

**Parable of the Soils**  
**Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23**  
**ABC 3/1/20**

Jesus' words were always striking. He spoke of sheep among wolves (Mt 10:16), of camels going through the eye of a needle (Mt 19:24), of people trying to remove specks from other people's eyes while planks were in their own (Mt 7:5). He referred to a house divided against itself, destined to fall (Mk 3:25), of throwing children's bread to dogs (7:27). He warned against the *yeast* of the Pharisees (8:15). But these aren't stories. The stories Jesus told all fall into a particular category known as *parables*. A parable is a story from real life or a real-life situation from which a spiritual truth is drawn. In Jesus' parables not every detail has a meaning. In fact, to try to force meaning into every detail can produce just about anything you want. Jesus started using parables at this specific time in his ministry for the purpose of withholding truth about Himself & the kingdom of heaven from some while revealing truth to others. From this point on the explanation of the parables is always given to the disciples alone & never to the crowds. One commentator explains the difference in this way:

When such people heard a parable about the kingdom it would ... be for them an interesting but pointless story conveying no revelation of divine truth. The disciples, on the other hand, had already grasped something of the supernatural character of their Master & of the kingdom He came to inaugurate. To them therefore He could explain the truth embodied in these parables, as in fact He did in the interpretations here recorded of the parables of the sower & the tares. The result was that their powers of spiritual understanding developed & the mysteries of the kingdom became clearer to them. In their case there was another illustration of the proverbial truth that *whosoever hath, to him shall be given, & he shall have more abundance*, just as in the case of the crowds the complementary truth was also being demonstrated that *whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath*.<sup>1</sup>

Mt 13 contains 7 parables, all of which have one theme: the kingdom of God. The 1<sup>st</sup> 4 Jesus speaks before the multitudes. The last 3 are given to the disciples only. The 1<sup>st</sup> parable He tells is a familiar one. It deals with the origin of the kingdom or how to enter the kingdom, which makes sense, right? If they're kingdom parable, how to become a citizen of the kingdom is essential. While this is often called the *parable of the sower* it's better called the *parable of the soils*, as we'll see. Jesus tells a story that would've been familiar to everyone listening. **1-9** PRAY

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<sup>1</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, p 135

As Jesus tells the story, several things become clear: 1<sup>st</sup>, nothing is said about the sower & his skill. The key difference between the seed that bears a harvest & the seed that doesn't has nothing to do with the sower or his method of scattering seeds. 2<sup>nd</sup>, nothing is said about the quality of the seed. The seed that survives & bears fruit is the same kind of seed that gets eaten, baked, or choked out. There's no problem with the quality of the seed. The lesson Jesus is teaching is all about the soil. This is a simple story with a simple meaning when explained by Jesus. & He urges His hearers to seek the true meaning of it. That's made clear in vs 9 where He says, **He who has ears, let him hear**. In other words, pay attention, listen with a believing heart, & look beyond the surface for the true meaning. Not all of Christ's parables are explained. In fact, most are not. But this one is. 18-23

The seed is called the **word** or **message of the kingdom** (19). Mark calls it **the word** (4:) & Luke says it's the **word of God** (Lk 8:). The soil is identified as the human heart (19). The emphasis is on the various kinds of soils, people's hearts & how they respond to the gospel message. When farmers planted then, they used a broadcasting method, taking a handful of seed & flinging it over a wide swath. This form of planting might look haphazard, & to some degree it was, but it covered large areas of ground with evenly scattered seed. A skilled sower wouldn't waste seed by letting some fall in concentrated areas while completely missing other areas. He'd throw the seed as widely & as evenly as possible. The goal was to cover the whole field, with nothing left unseeded. Of course, it's impossible to throw seed & guarantee it all stays within the boundaries. Some would fall outside the field. Even the seed cast in the field might find patches of ground where the soil wasn't ideal. Only the seed that found its way into good soil would ever produce a harvest worth gathering. The sower isn't identified. Some think it's Christ Himself, because when Jesus explained the parable of the tares, He said, **the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man** (Mt 13:37). But these are different parables & the imagery isn't the same. The sower in this one isn't identified because it's not important. He represents anyone who distributes the seed, anyone who shares the gospel. So if the seed & sower aren't the main point, what is? The soils. You can't understand this parable without knowing the soil is a picture of the human heart. Jesus highlights 4 kinds of hearts in

