

THE SETTING

MATTHEW 13:1-3a

Jesus had moved from Nazareth to Capernaum at the start of His public ministry. This event appears to have taken place at Capernaum, since He “went out of the house and was sitting by the sea,” and later on “left the crowds and went into the house” (Matthew 13:36).

The crowd was large enough that Jesus moves into a boat just offshore, likely to be more easily seen and heard by the crowd, which stood on the beach to hear Him. Sound carries farther over water; the entire crowd would have been able to hear Jesus speak.

TEACHING IN PARABLES

Jesus taught in parables for the same reason He did virtually everything else; to fulfill Scripture. Teaching in parables was a fulfillment of Isaiah 6:8-10, where God condemns Israel and all those who are hardened for their unwillingness to listen. Jesus quotes Isaiah in Matthew 13:14-15,

Matthew 13:14–15 (LSB) And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, lest they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.’

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

MATTHEW 13:3b-9

Matthew 13:3–9 (LSB) And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, “Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. And others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and were yielding a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

Nothing in this parable is particularly unusual or odd. The crowds would have followed Jesus very easily, nodding their heads as He spoke.

Sowing seed in that time meant taking a handful of seed from a sack, and then casting it out in an arc. Experienced sowers did a pretty good job of getting even coverage. The sower has his attention on his field; he wants every bit of his field to receive the seed, in order to produce the largest possible crop.

Some seed falls outside the field – on the pathways between fields, on rocky places where the soil is very shallow, in weedy places like ditches – because he is determined to use every bit of his field.

The growth that is described is normal. According to Crop Watch from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, a single grain of winter wheat will

produce, on average, 110 grains of wheat at harvest. Of course, that's using a hybrid, with artificial irrigation, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and doing everything else modern farmers do to grow a crop. Most of these things were not available to farmers in the ancient world, so the results were more varied.

Nothing about this parable stands out until the very last words: He who has ears, let him hear. It's given as a command: He who has ears, hear!

THE EXPLANATION

MATTHEW 13:18-23

Matthew 13:18-23 (LSB) “Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. And 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; yet he has no root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the one who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 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.”

Some preliminary comments.

The very fact that Jesus had to explain the parable of the sower to His own disciples tells us a few things:

- Parables are not clearer ways of expressing truth; we need help in understanding them.
- Parables are not open to interpretation; Jesus doesn't say, "Well, what does it mean to you?" but "Hear then the parable of the sower."
- Where Jesus doesn't provide a specific explanation, as in the smaller parables in this chapter, we must follow the pattern that He has already set for us.

THE SOWER AND THE SEED

The seed is the Word of the Kingdom, the Gospel, which is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16). There is only one Gospel; there is only one seed.

Since the Word of the Kingdom is sown in the heart, the sower must be Jesus Himself. We can speak the Gospel, but we can't even get it to someone's ears if they want to drown it out.

In Isaiah 55:10-11 God says this:

Isaiah 55:10-11 (LSB) - "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what pleases Me, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."

Then why doesn't the Word of the Kingdom, the seed sown by Jesus Christ, always produce the fruit of salvation? Is it because the Word of God has failed in some way? Not at all.

Romans 9:6-8 (LSB) - But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's seed, but: "through Isaac your seed will be named." That is, the children of the flesh [born as Jews] are not the children of God, but the children of the promise [those who believe in Jesus] are considered as seed.

The problem is not the Word of God, or the preacher for that matter, but the person hearing the Word. Listen to what Jesus says as He explains the parable.

THE HARD HEART

MATTHEW 13:19

Matthew 13:19 (LSB) 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.

Some people's hearts are as hard and impenetrable as a hard-packed footpath. They physical hear the Gospel, but they willfully reject it, and it gets nowhere. Notice the sequence of events: the evil one does not steal away the Gospel before they can understand it, but because they refuse to understand it. This person might be very warm and tender-hearted in a lot

of ways, but when it comes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they are dead and unresponsive; they might as well be made of stone. You can't begin to reason with this person; they refuse every effort to get the Gospel into their heart and mind. The Word of God just rolls off of them like water off a new teflon pan, leaving no trace that it was ever there. They have a kind of spiritual Alzheimer's; they might hear the Gospel over and over again, but could never explain what it actually says.

THE SHALLOW HEART

MATTHEW 13:20-21

Matthew 13:20-21 (LSB) And 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; yet he has no root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.

Some people's hearts are shallow; they seem to be listening and receptive, but just under the surface they are as impenetrable as the hard-heart people. The thing is, they often respond in a way, quickly but briefly. It might even seem that they've been instantly transformed. But the Gospel never got deep into them; it remained a surface experience. They might come to church for a little while, and use Christian language, but when difficulty strikes they abandon any pretense to faith.

