

Kingdom Parables

The Parable of the Sower

III. The Parable of the Sower - Matthew 13:3-9; 18-23, Mark 4:3-9; 14-20, Luke 8:5-8; 11-15

A. The Central Point of the Parable

Jesus gave this parable to teach the disciples how the message of the Kingdom of God would be received by people during the Interim Kingdom.

B. Significant Elements of the Parable

1. The Sower

The sower is not mentioned by name in any of the three passages dealing with the parable. Hence it is not valid to say that the sower is Jesus. To equate the sower in this parable with the sower in the Parable of the Tares is not to do justice to the passage.

Perhaps the best definition of the sower is found in Mark 4:14 which identifies the sower as anyone giving out the word.

The word “sow” has the idea of “broadcast.” In those days, a field was sowed by plowing it up, and then scattering seed over it. Only rarely was the seed plowed under.

2. The Seed

The seed is very definitely defined as the Word of God. One of the primary rules of symbolic interpretation is that when the Bible or speaker defines the symbol, seek no other definition. To equate the seed with anything else is to spiritualize the passage.

The seed is mentioned as the Word of God in the following passages:

Mark 4:14
Matthew 13:19, 20, 22, 23
Luke 8:11, 12, 13, 14, 15

3. The Hard Soil

This is the first of four different types of soil used to describe the four different attitudes people will have toward the Word.

This soil is that soil which has been unprepared by the plow. The fields of those days were usually quite small and were traversed by well-worn paths. Since these paths served as the means of getting to the field, they were never plowed. As a result, these paths became very hard and hostile to any seed landing on them.

4. The Stony Soil

This kind of soil appears on the surface to be good soil. However, just underneath a thin layer of soil lies a rocky substrate. In fact, this kind of ground is quite common in Palestine where the bedrock comes very close to the surface. Although this ground looks prepared, it lacks the necessary depth to sustain the life of the crop.

5. The Thorny Soil

The third kind of soil mentioned is the thorny or weedy soil. This kind of soil, as the second, looks prepared. Unfortunately, it is full of the seeds of weeds. As the crop grows, so does the weeds. After a time, the weeds take over all of the nourishment from the soil thus killing the crop.

6. The Good Soil

This is the soil that has been properly prepared and has the necessary depth to support the crop. This is the only kind of soil mentioned that bore any fruit.

7. Fowls

Although this is not one of the central elements of the parable, it is significant enough to be mentioned by the Lord. The fowls are very definitely identified with Satan and his hosts of demons. As an aside, one should not make the assertion that everywhere birds are mentioned, they refer to the same thing. For example, to make the birds of the Parable of the Mustard Seed demons poses some very serious exegetical problems.

C. Insignificant Elements of the Parable

1. The Skill of the Sower

Although a skillful sower is more apt to get a greater proportion of seed onto good soil, it does not mean that a skillful sower is the only one who can sow seed. In fact, anyone can take a handful of seed and cast it on the ground. To use this parable to teach that a sower of the word must be skillful is to read that into the text. That point is certainly not asserted by the Lord.

2. The Specific Level of Fruitfulness

The hundred-fold, sixty-fold, and thirty-fold fruitfulness of the seed refers only to the fact that good seed produces different levels of return. That the proportion is 100-60-30 is not important. Only the fact that different levels of fruitfulness are in view here is important. As an aside, a return of thirty-fold is large even for modern times.

D. Interpretation of the Parable

This is one of the easiest Kingdom Parables to interpret since it has been done for us by Jesus himself.

1. The Sower and the Seed

The sower has been defined as anyone who gives out the Word of God. The seed is the word itself. See above points 1 and 2.

2. The Hard Soil

The hard soil is defined in Matthew 13:19, Mark 4:15, and Luke 8:12 as representing those people who receive the message of the word with indifference.

We need to note that Jesus is not saying that the hard soil is necessarily bad, it is just that it is unprepared. In fact, all of the soil was hard soil until it was broken up.

Some possible examples of this kind of person are:

- Those openly hostile to the gospel.
- Those who consider the gospel as just another alternative among many.
- Those that deny the supernatural and any religion.

Not only does the hard ground not receive the seed, but the seed is snatched away by the ever-present birds that live in that part of the world. This portrays very graphically the fact that Satan and his hosts are very active in interfering with the power of the word in the lives of unbelievers. In fact, Paul states in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 that Satan blinds the minds of those who do not believe.

It is naive to think that Satan is worried about causing people to sin. His major effort is in the area of false religion and false teaching. If he can stir up enough mud in the stream, millions of people will be led astray. This is where he is most interested.

