

The Unconverted “Believer” (12): The Parable of the Sower (2)

Let us turn once again to Matthew 13 in which we will continue our study of our Lord’s parable of the sower. In this discourse of Jesus, which encompasses the entire chapter, there is a collection of **7 parables**. The theme of each and all of the parables is **the kingdom of God**. As we asserted last Lord’s Day, God’s Word is very clear as to the nature and content of the gospel that we are to declare to the world that they are to believe so that they may be saved from their sin.

The message of the gospel of our salvation is the good news that God has inaugurated His promised kingdom through the reign of Jesus Christ and that sinners may be granted entrance into His kingdom through repentance from sin and faith in Him. In this kingdom they receive the forgiveness of sins, enjoy fellowship with the Lord and His people, live with joy, in peace, and in righteousness, in this age and in the age to come (eternity). The heart of the gospel message is “Jesus is Lord”, that is, He is the once crucified, but now risen and enthroned Sovereign Ruler over the entire world.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1992) concurred with this understanding of the gospel. He wrote, “The gospel is *“the word of the kingdom”*: it has royal authority in it; it proclaims and reveals King Jesus, and it leads men to obedience to his sway.” Similarly **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) noted,

The seed sown is the word of God, here called *the word of the kingdom* (v. 19): the kingdom of heaven, that is the kingdom; the kingdoms of the world, compared with that, are not to be called kingdoms. The gospel comes *from* that kingdom, and conducts *to* that kingdom; the word of the gospel is the word of the kingdom; it is the word of the King, and where that is, *there is power*; it is a law, by which we must be ruled and governed.

To enter the kingdom of God is to receive and experience salvation. We are to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and press people to turn from their self-directed lives to believe and submit fully unto the Lord Jesus Christ. I fear that much nominal Christianity—those who are Christian in name only—is the result of a “gospel” message that has been reduced to the promise of forgiveness of sins only. It is a message that promises to relieve guilt, escape hell, and go to heaven. People are promised that if they simply and only believe on Jesus Christ as their “personal Savior”, they have salvation. But little or nothing is said about the kingdom of God over which King Jesus reigns and for people to enter that kingdom through repentance from sin, surrendering their hearts and wills wholly to the Lord Jesus Christ, to deny themselves and to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. The result is that many have a form of Christianity, while denying the power of it to transform their lives. They wrongly think that they are Christian because they simply and only believe certain things about Jesus Christ, but they do not order their lives as citizens of the kingdom of God under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. But this is what saving faith looks like according to the Holy Scriptures.

But I do want to give a qualification to what we are saying. Even though there is a truncated gospel that is widely proclaimed and many think that they are true Christians while they are yet in their sins, the Lord by His grace brings people to salvation even in their limited understanding of spiritual truth. The Holy Spirit will use the proclamation of Jesus Christ to regenerate sinners. Through the proclamation of the Word of God the Lord causes them to become born again which results in their entrance into the kingdom of God (John 3:3). And even though they have not heard or learned fully and clearly this gospel of the kingdom, as we have sought to explain and proclaim, the Holy Spirit has poured into the hearts of these converted people the love of God. This is shown forth in their love for Jesus Christ, an awareness of their own sinfulness and helplessness apart from Him to live before Him and for Him, as they have come to desire and aspire (Rom.

5:5). They live with Jesus Christ as their Lord, seeking to live for Him and to do His will, though they may not have been clearly instructed in these matters of the kingdom that we have sought to declare. God will bless and use truth. He never blesses error, but He will bless truth even when it is mixed with some error and even when there is much ignorance--thank the Lord.

