

**The Parable of the Sower Explained**  
**Matthew 13:18-23**  
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Matthew 13 is the third of five discourse sections of the Gospel of Matthew, with each one ending with the phrase, “*when Jesus had finished*” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1). This block of teaching by Jesus employs the use of parables, which serve 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 parables are a comparison for the purpose of metaphorically illustrating spiritual truth, a literary convention designed to convey a lesson of universal truth, and in the case of Jesus, a heavenly message. They are a fictional, earthly, comparative story with a spiritual meaning.

Matthew 13 is a series of eight parables, each involving truth regarding the kingdom of heaven. The first parable of Matthew 13 is the Parable of the Sower, which is foundational, for if we do not understand this parable, we cannot expect to understand any of the parables of Jesus (Mark 4:13). This parable instructs the reader about the nature of responsiveness to Jesus. The message of the kingdom will be heard by many, but not all will understand it in order to become fruitful in their service to our Lord.

The Parable of the Sower was taught in Matthew 13:3-8 and Jesus provided an explanation of this parable in Matthew 13:18-23. Between the parable and the explanation is a section where Jesus answered the question posed by His disciples, “why do You speak to them in parables?” His answer was to grant understanding about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to them, while hiding this from those who were against Him (Matthew 13:11-13). The followers of Jesus are blessed because they have been granted this revelation, which many prophets and righteous men from earlier times longed to know (Matthew 13:16-17).

**The exhortation to listen (13:18)**

Matthew is the only Gospel that includes this exhortation before the explanation of the parable. He is also the only writer that includes the statement from Jesus that those who see and hear His words with understanding are blessed. Because they have been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, they have a special responsibility to listen and respond to His words. We must always be thankful for the Lord’s grace in giving understanding to us and be compelled therefore to listen intently to His words, with the appropriate application.

## **The seed sown beside the road (13:19)**

Of the eight parables of Matthew 13, only this parable and the following one about the tares among the wheat are provided with an additional explanation. This is likely to help the disciples learn how to understand His parables.

Each of the four soils include the description, *“the man who hears the word.”* Verse 19 clarifies that this word refers to the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven. The first words that Matthew quotes Jesus as saying involve the kingdom, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matthew 4:17). His initial public ministry was described by Matthew as *“proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom”* (Matthew 4:23; cf. 9:35).

The first recorded public discourse, the Sermon on the Mount, is filled with words about the kingdom of heaven:

- *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (5:3).
- *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (5:10).
- *“Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”* (5:19-20).
- *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven”* (6:10).
- *“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* (6:33).
- *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter”* (7:21).

The disciples were sent out by Jesus to preach His same message, *“And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’”* (10:7). The kingdom of heaven was clearly central to the message of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the parables of Matthew 13 will expand upon the gospel of the kingdom and that the first parable relates to how people will respond to the word of the kingdom. Luke 8:11, *“the seed is the word of God,”* shows the correspondence between the word of the kingdom and the Scripture itself. The response to the message of the kingdom is the response to God Himself and to the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 4:23; 9:35).

The unique difference between the first soil in the parable and each of the three following soils is that the seed sown beside the road is *“anyone who hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it.”* This failure to understand is in contrast to the good soil of verse 23, which *“is the man who hears the word and understands it.”*

This verse helps the understanding of what Jesus meant in Matthew 13:13-17 regarding hearing and seeing. Those who are blessed by what they see and hear are also understanding what they see and hear. It is apparent that all people represented by each of the four soils “hear” but not all “understand.” We are blessed when we hear and we understand.

There is a clear correspondence between the soil beside the road and the heart upon which the word of the kingdom has been sown. The heart that does not understand is hard, like the road that does not allow for the germination of the seed. Hard-hearted people are not only uninterested in the gospel of the kingdom, but they do not understand the word as well. *“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Furthermore, the reason for the lack of understanding is attributed to the *“the evil one,”* which is a reference to Satan. The parables of Matthew 13 are the only place in the synoptic gospels where the devil is referred to in this way (cf. 13:25, 28, 38). John the apostle uses this title frequently (John 17:15; 1 John 2:13-14; 3:12; 5:18-19). Just as the birds came and ate the seeds that were sown on the hard path, the evil one snatches away what has been sown in the heart.

