed the seed, it fell on four different types of ground, and as a result there were four different results:
 - a. V. 4: Some of it fell "**beside the road**":
 - 1) This refers to the hard, compacted soil that made up the walking paths that separated the fields, and seed would obviously have been left exposed
 - 2) As a result, the birds came and ate it up
 - b. Vs. 5-6: Some of it fell "**on the rock places**":
 - 1) These weren't places that had a lot of rocks mixed in with the soil, but areas where "**they did not have much soil**" to adequately cover the limestone
 - 2) There was enough soil for the seeds to germinate, so they "**immediately sprang up**" but there wasn't enough soil to establish healthy roots
 - 3) As a result, when the sun came out the young seedlings were scorched and withered away
 - c. V. 7: Other seed fell "**among the thorns**":
 - 1) This likely means that the seed fell in areas where thorns were prone to grow because Jesus said the "thorns came up..." indicating they came up after the seed was sown and started to grow

The section on the side of the house that keeps growing prickly weeds every year no matter how many times we pull them or treat for them...EVERY year!

- 2) As a result of the **“thorns came up and choked them [the plants] out”**

- d. V. 8: The last bit of seed fell **“on good soil”**:
 - 1) This would be soil that is rich with nutrients and deep enough for growing healthy, deep roots
 - 2) As a result, these seeds **“yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty”**

4. The last thing I would like to point out before we move on to Jesus’ explanation of the parable, is what He said in v. 9: **“He who has ears, let him hear.”**
 - a. The Gospels record Jesus using this phrase repeatedly when teaching
 - b. He also used it with each of the seven churches in the book of Revelation
 - c. I was even used by God in the Old Testament on two occasions (Jeremiah 20:16; Ezekiel 3:27)
 - d. The NET seems to capture the nuance of this phrase better than most English translations (and it does this in almost every instance): **“If anyone has an ear, he had better listen!”**

C. The Explanation (Matthew 13:18-23; Mark 4:13-25)

1. Before we get to Jesus’ explanation of the parable, we need to review what happened between telling the parable and explaining it (Matthew 13:10-17):
 - a. The disciples asked Jesus why he spoke to the crowds in parables
 - b. Jesus’ response was that it had been granted to them (the disciples) to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but it had not been granted to the crowds
 - c. Just as Isaiah had foretold, much of Israel had become hard-hearted, hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving
 - d. As a result, those who had seen, and heard, and understood would be given more to see, hear and understand, but those who had not would have what little they did have taken away
 - e. The disciples fell into the former category—their eyes had seen and their ears heard what many of the Old Testament prophets and righteous men had desired to see
 - f. Therefore, Jesus took the time with them to teach them more plainly at times, and to explain the parables to them
 - g. In fact, this is seen in v. 18 when He starts His explanation: “Here then the parable of the sower”:
 - 1) Every English translation except the CSB leaves out an important word, though I’m not sure why
 - 2) The Greek text literally reads, **“You, then, listen to the parable of the sower”**
 - 3) The emphasis stands out when we read vs. 17 and 18 together: **“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. YOU, THEN, listen to the parable of the sower.”**