Now it could be argued that the promised kingdom of God over which Jesus Christ is Lord is the major theme of all of Holy Scripture. In the realm of biblical studies, particularly biblical theology, there has been a prolonged search for the major, unifying theme of all of Scripture. Although there have been many proposals for the main theme of the Bible, it is generally agreed that it is difficult, perhaps impossible to identify one predominate theme, for there are many important ideas or themes that run through the course of the Bible. But a good case can be argued that the kingdom of God may be the major theme that permeates and unifies all of Holy Scripture. We have previously cited that biblical scholars are in agreement that the kingdom of God was the primary subject of the teaching of Jesus during His earthly ministry. **George Eldon Ladd** expressed it in his classic biblical theology, *A Theology of the New Testament*: "Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus." But others have attempted to show that the kingdom of God is the major idea or thrust of the entire Bible. **Thomas Schreiner** wrote his biblical theology, which he entitled *The King in His Beauty*.¹ In his prologue he acknowledged the difficulty of asserting one central theme, nevertheless, he set forth the kingdom of God to be most prominent. He wrote:

By now it is common consensus that no one theme adequately captures the message of the Scriptures. It is not my intention to dispute that hypothesis here, for almost any center chosen tends to domesticate one theme or another. I maintain that there are a number of different ways to put together the story line and theology of the Scriptures that are legitimate... Here my focus is on one of the major themes in the narrative... I intend to argue in this book that the "kingdom of God," if that term is defined with sufficient flexibility, fits well as a central theme of the entire Bible.

Several weeks ago I had sought to condense the story of the Bible according to this kingdom of God theme in a paragraph or two.² I came across Thomas Schreiner doing the same thing, but in words much more clear and precise than what we had proposed. He wrote of this subject:

Perhaps it will help if I sketch in what I mean by "the kingdom of God." First of all, it designates the rule of God. In one sense, God is always the King of kings and Lord of lords, reigning over everything that happens. But in another sense, God's rule has been flouted since the fall of humankind, and the Scriptures tell the story of the kingdom regained.³

We may say a hearty, "Amen" to that synopsis of the story of the Bible. This fallen world is restored to God through Jesus Christ establishing the kingdom of God. Jesus Christ is Lord. He calls and enables His people to believe Him to be Lord, to submit to His reign, and to order their lives in faith and obedience to Him. Salvation is experienced when a fallen, independent, self-willed, sinner, repents of his sin, believes upon and submits to Jesus the Lord. He becomes a kingdom citizen in this world and an inheritor of the full manifestation of the kingdom of God in the new heavens and new earth when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world. Then what Paul expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 will take place:

Then comes the end, when He delivers *the kingdom to God* the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. ²⁵For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. ²⁶The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. ²⁷For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted.

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty; A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Baker Academic, 2013), p. 421.

² Sermon on April 4, 2021, FBC1081

³ *Ibid*, p. xiii.

²⁸Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

Now as we said last week, the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 describe the nature of the kingdom in this present age and how we are to regard it and embrace it. The first parable in this discourse is the most lengthy and detailed, the parable of the sower, or perhaps better described as the parable of the soils. When our Lord was before the crowds, He told the parable. When He was alone with His disciples, He explained the meaning of the parable. Let us read again the entire account in Matthew 13:1-23.

On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. ²And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

³Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. ⁶But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. ⁷And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. ⁸But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

¹⁰And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

¹¹He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. ¹³Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;
¹⁵For the hearts of this people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.'

¹⁶But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; ¹⁷for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

¹⁸"Therefore hear the parable of the sower: ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. ²⁰But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. ²²Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. ²³But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

We addressed our Lord's teaching in the first 17 verses of this passage last week. Today we will consider our Lord's detailed explanation of His parable to His disciples. But before we do, let us consider a few principles regarding the example of our Lord using parables to convey and illustrate spiritual truth. **Matthew Henry** wrote of the Lord's use of parables to both instruct us and to teach us how to teach others.

We have, in these verses, one of the parables which our Saviour put forth; it is that of the *sower and the seed*; both the parable itself, and the explanation of it. Christ's parables are borrowed from common, ordinary things, not from any philosophical notions or speculations, or the unusual phenomena of nature, though applicable enough to the matter in hand, but from the most obvious things, that are of every day's observation, and come within the reach of the meanest (simplest) capacity; many of them are fetched from the husbandman's (farmer's) calling, as this of the sower, and that of the tares. Christ chose to do thus,

1. That spiritual things might hereby be made more plain, and, by familiar similitudes, might be made the more easy to slide into our understandings.

