

## Matthew 13:1-23

### Introduction

In our last study we saw that Jesus seems to be beginning a new phase in His ministry where He speaks to the people mostly in parables – with the first parable being the Parable of the Sower.

(Read Matthew 13:1-9)

Now right after Jesus tells this parable of the Sower, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us how Jesus explained first of all *why* He was speaking in parables (10-17), and second of all, the *meaning* of the Parable of the Sower (18-23) (See chart; column 2). But we know from Mark that Jesus didn't actually give these two explanations until later, after the crowds had gone home and the larger group of disciples was alone with Jesus.

- ✓ Mark 4:10 – And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.

This would seem to fit with what happens in Matthew 13:36.

- ✓ Matthew 13:36 – Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him...

So it seems that Matthew has taken verses 10-23 from their normal place after verse 36 (see chart; column 1) and inserted them here after verse nine out of chronological order. This explains how the disciples can ask Jesus why He speaks to the people in parables (plural), when so far we only know of *one* parable (the parable of the sower) (see chart; column 2). Actually, Jesus has already told at least four parables (Sower, Weeds, Mustard Seed, Leaven) (see chart; column 1)!

So why does Matthew do this? Why does he change the order so that Jesus' explanation of why He speaks in parables is *sandwiched* right in between the Parable of the Sower in verses 1-9 and Jesus interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in verses 18-23? (see chart; column 2) What should this structure tell us? Well, Matthew is just trying to give an extra emphasis to what Jesus obviously intended – We must read the Parable of the Sower in light of the stuff in the middle (the *filling* in the sandwich). We must read the Parable of the Sower in light of what Jesus has said about the sovereignty of God's grace and the willful rebellion and responsibility of man.

**I. Verse 18** – Hear then the parable of the sower:

This verse is literally translated: “**You** therefore, **you** hear the parable of the sower.” Does the emphasis here sound familiar? Remember the “filling” from our last study? Jesus said to His disciples in verse eleven: “To *you* it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” And verse sixteen reads literally: “of *you*, however, blessed are the eyes...” And now Jesus says: “*You* therefore, *you* hear the parable of the sower”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mark 4:34 – He did not speak to [the crowds] without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. (cf. See Guelich [WBC] and Hendriksen on verse 33)

Why you? Because you are the ones to whom it has been given to have faith (“ears to hear”) and to know the secrets of the kingdom! So we see that the lesson of the Parable of the Sower is not intended for unbelievers, but rather for those who already have *faith*. When Jesus told the parable, *no one* understood what it meant. But later on, those who had faith asked Jesus about it, and only to them did Jesus explain the meaning. So what is the meaning of the Parable of the Sower, and how does it apply to us who have faith?

**II. Verse 19** – When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

So we see that the seed is the word of the kingdom, or the message about the kingdom. The seed is the *Gospel*, or the good news of God’s saving rule and reign in Jesus Christ (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). If this is the seed, then who is the Sower? Well, the Sower is first of all Jesus Christ, and secondly, *all* those who have ever shared the Gospel with others. In verse four, we read about the birds that came and devoured the seed that fell along the path. The birds represent the evil one (Satan), and the hard ground along the path represents the hearts of those who don’t understand. How is it that they don’t understand? Are they stupid? Are they mentally incompetent? No, not at all! These are the ones who have very *blatantly and obviously* hardened their hearts. They know in their heads exactly what Jesus is saying, but they don’t have the understanding of *true faith*. And so when the message of the kingdom falls on these hardened hearts, the evil one can quickly come and snatch it away so that there is not even the appearance of any true faith or obedience.

**III. Verses 20-21** – As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

Now we need to ask ourselves what has changed and what has not changed. Has the seed changed? No! The seed is still the exact same message of the kingdom! Has the sower changed? No! The sower is still Jesus Christ, and all of us who share the Gospel with others. But has the ground changed? Yes! Instead of the hard ground along the path which leaves the seed exposed to birds, we now have rocky ground. And the rocky ground represents “the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away”. Ultimately, these people don’t “understand” the message either, though for a while they could have fooled everyone – even themselves. They actually responded to the message with joy – perhaps even with tears of joy! They prayed a “salvation prayer”, they were baptized upon a very moving confession of faith. Everyone rejoices. To all outward appearances, they seem to be walking in true obedience to the Lord. But then the hot sun comes up (6), representing tribulation and persecution because of the word, and they are scorched and withered, and soon die, since they had no depth of soil to put down sufficient roots.

