

Growing Strong

Lesson for July 16, 2023

Unit II: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

Scriptural Background: Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4; Luke 8:5-15

Printed Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Key verse: *“But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”* (Matthew 13:23, NIV)

“One cool spring morning a old man got up and opened the back door to his little farm house. It’s early in the morning and there are still a couple stars out; the grass is covered in dew. He walks over to the barn and pulls the large doors open to see his old Massey Ferguson. He walks over to the machine the smell of old grease, diesel fuel, and dust filled the air. The old man climbs on the old red rusty machine and turns the key. The motor turns over and black smoke starts billowing out from the exhaust. He puts the tractor in gear and heads toward the fields. It’s planting day.

As he drives down the dusty road he hits a bump and turns around to see some of the seed he was planting that day laying among the gravel. The old man thinks to himself, “Well there goes a lot of valuable seed.” A car drives past and runs over the spilled seed. The old man knew that soon the crows would be there to clean up the mess. He continues to drive toward his fields. As the old man gets closer he looks at all the work that had been done and he thought about the work to come as well. His field was perfectly tilled, straight lines and not a weed in sight. He pulls up to the gate and climbs down off of his machine. The dew is now soaking through his boots and he can feel the cold on his toes. He swings the gate open and pulls the Massey Ferguson into position. The old man lumbers his tractor along the rows, and he starts to scatter the seed along the first row. He knows that he is getting good coverage because little bits of the seed are falling off to the side among the rocks and thorns in the ditch. He worked all day stopping only to refuel. The seed was planted.

As the weeks went by the old man would check on his field. He drove the same dusty lane as before, but this time in his pickup. He stops and looks at where he had spilled the seed before. There wasn’t anything left, not a single grain. The old man thinks to himself, “I wish those plants could have been saved,” but he just rolls his window back up and drives down to the gate that lead to the field. This time the old man backs the truck in. The tailgate groans as he sits down and looks at his work. His eyes gaze over the field and something catches his attention. There in a ditch there was some of his crop. He walks over to one of the plants, which is now brown and dead, and plucks it from between the rocks. “Not enough water,” the old man mutters to himself. Then he looks further down the ditch and notices some other of his plants, but they are in among the weeds and thistles. They were brown and shriveled too. The old man knew that the other plants had taken the nutrients that his crop needed and had choked the young plants to death.

The old man stands up and walks to the top of the ditch. The sun is starting to peak over the trees, and he can see his entire field. His crop had taken better than he had ever seen it. This was going to be the biggest harvest he had ever had. His crop had taken over the entire field, and the old man knew that he was looking at more plants than he could even imagine. He hadn't planted this much, but the seed was incredibly good and so was the soil.

From a sermon by Nicolas Campbell, "Old Man and his Massey Ferguson," 6/4/2012

Key Terms

1. **Hear** (verse 9) – Perceive with the ear the sound made by (someone or something). To be told or informed of something.
2. **Parables** (verse 3) – A brief, moral story that illustrates one or more instructive lessons or principles.
3. **Withered** (verse 6) – (of a plant) dry and shriveled. Speaking of a part of the body), shrunken or wrinkled from age or disease. Used figuratively to express leanness of soul, spiritual impotence, a low condition of spiritual life, a lack of moral nourishment: *"My heart is smitten like grass, and withereth"* (Psalms 102:4).

Lesson Background

Matthew wrote his account of Jesus's ministry to show that Jesus was and is indeed the King, Israel's long-awaited Messiah. He reflected this concern in his opening line, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). From there, Matthew consistently took his readers back to the Old Testament, providing Old Testament testimony regarding the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem as the location of Jesus's birth, the flight to Egypt, Herod's slaughter of the infants, and the beginning of Jesus's ministry. In a world where many in the Jewish community had claimed the role of Messiah for themselves, Matthew's commitment to grounding the life of Jesus in the Old Testament raised Jesus above the multitude of these false messiahs.

Concerning the purpose of Matthew's Gospel, we see that it is not a chronological history. Obviously, time plays a role in Matthew's arrangement, since he begins with Jesus' birth and ends with Jesus' death and resurrection. However, within this broad framework, Matthew has intentionally arranged his material around specific emphases. In particular, Matthew organizes his Gospel around five distinct teaching sections, and in between sections he tells us different stories, or narrative accounts. Jesus answers questions in each of the five discussions:

1. How are citizens of the kingdom to live (chapters 5–7)?
2. How are traveling disciples to conduct themselves on their evangelistic journeys (ch. 10)?
3. What parables did Jesus tell (chapter 13)?
4. What warning did Jesus give about not hindering entrance into the kingdom and on forgiveness (chapters 18–20)?
5. How will human history end (chapters 24–25)?