2. That common actions might hereby be spiritualized, and we might take occasion from those things which fall so often under our view, to meditate with delight on the things of God; and thus, when our hands are busiest about the world, we may not only notwithstanding that, but even with the help of that, be led to have our hearts in heaven. Thus the word of God shall talk with us, talk familiarly with us (Prov. 6:22).

It is this second point that I desire to consider briefly. Just as our Lord looked about Him and used common observations to illustrate spiritual truths, it would be good if we developed this propensity and ability to do the same. We could better communicate to others spiritual truths, and it would also enable us to be more fully reminded of the spiritual realm in which we live each day. **John Bunyan** (1628-1688) illustrated how this might be done in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The character, Interpreter, took time to instruct Christiana and her boys about the Christian life. He pointed to ordinary things that were seen by them and then he used these things as spiritual illustrations and for application to them. Here is one:

He had them into another room where were a hen and chickens, and bid them observe a while. So one of the chickens went to the trough to drink, and every time she drank she lifted up her head and her eyes towards heaven. 'See,' said he, 'what this little chick doth, and learn of her to acknowledge whence your mercies come, by receiving them with looking up. Yet again,' said he, 'observe and look:' so they gave heed, and perceived that the hen did walk in a fourfold method towards her chickens: first, she had a common call, and that she hath all the day long; second, she had a special call, and that she had but sometimes; third, she had a brooding note (Matt. 23:37); and, fourth, she had an outcry.

'Now,' said he, 'compare this hen to your King, and these chickens to His obedient ones; for, answerable to her, He himself hath His methods which He walketh in towards His people. By His common call, He gives nothing; by His special call, He always has something to give; He has also a brooding voice, for them that are under His wing; and He has an outer, to give the alarm when He seeth the enemy come.

And so, Bunyan through the use of a chicken drinking water illustrated how we should lift our heads to the Lord in grateful acknowledgment of every blessing He sends our way each day. And then with regard to the call of a mother hen to her chicks, Bunyan likened it to the different ways that God calls His people. He speaks to them daily guiding them and affirming His presence with them. But He also has an effectual call that He extends to His own to come unto Him. He speaks encouraging and comforting words to us as a hen broods over her chicks protecting and assuring them. And then He warns His people as a hen clucks loudly to warn her chicks of the danger that threatens them.

Here is another example from *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

Then, as they were coming in from abroad, they espied a little robin with a great spider in his mouth. So the Interpreter said, 'Look here.' So they looked, and Mercy wondered; but Christiana said, 'What a disparagement is it to such a pretty little bird as the robin redbreast; he being also a bird above many, that loveth to maintain a kind of sociableness with men! I like him worse than I did.'

The Interpreter then replied, 'This robin is an emblem very apt to set forth some professors (professing Christians) by; for to sight they are, as this robin, pretty of note, color, and carriage. They seem also to have a very great love for professors that are sincere; and above all others, to desire to associate with them, and to be in their company, as if they could live upon the good man's crumbs. They pretend

also, that therefore it is that they frequent the house of the godly, and the appointments of the Lord; but when they are by themselves, as the robin, they can catch and gobble up spiders ‘they can change their diet, drink iniquity, and swallow down sin like water.’

Here he used the robin to describe nominal Christians. They may appear to be quite sociable around the people of God. But when they are alone or away from the people of God their true character is evident. Their ugly life of sin comes to the forefront.

May our Lord help us to see in ordinary events and daily observations spiritual illustrations of biblical truth. May He remind us through what we encounter every day to perceive His ways and then may our observations enable us to better communicate our Lord’s Word and ways to others.

Let us return to our text of Matthew 13 and consider our Lord’s explanation of the parable of the sower to His disciples. Let us attempt to place ourselves among the disciples, listening to our Master clearly and concisely explain the meaning of this parable to us. As one once expressed:

The Master takes us, the little children, by the hand, and leads us through all the turnings of His first symbolic lesson, lest in our inexperience we should miss our way. The Son of God not only gave Himself as a sacrifice for sin; He also labored as a patient painstaking teacher of the ignorant: He is the Apostle as well as the High Priest of our profession.

