

The Sower and the Seed

Matthew 13:1-23

Turn to Matthew 13. The Sower and the Seed is a parable about parables. It is in Matthew and Mark and Luke, and much the same in each of those. And it is also basically the first parable of Jesus in each of those Gospels.

Jesus called it the parable of “the sower” (13:19) (planting *seed*, not sewing *clothes*), and we usually call it “the sower and the seed,” as I have done. But the parable is not about the sower or the seed. It is about the soils, the different kinds of dirt in which the seed gets planted.

Jesus explains this parable, one of the few times he does that, and people are the soil. Different kinds of people are different kinds of dirt. The seed is the message about Jesus the Lord.

The question is: what happens in us when we hear? In this parable, the *messenger* does not matter much, and everyone hears the same *message*. The difference is different kinds of soil, which means: what do people *do* when they hear about Jesus the Lord. As Jesus explains the parable, it is different ways of *hearing*. What happens after we *hear*?

Our text, 13:1-23, has three parts, and we’ll go over it that way. 1st, Jesus tells the story; 2nd, Jesus explains the purpose of parables more generally; and 3rd, Jesus explains this parable.

The Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:1-9) - *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear.”*

Four Soils - Seed was scattered by hand in those days, and we actually have four separate stories. Jesus probably does not mean to say that each of the four represents a quarter of the seeds planted. Rather, these are four different things that commonly happen to seeds, then as now.

It is clear, though, that seed goes everywhere. In that sense this planter is not careful about where seed lands. Some seed falls on a path, the ground is hard, and birds come and eat the seed. Some falls where the soil is shallow with rocks underneath, so that after rain when they plant, the dirt is warm, and seed sprouts quickly. But when it gets hot, the soil dries, so the roots go deeper.

But the roots can’t go down because of the rocks, not much soil, so the plant withers and dies.

Some seeds land where the soil is fine but there are too many weeds there, thistles. So the seed sprouts nicely, but then it gets choked by weeds and never produces a harvest.

And some seed lands on the fourth kind of soil, which is just right, and the seed sprouts and grows and produces a fine harvest. Some plants produce a hundred seeds, some sixty seeds, and some thirty. It is not a skimpy crop, at all.

We don't know enough about farming then, and what exactly was being planted, to know if this harvest is miraculous or not. Genesis 26 (v12) says Isaac's crops yielded one hundredfold because the Lord blessed him. We'll just say 100x and 60x and 30x means "excellent harvest."

Some soil produced one hundred times what was sown, some sixty, and some thirty. Even the least that produces yield is still give a fine harvest. No skimpy harvest here.

The Purpose of Parables (13:10-17) - *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"* ¹¹ *He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.* ¹² *Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.* ¹³ *This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*

¹⁴ *In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:*

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵ *For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'*

¹⁶ *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.* ¹⁷ *For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

This is a difficult text, even the experts struggle a bit to understand what Jesus means here. It sounds like Jesus does not want to be understood at all. It sounds like he wants to hide the truth from outsiders. That's not like Jesus.

Furthermore, if Jesus wanted to hide the truth, he could just not speak at all. He spends the whole day telling parables to the large crowds. The reason for parables cannot be just to hide the truth, or he would not have spoken to them at all. Note v9. He does want them to hear.

The Mysteries of the Kingdom (13:11) – What mystery or secret has been given to the disciples (11:25-27)? Answer: they believe that God's great work is beginning, and that Jesus is at the center of it. They realize that in Jesus, God's kingdom is on the move.

There is a lot they don't know, but they left their boats to follow him, that much they know. And that puts us on the inside too. The crowds do not know this, and are not ready for it.

Why the Severe Sovereignty of Jesus' Explanation? – “It has been given to you, but not to them.” And the Isaiah prophecy is like this as well, it sounds suspiciously like God does not even want them to believe. It seems that understanding and believing the message is all God's choice.

There is a reason for this: Jewish opposition to Jesus. In Matthew 11-12, Jesus was criticized and attacked in different ways. In other places he taught and did miracles, but the people would not repent, would not turn to God or believe that God himself was working in Jesus.

For those who followed Jesus, this was horrible. God's kingdom is on the move, God is fulfilling his promises for Israel, and Israel does not want the kingdom!! How can that be? But the Jews are not interested! *Is God's plan failing? Does Israel's hardness spoil God's plan?*

No, God's plan is not failing. This parable of the sower, and this stern explanation for parables, is Jesus teaching them and us that God's plan is not failing. God is still sovereign, he has not been stumped or blocked by Jewish hardness. It was all predicted by Isaiah long ago.

If we look at this from followers who despair because of Jewish hardness, despair that God's plan is failing, then God's sovereignty in Jesus' explanation actually brings relief. And we need to grasp this for ourselves. Some things for SURE look to us like God's plan is failing, like God is not in control here, humans have blocked God. Jesus knew better.

Why the Parables? Parables were for those who had not been given the mystery of the kingdom. They did *not* think Jesus was at the center of the kingdom, and they were *not even close* to leaving everything to follow him. So Jesus gave them the truth in a veiled way, indirectly.

Parables hide in order to reveal. Do you remember what the last line of the parable was? The last line to the crowds? Verse 9: *whoever has ears, let them hear*. That's bait from Jesus at the end.

After the parable, then says, “Did you get it? Did you listen? There is something you need to hear. Have you ears to hear it?” The people were skeptical (Mt 11-12), so Jesus gave them hidden truth. They needed to be hungry for truth, and pursue it. Parables hide in order to reveal.

Until now Jesus spoke directly, like the sermon on the mount, Matthew 5-7. But there was resistance, “who does Jesus think he is, anyway?” So we read in 13:3 that now he teaches them many things in parables.

