

Chapter 49: The Parable of the Four Soils

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

In Matthew 13, Jesus offers one of his most comprehensive sections of teaching on the nature of the kingdom of heaven. In his wisdom, however, our Lord did not distill his message into a tidy treatise of systematic theology. To be sure, the theology of this chapter is robust; however, Jesus presents his theology in the vivid language of parables. Using illustrations from the most ordinary scenes of life, Jesus draws out extraordinary spiritual truth. In Matthew 13:1–9, Jesus begins by offering an explanation for the different responses of people to the gospel of his kingdom. Through this, Jesus pleads with his original hearers and those of us reading his words today: *hear and understand the word of the kingdom.*

The Unyielding Heart (Matt. 13:1–4, 18–19)

In Matthew 12, Jesus began to face rising opposition from the Pharisees and the scribes. Our Lord cut through the confusion to identify this opposition as a demonic, spiritual attack (Matt. 13:31–32, 39, 43–45). In Matthew 13, Jesus begins to take up the task of explaining why there are so many “varied responses in Galilee to Jesus and his preaching of the kingdom of heaven.”¹ In this chapter, Jesus explains the reception, growth, progress, and value of the kingdom of heaven through several *parables*—that is, though short stories about ordinary events that illustrate some aspect of spiritual matters.

In the history of interpretation, parables have been interpreted in different ways.² Through the Middle Ages, parables were interpreted allegorically, where every detail was mapped onto some biblical or spiritual point of connection. All manner of fanciful interpretations were proposed during this time, so that one’s imagination became the only limit of the interpretational range of the parables. Then, during the 20th century, a few influential scholars argued that each parable made one—and *only* one—point. For example, the parable of the sower was often interpreted as exclusively making the point that the kingdom of God would assuredly grow, in spite of appearances of failure. More recently, scholars have recognized that if allegorical interpretation was too broad, single-point interpretation is too narrow. So, the general trend is to recognize that parables may have “allegorical elements,” but without trying to press each detail in ways that do not fit the main thrust of the passage. This is the general method that I will be following here.

So, we read, “That same day [lit: ‘on that day’] Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea” (v. 1). Hagner notes that “in that culture, teachers sat (cf. 5:1; 24:3).”³ Since Jesus was already a

¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 499.

² This general history of interpretation appears in most commentaries, which I am summarizing.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 368.

teacher held in high regard by the crowds (Matt. 7:28), the crowds flocked to hear him teach: “And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach” (v. 2). Morris makes an interesting observation: “Mostly in this Gospel lengthy pieces of teaching are addressed to disciples, but this one is aimed at the crowds.”⁴ This does not mean, however, that Jesus is seeking to make his message as publicly accessible as possible, as he will explain privately to his disciples in Matthew 7:10–17. Rather, Jesus’ purpose in these parables was to conceal his message in plain sight, so that he spoke to the crowd “many things in parables” (v. 3a), but that he did so entirely by speaking in mysterious parables (Matt. 7:34).

Jesus begins with what is commonly called the “parable of the sower,” but that is really a parable of the four soils onto which the sower’s seeds fall. As we study this parable, we will study the parable itself in conjunction with the interpretation of the parable that Jesus gives later in this chapter in Matthew 13:18–23.⁵ So, Jesus begins, “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them” (vv. 3b–4). Clearly, Jesus is identifying himself as the sower who is sowing seed, which is “the word of the kingdom” (v. 19). Then, Jesus begins to discuss various ways in which his hearers did or did not receive his message, using imagery of various kinds and qualities of soil. As Calvin draws out an important warning from Christ’s words:

He only intended to warn us, that, in many persons, the seed of life is lost on account of various defects, in consequence of which it is either destroyed immediately, or it withers, or it gradually degenerates. That we may derive the greater advantage from this warning, we ought to bear in mind, that he makes no mention of despisers who openly reject the word of God, but describes those only in whom there is some appearance of docility.⁶

Jesus is not speaking to the hostile Pharisees, but to the thronging crowds. It is not enough to be better than the Pharisees; Jesus requires a genuine commitment that many of the crowd were not willing to make.