varying degrees of receptivity to the gospel. The heart is where the seed of God's Word ought to take root. This parable is about hearts in assorted stages of preparedness. What makes the 4 soils distinct from each other is whether they're in a suitable condition for producing fruit or not. The point? A person's response to the Word of God is dependent on the condition of their heart. Furthermore, fruit is the only evidence a heart has heard the Word rightly.

**1. Beside the Road Soil** This is the hard, unresponsive heart. It's described as soil along the road or path. This ground has been packed down by years of use. As the sower threw seed at the edges of the field, some of it would land on the hard-baked earth of the paths. This seed had no hope of penetrating the hard-as-concrete dirt. It would lie there & either be trampled underfoot or eaten by birds. The seed would never have a chance to sprout. This seed lies on the path, doesn't sink in, & the birds (which Christ compares to the devil or the his workers) soon eat it. This is the most hopeless of all the conditions Jesus portrays. Unbelief & a love of sin have made the heart a dense, rock-like environment where truth can't penetrate, much less take root. The hearer is oblivious, hopeless, & spiritually dead. In Luke's account we read, **Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes & takes away the word from their heart, so they will not believe & be saved** (8:12). That explains the goal of the sower. He wants people to **believe & be saved**. What is it that makes the human heart hard? Sin. Sin hardens the heart & the heart that's hardened sins even more. This type of person is described in Romans 1. The person begins by suppressing the truth about God that's known from nature (18–20), plunges into spiritual ignorance (21–31), & comes to approve of sin (32). What is it that leads such a person to reject the truth of God? According to Paul, it's a determined opposition to the nature of God Himself, which he describes as **ungodliness & unrighteousness** (18). This is the fool of Proverbs, the person who hates wisdom & instruction (1:7) & **does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind or heart** (18:2). What's interesting is that Jesus isn't describing atheists. He's speaking to people in a highly religious society, & the hardest hearts in His audience are the religious elite, the scribes & Pharisees, those who'd blasphemed the Holy Spirit, cutting themselves off from God's grace completely. Their sin shows the ultimate in hard-heartedness. How does the devil snatch the Word

of God away from a heart? He has many devices & we shouldn't be ignorant of them (2 Cor 2:11). If you think Satan & his works are always obviously diabolical, you're going to be defrauded by him. He uses deceit. **He is a liar & the father of lies** (Jn 8:44). He transforms himself & his servants as angels of light & ministers of righteousness (2 Cor 11:14–15). He confuses people through false teachers who come in Christ's name but undermine the truth of the gospel. He also exploits sinful passions like fear of what others might think, pride, stubbornness, anger, prejudice, etc. He appeals to the fallen heart's love for the pleasures of sin. He knows people naturally love **darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil** (Jn 3:19) & he takes advantage of that. It's easy for him to make himself appealing to those who love darkness. Having gained the sinner's trust, he diverts the mind from the truth of the Word, effectively snatching it away from the person's consciousness. Sin hardens people's hearts. Therefore, they won't receive the gospel when it's given to them. The opposition of the unregenerate heart to God's sovereignty is clearly evident in the kingdom parables, because *kingdom* implies *rule*, & *rule* is the same as *sovereignty*. When Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, He came preaching God's right to rule over the minds & hearts of all people. But that's what sinful humanity doesn't want. This rebellion against God is clearly seen in that when Jesus Himself came to earth, the response of His own people was rejection. Nothing's changed. This might be the greatest reason for why people reject the gospel. I've heard people say, *I believe that Jesus is the Son of God & He died for sinners. But I don't want to give Him my life. I want to make my own decisions & be in control of my own life.* To think like that is fatal. What you need to do is humble yourself & yield your life to Jesus.