Satan is called the evil one because of his intent to bring evil in opposition to God. The evil one quickly and suddenly snatches the word that was sown in the heart. The unbelievers reject God, not only because they are dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1), but because they are held captive by the snare of the devil to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26). This should lead us toward compassion for those who hear the word but do not understand, as they are the victims of the devil, who prevents them from believing apart from the Lord’s divine intervention.

This is why when Jesus saw the crowd of people, He felt compassion for them because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. We ought to grieve for those who have the word of the kingdom snatched away from them by the evil one because, in the words of the Gospel of Luke, *“they will not believe and be saved”* (Luke 8:12).

### **The seed sown on the rocky places (13:20-21)**

The difference between the seed sown beside the road and the seed sown on the rocky places is the immediate response of joy in this second case. Because of this enthusiastic reception of the word of the kingdom, there would naturally be an expectation of great fruitfulness. Instead of such fruitfulness, this one is said that “*immediately he falls away*” because the response is only temporary, since “*he has no firm root in himself.*” In both the case of the initial response and the later falling away, the adverb “immediately” was used by Jesus to describe the quick and sudden change by the person who is represented by the seed sown on the rocky places.

Unlike the first case of the seed sown beside the road and the last case of the seed sown in the good soil, there is no statement regarding the person’s ability to understand. Rather, Luke’s gospel describes it as “*they believe for a while*” (Luke 8:13), implying some limited degree of understanding. Their understanding was superficial and emotional, without a root of faith (the word “firm” is not in the Greek text). This is evidenced by the person’s falling away, which proves there was never true saving faith since “*the one who endures to the end, he will be saved*” (Matthew 24:13). The seed sown on the rocky places has no root whatsoever.

The reason for the eventual falling away is because “*he has no firm root in himself.*” This lack of root is due to the soil being rocky, which limited the depth of the soil and the ability for the root to grow. Thus there was no lasting fruit because there was no root.

The circumstances that produced the falling away was when affliction or persecution arose. If there was a true root of faith, there would have been an ability to withstand these difficulties. Therefore, affliction or persecution was not the cause of the falling away, but was simply the instrumentality that brought into light the evidence of the lack of true root that led to temporary and superficial faith in Christ.

Affliction (THLIPSIS) literally means “to crush or press together” and persecution (DIOGMOS) literally means “to chase or pursue.” Affliction is a more general term to describe the difficulties that will arise from the circumstances of life, while persecution is a more specific term to describe the difficulties that will arise from those who will persecute followers of Christ. The lack of root will be seen “*when affliction or persecution arises.*” There is a full expectation that these will occur and such superficial faith will be shown as temporary in the falling away.

Some who immediately hear the word and receive it with joy are expressing such superficial faith because their sole motive is their own benefit. When people see the blessing that faith can bring them, they are instantly joyful. However, because of their self-orientation, they will fall away once circumstances exist that bring affliction or persecution. This is because the momentary blessing that they quickly enjoyed becomes replaced by the momentary hardship that they will suffer.

Those who come to faith in order to have a better life on earth will soon be disappointed, for the difficulties of life do not diminish with faith. In some respect, these difficulties will increase because of the persecution of those who are sinful. At a minimum, the responsibility of our service to others for the sake of Christ will incur certain additional burdens that those who are serving themselves will find onerous.

Those with no root will immediately fall away when they realize these hardships outweigh their selfish benefit. On the other hand, those with the true root of faith will *“consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed”* to them (Romans 8:18). Those with faith will eagerly embrace the perspective of Paul from 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, *“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”*

### **The seed sown among the thorns (13:22)**

The seed sown among the thorns is the person who once again hears the word of the kingdom, has some limited understanding, but is unfruitful as compared with the seed sown on the good soil. The imagery of thorns, or prickly weeds that grow in the land of Palestine, represents the concerns that compete against a person's commitment to Jesus Christ. These are identified as *“the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth.”*

This seed among the thorns does not have the same emotional response of joy as the seed on the rocky places. When this person hears the word, it holds a certain place of value and importance. Yet when other considerations begin to compete with the word of the kingdom, it becomes evident that there was never a sufficient commitment to the significance of its meaningfulness. Other interests begin to gain control and choke the word out so there is no fruitfulness.

The first specific interest that Jesus highlights is the “*worries of the world.*” The word translated “world” literally means “age,” and references an extended period of time. The New International Version brings this sense about when it translates this phrase as “*the worries of this life.*” In contrast to the life to come, the pressing concerns that exist in this present world are passing away. These present worries are set against true faith in God, who knows our needs. “*Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*” (Matthew 6:31-34).

