

The Parable of the Sower
Matthew 13:1-9
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Matthew 13 begins a new section, where Jesus employs a series of parables in order to instruct His disciples. This follows the open opposition to Jesus by the religious leaders, climaxing with the accusation by the Pharisees that His miracle of healing a demon-possessed man was done by the power of the evil one (Matthew 12:24). While the people of Israel were amazed at His great works (Matthew 12:23), their general response to them was with indifference (Matthew 11:20-24). This failure to respond would mean that the reader will no longer see the words “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (cf. Matthew 3:2; 5:17; 10:7).

There is a direct correlation between Jesus teaching His disciples in Matthew 13 and turning from those who did not respond to Him in the prior chapter. Jesus adapts His teaching method to teaching His disciples regarding the coming kingdom rather than to continue to instruct those who are unrepentant among the people of Israel. The use of parables is to further teach those who have ears to hear (Matthew 13:9), while obscuring His teaching from those who do not hear and do not understand (Matthew 13:13).

The word “parable” is a transliteration of the Greek word PARABOLE, which means “to throw alongside.” Thus, it is a comparison for the purpose of metaphorically illustrating spiritual truth. Parables are a literary convention designed to convey a lesson of universal truth, and in the case of Jesus, a heavenly message. A parable then is an earthly, comparative story with a spiritual meaning.

These stories are not literal, historical accounts but are true-to-life depictions of reality. They are fictional, but are not science fiction. These stories are common and timeless. One does not need to have a vast understanding of the Hebrew culture to understand them, since they are normal events that could naturally occur where people live. It is valid to consider that Jesus knew that His stories would be repeated throughout time and place and must be understandable to all people.

Yet these parables are stories drawn from Israel in the first century and would be uniquely understandable for the people that Jesus came to dwell among. Therefore, the historical context is important. Often, the parables of Jesus relate to the kingdom of God, of which our Lord came to offer to the people of Israel, only to be rejected by those He taught.

The message of the parables is simple and straight-forward. People have sometimes sought to allegorize parables to bring out some hidden, esoteric meaning. Yet the meaning of them is evident to those who have been given the ability to understand spiritual truth.

Matthew 13 is not the first time that Jesus taught by using a parable (although it is the first time Matthew uses the word “parable”). Jesus used the metaphor of a house built upon rock versus sand to implore people to not only hear His words but to act upon them in Matthew 7:24-27. Jesus used the metaphors of a wedding, patching an unshrunk cloth, and putting new wine into old wineskins, to communicate the new nature of God’s work through the Messiah in Matthew 9:15-17. Jesus used the analogy of children taunting other children in the marketplaces to compare the Jews’ condemnation of John the Baptist with their hypocritical condemnation of Himself in Matthew 11:16-19. In Matthew 12:33 (cf. 7:15-20), Jesus used the analogy of a tree and its fruit to identify false teachers. In the immediately preceding context, Jesus used the example of an unclean spirit returning to an empty house to describe the Jews of His day (Matthew 12:43-45).

However, in Matthew 13 we find an entire discourse dedicated to parabolic instruction, and specifically with regard to the kingdom of God. As a result of the rejection of the Messiah, Jesus’ ministry became focused upon His disciples to whom He gave instruction regarding the coming kingdom of God. This kingdom will be reserved for those with ears to hear and various aspects of the kingdom will be explained throughout this chapter.

The structure of Matthew 13 has been described as a chiasm, with the focus upon the parable of the weeds in 13:34-43:

- A The introduction (13:1-2)*
- B The first parable to the crowd (13:3-9)*
- C An explanatory interlude (13:10-23)*
- D Three more parables to the crowd (13:24-33)*
- E The parable of the weeds (13:34-43)*
- D' Three parables to the disciples (13:44-48)*
- C' An explanatory interlude (13:49-51)*
- B' The last parable to the disciples (13:52)*
- A' The conclusion (13:53)*

However, this structure is perhaps a bit forced upon the text and it is better to observe distinction between the first four parables that were addressed to the crowds (13:2-35) and the last four parables that were addressed to the disciples (Matthew 13:36-53). This structure is consistent with the emphasis on turning from the crowds to the disciples.

The setting (13:1-2)

This chapter begins with a connection to the prior chapter. The very same day that Jesus healed the blind and mute demon-possessed man (Matthew 12:22) and taught His series of condemnation upon the evil generation (Matthew 12:25-45), He taught these eight parables of the kingdom of heaven. This is also apparent from the phrase “*Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea,*” implying the encounter continues outside.

