

The Parable of the Sower

📖 Matthew 13:4-9, 18-23

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Last time we introduced Matthew 13, the third discourse in Matthew's Gospel, the Discourse on Kingdom Parables. At this time Jesus suddenly began to teach extensively in parables. The reason in context is that generation's rejection of the Messiah as expressed by the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. We need to keep that sin in mind because after the Pharisees committed that sin and Jesus refuted it as illogical He gave the people an opportunity to separate from the Pharisees and follow Him or not. It's the divide in that generation that really gives rise to His parabolic teaching. Anyone who was not separating from the Pharisees was not going to get further understanding but would be struck spiritually blind and deaf. This is the essential message of the parable of the sower.

The setting of the discourse is given in 13:1. We read that on "that day," the very day of the blasphemy of the Spirit "Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea."¹ In 13:2 large crowds came to Him so that He got in a boat in order to create some space between Himself and the crowds standing on the beach and He sat down in order to instruct them. In 13:3, "He spoke many things to them in parables." He had used parables before but this was an extensive use of parables. What's a parable? A parable is a story well-known from life and true to life that is cast alongside a theological truth in order to illustrate one major point of comparison between the two. On this day He spoke eight parables. I've given you a chart outlining the eight parables. The first four parables were spoken in public to the crowds and afterward Jesus went into a house and that is when His disciples asked in 13:10, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" They had noticed a distinct shift in His teaching style. Before He had spoken plainly, now He spoke in parables. He then answered their question in 13:12 and note the contrast between "you" and "them." "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." "You" refers to His disciples and the twelve, the group that would get more understanding about the newly revealed secrets of the kingdom, but "them," the crowds, were the group that would not get more revelation and understanding about the kingdom. So His purpose in speaking in parables was to reveal kingdom truths to His disciples and conceal it from the crowds. In 13:12 Jesus explains that "whoever has" understanding of the significance of the kingdom's nearness, "to him" more understanding "shall be given, and he will have an abundance," an abundance of understanding which corresponds to the fruit

in verse 23. The abundance is a temporal reward of more understanding of the kingdom program. But by contrast He says, "whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him." Jesus is issuing an immediate temporal discipline for those who did not understand the significance of the kingdom's nearness. By taking what they have away is meant that they will have less understanding than they had before since they will be spiritually blinded and deafened. "Therefore," in 13:13 gives a causal explanation for this temporal judgment. "Therefore, I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." That generation had tremendous revelation, the greatest revelation any generation had ever seen; greater than that seen by the generation of Moses and Joshua and greater than that seen by the generation of Elijah and Elisha and yet they did not understand the significance of what they saw and what they heard and consequently they were being struck blind such that they would hear the parables but not understand the parables. In 13:14 this was to fulfill prophecy; "in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says that they would keep on hearing but not understanding and they would keep on seeing but not perceiving." In 13:15 the reason is set forth that their hearts had become spiritually dull and their ears scarcely heard and further they closed their eyes. When the kingdom came near and the King came they did not want to see His magnificence, otherwise, if they had seen Jesus says they would have heard and understood and returned to Him and He would have healed them. By contrast, in 13:16, "blessed are your eyes, because they see and your ears, because they hear." So there is a distinct division in that generation between the crowds who did not understand the significance of the King and His kingdom and His disciples who did understand. Henceforth, only those who heard and understood the significance are going to get further understanding of the kingdom program. In 13:17 He explains just how blessed they were above all generations. "For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." So what His disciples had seen and heard was unique and more importantly, their response to what they had seen and heard was that they understood and therefore followed after the King. The results were that they would enjoy the temporal reward of more understanding. This would help them clarify the mystery truths of the interadvent age. It is critically important to understand that mystery truths are truths of the kingdom that had been hidden in God from all eternity but were now to be revealed in parables. In other words, the mysteries of the kingdom were not a subject of OT revelation about the kingdom. All the OT taught was that the King would come and He would establish His kingdom on earth. The new truths relate to the fact that now it is revealed that the King would come and in light of His rejection He would leave and an interadvent age would intervene which is not the kingdom or a new form of the kingdom but rather a postponement of the kingdom. Only when a generation of Israel receives Jesus as the King and calls on Him to be saved will He come and establish the kingdom. So the big point is that the kingdom had been offered to that generation of Israel but they rejected it because they were not spiritually prepared to understand the significance.

