

Parable of the Soils—Matt. 13, Mark 4, Luke 8

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Image of the Sower Parable (Photo credit: Wikipedia)[/caption]

Try to imagine the scene in which Jesus taught the Parable of the Sower, the Seeds, and the Soils. In Matt.11-12, the increasing strong opposition to Jesus and His message reached such a boiling point that it was clear that no matter how awesome His teaching was, no matter how many miracles He did, and no matter how many prophecies He fulfilled, the religious leaders of Israel were rejecting Him with great hostility. It reached the point of no return in Matt. 12:24 when the Pharisees attributed His miracles to Satan. Jesus made it clear that their unbelief was irretrievable when He responded that they had committed the unforgiveable sin of unbelief. Any further signs that Jesus did, only further hardened their hearts against Him. This was clear in Matt.12:38 when they asked Him for a sign (miracle), but He refused. Naturally Jesus' disciples must have been shocked at all this opposition. Since Jesus was the Son of God and He was teaching God's Word, why were all the people responding in so many different ways?

In His first sermon on the mount, Jesus' conclusion to the crowd was that it is not enough to just hear His words and like them. They must take His Word to heart. Jesus' words were like seed. They were creative, producing new life to anyone who took them to heart. Jesus' view of His words as life giving seed, are echoed throughout the New Testament. James 1:21 says "accept the word planted in you, which can save your life". 1 Peter 1:23 says "you have been born spiritually not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and enduring Word of God". And Colossians 1:5-6, "all over the world the gospel is bearing fruit and growing".

Why weren't all people accepting and believing in Jesus and His good news? Why were the priests and religious leaders rejecting Him? Why did the crowds react emotionally to His teaching, but their lives were not changed? One reason is that Jesus depended not on military force or supernatural power to force the kingdom on to people. Instead, Jesus depended on the Word of God, the seed of the kingdom as depicted in the Parable of the Soils. Jesus called them to believe, but did not force the belief. He came to serve and to conquer by love and personal sacrifice, not by force. Therefore the receptivity of a person's heart determined whether they would believe in Him and take His words to heart. If they would take His words to heart, the "seed" would grow within them and be productive. The question then was, "Would the seed of the gospel fall on cultivated soft hearts, or on hard rocky hearts? Would the people focus on His Words, or were they too distracted by the worries and materialistic concerns of the world?"

Context of the Parable of the Soils in Matthew 13:1-23

Previously, that same day, Jesus had the confrontation with the Pharisees who attributed the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan, and said Jesus got His power from Satan. After Jesus refused to give them any more signs, He condemned them. At the end of His showdown with the religious leaders, His mother and brothers came and tried to "take custody" of Him because "He has lost His senses" (Mark 3:21, 31-35). All parents and siblings usually want their relatives to be law abiding and to conform to all the traditions of society and religion, but Jesus was in opposition to the hypocrisy of the establishment. John 7:5 tells us that "not even His brothers were believing in him". How did He explain all the different reactions to the same message and same miracles? Matthew 13 is a pivot in Jesus' ministry. Up until now, Jesus had been speaking relatively straightforward and clear, but in Matthew 13 Jesus began speaking in cryptic parables. Naturally, His true followers wanted an interpretation, but the religious leaders were deaf to His message. The crowds reacted emotionally at first, but when opposition or the realities of all their problems arose they fell away. Yet His closest disciples took His teaching to heart, their lives were changed and they were serving the Lord. Since Jesus is the same for everyone, and His message was the same for everyone, why were there different responses? Jesus answered that question with the Parable of the Soils.

Parable of the Sower, the Seed, and the Soils, Matthew 13:1-9

The simplest definition of the parables Jesus taught is that they were earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. These were short fictitious stories about things everyone understood to illustrate spiritual truth they did not understand. As Jesus taught His message about the Kingdom of God, He saw four basic responses—hard, superficial, distracted, and receptive. To illustrate this, He used an agricultural story they were familiar with. The sower represents Jesus or anyone preaching the gospel. The seed represents the Word of God, and the soils represent the receptivity of the human heart.