The heart of the discourse lies in Chapter 13. It is the hinge on which the Gospel turns. It is the break in the middle of the book, and the emphasis thereafter moves from the crowds to the Twelve. It may well reflect the theme of the Gospel, too. In chapter 13 we see the different responses to the planting of God's seed in the hearts of men and women: it is both reflective and challenging.

In his parable of the Sower and the seed, Jesus shows us various kinds of spiritual heart trouble. This week's lesson focuses only on the good soil.

Lesson in Depth

I. A Great Multitude Gathered (Matthew 13:1-6)

Local tradition locates the place of this discourse at a distinctive inlet called the "Cove of the Parables." It lies approximately a mile (1.5 km) southwest of Capernaum, halfway to the traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount near Tabgha. The land slopes down like a natural, horseshoe-shaped amphitheater around the cove, providing environmental acoustics for Jesus' voice to have carried over one hundred meters from the boat to a crowd of perhaps hundreds gathered on the shore. Israeli scientists have tested the acoustics in modern times and found them to be realistic for Jesus' parables to have been heard.

He had probably been resting in Peter's home, which was right on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This multitude of people had probably, been waiting for Jesus to appear again out of the house. He was so pressed by the large number, that He cast out a little way from the shore. His voice would carry well across the water, as well.

He got into a boat and sat: Jesus sometimes used a boat as His "pulpit" (Mark 4:1). It gave Him a place to speak, away from the press of the crowds, provided good acoustics, and probably a nice backdrop.

When Jesus taught from a boat, surely that was a new thing. We can imagine some critic saying, "You can't do that! Teaching belongs in the synagogue or in some other appropriate place." It would be easy to come up with objections: "The damp air might make people sick" or "There are a lot of mosquitoes down at the shore" or "Someone might drown." But Jesus knew that teaching from a boat suited His purposes well enough.

Then He spoke many things to them in parables: The idea behind the word *parable* is "to throw alongside of." It is a story thrown alongside the truth intended to teach. Parables have been called "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning."

"The Greek *parabole* is wider than our 'parable'; it translates *masal*, which includes proverbs, riddles and wise sayings as well as parables. Matthew uses it for instance for Jesus' cryptic saying about defilement (Matthew 15:10-11, 15), and in Matthew 24:32 ('lesson') it indicates a comparison." (France)

“It had a double advantage upon their hearers: first, upon their memory, we being very apt to remember stories. Second, upon their minds, to put them upon studying the meaning of what they heard so delivered.” (Poole)

Parables generally teach *one main point* or principle. We can get into trouble by expecting that they be intricate systems of theology, with the smallest detail revealing hidden truths. “A parable is not an allegory; an allegory is a story in which every possible detail has an inner meaning; but an allegory has to be *read and studied*; a parable is *heard*. We must be very careful not to make allegories of the parables.” (Barclay)

A Sower went out to sow: Jesus spoke according to the agricultural customs of His day. In those days, seed was scattered first and then it was plowed into the ground.

Before one can be a Sower, he must be an eater and a receiver. This one came out of the granary – the place where seed is stored – and from his Bible the **Sower** brought forth seed.

As he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside...on stony places...among thorns...on good ground: In this parable the seed fell on four different types of soil.

The wayside was the path where people walked and nothing could grow because the ground was too hard.

Stony places were where the soil was thin, lying upon a rocky shelf. On this ground the seed springs up quickly because of the warmth of the soil, but the seed is unable to take root because of the rocky shelf.

II. Seed on Good Ground (Matthew 13:7-9)

Among thorns describes soil that is fertile – perhaps too fertile, because **thorns** grow there as well as grain.

iv. **Good ground** describes soil that is both fertile and weed-free. A good, productive crop grows in good **ground**.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear: This is an unusual statement, because we all have our two ears hanging on the sides of our head. In some cases, that is the only use (to decorate the head). You see, even though we hear with our physical ears, it does not mean that we receive the message in our inner being.