Jesus had declared, “Behold, a sower went out to sow” (v. 3). It is clear that Jesus intended meaning of this seed to be the gospel of the kingdom and how that kingdom would be evident in the present age. Jesus was the promised King of the long anticipated Kingdom of God that He was inaugurating through His ministry, through His death on His cross, resurrection from the dead, and His ascent to be enthroned by His Father in heaven. This was the heart of His gospel. The “mysteries of the kingdom” that He was revealing to His apostles (cf. v. 11) was how His kingdom would be manifested in this present fallen world until His second coming. Interestingly, in Luke’s parallel account of Jesus telling this parable, the seed of this sower is set forth as “the word of God” (Luke 8:11). There, too, Jesus spoke of the “mysteries of the kingdom” being the privilege of His disciples to know and understand (Luke 8:10). When comparing Matthew’s account and Luke’s account of Jesus telling this parable to His disciples, the message of “the kingdom of God” and “the Word of God” are one and the same.⁴

The four different kinds of soil are four different kinds of people who hear the good news of the kingdom. All four hear the Word of God, only one of these hearers, the last one, has salvation; only the fourth type of soil produces the yield--the fruit--for which the seed was designed to bring forth. Generally speaking, this is how people react and respond to the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus Christ during the course of this age. Let us consider each one.

I. The seed sown along the path (13:19)

Jesus declared in verse 19, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.” One once described this first kind of hearer of the Word: “Behold in one picture God’s gracious offer, man’s self-destroying neglect, and the tempter’s coveted opportunity!”⁵ We see that someone can hear the Word of God quite clearly proclaimed and explained to him, but it has no impact on his soul. The Lord was indirectly telling His disciples of the importance to listen carefully and to understand clearly what he hears regarding the Word of God. The 17th century Reformed Baptist, **Benjamin Keach** (1640-1704), wrote,

⁴ This could be viewed as one more bit of evidence that the theme of the kingdom of God is the main theme of all of Scripture, the Word of God.

⁵ William Arnot, **The Parables of Our Lord** (T. Nelson and Sons, Paternoster Row, 1893), p. 52.

It is evident, that one reason or main design of Christ speaking this parable, was to convince them, that it is not enough or sufficient to hear the word of God preached, but that many hear it, who are never effectually wrought upon by it, but shall eternally perish.⁶

These are hearers who are unaffected by the Word. We all know persons of this type. They hear the Word of God, but they may as well have not heard. No change occurred in their life as a result of having heard the Word of God read by them or taught to them. This is a typical example of an *unbeliever*. It is not the fault of the seed. Nor is it the fault of the sower. The seed is good; it will bring forth fruit! The sower fulfilled his responsibility; he scattered the seed, that is, he made known the gospel of the kingdom. It is the soil that is defective; the problem lies with the hearer.

The soil trodden by all comers, is never broken up and softened by a through self-searching. A human heart may thus become marvelously callous both to good and evil. The terrors of the Lord and tender invitations of the gospel as alike ineffectual. Falling only on the external senses, they are swept off by the next current; as the solid grain thrown from the sower's hand rattles on the smooth hard road side, and lies on the surface till the fowls carry it away.⁷

No amount of coercion, no amount of pleading will make a real spiritual impact or difference. The ground, that is the heart of this person, is not prepared, not willing to receive the Word of God.