**2. The Rocky Places** This is the shallow, superficial heart. Jesus isn't referring to a rocky slab on the surface of the ground or a patch of ground full of rocks. No farmer would leave stones in his field. Visible rocks would be carried off. What Jesus is describing is rock under the field's surface, covered by a thin layer of soil. The rock would be invisible to the farmer. Such a shallow layer of soil wouldn't be deep enough or stay wet enough to grow crops. In this soil the seed sprouts but almost as soon as it begins to look good, it withers from a lack of water. The roots can't get past the rock. For a while, the crop might look healthy & full of potential, but when the sun comes out & the water is

gone, it quickly dies. The soil spread thinly over rock illustrates a shallow-hearted person who responds immediately to the gospel, but only superficially. **20-21**

Many people today fit this description. Their shallow hearts are attracted to the benefits of the gospel. They hear the gospel & make a profession of faith. But then some difficulty arises & just as suddenly they fall away. They aren't hard-hearted & seem receptive. Jesus says this person **receives the gospel with joy** (20). But all that enthusiasm hides the fact that there is no root. Their belief is temporary. This isn't true faith because it's superficial & doesn't persevere through difficulties. Jesus said, **If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine** (Jn 8:31). Heb 3:14 says, **we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end**. Paul said you can know you're truly reconciled to God **if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established & steadfast, & not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard** (Col 1:23). Those whose faith is temporary hear the gospel & respond, quickly & superficially. Maybe they have some selfish motive, thinking Jesus will fix their problems or make life easy. There's even lots of activity at first. That leads others to think this is a true conversion. An outburst of joy isn't the distinguishing feature of true conversion. Joy is a good & appropriate response, but, as Jesus makes clear, joy sometimes accompanies false conversion. It doesn't ultimately matter how much enthusiasm the shallow hearer shows in their initial response to God's Word. If it's a shallow conviction with no real roots, that person will eventually fall away. & when that happens, it proves definitively that in spite of all their joy, they never truly believed. As John says, **they went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us** (1 Jn 2:19).

**3. The Thorny Soil** This is the strangled, worldly heart. The word for **thorns** here is the same word used to describe the crown of thorns that was placed on Jesus' head at His crucifixion. Thorns & thistles are useless for farming. They take over the field & choke out everything else. Seed planted in a field of weeds won't mature to a healthy harvest. But freshly tilled, weed-infested soil has a promising appearance. On the surface it looks rich & ready for seed. But underneath there's a tragic reality. Roots & seeds left over from the weeds are under the soil & alive, ready to spring

forth with abundant but worthless foliage. Those weeds will suck up the soil's moisture, drain out the nutrients, block the sunlight from the crops, & choke the life out of everything growing in the field that might be beneficial. Those who fit this category (like the shallow-soil hearers) may seem to respond positively at first. The analogy suggests there will likely be some initial sign of receptivity. Seed sown among weeds would sprout. Mark seems to suggest that at first they seem to have every potential to be fruitful, but then at some point afterward, **the worries of the world, & the deceitfulness of riches, & the desires for other things enter in & choke the word, & it becomes unfruitful** (4:19). This isn't a hard-hearted unbeliever or a shallow, emotional person. This time the soil itself is OK. But there are impurities in it. Weeds always grow stronger & faster than good seed. The Word of God is a foreigner in such a heart. Weeds & thorns own that ground. This person is too in love with this world, too obsessed with the cares, riches, & pleasures of this life. The values of this world choke the truth of God's Word. The stress in Matthew is on the worldly hearer's love of money: **The deceitfulness of wealth choke the word & it becomes unfruitful** (22).

Writing to Timothy, Paul said,

**those who want to get rich fall into temptation & a snare & many foolish & harmful desires which plunge men into ruin & destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, & some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith & pierced themselves with many griefs** (1 Tim 6:9–10).