Now this introduces us to and sets us up to understand the parable of the sower which is a very misunderstood parable. It is important to point out at this time that the disciples did understand it. In Mark 4:13 Jesus asked His

disciples about the parable of the sower saying, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?" And in Matt 13:51 Jesus asked them, "Have you understood all these things? They said to Him, "Yes." So the disciples understood the parable of the sower and hence they understood all the parables. So whatever the parables are teaching they understood and that was the purpose of Him speaking in parables; that His disciples get further understanding whereas the crowds would not understand. As Jesus noted, then, understanding this first parable is important. It is important for two reasons. First, because it is introductory to the others and not a kingdom parable. Walvoord says, "The first paragraph does not have the precise formula of the later paragraphs, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto," but is, rather, an introductory parable, serving as a basis for all that follows."² Second, because Jesus interprets it for the disciples so that we have clear explanation of this parable given to us and we are not left to our own imagination. Contextually the key to interpreting the parable is that it relates to the lack of preparedness of the vast majority of Israel and thus their lack of understanding. They heard but they did not understand the significance of the proclamation that the kingdom was at hand and they needed to repent. Because they did not understand the significance of this they would not receive further understanding but would be blinded. The word understanding is the key to the parable. Toussaint says, "The four soils represent four kinds of receptions given to the seed. The seed is the word of the kingdom (verse 19). The fruit spoken of in verse twenty-three is more revelation and understanding concerning the kingdom."³ Only the fourth group would get more understanding of the kingdom. This is absolutely fundamental to proper interpretation and with so many other prevalent interpretations it requires discipline to keep the concept of understanding in the forefront of your mind throughout.

Let's read the parable in 13:3. **Behold, the sower went out to sow; ⁴and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. ⁸And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. ⁹He who has ears, let him hear."** Let's make some observations. The first step in Bible study is always observation. First, what do we see? A sower sowing seed. This was a familiar sight in Israel. McGee says, "Sowing seed was a familiar sight in Palestine. They would sort of scratch the surface of the ground with a very crude plow. Sometimes they didn't even do that much. Then the sower would go out and fling the seeds upon the earth."⁴ So what we see is an imagery that was well-known from everyday life. This is exactly in line with a parable. Second, what is different as the sower sows the seed? The sower is not different. He's always the same. The seed is not different. It's always the same. What is different? The location where the seed falls. I prefer not to refer to them as soils because really only the last one is referred to as soil. The first fell where? Beside the road. The second fell where? On rocky places. The third fell where? On a thorny area. And the fourth? On good soil. That is an important observation. Third, which location was prepared

to receive the seed so that it yielded fruit? Only one of the locations, the good soil was prepared to receive the seed such that it grew to yield fruit.

These are just observations and it is this last observation that is the most important. You can focus on other places, such as three receiving the seed in some sense, but that is not appropriate. Why is that not appropriate? Why is that a misguided question? Because of what happens next in the context. What is next in the context? Who will get understanding vs. who will not! You the disciples vs. they the crowds. Verse 11, "to you it has been granted to know...to them it has not been granted." Verse 12, "whoever has, to him more shall be given...but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him," speaking of understanding. Verses 13, 14 and 15, they will keep on hearing but not understanding but verses 16-17, you are blessed because you see and hear and you are going to get more understanding. It's the context that points up that the big difference is between the three locations that did not yield fruit and the last location that did. I'm jumping ahead here but basically the crowds are represented by the first three locations where seed fell and these are their three basic responses but the bottom line is none of the three yielded fruit, representative of further understanding, and the disciples are represented by the last location, the good soil which did yield fruit, representing further understanding, and which they all said they did understand later in verse 51 which locks in the interpretation. So focusing on other observations such as the fact that three locations received the seed has significance but it detracts from Jesus' primary interest which is the one location that was prepared to receive the seed such that it grew to yield fruit and this refers to His disciples. Every other location refers to part of the crowds.