Now there are ways that we could get this kind of person to attend church, in fact, many of this type attend church regularly. We could use other means, offer other things rather than the Word of God, to bring them in—many churches do. We could fill the church with these kinds of hearers. Modern church growth pundits tell us how to do it, if it were our desire to do so! But what do you do after you gather such a group? You preach and teach the Word of God but there is no interest, no real concern. No, our responsibility is to proclaim the Word of God. And we should recognize and submit to the fact that all will not receive it; in fact, it will not be received by most. In the work of the kingdom most seed falls on the hearers with hardened hearts. These hearers are indifferent to the gospel. Their interests lie elsewhere. They really care little of Jesus Christ. They do not see that the claims of God are binding on them. This kind of hearer does not want Jesus as Lord over his life, for he himself is his own Lord, and there is room for only one master in a heart. This person will most certainly be banished from the presence of Christ at His coming.

The Lord mentions the involvement of “the evil one” in preventing these people from responding to the Word. “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.” Recognize that satan is able to take good and true thoughts out of our heads; that is, he is able to cause us to forget truth that we have heard. The devil is able to lead a hearer of the Word of God to forget what was proclaimed to him so that it will bring no benefit to him. He is also able to put wrong thoughts into our minds and place temptations before people that lead them away from Christ and into further depths of sin. The devil is the true god of these lost people. They serve him unwittingly, for his major thrust is to entice people to serve themselves, to be their own gods, their own lords. This is what the serpent did in the beginning in his enticement of Eve. Although the Lord had told Adam and Eve they would die if they ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the devil told them otherwise. “The serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’” (Gen. 3:4f). Fallen man desires to be his own god, his own lord. He does not desire nor is he willing to submit to Jesus Christ the Lord. And so, unless the Holy Spirit had previously plowed/prepared the hardened heart of the sinner, causing it to desire and willing to receive the seed of the gospel of the kingdom, the devil will snatch away that word before the sinner fully understands its full meaning and its implications for his soul before God.

It would seem that our Lord had earlier described this first kind of hearer of the Word. Jesus had said earlier in this chapter:

⁶ Benjamin Keach, **Exposition of the Parables of the Bible** (Kregel Publications, 1974), p. 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*

“For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” (Matt. 13:12f)

So too, the one characterized as hardened soil does not understand the word proclaimed to them. **Spurgeon** wrote of these:

Satan is always on the watch to hinder the Word: “*Then cometh the wicked one*”, even at the moment when the seed fell. He is always afraid to leave the truth even in hard and dry contact with a mind, and so he *catcheth it away* at once, and it is forgotten, or even disbelieved. It is gone, at any rate; and we have not in our hearer’s mind a corn-field, but a highway, hard, and much frequented. The man was not an opposer, he “*received seed*”; but he received the truth as he was, without the soil of his nature being changed; and the seed remained as it was, till the foul bird of hell took it off the place, and there was an end of it. So far as the truth *was sown in his heart*, it was in his natural, unrenewed heart, and therefore it took no living hold. How many such hearers we have! To these we preach in vain; for what they learn they unlearn, and what they receive they reject almost as soon as it comes to them.⁸

But our Lord then told of another kind of soil into which the seed of the gospel is sown.

II. The seed sown in rocky soil (13:20f)

Jesus then told His disciples,

²⁰But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

The Word has affected this one. He advanced farther than the first, but he, too, failed to bring forth fruit. And yet he immediately received the word “with joy.” Everyone was hopeful for this person! He became a “believer.” Luke’s account says so specifically:

“And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; **they believe for a while**, and in time of testing fall away.” (Luke 8:13)

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) wrote of ones like these:

We may listen to a sermon with pleasure, while the impression produced on us is only temporary and short-lived. Our hearts, like the “stony ground,” may yield a plentiful crop of warm feelings and good resolutions; but all this time there may be no deeply-rooted work in our souls, and the first cold blast of opposition or temptation may cause our seeming religion to wither away. Alas, there are many such hearers! The mere love of sermons is no sign of grace. Thousands of baptized people are like the Jews of Ezekiel’s day: “Thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear they words, but they do them not” (Ezek. 33:32).⁹

And so, here in this stony ground hearer we see a very joyous, enthusiastic “believer.” He seemed to grow more rapidly than all about him. But the problem is that he only believed “for a while.” Sadly he is only a nominal believer. He has a kind of faith, but it is not saving faith. The effects of the Word were only temporary. And there is no salvation for a temporary believer. This is an example of an *apostate*. He seemed so enthusiastic and so responsive. He seemed to be set on fire for the cause of Christ. He had aspects about his faith that we should desire for ourselves! “Why surely, a true work of salvation had been