**IV. Verse 22** – As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Once again, we need to ask ourselves what has changed and what has not changed. Has the seed changed? No! The seed is still the exact same Gospel of the kingdom! Has the sower changed? No! The sower is still Jesus Christ, and all of us who share the message of the kingdom with others. But has the ground changed? Yes! Instead of the hard ground along the path which leaves the seed exposed to birds, or the rocky ground which keeps the seed from putting down sufficient roots and leaves the new plant vulnerable to the scorching sun, we now have ground that is full of thorns. These weeds represent the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches, which choke the word, so that the word proves unfruitful. Once again, these people did not ultimately “understand” the message of the kingdom. They may have *seemed* to respond positively at first, but time would tell that their hearts were still consumed and preoccupied with the worries and the loves of the world. And so the word is choked, and it once again proves unfruitful

**V. Verse 23** – As for what was sown on good soil, 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.

So now for the last time we ask again what has changed and what has not changed. Has the seed changed? No! The seed is still the exact same Gospel of the kingdom! Has the sower changed? No! The sower is still Jesus Christ, and all of us who share the Gospel of the kingdom with others. But has the ground changed? Yes! Instead of the hard ground along the path which leaves the seed exposed to birds, or the rocky ground which keeps the seed from putting down sufficient roots and leaves the new plant vulnerable to the scorching sun, or the ground that was full of thorns which chokes the seed as it attempts to grow, here the seed finally falls on good soil! “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.” This is the one (the *only* one) who responds in true *saving* faith. The others all heard the word, and some of them even seemed to respond positively (even with joy), and yet none of them had true saving faith. How do we know? Because none of them brought forth any genuine and lasting *fruit*. Sooner or later, it was revealed that their hearts were either like the hardened ground along the path (sooner), the rocky ground (later), or the ground full of thorns (later). Only when the seed has brought forth genuine and lasting fruit can we know that the seed has fallen into good soil. Here is the principle of “time will tell”. Time will not make a person saved or more saved, but time will tell if a person is truly saved.

### **Conclusion**

We need to be careful. Some people have concluded from this parable that it is possible for people who are truly saved to lose their salvation (since in the second and third examples, the seed of the Gospel actually sprouted and began to grow, but then was killed off by the sun and the thorns). Others have concluded from this parable that it is possible for people to be truly saved without ever bearing any fruit (since in the second example, the seed of the Gospel actually sprouted and began to grow, but never produced any fruit). Both of these ideas are

utterly false. True salvation can never be lost *because* it is of God's pure grace from beginning to end. If true salvation could be lost, then we know it would not be by grace alone. On the other hand, where there is no fruit, there cannot possibly be any salvation. This parable teaches both of *these* truths. Therefore, we have to assume that the sprouting of the seed in this parable is not the same thing as conversion, but rather an accommodation to the form of the story (which is about a sower sowing seeds)! We must always be careful that we don't try to make every detail of the story teach a specific theological point – especially if that point contradicts the rest of Scripture!

Remember now that Jesus told this parable for the benefit of those who already believe. He told this parable for the benefit of those who have heard the word and understood it, and are bringing forth fruit. I believe that this may be one reason why *Jesus* called this parable the “parable of the sower” (v. 18). There have been a lot of people recently who have suggested that a more appropriate name would be the “parable of the soils”. But that misses the point that the lesson of this parable is not intended for the people represented by the various soils but rather for the *sowers* who sow the Word. It is the parable of the sower, not the parable of the soils. So what is the application to us who already believe and who have been called to share the Gospel with others? The application is first of all this (we'll look next week at the secondary application of this parable): When we sow the seed of the kingdom, we are guaranteed to have *different* responses. There are many who will reject our message. Some will reject it outright. Others will reject our message only after they at first appeared to accept it. And yet in each of these cases, the fault is not with the seed, and *neither* is the fault with the sower. Remember the emphasis in the “sandwich filling” (13-15) on the willful rebellion and responsibility of man? Well, as we interpret the parable in light of the filling, we see that same emphasis here. The disciples should not be discouraged when the seed they sow fails to bear any fruit, for the fault is not with them (the sower) or with the Gospel they proclaim (the seed), but always and only with the one who hears (the soil). Our only responsibility is to *earnestly* and *prayerfully* sow the seed of the Gospel of the kingdom, knowing that sometime, somewhere there will be good soil, and that whenever the seed falls in good soil, it *will* take root and bear fruit.