As for the “birds” who “came and devoured” those seeds as they fell on the hard path, Jesus explains that this illustrates the work of the “evil one” who “comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart” (v. 19). Lenski is probably right when he writes this:

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 335.

⁵ One important detail that our plan misses when we study this parable and its interpretation together is the emphasis that Jesus puts on how his *disciples* are given unique insight into the interpretation of the parables in the intervening passage in Matthew 13:10–17. From this, in v. 18, Jesus emphatically says, “You, therefore, hear the parable of the sower”; however, the word “you” is often left untranslated, as in the ESV: “Hear then the parable of the sower” (v. 18). Morris writes, “Jesus has made the point that the parables are meant to conceal truth from those who lack genuine religious seriousness (like his scribal opposition), and he proceeds to set his close followers apart from that kind of approach to religious truth. The parable may go over the heads of Jesus’ enemies and of the careless crowd, but those who have committed themselves to Jesus will not remain in ignorance.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 345.)

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:113.

We need not regard the birds as devils (plural), they represent Satan in his different methods of snatching the Word away from a heart. At one time he tells a man that the Word which disturbs the conscience is mere exaggeration and only unbalances the mind; again, that it is uncertain, that there is no solid fact in it, that no up-to-date man believes it; then, that the preachers themselves do not believe it, that they preach it only to make an easy living and are really hypocrites as their own actions show. Endless are these birds through which Satan operates.⁷

In our day, the project of sexual liberation is one of the Satan's main snares to draw people away from faith in Christ, since sexual immorality has unusual power to destroy faith (see 1 Cor. 6:18). Whatever the method, Jesus is here describing "the unresponsive, insensible, callous heart, the heart of the person who by persistent refusal to walk in the light has become accustomed hardly even to listen to the message as it is being proclaimed."⁸ Satan's first goal is always to snatch away the word of the kingdom before it can have any power at all in a person's life.

The Unrooted Heart (Matt. 13:5–6, 20–21)

Next, Jesus speaks about the rocky soil: "Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away" (vv. 5–6). Jesus' warning to those who never embrace the gospel makes clear sense; however, this part of the parable raises a number of questions. Why would people who seem to believe fall away? What does that mean about the nature of their faith? On the one hand, their eagerness to believe the gospel of the kingdom ("immediately...with joy"; v. 20) is to be commended.⁹ On the other hand, Jesus explains that their faith ultimately withers and dies. What should we make of this?

The problems arise when these individuals begin to experience "tribulation or persecution...on account of the word" (v. 21). The word "tribulation" means "trouble that puts one under pressure."¹⁰ This is a person, then, who "immediately, impulsively, gladly, he as it were jumps up to accept the message. He is thrilled and enthused, may even be sufficiently affected to shed a tear. Once the spell has subsided he seems to have forgotten all about it and returns to his former sinful life."¹¹ As Lenski observes, these people are more alike the the people symbolized by the hard soil than we might realize at first, given the initial growth: "where the soil is shallow, the ugly rock, the hidden hardness in the man's heart are found, he 'is caught.'"¹² Calvin concludes, then, by writing that "none are partakers of true faith, except those who are scaled with the Spirit of adoption, and who sincerely call on God as their Father; and as that Spirit is never extinguished, so it is impossible that the faith,

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 519.

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 559.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:115.

¹⁰ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 541.

