

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 // Mark 4:1-9, 13-20 // Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

Title: The Parable of the Soils

Truth: Make every effort to understand Scripture and live it out.

Date/Location: Sunday 11/13/2016, rev. 12/12/2021, at FBC

Introduction

This parable is given in all three synoptic gospels—along with the explanation. It must be very significant for the Spirit of God to include it in full three times.

After reading this parable a few times, we are confronted with the problem of how to title the parable. Does “the parable of the **sower**,” convey everything the parable teaches, or would “the parable of the **soils**” better capture the entirety of what the Lord is teaching? Which is the parable more concerned with—the sower or the various soils? I think the right answer is “the parable of the soils.”

This point requires a bit more explanation because clearly the Lord refers to His own parable as the “parable of the sower” (13:18). How can I title it differently or better than Jesus?! My reasoning for entitling it differently is as follows. The Lord is referring to the parable by its first significant character or word: *sower*. He is not saying that the parable is *mainly* concerned with the sower. It *is* a parable about a sower because that will call to the audience’s memory the story he is talking about, but that story-with-a-point is about more than a sower. It is kind of like the Book of Genesis being called by that name. In Hebrew, the title for the book is “be-ray-sheet” which means “beginnings.” It is the first word of the book. But obviously a more descriptive or longer title can be envisioned without impugning the traditional title. I believe my title is appropriate because the parable, although *about a sower*, is concerned with teaching an important lesson not about the sower but about the different types of soil, as they represent different types of people and their responses to the good news of the kingdom. These kinds of responses will be faced by ministers of the good news for all the ages after Jesus, and in fact have been part and parcel of how God’s message is received in all ages.

There are four soils and four things that happen in the soils. This comes out clearly as you outline the parable and its explanation. There is also the seed that is sown, Satan the adversary, and the fruit. We need to look at all these aspects in turn to understand the parable.

I. Sower

- A. I think we would agree that Christ is the main and best planter. The prophets before Him spread the message of the kingdom as well and their message was not oft well received, as perfectly illustrated by John the Baptist. He was a prophet, and in fact more than a prophet (11:9).
- B. After Christ, all who spread the Bible's message—NT prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and everyday Christians—are sowers. Keep that in mind. Jesus used a farming illustration. Anyone can be a farmer if they put their mind to it, and similarly anyone can be a sower of the Word. It does not take a bachelor's degree to plant grass seed. A few basic steps, common sense, water, and diligence will get grass growing in a couple of weeks. Nor do you have to have super-special training to be a witness of Jesus to others. You too can spread the message. And you must, for the sake of Christ's name, for the sake of the lost, for the sake of growing and strengthening this church and all churches, and for eternal reward.
- C. What does the parable tell us about how the sower does his work? The sower plants the seed liberally, even on soils that might not look promising.
 - 1. In real farming, the farmer does not go out of his way to plant seed on bad soil, but some does inevitably fall in places where it won't produce anything or is trampled or choked out by weeds.
 - 2. In spiritual farming, we cannot determine the condition of the soil by mere external appearance. If you try to do that, you are expressing partiality and favoritism, which God does not approve. Make a mental picture in your mind of someone who you think would not respond to the gospel. Let's be honest here about what is in our hearts on that matter—someone with

tattoos, piercings, hair style, hair color, certain skin color, life situation, past expressions of worldview, etc. How do you know what is going to happen when you cast the seed of the gospel of Christ upon their heart? You don't. The condition of the soil is seen only *after* some seed is placed on it.

II. Seed

- A. The seed represents the word of the kingdom of God including the so-called “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (13:11). The “word of the kingdom” is generic enough that it does not refer to one specific part of the Bible's message (like John 3:16 alone). It refers to the things Jesus has been teaching in Matthew 1-12, and that Matthew has chosen to write (as superintended by God) in his gospel.
1. Included is the fact that Christ is the Davidic king (ch. 1-2); that the kingdom of heaven is near and that it is necessary to repent of sin in order to be a citizen of it (ch. 3-4); the character and conduct of such repentant kingdom citizens (5-7); the authentication of the kingdom's king through miracles of healing, natural phenomena, and removal of demons (8-9); the spread of the message through the disciples and their call to repent to be participants (10); and the renewed calls for repentance and warnings of judgment (11-12).
 2. By chapters 11-12, it becomes apparent that many of His countrymen are not accepting the kingdom message of repentance. Some are guilty of the unpardonable sin which is the blasphemy of the Spirit.
 3. We could boil down the idea of *seed* as the word of God which proclaims the King, His kingdom, participation in the kingdom through repentance and the resulting conduct of kingdom citizens. The other things in the text, like miracles and teachings of Christ, are supportive of those main themes.
- B. We must think carefully about our Lord's message of the kingdom.