A large crowd gathered and Jesus took up a common position of a rabbinical teacher by sitting as He had done earlier in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1). He got into a boat to sit down to teach, which would have allowed His voice to carry further and provided some space for His address to the entire throng of multitudes before Him. The “whole crowd” remained standing near the water in an attentive fashion.

The story (13:3-8)

Matthew states that Jesus spoke many things in parables. This is the first occurrence of the word. This certainly references the eight parables in chapter 13. The first (and most well-known) of the eight parables is the parable of the sower. Although this parable is commonly referred to as the parable of the sower, the focus is not upon the sower, but rather is upon the different soils that the sower sows his seed. As such, some will refer to this opening parable as “the parable of the soils.” The different soils will come to represent the different responses to the message of the kingdom, as explained by Jesus in Matthew 13:18-23.

This parable is the most preeminent of the eight that Jesus spoke, not only because of its position as the introductory parable, but because of what Jesus says about it in the parallel account in the Gospel of Mark. Mark introduces Jesus’ explanation of this parable with the words, “*And He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?’*” (Mark 4:13). If we do not understand the parable of the sower, we cannot expect to understand any of the parables of Jesus.

In this parable, the farmer is described as scattering seed (13:3b) that falls in various places, the normal convention for sowing in primitive agriculture. The first place that his seed falls is “*beside the road.*” When the farmer went out to sow, he did not intend to place his seed upon the path but the description is a passive one, that some seed fell beside the path. The reason there is a road, or better translated as a path, is because of the foot traffic that has trampled the soil.

This first soil has become hard-packed because the farmer, and perhaps his fellow workers, needed access to his crop over the years of planting and harvesting. Because the soil by the path was hard, the seed did not penetrate the soil. This left the seed exposed and the result was the birds came and ate the seed laying by the path.

The second place where some of the farmer's seed was scattered was "*on rocky places.*" This seed, along with the last two instances in this parable, is called "others" (ALLOS in Greek), which means it is another seed of the same kind. Therefore, just as there is only one sower, there is also only one type of seed. The variable in this parable is the soil, not the sower nor the seed.

The rocky soil differs from the path in that there is enough soil that exists for the seed to grow but the soil is described as shallow. This type of soil allows for quicker germination of the seed because the rocks that lay upon the shallow soil provide increased warmth from the sun, producing faster growth. However, this same effect the rocks had upon the soil was also harming the plant as it grew. The additional heat produced by the rocks scorched the plant as it grew.

If the soil had been good soil under the rocks, the plant might have survived the heat, but without the benefit of depth of soil, the root system was limited and the plant became more vulnerable. As a result of this shallow soil, the plant withered because its roots were not stable enough to deliver the needed nutrients for its fruitfulness.

The third place that some seed fell was among the thorns. Thorns were associated with thornbushes and more widely, for any type of prickly weed. These types of weeds are prevalent in the arid Middle East. As weeds, they compete with plants for moisture and nutrients from the soil, with roots that also limit the growth of plants. As "*the thorns came up,*" or as the weeds grew, the plant from the germinated seed would be choked out and would be unable to mature to the point of fruitfulness.

Finally, there were other seeds that fell upon good soil that produced a crop. The word for crop (KARPOS), used in each synoptic account, simply means either fruit, produce or offspring. It does not tell us exactly what type of plant was intended by Jesus. If the seed was producing grain, this would be a large harvest of grain seeds. Some view the harvest as phenomenally large while others view the crop yield as within the norm, but this is impossible to ascertain without knowing the type of seed. Yet the good soil was fertile, plowed, and free of rocks and thorns.

The significance of the numbers is very likely a mere description of degrees of fruitfulness among the seeds. It would be fanciful to read much into these numbers. What is communicated is that the crop from the good soil varied in abundance depending on the seed. Some seeds were much more fruitful than others.

Therefore, we ought not to expect the same degree of fruitfulness from all people. Some people will be much more effective than others. There are various reasons for this including:

1. Maturity. Different people mature in their faith at different rates.
2. Idleness. Some will let ministry occasions pass them by.
3. Giftedness. People have been given different abilities by God.
4. Opportunity. People have their specific roles (Ephesians 2:10).
5. Longevity. The Lord grants people different life spans.