This was not a call for all to listen. Rather, it was a call for those who were spiritually sensitive to take special note. This was especially true in light of the next few verses, in which Jesus explained the purpose of parables. Jesus was saying, listen with your understanding and receive this message in your hearts. Those of you who are capable (Christians), receive the message that the world cannot understand. In other words, He was going to tell us a secret that would help us understand Him better.

III. Hear the Parable Explained (Matthew 13:18-23)

In the omitted verses prior to this section, Jesus' disciples approached Him and asked, Why do You speak to them in parables? *Jesus* explained to His *disciples* that the reason "*I speak to them in parables*" is *because they* do not fear the Lord or have a heart that is open to what He teaches. Even *while seeing* the miracles, which clearly testify that *Jesus* is the Messiah, *they do not see*. Even *while hearing* the *parables* demonstrating *the kingdom of heaven*, *they do not hear* the core truths. *Nor do they understand its mysteries*.

Then *Jesus* told His *disciples* that *in the case* of those whose hearts were against *Jesus* from the outset, that *their* confusion was in accordance with a *prophecy from Isaiah*. After quoting directly from Isaiah 6, *Jesus* follows with: *the heart of this people has become dull*. This indicates the real issue is a matter not of the mind, which hears and perceives thoughts, but of the *heart*, which decides. In this case, the people had decided to seek their own way rather than to seek what was true. The result is that they got their own way, which is always the same result. When we follow our own way instead of God's way it always leads to some form of death. It is at this point that the lesson resumes.

This is he who received seed by the wayside: As the birds devoured the seed on the wayside (Matthew 13:4), so some receive the word with hardened hearts and **the wicked one** quickly **snatches away** the sown word. The word has no effect because it never penetrates and is quickly taken away.

The **wayside** soil represents those who never really hear the word with understanding. The Word of God must be understood before it can truly bear fruit. One of Satan's chief works is to keep men in darkness regarding their understanding of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

"Satan is always on the watch to hinder the Word...He is always afraid to leave the truth even in hard and dry contact with a mind." (Spurgeon)

"People are now so sermon-trodden many of them, that their hearts, like footpaths, grow hard by the word, which takes no more impression than rain doth upon a rock: they have brawny breasts, horny heart-strings, dead and dedolent dispositions." (Trapp)

On stony places: As seed falling on the thin soil on top of the stony places quickly springs up and then quickly withers and dies (Matthew 13:5-6), so some respond to the word with immediate enthusiasm yet soon wither away.

This soil represents those who receive the word enthusiastically, but their life is short-lived, because they are not willing to endure **tribulation or persecution... because of the word**.

Spurgeon made a good point: "I want you clearly to understand that the fault did not lie in the suddenness of their supposed conversion. Many sudden conversions have been among the best that have ever happened." The problem was not their sudden growth, but their lack of depth.

“*Tribulation* is a general term for suffering which comes from outside; *persecution* is deliberately inflicted, and usually implies a religious motive. *Falls away* is literally ‘is tripped up’; it is not a gradual loss of interest, but a collapse under pressure.” (France)

Among the thorns: As seed falling among thorns grew, the stalks of grain were soon choked out (Matthew 13:7), so some respond to the word and grow for a while but are choked and stopped in their spiritual growth by competition from unspiritual things.

This soil represents fertile ground for the word; but their soil is *too* fertile because it also grows all sorts of other things that choke out the Word of God; namely, it is **the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches that choke the word.**

Good ground: As seed falling on good ground brings a good crop of grain (Matthew 13:8), so some respond rightly to the word and bear fruit.

This soil represents those who receive the word, and it bears fruit in their soil – in differing proportions (**some hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty**), though each has a generous harvest.

Therefore, hear the parable of the Sower: We benefit from seeing bits of ourselves in all four soils.

- Like the **wayside**, sometimes we allow the Word no room at all in our lives.
- Like the **stony places**, we sometimes have flashes of enthusiasm in receiving the Word that quickly burn out.
- Like the soil **among thorns**, the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches are constantly threatening to choke out God’s Word and our fruitfulness.
- Like the **good ground**, the Word bears fruit in our lives.