But how can we know that there will ever be any good soil – especially when it may seem like all we ever encounter is hard, rocky, or thorny ground? Well, because we know that just like it has been *given* to us to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, so also it has been, and it will be *given* to others. If the failure of the seed to bear fruit is always and only the fault of the hearer, then the success of the seed in coming to full maturity and bearing fruit is always and only due to the sovereign grace of God. This ought to give us great confidence and hope in the task of evangelism! Here again, we are interpreting the parable of the sower in light of the “sandwich filling” in verses 11-12. The Apostle Paul writes:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 – I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

If it is God alone who gives the growth in 1 Corinthians, then it is God alone who prepares the soil here in Matthew.

“Like the sower, the preacher cannot give life. He can scatter the seed committed to his charge, but cannot command it to grow. He may offer the word of truth to a people, but

he cannot make them receive it and bear fruit. To give life is God's sovereign prerogative" (Ryle).

This, then, leads us to another very important point – though it only flows indirectly from this parable. We've been saying all along that the fault is not with the Sower (as long as he is earnestly and prayerfully scattering the true seed of the Gospel). But what about the fact that the sower has "wasted" some of the seed on ground that is guaranteed to be unfruitful? Wasn't this irresponsible of the sower? Well, the fact is that we are called to earnestly proclaim the Gospel to *all* without exception. Jesus *assumes* that the seed *will* fall on all different kinds of soils. In our case, we don't first try to figure out where is the right soil before we sow the seed. And why not? Well, first of all, because that would be trying to play God. There is no way for us to know in which hearts the seed will take root, and grow to maturity, and bear fruit and in which hearts it will not. But second of all (and this is most wonderful!), wherever and whenever God sovereignly bestows the new birth and creates the good soil, He has chosen always to do so *through* or *by means* of the Word that we proclaim and the seed that we sow! This is a great *mystery*! The Apostle Peter wrote:

✓ 1 Peter 1:23 – You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, *through* the living and abiding word of God.

We don't first try to figure out where is the good soil before we sow the seed of the Gospel, *because* it is *by means* of the seed of the Gospel that God sovereignly and miraculously creates the new birth and true faith in the one who hears.

So how does the parable of the sower apply to us who are called to be sowers of the Word? Well, we should not be discouraged when the seed that we sow fails to bear any fruit, for the fault is not with us (the sowers) or with the Gospel that we proclaim (the seed), but always and only with the one who hears (the soil). We should not be disillusioned when people reject our message outright (though we should be greatly saddened). Jesus already told us that this is sure to happen because sometimes the seed will fall on the ground beside the path. Though we may grieve, we should not be disillusioned when people receive the word even with tears of joy, are baptized, and become members of the church, but then shrivel up under the heat of persecution, or are choked by the worries and loves of this world. Jesus already told us that this is sure to happen because sometimes the seed will fall on ground that is rocky or choked with thorns. Our only responsibility is to *earnestly* and *prayerfully* sow the seed of the true Gospel of the kingdom, knowing by faith that sometime, somewhere there will be good soil, and that *whenever* the seed falls in good soil, it *will* take root and bear fruit by the miracle working grace of God. In light of these things, we can see that there is no need for us to try to artificially stir up a person's emotions when we are sowing the seed – in fact, this would be completely wrong and inappropriate. (On the other hand, we should be careful that we always present to people a genuinely living and vibrant faith.) We should never resort to any high pressure tactics in our sowing of the seed. There is no need to press for decisions as though decisions automatically equal conversion. (I have seen all of these things happen in many an evangelistic meeting.) There is no need to be eloquent, or to worry about messing up, or saying everything "just right". We have only one responsibility: earnestly and prayerfully *sow the seed*, knowing that every failure to bring forth fruit is the responsibility of the hearer, but that because of the sovereign grace of

God, there will always be those who will understand, and who will *indeed* bear fruit. So as we go out and sow the seed, let's *remember* Jesus' parable of the sower – and let it strengthen and encourage us for the work.