⁸ Charles Spurgeon, **Spurgeon’s Popular Exposition of Matthew** (Zondervan, 1962, orig. 1893), p. 98.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on Matthew** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986, orig. 1856), p. 143.

done in this man's heart!" But not so fast. A time of testing and trial comes. Perhaps in the form of *temptation to sin*. Or maybe false teachers deceive him. Or maybe it was *pressure* from friends, family, or *persecution* from others about him. Or perhaps the testing was in the form of very *difficult circumstances* encountered in life. Or perhaps he hears some "*hard*" teaching in the Holy Scriptures and he refuses to accept it; and because of this, he rejects the faith. This is the emphasis that Matthew gives in his account: "*when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word*, immediately he stumbles" (Matt. 13:20f). "Many" of Jesus' followers left Him due to the fact they did not like what He was teaching them (cf. John 6:60-66). The point is this: the stony ground hearer endures only for a while, but his trials lead him to give up. He abandons his faith in Christ and repudiates the Word of God as binding on his life. He ceases to do the Word of God that he has heard. Salvation only belongs to those who continue to hear and continue to order their life according to the Word of God. It is not that this person lost his salvation; rather, his testing only revealed what was not there from the beginning. There was no true substance to his profession of faith. He had some understanding. His emotions had been stirred. He was enthusiastic. But in reality, it was but superficial from the beginning, and the time of testing only revealed what was already there, or not there.

Two points may be concluded from considering this kind of hearer:

1. Do not be so quick to lead people to make "decisions" for Christ, and if they do, do not be too quick to label professors of Christ as numbered among the people of God. Here are some wise words that we have cited before:

Do not, therefore, consider that soul-winning is or can be secured by the multitude of baptisms, and the swelling of the size of your church. What means these dispatches from the battlefield? "Last night, 14 souls were under conviction, 15 were justified, and 8 received full sanctification." I am weary of this public bragging, this counting of unhatched chickens, this exhibition of doubtful spoils. Lay aside such numberings of the people, such idle pretense of certifying in a half a minute that which will need the testing of a lifetime. Hope for the best, but in your highest excitements be reasonable."¹⁰

And so, yes, be encouraged, but watch over their souls, be in prayer for them, and encourage them in the faith. Continue to sow the good seed of the Word of God.

2. How do you know that you are not one of these kinds of hearers? Answer: you don't, really, until the testing of the life bears the true nature of your faith. Peter wrote of the need for this testing in every Christian's life:

¹Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary (and it is), you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷*so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* ⁸Though you have not seen Him, you love Him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

When you experience a severe trial of your faith but you come through on the other side believing and following the Lord, you will have shown yourself not to be a stony ground hearer.¹¹ The Lord will send trials to His people through which they will only be able to withstand and remain in faith because of the power of His grace to sustain their faith.

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (Eerdmans, 1963) p. 19.

¹¹ This does not mean that you cannot have legitimate assurance until your faith is tried, for indeed, you can have! (again, cf. 1 Pet. 1:3, 4)

Our Lord then told His disciples of a third kind of hearer of the gospel.

III. The seed sown among thorns (Matt. 13:22)

Jesus then explained to His disciples what He had intended by speaking of a third type of soil onto which the seed is cast.

“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.”

This person also responded to the Word. He, too, became a “believer.” But he, as the one before, had faith but it was not saving faith, for it failed to bring forth “fruit.” This hearer responds to the Word, a real change occurs in life. Perhaps this continues for some time. What is the problem with this hearer? Doing the will of God, obeying the Word of God, is not the most important concern for this person! ***He is a hearer, but is not a doer of the Word.*** This is an example of a ***hypocrite***. And there is no salvation promised for the hypocrite. He is a hearer, not a doer, he is but deceiving himself that he has salvation (cf. James 1:22). The hypocrite will find himself consigned to the same place of the unbeliever on judgment day (Luke 12:46).