Interestingly, Matthew's account differs from the other synoptic Gospels:

- *"yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty"* (Mt. 13:7)
- *"yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold"* (Mark 4:8)
- *"produced a crop a hundred times as great"* (Luke 8:8)

Matthew and Mark's order of the numbers are reversed and Luke only refers to the number one hundred. Luke's summary and Matthew and Mark's quotation shows that these words are not necessarily quoted exactly in the Gospel text, but are rather an accurate portrayal of the essence of what Jesus said. Our translations used quotation marks that signify a direct quotation but the Greek text does not contain such features.

This approach of the use of paraphrase in place of direct quotation is very similar to how the New Testament often quotes the Old Testament. Rarely is there an exact word-for-word translation when an Old Testament text is referenced in the New Testament. This of course does not invalidate the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture, since it is the original text that is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16). But we must recognize the literary norms contained in the Bible.

There is an active debate regarding the state of salvation of each type of soil. Everyone agrees on the first and the last case, that the seed on the path represents an unbeliever and the seed on the good soil represents true believers. At issue is the seed on the rocky soil and the seed among the thorns.

The answer to this question does not come from this specific text but rather from a theological study of the Scripture. Those that view believers can have a life of total fruitlessness, with no outward display of Christian character or ministry, will understand the last three soils as producing believers in Christ. Conversely, those who believe that Christians will necessarily manifest a changed life to some degree will consider only the seed sown on the good soil as being true believers in Christ.

There is ample evidence to hold to the view that true believers bear fruit that will remain. Jesus told us this directly in John 15:16, *"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain."* Paul wrote that this work of God will be completed in us, *"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6). Because of God's sovereignty in salvation, we can know that the One who chose us before the foundation of the world will deliver us to fruitfulness.

The saying (13:9)

The phrase "he who has ears to hear, let him hear" is an important conclusion to this section of Scripture. It is used similarly in other places in the Bible (Matthew 11:15; 13:43; Luke 14:35; Revelation 2:7; 13:9). It means more than a call to careful consideration to what Jesus had taught. It is not only an exhortation to interpret and apply the parable, since Jesus would later interpret the parable for them in Matthew 13:18-23.

Implicit in this saying is that not everyone has ears to hear. Just as the ministry of Jesus included the miracle of bringing physical hearing to the physically deaf (cf. Matthew 11:5; 12:22), His ministry also included bringing spiritual hearing to those who were spiritually deaf. Apart from God's work of illumination, the word of the Lord is foolishness, *"but a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised"* (1 Corinthians 2:14).

This truth that people are unable to perceive spiritual truth is taught by Jesus in Matthew 13:12-13, *"For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."* The reason anyone has ears to hear is because it has been granted to them (Matthew 13:11).

Conclusion

The lessons from the parable of the sower are numerous. We can expect a varied response to the word of God. Many will be impervious to the significance of God's truth. The word of God will have no effect on their lives. Others will exhibit aspects of responsiveness to God's word, but for various reasons which will be explained by Jesus in Matthew 13:20-22, there will be no lasting fruitfulness. Finally, there will be some that God has allowed to have ears to hear, leading to abundant fruitfulness. We must recognize these responses to God and be undaunted in our ministry, regardless of the degree of sensitivity to the truth.

Also, this parable demonstrates there is no variation in the sowing process that produced a more fruitful outcome. The same scattering of seed produced different responses in this parable. Our task of being faithful in the communication of God's word is sufficient for those who have been granted by God to know the mysteries of the kingdom to respond in fruitfulness. We ought to be wary of thinking that anyone is responding to God because of our methodology or our programs for them. While we can fail in our communication of the truth, we cannot create fruitfulness in anyone beyond God's work in using the communication of the truth for His purposes.

Finally, Jesus spoke this parable to the crowds. He exhorted the crowds to hear the parable when He explained the meaning of it (Matthew 13:18-23). Within the large crowd were those represented by each of the four soils, and who were not granted the ability to hear (Matthew 13:11). It included those who were His disciples and those who were decidedly against Him (Matthew 12:14, 24). Nevertheless, the Lord instructed them all, giving everyone an ample opportunity to respond.

Whereas God has granted some to know the mysteries of the kingdom, this should not deter us from the ministry of the word of God to all people. While God knows those who are His, we do not. We may even consider those who temporarily give evidence of spiritual life to be saved, while the reality is that some may be like the seed sown on the rocky soil or among the thorns. We ought to expect that people fall away for a variety of reasons, *"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 [a] it would be shown that they all are not of us"* (1 John 2:19)