But that's all just me so let's let Jesus interpret His own parable starting in 13:18. Note how he begins with the concept of understanding. **Hear then the parable of the sower.** This is so important that you pick up on the word **Hear** because it is referring to hearing with understanding. Glance back up to verse 9 where he finished the parable when He gave it to the crowds. What did He say? "He who has ears, let him hear."⁵ Of course, some had ears to hear but most did not. That is the entire point. Those who had ears to understand. And in 13:18 Jesus is now in private and saying to His disciples "Hear" with understanding **the parable of the sower.** He wants them to understand this parable. They do have ears to hear it. Also we note that **the parable of the sower** is Jesus' title for the parable even though many people refer to this as the parable of the four soils. But it's not, it's the parable of the sower and that may be an important observation just so we don't get too focused on the four locations, even though we know that a lot of attention is given to the four locations. What hardly anyone gives attention to is the **sower.** But that's His title for the parable; **the parable of the sower.**

Who is **the sower?** We have only two aids in identifying **the sower.** First, the image of verse 3 where we see a "sower going out to sow." Our first help is the picture of a man going out into a field and flinging seed. Second, the interpretation of the seed in verse 19 as **the word of the kingdom.** Mark 4:14 refers to it merely as "the word" and Luke 8:11 as "the word of God." These are all accurate descriptions but the most specific description is Matthew's, **the word of the kingdom.** Understanding that the seed represents **the word of the kingdom** is

vital to the interpretation of the parable. The seed is not the gospel in the sense of Christ's death and resurrection. That certainly had not happened yet and is not being predicted here.⁶ If anything it is the gospel of the kingdom. The gospel of the kingdom is the message that had already been proclaimed to Israel in Matthew 3-12. So what is **the word of the kingdom**? It is the message "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." So the seed represents the proclamation of the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

If that is what the seed represents then who does **the sower** represent? Those who proclaimed that message. Who proclaimed that message? John the Baptizer proclaimed it in Matt 3:2, Jesus proclaimed it in Matt 4:17, et. al., and the Twelve were sent out to proclaim it in Matt 10:7. Who did they all proclaim it to? "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The sowers are John the Baptizer, Jesus and the Twelve. The field where they flung the seed was the house of Israel only. The parable is thus about the historic proclamation of the kingdom's nearness to Israel and not predictive of responses to the gospel by Samaritans or Gentiles in the coming Church age. Toussaint agrees saying, "This interpretation fits the context of the parabolic instruction. The word of the kingdom had been proclaimed to Israel by John, by Jesus, and by the disciples. This parable notes the blindness and dullness of Israel's response to this proclamation."⁷ Of course, it also notes the good eyesight of those in Israel who responded positively to the kingdom message when it was proclaimed.

So what is **the parable of the sower** about? It's about how the nation Israel responded when John, Jesus and the Twelve went out and preached "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." What happened was it fell on Jews who had four different degrees of preparedness to understand the significance of that message and only the well prepared group understood and would get further understanding. So is the parable really any different than what Jesus just taught in vv. 10-17? That to you, the disciples, it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom but to them, the crowds, it would not be granted? No, it's not really different at all. It's just giving a little more specification about the crowds by dividing them up according to their three different degrees of preparedness to hear with understanding and the three reasons ultimately break out into the world, the flesh and the devil. That's for later but I'm trying to tantalize you now into this interpretation and how only the last location where the message of the kingdom fell actually was prepared to understand the significance of that message and because of that resisted the world, the flesh and the devil such that they would be granted further understanding of the kingdom program. And this interpretation is confirmed later when in verse 51 Jesus asks His disciples privately, "Have you understood all these things?" And they said to Him, "Yes." Signifying that they had gained further understanding, they are the fourth soil. They are the only group among Israel that would get further understanding because they were the only group that was prepared to receive the message of the kingdom.

Now let's look at the four locations where the seed fell. Again, they are not really four soils but four locations. The first location is in 13:19. **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 the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. So the first location was **beside the road**. The ones **beside the road** represent Israelites whose hearts were like a hard compacted surface and so when they heard the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," Jesus says they did **not understand** the message. They were already so spiritually blind that they did **not understand** the significance of the message that the kingdom was on the verge of breaking into history and they needed to repent. So they heard it but were hardened and did not understand it. It just sat there and as a consequence Jesus says **the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart**. The **evil one**, of course, is Satan and his minions, in the parable he and his are represented by the birds of the air that ate up the seed. So Satan and his demons know that it's possible for a Jew's heart to soften so the seed sinks in and they understand but to avoid that possibility they **come and snatch away** the message so that the opportunity to understand it is taken **away**. Luke 8:12 says "the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved." This is often taken to mean that the first group are unbelievers. While this is certainly true that is not the meaning of the text. The meaning is that the devil removed the message from their thinking so that they would not believe that the kingdom was near because if they did it could lead to their being saved from the judgment coming on that generation (also cf Acts 2:40). Obviously believing the message that the kingdom of heaven is at hand was preparatory for believing in the King. Who could this location refer to? Could it be the Pharisees and Herodians? Could be. I don't want to strictly identify each group but they do fit the bill. From the start these groups did not receive the message of the kingdom's nearness. Thus, the first location where the message of the kingdom fell were Israelites who were so hardened that they had no preparedness to receive the message of the kingdom and consequently when they heard it they did not understand it. Therefore Satan and his minions took away any further opportunity by removing the message from their minds. That way when the King came they would certainly not believe in Him. This part of Israel firmly rejected and would not get further understanding of the kingdom.