Here is the man who “hears” the Word. He knows the truth. He sits under the truth. But the truth does not impact his life because he has this sin that prevents the Word from possessing his soul. He is not a godly man, for he is a covetous man. He wants to possess riches, but riches have possessed him. And so it is, that there are many who claim to be Christian, attend churches week after week, but whose lives bear little evidence of the life of Christ because of this sin. Because they longed to be rich, they were tempted by the world. As a result they were caught in the snare. The noose tightened around them and the spiritual life was choked out of them. It was not riches that did so, but the deceitfulness of riches and love of riches which choked him so that the Word did not govern his affections or direct his actions.

Note, worldly cares are great hindrances to our profiting by the word of God, and our proficiency in religion. They eat up that vigour of soul which should be spent in divine things; divert us from duty, distract us in duty, and do us most mischief of all afterwards; quenching the sparks of good affections, and bursting the cords of good resolutions; those who are *careful and cumbered about many things*, commonly neglect *the one thing needful*. (Matthew Henry)

But maybe this one was not so much consumed with acquiring riches, but the “cares of the world” consumed him or her. It did not at first. There was a time when the profession of faith seemed to be genuine. There was regular attendance on hearing the Word and gathering with the Lord’s people. But over time spiritual interest waned as the desire and delights offered by the world further possessed the soul. The weeds of cares for this world choked out the Word of God so that the Word no longer governed the thoughts and the affections of this professing Christian, but rather the world in all its glory was the chief pursuit and delight of his soul. This person allowed his heart to grow cold and indifferent to the Word of God as other matters took precedence. Gradually his life became so consumed with the affairs of this life the Word of God no longer governed his life. Other issues became more important to him than the Word of God.

Again, two issues are mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel that led to this one’s ruin, and then Luke records a third.

1. The cares of the world. ***“My health, family, my job--God’s claims on my heart will follow these.”*** We live in a world that demands so much of our time and energy. Time for Christ, time with Christ and His people is constantly under restraint by the demands of life in this fallen world system. The Lord must retain first priority in our hearts. Even the seemingly most important matters of this life must be kept subordinate to Him and the matters of His kingdom. Did not He say, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37).

2. The deceitfulness of riches. He is either accumulating wealth or longing after wealth. You need not have any money to fall into this error. I have met some of the most non-covetous persons who were very rich. But I have met many poorer persons who were extremely covetous. It is not the possession of money, but the unbridled desire and pursuit for riches that will damn the soul. You cannot serve God and mammon. You will choose one over the other.

3. The pleasures of this life (in Luke 8:14). He in effect says, *“My time, my hobbies, my activities are my principle pursuits.”* Now, there is nothing wrong with cares of this life, riches of this world, or the godly pleasures of this life. The problem is when they become more important than doing the will of God! God and His Word are eternal. The things of this life are but temporal. Do not allow these things of this world to dominate your thoughts. Do not allow other things to become more precious to you than the cause of Christ and God’s Word.

Paul wrote with a sorrowful heart regarding Demas, who had begun his journey to follow Christ in faith, but having loved this present world, desiring to gain it or preserve it for himself, he forfeited his own soul (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). There are many like Demas, who are as ones in which the seed of the word of God was sown among thorns. They follow Christ for a while, but then they walk away from following Christ. No, perhaps they would not say forthrightly that they have done so. They would claim they are believers still. But their lives indicate that they love the world, not Christ. Let each of us heed the warning that this man Demas has left for us. Each of us has worldly concerns to which we must give our attention. We have family, work, friends, and other relationships. We have desires, weaknesses, plans and purposes. God has given all of these to us to enjoy and through which and with which we may serve Him, but we must keep them subordinate to the cause of Christ. So many interests, so many possessions, can squeeze out our love for Christ and our willingness to follow Him. We must be willing to sacrifice any and all, if called upon to do so, in order to maintain our allegiance and commitment to believe and serve Christ. May the Lord enable us always to keep a proper perspective of these matters, maintaining their subordination to the things of Jesus Christ. And we should pray that if these come to threaten our willingness to live for Christ wholly, that He would take the love of these things or the presence of these things from us.