We notice that the difference in each category was with the soil itself. The same seed was cast by the same Sower. You could not blame the differences in results on the Sower or on the seed, but only on the soil. “O my dear hearers, you undergo a test today! Peradventure you will be judging the preacher, but a greater than the preacher will be judging you, for the Word itself shall judge you.” (Spurgeon)

The parable was also an encouragement to the disciples. Even though it might seem that few respond, God is in control and the harvest will certainly come. This was especially meaningful in light of the rising opposition to Jesus. “Not all will respond, but there will be some who do, and the harvest will be rich.” (France)

Even more than describing the mixed progress of the gospel message, the parable of the Sower compels the listener to ask, “What kind of soil am I? How can I prepare my heart and mind to be the *right* kind of soil?” This parable invites *action* so that we would receive the Word of God to full benefit.

Lesson Summary

There are two ways to look at this parable, first from a personal/individual perspective and then universally.

From an individual perspective, the parable doesn't say the Sower went to different locations to sow seed. He was in the same area. As He was sowing some seed fell on different kinds of soil. So, these different kinds of soil were in the vicinity of one another. Perhaps, all in the same field. As the Sower would walk around the field, he would throw seed and the seed was cast into different kinds of soil – but the same field. In other words, there is a ground war going on in each of us! This is an all-out war for territory! The one with the most territory wins. Same field – different ground. Same life – contradictions. We only show the good ground on Sunday but Monday - Saturday the rocky ground is exposed, and the thorny ground is on display. It is there. Different soil for different days.

We allow our dirt to get in the way and resist seed saturation. There are areas of our lives where we refuse to deal with the rocks and thorns and that ground rises up and fights the seed in us so our harvest is weak, stunted, and often times nonexistent.

Harvest is determined by saturation. Shallow saturation slim harvest. Obstructed saturation limited harvest. Our harvest is directly proportionate to our saturation!

We have rocky areas of life that we won't let seed penetrate. We have allowed the traffic of life to harden us to the Word. We get seed but we allow life to choke it out. It isn't that we don't get seed. We get seed but we don't like it because it addresses/challenges/corrects an area of our life we like and so we choke it out before it can take root and affect the ground! Close enough to get seed but not saturated enough to enjoy the harvest of that seed! We can tell how seed saturated you are by what it takes to kill the seed in your life. Just encounter a little trouble and seed choked out and we give up on the promises we claim we believe. A little trial and the seed is trampled and we give up courage to hold on to claims of seed.

1. We need to share the good news with everyone. In the parable, the farmer throws the seed everywhere, not knowing in advance where it may sprout. Likewise, God calls us to share the good news of his love and forgiveness with everyone we encounter, sometimes with deeds, sometimes with words. As the famous quote goes, “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words.”

This was a revolutionary message for Jesus' listeners, for they thought God's word was reserved exclusively for the Jews. Yet, Jesus says in his parable that the seed goes out to everyone indiscriminately. If we're honest, it is a challenging word for us today. Some people I have trouble believing God truly loves. Yet he does! That one person you despise the most—perhaps the face of a Muslim extremist; or maybe the face of your next-door neighbor—Jesus loves that person just as much as he does you. When we remember that, everything changes. We need to share the good news with everyone we meet.

2. We need to trust God to bring the growth. Today's medical teams do wonders with physical heart surgery, but only God can do spiritual heart surgery. Sometimes we may grow frustrated with those who don't embrace the gospel message as we have, but that is between them and God. Unfortunately, not everyone will come to Jesus. Sadly, most won't. In today's story, only a fourth do. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). As we allow the soil of our heart to be open to God's planting the seed of salvation, we enter the narrow road to life. For those who are not on that road, we can pray that they wake up before it is too late. And we can continue to love them unconditionally as God does.

3. We need to cooperate with God in the growth he brings in us. Note that even for those with fertile hearts, God's word doesn't grow at the same level in each of us. Some will see 30-fold results, some 60-fold, and some even 100-fold. That's ok, because all of those results indicate amazing growth! We can keep the soil of our heart fertile by adding fertilizers such as regular conversational prayer with God, scripture reading, worship services and Bible studies, and time with other Christians. All these activities are ways to cultivate our spiritual life, not to stay busy, but to connect with Christ, the living Word, at work in us.

And as we connect, we allow ourselves to be transformed by God. The Word of God takes root in our life and begins producing fruit. We see God do things in and through us to bring himself glory. We see prayers answered. We notice God giving us more love, more kindness, more patience, more boldness, more grace for others, more forgiveness, as he conducts spiritual heart surgery.