1. When you believe in Jesus, you immediately become a kingdom *citizen*. You are now ready to become a kingdom *resident* when Christ returns and sets up the kingdom (we are not there yet!).
2. We are displaced because we live in this pre-kingdom world instead of in the kingdom *per se*. We are foreign nationals, that is, we are not firstly citizens of the United States or Canada, etc.
3. God arranged that we, expatriates (those who live outside their native country), should gather in small groups called churches to worship, pray, receive instruction, fellowship, and propagate the message of the King. We are His commissioned ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20, Eph. 6:20).
4. Today, the message has additional information, including the crucifixion and resurrection and the church teaching of the apostles.

III. Soil and Fruit

Here we are at the core message of the parable.

- A. The **soil** represents the heart of a recipient of the preaching. The **fruit** represents the life, conduct, character, and what comes out of the inside of a person.
- B. To properly understand the parable, we MUST understand this key idea: a tree is known by its fruit (Matthew 7:16-20, 12:33-37). If there is no fruit, that means there is nothing useful; there is no real change; no difference from the pre-saved state. The springing up of a scrawny plant among rocks or thorns is not what Jesus intends to portray as "OK." *That* does not represent spiritual life. What He intends to convey is that when the plant produces fruit, it is **the fruit** which shows a person who is truly alive and where God is at work.
- C. There are four kinds of soil upon which seed was scattered. List them in your mind: road, rocks, thorns, and good soil. Many want to say that only the road represents an unsaved person. But if there is no fruit in three cases, I ask, how can you know there is salvation? By their fruit you know them; so if there is no fruit, there is no real life.

- D. There are six distinguishable results of the planting operation: trampled/devoured; scorched; choked; 30x fruit; 60x fruit; 100x fruit. Three are bad results, three are good results. If someone's spiritual life is “trampled, devoured, scorched, and choked” then there is something seriously wrong.
- E. Viewing the fruit from another angle, we see four levels of fruit: 0x (the first three cases), 30x, 60x, and 100x. Those choked by thorns had the same result as if they had not germinated at all. Those scorched by the sun had the same zero result as if they had not grown at all.
- F. There are also characteristics of the soil and plant that indicate problems in the non-fruitful cases. There are descriptions like no depth of earth; no root; no moisture; temporary; stumbling; cares; deceitfulness; and unfruitfulness.
- G. The good ground produces a crop. That is where the action is. Fruit! Again, let us emphasize that sprouting is not salvation. **Fruit** represents salvation. No farmer in his right mind would try to say that the road, stones, or thorns could produce anything of value. You can tell just by looking at them that they are not right for fruit production. Those will not produce good outcomes. The only way we can tell about a person is to look at the outcome, since we cannot directly see the traits of the heart.

IV. Satan

- A. Satan plays an important role in the parable and explanation. Exactly how he does his snatching-away work is not specified. He is outside the realm of nature so his work has a supernatural origin, although he almost always makes use of natural means to accomplish his desired effect. This is a troubling reality. The preacher is working hard and Satan is working against that work. The listener is hearing and Satan is trying to snatch away. Almost as quickly as you are bailing out the boat, more water is coming in.
- B. Satan's goal is to make it so that people will not believe and be saved (Luke 8:12). So let me ask you this: if that is the devil's goal, what should be your goal? Do you want his goal or God's?

- C. At this point, let us ask another question: what is the mystery part of this parable? It has to do with the introduction of the kingdom.
1. Normally a king comes, conquers, and takes over without input from the citizens of the country. No offers, no niceties, just victory.
 2. The kingdom of God is different, at least initially. It propagates itself by sowers spreading a message, which some recipients reject and some outside forces snatch away the message so that people will not respond. This is how Jesus' kingdom is spread—not by military force, but by gentle persuasion.
- D. Take note that the devil is not the only reason that salvation is hindered. He is only blamed in ONE of the three bad cases. In the case of the second and third soils, you have the effects of the world and the flesh intruding into the fruit-production process and ruining it.

Conclusion

- A. The condition of the good soil is characterized by things we can discern in all four of the soils. Several ingredients must be in place. We discern that the good heart is marked by:
- (1) hearing the message of the kingdom and understanding it;
 - (2) accepting the kingdom message with lasting joy;
 - (3) enduring in adherence to the message;
 - (4) being devoted single-mindedly to the message;
 - (5) having a noble and good heart (Luke 8:15);
 - (6) producing fruit of various amounts.
- I produced the above list by looking at the positive characteristics listed in Matthew 12:18-23, and then I turned each of the negative characteristics into its opposite.
- B. Corresponding to this, we see that a bad response to the message is marked by the various deficiencies in the three soils. Such deficiencies include some combination of the following, each the opposite of the above list:

- (1) hearing but not understanding;
- (2) not accepting; indifference or lack of gladness;
- (3) stumbling when difficulties arise;
- (4) being distracted by the things of life, money, pleasures;
- (5) having an evil heart (negation of Luke 8:15);
- (6) producing no fruit.

Your local agriculture extension soil testing service is a helpful tool to test your garden's soil to see what ingredients it needs. Testing of a person's heart soil is more difficult. Send your heart's soil off to Heaven for a soil test. Ask God, "Does my heart have these good or bad characteristics?" What kind of heart soil do you have?

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