Spurgeon said of these professors of the faith:

This class of hearers we know by personal acquaintance in this busy age. They *hear the word*, they are affected by the gospel, they take it as *seed* into their minds, and it grows well for a season; but the heart cannot belong to two absorbing objects at the same time, and therefore these men cannot long yield themselves up to the world and Christ too. Care to get money, covetousness, trickery, and sins which come from hasting to be rich, or else pride, luxury, oppression, and other sins which come of having obtained wealth, prevent the man from being useful in religious matters, or even sincere to himself: *“and becometh unfruitful.”* He keeps his profession (i.e. claim to be a Christian); he occupies his place; but his religion does not grow; in fact, it shows sad signs of being choked and checked by worldliness. The leaf of outward religiousness is there, but there is no dew on it; the ear of promised fruit is there, but there are no kernels in it. The weeds have outgrown the wheat, and smothered it. We cannot grow thorn and corn¹² at the same time: the attempt is fatal to a harvest for Jesus.¹³

The Lord Jesus then described the fourth kind of hearer of the word of God. This is the only true Christian out of the four that Jesus described.

IV. The seed in good soil (9:23).

²³As 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.”

¹² “Corn” is the old English word for wheat.

¹³ Spurgeon, **Matthew**, p. 101.

This is an example of a *true disciple of Jesus, one who has salvation*. “He hears just like all the rest, but in contrast to all the rest...

1. This hearer “understands” the word; that is, he not only understood it intellectually, but he understood its importance, its relevance, and its implications.

2. He retains the word, persevering in his faith based upon the word that he heard, understood, and came to believe. Those who fail or refuse to do so believed in vain, that is, their faith was not saving faith, it was temporary and superficial faith. Paul had written to the Corinthians about those who might have believed in vain. Paul wrote: “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain” (1 Cor. 15:1, 2).

3. This hearer “bears fruit” due to the Word; the seed accomplishes its design, bringing forth a life, which bears fruit before God. This one not only hears the Word, but the Word of God governs his existence. It was not because this hearer was more intelligent, more deserving than the others. Rather, this difference lies in the fact that this hearer had been the object of a deep and thorough work of God’s grace. His heart had been prepared to receive the Word. The hard, fallow heart had been ploughed thoroughly, the rocks removed, the weeds uprooted. The ground was prepared by God to receive the good Word of God.

4. The harvest varies in different places in the field, “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” All good ground is not alike. Some good ground brings forth much fruit. Some good ground brings forth less fruit. But all good ground brings forth some fruit. Let us pray as Spurgeon, “Lord, if I cannot reach a hundredfold, let me at least prove to be good ground by bearing thirtyfold.”¹⁴

We will close with what **J. C. Ryle** wrote regarding this good ground hearer that we might be like him.

In the last place, let us learn from this parable that *there is only one evidence of hearing the Word rightly*. That evidence is to bear “fruit.”

The fruit here spoken of is the fruit of the Spirit. Repentance towards God, faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ, holiness of life and character, prayerfulness, humility, charity, spiritual mindedness,—these are the only satisfactory proofs that the seed of God’s Word is doing its proper work in our souls. Without such proofs our religion is vain, however high our profession: it is no better than sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Christ has said, “I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth *fruit*” (John 15:16).

There is no part of the whole parable more important than this. We must never be content with a barren orthodoxy, and a cold maintenance of correct theological views; we must not be satisfied with clear knowledge, warm feelings, and a decent profession; we must see to it that the Gospel we profess to love, produces positive “fruit” in our hearts and lives. This is real Christianity. These words of St. James should often ring in our ears: “Be ye doers of the Word, and hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22).¹⁵

But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. (Rom 6:22)

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 98.

¹⁵ Ryle, **Matthew**, p. 143.