After His confrontation with the religious leaders, Jesus walked down to the lake (the Sea of Galilee) to teach the great crowd that was following Him. The entire northern shore rose up like a natural amphitheater, so imagine the crowds all sitting on the hill with Jesus in a boat just off the shore looking up at them. His voice would have been easily heard by the crowd. He probably saw in the distance a farmer walking through a plowed field with a bag hanging on his neck casting out seed indiscriminately. He would sow all the way to the edges of the field and then back. Today, farmers have the finest tractors, plows and combines, and therefore all the soil in the field is properly cultivated, but in Jesus day they did it all by hand. The

farmer in the parable does not have the tools to properly prepare the field for seed. With the naked eye, he can't see what is just below the surface. He simply reaches into his bag, takes the seed and flings it in every direction. Some of the seed falls on the hardpan path that runs through the field. Some of the seed falls on soil that has solid rock a few inches below the surface, and some of the seed falls on soil that has the seeds of weeds, thorns, and thistles that will grow up with it. These are all unproductive soils, but some of the seed falls on "good soil" and when it grows to maturity it produces fruit. Then Jesus emphasized the importance of hearing and responding to His words by saying, "He who has ears, let him hear".

Jesus' Disciples Have Questions

In Matt.13:10, His disciples ask why He is suddenly speaking in cryptic parables? Then in Mark 4:10s version of the same story, they ask Him to give a detailed explanation of the parable. Therefore, I think this is the first parable that He taught, except for the parabolic metaphorical expressions He used. The religious leaders had fully rejected Him, so now there is a pivot away from the nation to believing individuals. Now Jesus would teach in stories that would be explained to believers, but would be concealed from those who rejected Him. Their hearts were so hard that any revelation from God would just further harden them against the truth. You can follow the growing, more desperate opposition progressing throughout the Gospels until it finally erupts into His arrest and crucifixion. The Pharisees would hear the truth, but not understand it or believe in it because their hearts were already hardened against it. Nevertheless, the truth was given to them and thus held them accountable. The principle here is that the condition of one's heart determines whether there is any reception of the truth.

The Four Soils = the Four Kinds of Human Hearts

In Matt.13:19-23, Jesus explained the parable to His disciples. The sower is the same, and the seed is the same, but there were four kinds of soils. Jesus preached the Word of God to everyone, but there were four different reactions. The sower is Jesus, the seed is the gospel, and the soils represent the human heart. The seed that fell on the hard path did not penetrate, and was eaten up by birds. This was just like Jesus' preaching to the religious leaders whose hearts were so hard that the truth could not penetrate, and "the evil one" snatches it away. Without knowing it, they were actually in league with the adversary of God when they rejected God's Son. The second soil had bedrock just below the surface so that the seed could quickly sprout, but could grow no roots and withered. These were people with shallow hearts who may respond emotionally, but any kind of opposition caused them to fall away. This was just like the crowds during Palm Sunday that welcomed Jesus, but after He was arrested they fell away. The third soil has weeds and thorns that grow with the seed, and then choke it out. This soil represents the infested heart that hears the Word of God and loves it and responds to it, but the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word out, and there is no fruit. This is all the people (and they may be believers) who believe the Word, but they have a divided heart with irreconcilable loyalties. The problems of life and the promise of riches crowd out the truth. Mark 4 adds "desires", and Luke 8 adds "pleasures". There is a competition for your attention, loyalty, thinking, passion, and interest between God's Word and all the distractions in the world. As Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters". Riches, luxury, power, prestige, and pursuit of pleasure (entertainment) have a very seductive effect.

What does the “fruit” in the parable represent? The fourth soil is the person who hears the Word, understands and believes it, and since it has their undivided loyalty, they bear much fruit. Does the fruit represent good attitudes (Gal.5:22), or good works (Jn.15:4-5), or evangelism (Matt.7:14-20), or lifestyle (Eph.5:9)? YES to all of those! Fruit is a metaphor that is used for all those things in the New Testament.

Jesus Challenges His Audience

When He told the parable to the crowd in Matthew 13:3-9, Jesus ended it with a challenge, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”. Jesus was challenging that audience as well as us—WHAT KIND OF HEARERS ARE YOU? Is your hearing impaired by your secular worldly busy lives? Does your selfish pursuit of stuff, your desire for pleasures, and all the perceived problems in life keep you from bearing fruit? Even though all of our sins were forgiven at the cross, God is going to hold believers accountable for their spiritual productivity. In 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, Paul wrote that the foundation for our lives is Jesus Christ, and now the challenge is what we will build on that foundation. It’s as if Jesus built a foundation that could support the highest building, and the question is, “Will you build a shack or a skyscraper?”

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