It is interesting to note that in the section immediately following the Kingdom Parables in Matthew, Matthew 13:53 through 16:12, we find examples of each of these types of soil.

In Matthew 13:53 to 16:12 we find these examples showing the character of hard soil:

Matthew 13:53-58 - People of Nazareth
Matthew 14:1-12 - Herod the Tetrarch

3. The Stony Soil

This soil is defined in Matthew 13:20-21, Mark 4:16-17, and Luke 8:13 as depicting those who hear the word with joy, and seem to receive it, but lack the necessary endurance to continue in the faith.

There are many who would say that these people are true believers, however, we must note that this soil bears no fruit, in fact, the crop dies. One

of the identifying marks of true believers is the fact that they bear fruit in one of the following three areas:

- 1) Others won to Christ
- 2) Spiritual Attitudes (Fruits of the Spirit)
- 3) Godliness

This same idea is taught by our Lord in John 15. In that passage Jesus gives us the metaphor of the vine and branches. Some would have us believe that all of the branches are true believers, yet if that is the case then why are the unfruitful branches pruned off and burned in the fire? What Christ is actually teaching is that one can appear to be part of the vine, but lack the necessary connection to be real.

John speaks of this same issue in 1 John 2:18-19 where he talks about those who left the fellowship because they were not true believers.

The Parable of the Tares explains this concept as well.

Christ alludes to this concept in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:15-23) where he states very clearly that there are those who claim to be representatives of God, but are actually non-believers.

The real point being made by Christ is that there are many who give every outward sign as belonging to him, but when tests and trials come, they fall away. Someone once said that the best way to purify the Church is to persecute the Church.

In Matthew 13:53-16:12 we find two examples of this kind of soil:

Matthew 14:13-28 - The crowd of 5,000 +
Matthew 15:29-39 - The crowd of 4,000

+ Note that the above people flocked to hear Christ and to be healed by him. There was a certain novelty about hearing Christ. However, when Christ did not deliver what they wanted, they bailed out.

4. The Thorny Soil

This type of soil is defined as those who receive the word but fall away because of the cares of this life. See Matthew 13:22, Mark 4:18-19, and Luke 8:14.

As with the second type of soil, there are those who would want us to believe that this soil represents true believers. This, however, does not fall in line with the flow of the parable as well as the fact that this seed, as the seed on the stony soil, produces no fruit.

Some possible examples of this kind of person are:

- Those who are rich and have no place for God.

- Those who are caught up in the cares of this life and are unwilling to give them up for God.
- Those who are unwilling to pay the necessary price to be Christ's disciple.

A good example of this kind of person can be found in Luke 18:18-30 where we find the story of the rich young ruler. This man had been prepared and had heard the word, however, he was unwilling to forsake all to follow Christ.

In Matthew 13:52-16:12 we find another couple of examples of this kind of soil.

Matthew 15:1-10 - The Pharisees
Matthew 16:1-12 - The Sadducees

5. The Good Soil

The fourth type of soil found in Matthew 13:23, Mark 4:20, and Luke 8:15, illustrate the true believer.

Note that the one distinguishing characteristic of this type of soil is that it produces fruit. The others do not.

There is a common error creeping into the Church today which says that it is possible to be a Christian without bearing fruit. This is an impossibility. A true believer has the resident Spirit of God within them and must bear fruit, even if it is only a little.

Note a difference between this soil and the second type of soil, the stony ground. The stony ground receives the Word with joy, this soil receives the Word with understanding. We must be careful to tell people who respond emotionally with the gospel that true salvation is based on understanding, not emotional experiences.

In Matthew 13:53-16:12 we find two examples of this soil:

Matthew 15:21-28 - Syrophonecian woman
Matthew 14:24-33 - The Twelve (actually Eleven)

E. Application of the Parable

Just as the seed fell on four types of soil, so the word falls on four types of hearts:

- The indifferent or hostile heart rejects the word.
- The emotional heart receives the word but since it has not counted the cost, it is offended when things do not work out the way it wants them to.
- The preoccupied heart receives the word, but has no place for it since it is more concerned with the things of this life, than it is about the things of the life to come.

- The prepared heart receives the word, understands it, and bears fruit.

We need to sow the seed. We should not make excuses about our inadequacies since it is not us, but the Spirit, who convicts of sin and transforms lives.

We need to avoid glossing up the gospel to fit the expectations of people. To do so encourages people to accept the gospel for what it does for them. When those expectations aren't met, the gospel is discarded as another thing that doesn't work.