As with the worries of this world, the phrase “deceitfulness of riches” uses anthropomorphism, or attributing a human characteristic to an inanimate object, to describe the negative effect that both the world and riches can have on people. Riches are deceitful in the sense that they are viewed erroneously by mankind. To be deceitful is to present a false impression in order to mislead others. Riches are deceitful in that people will attribute abilities to them that do not correspond to reality.

Specifically, there are a few ways that people mistakenly view riches as accomplishing what they cannot. Most fundamentally, since wealth can purchase goods and services, we can mistakenly believe that greater wealth brings greater enjoyment and meaningfulness in our life. Also, since wealth is measurable, we can mistakenly believe that greater wealth equals greater significance in life. And likewise, people mistakenly believe that greater wealth will bring them greater safety and security. All these things are the deceitfulness of riches, leading us to trust something that cannot accomplish what many perceive it can.

Jesus spoke directly to this deceitfulness in Luke 12:15, “*Then He said to them, ‘Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.’”* Greed, therefore, is the result of being deceived about riches, thinking that our life is about the wealth that we possess.

Paul connected the greedy love of money with a lack of faith in 1 Timothy 6:10, “*For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*” A heart that loves money is inconsistent with true faith that brings contentment, for it is impossible to love both God and money (Matthew 6:24; cf. 1 Timothy 6:6-8).

### **The seed sown on the good soil (13:23)**

Unlike the other seeds, the explanation of the seed sown on the good soil is very similar to the original parable. The basic additional explanation is that the seed refers to the man who hears the word and understands it. All four seeds heard the word but only the seed sown on the good soil understood the word. The word for understood literally means “to bring together,” like one would bring the pieces of a puzzle together.

Mark and Luke help clarify what was meant by “understand.” Mark 4:20 includes the concept of acceptance with, “*And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.*” Luke provides even more information, “*But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance*” (Luke 8:15).

From the other synoptics, we can see that the fruitful man does more than simply comprehend the word, he accepts it with an honest and good heart. This is synonymous with belief, with a sincere embrace of the truth for oneself. Furthermore, he holds it fast and bears fruit with perseverance. Jesus described this 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.*” Therefore, the man who hears and accepts the word will persevere because he has been chosen and appointed by the Lord.

While this fruitfulness is from the Lord, there is variation in the abundance of the crop, “*some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.*” Fruitfulness is used in the New Testament to refer to our good works (Colossians 1:10), to ministry to the unsaved (Romans 1:13), to the sharing of money for God’s work (Romans 15:25-28), to our Christian character (Galatians 5:22-23), and to our praise to God (Hebrews 13:15). Taken together, we see that fruitfulness is simply the result of God’s work in our heart that brings praise and honor to Him in our lives of obedience to Him in service to others.

Experientially, we are aware of variations in our own responsiveness to God in each of these areas. But with all true believers there will be fruitfulness, which will persevere to the end and remain. There is no true believer that is unfruitful because true disciples are proven by their fruitfulness, “*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples*” (John 15:8).

## **Conclusion**

The parable of the sower is the foundational parable in Matthew 13. The other seven parables will describe what the kingdom of heaven is like, but the parable of the sower describes how a person enters the kingdom of heaven. True faith hears the word of the kingdom and understands it, from an honest and good heart. Those who temporarily respond, only to fall away when afflictions, persecutions, worries of this world, and deceitfulness of riches come, are proven to not possess true saving faith.

This lack of faith should therefore be expected in our ministry for Christ. Many will hear the word and either not respond at all, like the seed on the path, or respond momentarily, like the seed on the rocky places and the seed among the thorns. We should therefore refrain from asserting our knowledge of anyone's eternal destiny based upon a person's limited responsiveness to the word of God. This is why there are so many who make professions of faith in Christ and even will receive the word with joy, only to no longer follow Christ.

In our human condition, with a sinful nature and living in a fallen world, we can at times receive the word like the soil on the path, where we do not respond. We can also be susceptible to weakness of faith in times of affliction or persecution. The worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches are always a threat to choke out the word of God in our lives. The more we resist these temptations, the more we will be the seed on the good soil that brings forth fruit a hundredfold.