I've known a number of people who claimed to be Christians, but whose faith was just a thin veneer, easily destroyed. All it took was a serious disease, or the death of a loved one, or the loss of a relationship.

Sometimes it didn't even take that; sometimes it was enough that the Bible told them that they were sinners under the judgment of God, helpless to save themselves. And just like that, whatever so-called faith they had was gone. If being a Christian means admitting that you are a helpless wretch, or being a Christian means enduring suffering, they see no point in it.

The problem isn't life, Jesus says, or that they're being treated unfairly. The problem is that they have no root in themselves; their faith is just a thin layer on top of a stony heart. They might have been excited about the Gospel, but they were never actually converted.

THE WORLDLY HEART

MATTHEW 13:22

Matthew 13:22 (LSB) And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the one who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

Some people's hearts are teeming with weeds and worthless things. They love the world and the things of the world. They are fascinated by what First John 2 calls "all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life." They are obsessed with worldly things: money, possessions, physical health, mental health, even relationships. There isn't room for anything else. Quite a few cram the Gospel in with their own worldly possessions, but the seed of the Word of the Kingdom won't grow in that environment. Jesus makes it clear that He

requires our exclusive love and loyalty:

Luke 14:26 (LSB) - "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple."

Luke 4:33 (LSB) - "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."

We can't cling to Jesus Christ if our hands are full of other things.

THE FRUITFUL HEART

MATTHEW 13:23

Matthew 13:23 (LSB) 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.

So the fruitful heart is not hard and impenetrable:

First Thessalonians 2:13 (LSB) - And for this reason we also thank God without ceasing that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also is at work in you who believe.

The Word penetrates the fruitful heart and does its perfect work.

And the fruitful heart is not shallow:

Philippians 3:7 (LSB) - But whatever things were gain to me, those things I

have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

The fruitful person receives the Word deep in their heart and soul and mind, and so is rooted into Christ.

And the fruitful heart is not worldly:

Titus 2:11-14 (LSB) - For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us that, denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all lawlessness, and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good works.

Instead, the fruitful heart is full of the Word of God, full of Christ, full of the Spirit and bearing the fruit of the Spirit. The fruitful heart remains faithful to the Lord Jesus; times of trouble only deepen our their faith and dependence on Him. The fruitful heart grows closer to the Lord as time passes.

Second Corinthians 4:16-18 - Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For our momentary, light affliction is working out for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The sower wants a good, abundant crop. This means that a person hears the Gospel, understands it, believes it, and is truly converted. They don't ignore the Gospel and have it stolen by the devil. They don't respond emotionally to the Gospel but abandon Christ the moment it becomes costly. They don't try to cling to earthly things at the loss of Jesus Christ.

They themselves are the fruit of the Gospel,

First Peter 2:9-10 (LSB) But you are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

And they also experience fruit in their own lives. They have the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). They have the fruit of righteousness (Philippians 1:11). The fruit of their lips is a sacrifice of praise to God (Hebrews 13:15).

Because Christians are eternally and inseparably joined to Jesus Christ, they will produce the fruit that He desires, to the glory of God the Father (John 15:1-11).

BRINGING IT HOME

PERSONALIZATION

What kind of a heart do you have? You can tell by what the Word of God has done in you over time. If it leaves you cold and uninterested, then you have a hard heart. If you get excited, but are completely ruined by difficulty, then you have a shallow heart. If you want to fit Jesus in with the rest of your life, and are unwilling to give up other things for Him, then you have a worldly heart.

But for most of you, I believe I can say with a clear conscience, and with joy in the Lord, that you have a fruitful heart. The Word matters to you, and has a strong impact on you. The difficulties of life have not ruined your faith, but strengthened it. The things of the world matter less and less as time passes, and the Lord matters more. You carry Christ with you everywhere you go; and you are carried everywhere by Him.

APPROPRIATION

Jesus' disciples asked Him why He taught the crowds in parables; He said that it was because the disciples, not the crowds, had been granted the blessing of knowing the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven. The parable of the sower tells us why so many who hear the Gospel are

unchanged by it. But it also tells us why we have been changed; the Holy Spirit made our hearts fruitful soil.

Those whose faith is shallow or worldly should call on the Lord for softened hearts that fully embrace the Gospel.

And you who believe in Jesus, whose hearts are good soil, can rejoice today in His love and favor and mercy. There's a lot of pressure in this world; you can be at peace with the Lord Jesus today, and rest in His as your Sabbath.