Nothing is more hostile to the truth of the gospel than love for the riches & pleasures of this world. To those whose goal is to spend their life on worldly pleasures, Js 4:4 says, **do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.** John condemned worldliness with equal severity. He wrote, **Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him** (1 Jn 2:15). Did he mean it's a sin to love the outdoors or good food & people? Of course not. He's talking about the values & vices of this world, everything in the world's hatred toward God: **all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, & the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world** (16). That's what the weeds & thorns in the parable represent: selfishness, sinful desires, & the unholy belief system that dominates this world. Values like this are what suffocate the truth of God's Word in these hearts. Of course, material wealth & pleasure

aren't inherently evil. When properly prioritized, wealth & pleasure should be received with thanksgiving as gracious gifts from the hand of God (Dt 8:18; Eccl 5:18–19; Hos 2:8). But it's evil to love the gifts more than the Giver & to value temporary benefits higher than spiritual blessings. Paul told Timothy, **Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy** (1 Tim 6:17). Jesus often warned against riches. For example, He said, **it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven** (Mt 19:23) & **It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God** (Mk 10:25). On one occasion a rich young man turned away sorrowfully because Jesus told him to sell everything he had & give it to the poor & he was unwilling to do so (Lk 18:23). If that was true in Jesus' day among people whom we'd regard as very poor, how much truer must it be in ours? & riches don't choke a person all at once. It's a gradual process. Like the weeds in this parable. Slowly they strangle the budding of spiritual life within.

Here's what the roadside hearer, shallow hearer, & worldly hearer all have in common: They **bring no fruit to maturity** (Lk 8:14). The whole purpose of farming is to produce a crop. Soil that fails to produce a harvest is of no value. The hardened roadside will remain perpetually hard, the shallow soil will most likely not be seeded again, & the weedy soil will be burnt. If it can't be completely cleared, purged of weeds, & cultivated again, it will be abandoned as wasteland.

**4. The Good Soil** This is the open, receptive heart. This is the soil to which the entire parable has been building. It's the open heart, the heart that receives the gospel like good soil receives seed. This soil produces a good crop. **23**

This is the heart that **hears the word & understands it** (23). In Mk 4:20, He says it's a symbol of those who **hear the word & accept it & bear fruit**. He's describing someone with a heart so well prepared that when they hear the gospel, they receive it with understanding & true faith. The phrase Luke uses, they **hold it fast, & bear fruit with perseverance** (8:15), suggests a tenacious hold on the truth & perseverance in the faith. Perseverance with fruit is a sign of genuine, saving faith in Jesus. This is one of the key lessons of the whole parable: the mark of true faith is fruitful endurance. How much fruit will they produce? Matthew & Mark both say some a hundred fold,

some 60, & some 30 (Mt 13:23; Mk 4:20). Anything over tenfold would be a bumper crop for a farmer. While Jesus is clearly teaching what we know from experience, that Christians are not all equally fruitful, He's suggesting an abundance of fruit is the result of faith. The spiritual fruit in our lives should be obvious & not so scarce that it's hard to find. After all, we're **created in Christ Jesus for good works** (Eph 2:10). Jesus said, **Every branch not bearing fruit in Me, the Father, who is the Vinedresser, takes it away; & every one bearing fruit, He prunes it that it may bear more fruit** (Jn 15:2). Fruitfulness is the expected outcome of saving faith.