### Teaching our Children

- ✓ See how well your children can “narrate” to you Jesus’ Parable of the Sower.
- Q. In Jesus’ Parable of the Sower, what does the “seed” represent?
  - A. The seed represents the message of the kingdom (the good news of God’s saving rule in Jesus Christ / or: the Gospel).
- Q. Who does the “sower” represent?
  - A. The sower represents Jesus, *and* all of us who have been called to share the good news with others.
- Q. What do the different soils represent?
  - A. The soils represent the hearts of the people with whom we share the Gospel.
- Q. What happens when the sower sows the seed and it falls on the hard ground along the path?
  - A. The birds (Satan) come and devour it because this person has blatantly hardened his heart.
- Q. What happens when the sower sows the seed and it falls on the rocky ground?
  - A. The seed sprouts and begins to grow (this person is filled with joy over the good news), but eventually the seed is scorched by the heat of the sun and dies because its roots could not go down deep enough (this person could not stand up under the heat of suffering and persecution).
- Q. What happens when the sower sows the seed and it falls on the ground full of thorns?
  - A. Once again, the seed sprouts and begins to grow, but eventually it is choked and dies because of the weeds (this person is consumed with the worries and loves of the world).
- Q. What happens when the sower sows the seed and it falls on the good soil?
  - A. The seed sprouts, and grows, and *bears fruit!* This is the person who understands the message with a true saving faith.
- Q. In each of these four examples, were there ever any changes in the sower or in the seed?
  - A. No. The sower and the seed were always the same. The only thing that ever changed was the soil.
- Q. What lesson did Jesus want to teach us so that we would not be *discouraged*, but *encouraged*” as we sow the seed of God’s Word?
  - A. ~ Jesus wanted to show us that there are many times when the seed will fail to bear any fruit. This will be very sad for us, but we don’t need to be discouraged because the fault is not in us (the sowers) or in our message (the seed), but rather in the hearts of those who hear (the soil).
  - ~ Jesus also wanted to show us that there will be times when the seed *will* bear fruit because of the amazing power of God to create good soil!
  - ~ Our job is simply to *earnestly* and *prayerfully* sow the seed of the true Gospel whenever and wherever we can, and then to trust God with the results. (See Scripture on page 4)
- ✓ Talk about some of the further practical implications of this wonderful truth (pressing for “decisions” [remember that time will tell], trying to stir up emotions, trying to be eloquent and say everything “just right”, etc.)

## Matthew 13:1-52

### Chronological Order (Likely) (cf. Mark 4:10)

1. **Verses 1-9** – Parable of the Sower
2. **Verses 24-30** – Parable of the Weeds
3. **Verses 31-32** – Parable of the Mustard Seed
4. **Verses 33** – Parable of the Leaven
5. **Verses 10-17** – In private, Jesus explains to His disciples why He speaks in Parables (Sovereign grace / man's rebellion)
6. **Verses 18-23** – In private, Jesus explains to His disciples the meaning of the parable of the Sower (cf. Mark 4:10).
7. **Verses 36-52** – In private, Jesus explains to His disciples the parable of the Weeds and gives His disciples further instruction in parables.

### Matthew's Order

#### The Sandwich (A / B / A') Structure

Bread (A)

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1. **Verses 1-9**  
The Parable of the Sower

Filling (B)

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5. **Verses 10-17**  
Why Jesus speaks in Parables  
(Sovereign grace / man's rebellion)

Bread (A')

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6. **Verses 18-23**  
Explanation of the Parable of the Sower

2. **Verses 24-30** – Parable of the Weeds

3. **Verses 31-32** – Parable of the Mustard Seed

4. **Verse 33** – Parable of the Leaven

7. **Verses 36-52** – In private Jesus explains the parable of the weeds and gives His disciples further instruction in parables