The second location where seed fell is in 13:20. **The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.** The second location was **rocky places**. The ones who are **rocky places** represent Israelites whose hearts were mostly hard like stones with not much soil mixed in because the parable in verse 5 says "they did not have much soil" and "they had no depth of soil." The point is they lacked adequate preparedness to understand the implications of the message. Jesus says, **this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy**. He was an Israelite who heard the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" and immediately received that message **with** excitement. He understood that the kingdom was the time when Israel would be restored from captivity to Gentile kingdoms and so his first response to that message was **joy**. However, Jesus says, **yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary**. Because their hearts were mostly stone with only a little preparation they eventually fell away. Luke 8:13 says "they believe for a while."

This has led Lordship commentators to conclude that they had a false faith and so were never saved and Free Grace commentators to conclude that they are true believers because they did believe. While I believe that believing for even a moment is sufficient to be saved, neither of these is really the point in the context. The real question is "What did they believe for a while?" They believed what the seed represents, which is that the kingdom was at hand. It does not say that they believed in the King. The King is represented among the sower. Therefore what this says is that they believed for a while that the kingdom was near but for reasons explained later in the verse they stopped believing the kingdom message. Could these be those who initially responded to John the Baptizer's message and followed him but when John pointed to Jesus as the King they never went after Him? It's possible. There are still disciples of John in Matt 9:14 who came to Him asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" Clearly they had believed the message that John preached, that the kingdom was near, but they had not believed that Jesus was the King, otherwise they would have been Jesus' disciples, not John's. On another occasion we see disciples of John in Matt 11:2 while John was in prison. It says that John "sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" In my thinking John was not wondering for himself whether Jesus was the King but he was asking for the benefit of his own disciples. The reason is they should no longer be his disciples, they should be Jesus' disciples. He tried to point this out. The fact is there were those who believed in the kingdom's nearness for a while but never believed that Jesus was the King. Therefore they only believed in the kingdom's nearness for a while. Jesus says the occasion for them no longer believing was due to **affliction or persecution arising because of the word** of the kingdom. The Pharisees clearly opposed this message and it is not imaginative to believe that they **afflicted** or **persecuted** those who proclaimed the kingdom was near. But these had hearts of mostly stone and so were not adequately prepared to withstand the **affliction** and **persecution**. Thus Jesus says they **immediately fell away**. Luke says "in time of temptation fall away." The point is that when they came under affliction or persecution because of the word of the kingdom it was tempting to preserve self rather than continue to proclaim the kingdom. The temptation to preserve self-arises from the flesh. Thus when it came right down to it these gave into the temptation of the flesh and fell away. Thus, the second location where the message of the kingdom fell were Israelites who initially received it but were mostly hardened such that they were not adequately prepared to endure the difficulties associated with its proclamation. When affliction arose the temptation arising from the flesh to reject the message was too great, and they fell away. Because of their lack of preparedness they would not get further understanding either.

So the first location, no preparedness, devil took away, the second, very little preparedness, flesh gave in to temptation and fell away. Now we come to the third and this looks to the lack of preparedness that gives in to the pressures of the world.

The third location where seed fell is in 13:22. **And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.** The third location was **among the thorns**. **Thorns** represent the difficulty of living