It's each of our duties to have a prepared heart, ready to **in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save our souls** (Js 1:21) & then nurture that seed to full fruitfulness. The OT tells us that Rehoboam **did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the LORD** (2 Chron 12:14). Here's the problem: We can't accomplish that for ourselves. We're already hopelessly sinful. We're fallen, guilty reprobates with shallow, weedy, rebellious hearts. Left to ourselves we'd just grow harder. Every exposure to the light would bake the hardness in even more, until we became as impervious to God's Word as a sidewalk is to grass seed (Rom 8:7-8). Only God Himself can plow & prepare a heart to receive the Word. He does it through the regenerating & sanctifying work of His Holy Spirit, who convicts **the world concerning sin, & concerning righteousness, & concerning judgment** (Jn 16:8). For those who believe, He awakens them spiritually (Rom 8:11) & enlightens their minds to the truth (1 Cor 2:10). He washes them clean (Ezek 36:25), removes the stony heart & gives them a new heart (26). He indwells His people & motivates them into righteousness (27). He engraves the truth of God on their hearts (Jer 31:33; 2 Cor 3:3), & pours the love of God into their hearts (Rom 5:5). We who believe in Jesus are totally dependent on the indwelling Spirit's work in our hearts to keep us tender, receptive, & ultimately fruitful. It's only the open heart that receives the gospel message & is saved. Not the hard heart. Not the shallow heart. Not the strangled heart. Which leads to this most important question: Do you have an open heart? Are you receptive to God's truth? Have you allowed God's Word to grow into your life so that you've turned from sin, placed your faith in Jesus, & allowed the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in your life? You may be thinking, *I wish my heart were like that, but it's hard, shallow, & strangled by this world's goods.*



*What can I do? Is my case hopeless?* No, it's not. It is true you can do nothing, any more than soil can change its nature. But although you can do nothing, there is One who can: the divine Gardener. He can break up the hard ground, uproot the rocks, & remove the thorns. That is your hope, not you, but God.

Earlier I mentioned the rich young man who turned from Jesus sorrowfully because he was unwilling to sell his riches. He seemed to be open to the gospel. He'd even asked Jesus how he might be saved. But riches were choking him & he was unable to leave them in order to become Christ's disciple. Jesus remarked on how difficult it is for the rich to enter God's kingdom, & the disciples asked, **Then who can be saved?** (Mt 19:15). They were beginning to recognize the seriousness of the problem. Jesus replied, **With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible** (Mt 19:26). & they are! Not just for someone else but it's possible for you, if God does the work. What you need to do is turn to Jesus & allow Him to give you an open heart that will receive the gospel. Admit that you have a hard, calloused, arrogant, greedy, sinful heart, & ask Him to save you anyway. Like David, pray, **Create in me a clean heart, O God, & renew a steadfast spirit within me** (Ps 51:10). Approach God with faith & submission, allowing Him to do the necessary work in your heart that you can't do. What is the soil of your heart? In all probability, there are some here today that the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 soils represent. If that's you, let the Holy Spirit work within your heart right now. Just because you may have a hard, rocky, or thorny heart, it doesn't mean it has to stay that way. Let the seed of His gospel take root in your heart & life. Study His claims in His Word with an open heart & see what He has done for you. This parable is also a reminder that when we proclaim the gospel or teach the Word of God to others, the results will vary according to the condition of the hearts of our hearers. Success or failure doesn't depend on our skill. Some of the seed we disperse will fall on hard, shallow, or weedy ground. But there's nothing wrong with the seed. If you're faithful at the task, some of the seed you throw will find well-cultivated soil, & the result will be abundant fruit. PRAY

If God has saved you, we welcome you to remember our Savior with us through the communion table. If your heart is still resistant to the good news of Jesus, this table has no meaning for you.

Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, at the Passover meal with His disciples. While doing so, He told them, & tells us, to remember Him, His sinless life, atoning death, & victorious resurrection, by eating bits of bread representing His body & drinking fruit of the vine representing His shed blood, His death in our place. He died for the forgiveness of our sins. Do you believe this? Have you placed your faith in Him completely? PRAY PASS

**While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, & after a blessing, He broke it & gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body" (Mt 26:26).** We eat of the bread remembering & thanking Him for saving us.

**When He had taken a cup & given thanks, He gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (27-28).** We drink of the cup remembering that He died in our place, allowing us to be forgiven.