The Effect on Insiders – This section, and in fact the whole 23 verses, encourages us on the inside to be careful how we hear. When you hear words that tell you God is calling you to faith and obedience, one more time, what happens in you?

I'm not asking what you feel like. What do you do? Is your response “yes”? Or “no”? Are you in, or are you out? When he calls us to trust him, and live in his ways, do we pull back, or go in? That's what kind soil we are. Have we ears to hear?

The Remarkable Seed (13:11, 16-17) - *“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them... [If we understand that Jesus is at the center of what God is doing on earth, and we have put our trust in Jesus, the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to us. A great prize has been given to us.]*

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

This simple message, that God himself calls us to put our faith in Jesus, and worship and obey Jesus, because Jesus is the center of what God is doing on earth: that is called knowing the mysteries of the kingdom. That is the seed that the planter plants.

We don't see what those first followers saw, as they gathered privately around Jesus on that day. But in the deeper kind of “seeing” and “hearing” that Jesus has in mind, we are blessed, because God's Spirit has shown us the truth of it.

It is the incredible seed, the incredible message from God. The prophets knew it was coming, they longed see and hear, but they were too early. But we have heard it, and it has been given to us to grasp it. And now we yield a harvest as it shapes our lives.

Jesus Explains the Parable (13:18-23) - *“**Hear** then what the parable of the sower means:*

*¹⁹ When anyone **hears** the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.*

*²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who **hears** the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who **hears** the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ 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.”*

Parables are either analogies or allegories. An analogy is a story with a lesson, a story that teaches a truth, like Aesop's fables. An allegory is an analogy with something more: different characters in the story stand for different people or groups in the real world. Most of Jesus' parables are analogies, but not allegories. The sower and the seed is an allegory, because the different kinds of soil plainly represent different kinds of people. The basic rule in interpreting parables is that the parable is an analogy only, not an allegory, unless it is clear from the immediate context that Jesus intended the parable to be an allegory. Jesus gives an allegorical interpretation of the sower, so there is no doubt.

Other examples of allegorical parables: In Matthew 21, Jesus was questioned by the priests and elders, and in response told the parable of the two sons, and of the wicked tenants. After the parable of the two sons, he applied it directly to the priests and elders, and after the next parable we read that the priests and Pharisees knew had had told this against them. These are legitimately allegorical parables; but most are not.

Seed that falls on the path is when a person hears the message of God but has no interest, it goes right past them. Whether they were bored from the start, or felt interest but turned away, does not matter. The seed did not go in, and it is lost.

Seed on rocky soil starts well – these people immediately receive the message, and with joy. But when being connected to Jesus brings them ridicule or trouble, they immediately fall away.

In Greek the same word “immediately” is used twice, vv20 and 21, for how quickly they receive the word with joy, and also how quickly they leave when there is trouble. Following Jesus will bring us ridicule and trouble. That’s assumed. Receiving the message with joy does not count very much. A life of being Jesus’ disciple is what counts. This is about how we *hear*.

Some seed lands beside persistent weeds. These are people who receive the message about Jesus, and begin to follow. Two things make their faith unfruitful: the cares of life, and the deceit of wealth. The cares of life are regular troubles, of which there are many, and they distract us so that we only want to survive, get through another day, and trusting and obeying Christ gets lost.

The deceit of wealth – money and possessions promise us something that they cannot deliver, that is the consistent biblical view. They do give some good things, the Bible agrees with that, but not what they promise. Pursuing money and possessions occupies people enough that trusting and obeying Christ is lost.

And the problem is how we hear the message from God. When we heard, we did not understand that this message towers above anything else we will hear, that this is an eternal message that will change the whole universe. We did not understand how foolish it would be to let anything else distract us.

Jesus is telling all of this to insiders, to people who have already decided to follow him. The seed has sprouted, and is growing. Jesus is talking to us. In three kinds of people, the message produces real spiritual life, but only one of the three produces a crop.

Understand - Jesus described the fourth kind of soil as those who hear the word and understand it. The previous two, the rocky soil and the soil with thorns, also began to produce spiritual life, but then it failed. What does it mean to hear and understand?

Hearing with understanding means something like, “I will stay focused on this for the rest of my life. This message is the most important thing I could have heard. I want following Jesus to guide me every day.”

We *understand* that the message is more important than ridicule or troubles, I can't walk away because of those things. This message is too important to leave it because of cares, or because of wealth. Can't leave for *that*! That's hearing and understanding.

Only fate? This whole text sort of sounds like fate. To some it is given, and to some not. We are all either one kind of soil or another. The "fate" aspect is there on the surface, but underneath Jesus urges us all to be good soil. That's why he ends the parable with *whoever has ears, let them hear* (v9). He urges those outside to listen more attentively.

And he begins the explanation to insiders the same way: *Hear then the parable of the sower*. He wants us the insiders also to listen attentively. He invites us to upgrade our soil type.

This parable is also promise. If we give the call of God lots of room in our lives, it will make us fruitful. If we will keep putting our trust in him again, and obeying him again, we will be fruitful.

Jesus gives no hint of what fruitfulness is, in this chapter, probably the sermon on the mount already answered that. Jesus told the first disciples, "you follow me, and I will make you what you should be." The fruit is his business, attaching ourselves to Jesus, that's our business.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the story about two builders, a wise and a foolish builder. The foolish builder meant one who *hears*, but does *not obey*. The wise builder *hears* and *obeys*. In Matthew 7, the wise person *hears* and *obeys*.

In our parable, the good soil person *hears* and *understands*. The good soil person understands that this message from God must shape my life. "Hearing and understanding" is much the same as "hearing and obeying" in Matthew 7.

Hearing the words is not enough. Hearing with joy is not enough. The good soil says: "This message will capture my life. This message will shape my life." And we keep listening like that. And keep on. That's what makes us good soil. Amen.