in a **fallen world** (Gen 3:18). The ones who are **among the thorns** represent Israelites whose hearts were too caught up in the difficulties of living in a fallen world. These Israelites heard the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and probably thought it was significant, however, as Jesus notes **the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word** was more significant, **it becomes unfruitful**. This signifies lack of adequate preparedness. They understood some significance of the message that the kingdom was on the verge of breaking into history and Israel's glory under the King but what was more significant to them was **the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth**. Just as **thorns** choke out a good plant so that it does not bear fruit so the **world and wealth** choked out their understanding of the kingdom. Who do these represent? I don't know. I can think of the rich man who was told to go sell all he had and he would have riches in heaven. That was a man who had an interest in the things of the kingdom of heaven but not so much that he was willing to let go of the things of the world. Maybe the Sadducees. They were also very wealthy but they were more interested in their money and power to go after the kingdom. I don't know, and so while I make some comparisons it's not my point to strictly identify them, although I do think this helps understand many passages in the gospels about riches. But the main point is that there were Israelites that had differing degrees of preparedness for understanding the significance of the kingdom being near. And this third group had only some understanding because the **world** and its cares choked out the message of the kingdom. Thus, the third location where the message of the kingdom fell were Israelites who initially received it and saw some significance to it but were not adequately prepared to set the world and its wealth aside in order to really go after it. Thus the productivity was choked out by the world and they did not understand. Because they did not understand they would not get further understanding.

So the first location, no preparedness, devil took away, the second, very little preparedness, flesh gave in to temptation and fell away, the third, only some preparedness, world choked out. Thus we see the role of the world, the flesh and the devil in Israel when the word of the kingdom was proclaimed by John, Jesus and the Twelve.

Finally we come to the fourth location where seed fell in 13:23 and this one stands apart from the others. **And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.**" The third location was **good soil**. The ones who are **the good soil** represent Israelites whose hearts were prepared to receive the message with understanding. As Jesus says, **this is the man who hears the word and understands it**. Their hearts were prepared to understand it. When they heard the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," they realized the significance of this announcement. They understood that the time predicted by all the OT prophets of being released from Gentile domination was near. They understood that the King would be coming soon. They understood that the only proper response was to look for the King. They understood that when the King appeared they should listen to His teaching to test for orthodoxy and evaluate His miracles for authentication. They understood that there was nothing more important than being His disciple.

They understood these things and that is why they are referred to as **the good soil**, soil that when the seed lands upon it is full of the kinds of nutrients that cause germination and growth uncontested by the world, the flesh and the devil. Luke says, “who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast...” This means just what I said it means, that they did not allow the devil or the flesh or the world to strip it away from them. They knew the significance of the message of the kingdom and they continued to proclaim it despite satanic opposition, fleshly temptation and worldly pleasures. Because of this Jesus says uniquely of them, **who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty**. Since the others were unfruitful and this meant they would not receive further understanding, this means they would receive further understanding. Further understanding of what? Further understanding of the seed, which is what the plant bears. Thus they would receive further understanding of the kingdom. Thus, the fourth location where the message of the kingdom fell were Israelites who heard the word of the kingdom and understood its significance and held to it fast through the opposition of the world, the flesh and the devil. Because they did understand they would now get further revelation and understanding.

Toussaint gives several reasons for this identification of the fruit as further revelation and understanding of the kingdom. First, this fits the context of the parabolic instruction which distinguishes “you” from “them.” In 13:12, “to you it is granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom...but to them it is not granted. The contrast between “you” and “them” is with respect to getting further revelation and understanding. Second, in the explanation of the parable the emphasis is on hearing with understanding. In 13:19, they heard but did not understand. In 13:20 they heard with only a little understanding which they lost. In 13:22 they heard with some understanding but it was choked out. Only in 13:23 did they hear with understanding. It follows then that the reward is further revelation and understanding. Third, what Jesus reveals in the parables is new revelation about the kingdom. It makes sense then that the fruit would be further understanding of this new revelation. Fourth, it is logical that the fruit is more understanding because seed produces more seed. The word of the kingdom received into the heart with understanding would yield more revelation and understanding of it.⁸

In conclusion, the principle taught by the parable is this: only if one’s heart was prepared to receive the word of the kingdom with understanding would that one’s heart be given more revelation and understanding of the kingdom in light of the rejection. In this way the parable acts as an introduction to the new truths of the kingdom’s postponement. **He who has ears, let him hear.**

The application is this. Is your heart prepared when you hear the word to receive the truth? If so you will have access to further truths. And if not, if you don’t care, if you are just here to fill space or to do the nod to God, then you won’t get it.

¹ Some think the sea represents Gentile nations which constituted His next mission during the coming age...cf J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, p 71.

² John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, p 98.

³ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 178-9.

⁴ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, p 72.

⁵ The usage of this expression here seems to impact the proper understanding of the similar expression used seven times in Rev 2-3.

⁶ Contra Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, p 99.

⁷ I have organized the ideas a little differently but credit for these thoughts goes to Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 179.

⁸ Cf Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 179.