2. Jesus explained that the parable was a description of the different ways people responded—and would continue to respond—to what He taught about the kingdom of heaven:
 - a. READ Matthew 13:19:
 - 1) The seed sown beside the path represents the person who heard what Jesus taught about the kingdom but didn't understand it
 - 2) Based on Jesus' use of the imperative earlier (he who has ears, let him hear) indicates that this wasn't a matter of not being able to understand, but rather an unwillingness to understand
 - 3) This person's heart was like that of the hard, compact ground of the path on which the farmer's seed fell
 - 4) As a result, the evil one, Satan, would come and snatch the seed away
 - b. READ Matthew 13:20-21:
 - 1) The seed sown on the rocky soil represents the person who heard what Jesus taught about the kingdom, and immediately responded to it with joy
 - 2) However, as soon as he faced any affliction or persecution over it, he immediately fell away because he never put down any roots
 - 3) He was just like the seed that shriveled up in the heat
 - c. READ Matthew 13:22:
 - 1) The seed sown among the thorns represents the person who, like the previous person, seemed to have a positive response to what Jesus taught
 - 2) However, **"the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth"** choked off the Word and it became unfruitful in his life; Luke records this as the **"worries and riches and pleasures of this life"** (Luke 8:15)
 - 3) We have an example of this in the rich ruler who came to Jesus and asked Him how to inherit eternal life (recorded in all three Gospels; READ Mark 10:17-27):
 - a) Luke records that this man was a ruler with an extreme amount of money and property
 - b) He was obviously moved by what he heard Jesus teach because he not only RAN to Him, but KNELT before Him
 - c) He seemed to recognize that Jesus had the answer to inheriting eternal life, but there was one thing standing in his way of receiving it: he valued his earthly wealth and possession more than devotion to Jesus
 - d) As a result, the words he heard from Jesus were unfruitful
 - d. READ Matthew 13:23:
 - 1) The seed that was sown on good soil represents the person who heard what Jesus taught about the kingdom, understood it, and bore fruit
 - 2) Luke records this as the person who had **"heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance"** (Luke 8:15)
 - 3) And not just a little fruit: Jesus said fruit that is **"a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty"** fold which for a crop in the ANE would have been a massive return on investment
 - 4) This harkens back to the Parable of the Vine and Branches from a few weeks ago: genuine disciples are those who bear fruit, persevere, and continue to abide in Christ

D. The Takeaways

1. In my introduction I was a little hard on Dustin and his buddy, John MacArthur, because in all honesty this parable isn't as much about the sower or the seed as it is about the different kinds of soil:
 - a. This doesn't mean the sower isn't important; The sower in this parable is obviously either God the Father or Jesus (or both) and there would obviously be no crop or fruit without them
 - b. The seed is also important because it represents the Word of God, and likewise there would also be no crop or fruit without it

2. However, there really is only one variable in this parable and it's the type of soil:
 - a. The same farmer sows the same seed in all four soil types, but only one produces fruit
 - b. The hard, compact ground produces nothing
 - c. The rocky and thorny soils initially produce something, but it doesn't last and is quickly burned up or choked out without producing fruit
 - d. It's only the good soil that produces fruit—and it produces a ton of it!

3. Three takeaways:
 - a. How one responds to the Gospel and God's Word, and subsequently enters into the kingdom of God, is a matter of the heart:
 - 1) Ephesians 4:18 says that the unsaved are **"darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart, and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness."**
 - 2) Romans 2:5 says of the unsaved, **"but because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God"**
 - 3) A hard, stubborn, unrepentant, and unbelieving heart is the greatest obstacle to hearing and understanding the good news of the Gospel
 - 4) It's why the author of Hebrews warned his fellow Jews to whom he had just preached the Gospel, **"Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God."**
 - b. The only way to address a hard heart is with the Word of God:
 - 1) In this parable, it's the Word of God that is sown into the soil (in fact, v. 19 says it was sown into the man's heart)
 - 2) Psalm 19 says the Word of God has the power to restore the soul, make the simple minded wise, rejoice the heart, enlighten the eyes, discern errors and acquit of hidden faults
 - 3) Hebrews 4:12 say: **"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."**
 - 4) Paul wrote that he wasn't ashamed to preach the Gospel because **"it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..."** (Romans 1:16)
 - c. Genuine faith requires a response from the whole-heart:
 - 1) In this parable, the second and third persons only respond half-heartedly; the first was only an emotional response while the second was more interested in worldly wealth and possessions than devotion to Jesus

- 2) According to Luke's account, only the fourth person in this parable responded from an **"honest and good heart"**
- 3) This is akin to what the author of Hebrews wrote (Hebrews 10:22): **"Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water"**
- 4) It's why Jesus repeated what the Law stated: **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind"** (Mathew 22:37)