¹¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 560.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 520.

which he has once engraven on the hearts of the godly, shall pass away or be destroyed.”¹³

The Uncommitted Heart (Matt. 13:7, 22)

Jesus continues: “Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them” (v. 7). Once again, there are differences and similarities to the previous kinds of soil. Unlike the first soil, but like the second soil, this thorny soil permits some initial growth. This third soil is unlike the second soil in an important respect, however: “The luxuriant growth of the thorns shows that there is nothing wrong with the soil here; the problem is that it is already occupied and there is no room for a new type of vegetation....The plants do not necessarily die, but they cannot produce grain because of the competition for light and nourishment.”¹⁴

In this case, the soil of these hearts are filled with “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches [which] choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (v. 22). Hendriksen writes:

Similarly a heart filled with worry with respect to the workaday world and beclouded by dreams about riches thwarts any influence for good that might otherwise proceed from the entrance of the kingdom message. Such a heart is preoccupied. It has no room for calm and earnest meditation on the word of the Lord. Should any such serious study and reflection nevertheless attempt to gain entrance, it would immediately be choked off.¹⁵

In this passage, the pressure to turn back from discipleship is not so much external (the threat of tribulation or persecution) as internal, by the pressures of our own desires for this world and the things of this world (cf. 1 John 2:15).

The Unencumbered Heart (Matt. 13:8–9, 23)

Finally, Jesus comes to the good soil: “Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (v. 8). In this case, Jesus explains that “this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (v. 23). Calvin rightly comments that, in part, this comment distinguishes between those of genuine faith and those who are insincere in the other three manners; however, another part of what Jesus intends is “to arouse his disciples to consider attentively that doctrine which is not readily and easily understood by all.”¹⁶ This latter part is what Jesus means when he exhorts his hearers, “he who has ears, let him hear” (v. 9).

Importantly, Jesus explains that the good soil will produce different yields: “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (v. 8). Now, from one perspective, it is important to keep in mind that the “Word as such is, indeed, a fixed entity which is neither to be increased or decreased; its

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:115–16.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 505.

¹⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 561.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:101.

multiplication lies in its spread in one heart and from one heart to other hearts. This is how the Word bears fruit.”¹⁷ So, to some degree, this is an exhortation to us to conduct ourselves seriously in our spiritual lives: “We ought to labor, no doubt, to pull out the thorns; but as our utmost exertion will never succeed so well, but that there will always be some remaining behind, let each of us endeavor, at least, to deaden them, that they may not hinder the fruit of the word.”¹⁸ Still, Jesus is clearly teaching that the varying yields are all “acceptable,” since each arises from the good soil.¹⁹ The point is not to pit believers against each other in fruit-bearing competitions. Rather, the point is that, just as only good trees will produce good fruit (Matt. 12:33–35), so also only good soil will produce good grain.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom relate to Jesus’ teaching about spiritual warfare in the previous chapter? What is a parable? Why does Jesus use parables to teach about the kingdom? How should we interpret parables? In the parable of the sower/four soils, what is Jesus teaching when he warns about the hard soil? What would an unyielding heart look like? What ways might the evil one use to snatch away the word from your heart?
2. What does Jesus mean when he warns about the rocky soil of the unrooted heart? How does the growth of the plant in the rocky soil contrast with the lack of growth in the hard soil? What kind of a situation is Jesus describing by this “immediately...with joy” (v. 20) response? Why does this kind of heart ultimately fall away? How, then, is the unrooted heart similar to the unyielding heart in the end? What external pressures threaten your own faith?
3. What does Jesus mean when he warns about the thorny soil of the uncommitted heart? How is the growth of this plant in thorny soil similar to and different from the seeds scattered on the hard soil? How is it similar to and different from the growth of the plant in the rocky soil? What kind of internal desires seek to lead you away from your faith? What spiritual resources does Christ give us to put our old desires to death and to cultivate new desires for him?
4. What does Jesus mean when he speaks about the good soil of the unencumbered heart? What is similar in the good soil to the other soils? What is different? Why does the good soil produce fruit when the other soils could not? What is the spiritual significance of the good soil? How might we seek for our own hearts to be characterized as good soil? What is the main application that you take away from this passage as you think about the condition of your own heart?

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 522.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:117.

¹⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 348.