

Who Really Believes? – The parable of the soils

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

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13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. 5 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, 6 but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear."

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower: 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. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 21 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. 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. 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" (Matt 13:1-9; 18-23).

It always fascinates me what stories, sermons, and events are recorded in multiple gospel accounts. Some stories, sermon and events only make it in one of the gospels (like the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37), and other events (like Jesus' baptism) make it in all four. This is an important point to consider if you know that, according to John 20:31, there were many other things that Jesus did but "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." So each Gospel writer selected which stories, sermons, or events best served the point of his gospel.

It is interesting to me that the parable of the soils is one of three parables out of a total of twenty-four that is recorded in all three gospels. Further, the flow of thought and the content in Matthew, Mark and Luke are incredibly similar. Additionally, the parable of the soils is the first parable that Matthew records after introducing a season of Jesus' ministry where "he told them many things in parables" (Matt 13:3).

What is the significance of this? Well, I think that this parable, probably more than any other, could be ranked as the **most important parable** that Jesus ever gave. The prominence of its position, its quotation in three gospels, and its unusual explanation by Jesus all make it a signature teaching moment in the ministry of Jesus. As important as the parable of the Good Samaritan is, I think that this one ranks even higher.

Not All "Hearing" Leads to Life

The parable of the soils is at the top of its class because this parable is about the central problem connected to people and their view of Jesus and his kingdom: **unbelief**. Some people hear the words of Jesus, and they follow him. Others hear his words, and they want to kill him. Both groups hear the same words, but the response is incredibly different. This is remarkable, and it is what leads Jesus to give this parable.

Last week we learned that all parables have one point and two purposes. Every parable has a particular message that is being communicated. As well, every parable is designed to reveal truth to believers while, at the same time, concealing that truth to unbelievers (Mt 13:11).

What is the lesson from this parable? **It is help believers understand that not all hearing leads to spiritual life.** There are four soils and only one soil produces the fruit that is characteristic of real life.

So Jesus uses this parable to help his followers understand what happens when the Word of God goes out. Not everyone who hears believes. And for that matter – here's something shocking – not everyone who "believes" really does. Not everyone who professes actually possesses. And, as we saw last week, those who do receive only do so because it has been given to them.

All that the disciples can see are people who are hearing Jesus' word. Through this parable Jesus is able to show them four pictures of what is happening inside the hearts of people. The parable reveals what is unseen.

The Story (13:1-9)

Let's first examine the basics of the storyline, and then we'll dive into the meaning. Hopefully you'll remember that Jesus is teaching from a boat as the people are on the beach listening to what he is saying (13:1-2). Apparently there is a fairly large crowd that is following him, and he begins to explain the kingdom of heaven to them through the use seven different parables.

The parable begins with a sower who goes to sow. A bit of background is important here. Most of the time when a farmer was planting his crop he would take a pouch, fill it with seed, and then make long rows of seed on the ground on either side of his path. Then he would turn

the dirt or plough, mixing the soil and the seed.¹ But, as any farmer knows, the growth of the seed was directly related to the kind of ground upon which it fell.

Verse 4 indicates that some fell along the path which would have been the various walkways in the farmer's field or the path between the furrows. This ground was not conducive to any kind of growth. The seed remains exposed, and the result was that it became food for the birds.

The next soil is described as rocky ground in verse 5. This would have been a common problem in Israel where a thin layer of soil covered bedrock underneath. The image is not a soil littered with rocks but of soil whose depth is very shallow. The effect was initial growth, but because there was no depth and no root system, the plant was scorched when the sun came out. It lived for a season, but it couldn't survive the elements.

Verse 7 tells us that other seed fell "among thorns." This seed is mixed with the seed of the thorns or thistles. The problem here is not the soil per se, but the competition with other plants. Both seeds grow, but the thorns rob the good seed of its needed nutrients, and the result is that "the thorns grew up and choked them."

Finally we come to verse 8 where Jesus tells his listeners that some seed fell among good soil and produced grain. This is **the** defining difference in the parable. There is a variety of causes, but the one characteristic of the three bad soils is that they produced nothing. The problem is evident not at planting but over time. In contrast, the good soil produces three different yields – hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold. In Jesus' time the average ratio of harvested grain seeds to those planted was usually 8-1.² So the kind of harvest that Jesus is talking about is truly remarkable.

Then he ends with a somewhat familiar statement in the Bible that indicates that careful listening and thoughtfulness is in order: "let him who has ears, let him hear."

The Ways People Hear (13:18-23)

We covered verses 11-17 last week so that we could get into Jesus' explanation of the parable this week. Verses 18-23 is the explanation that Jesus gives to his disciples when they inquire as to why he speaks in parables.

Jesus tells them that the parable is all about hearing. Notice that is how verse 18 even begins. The very first word in the original language is "you." Jesus is attempting to show his disciples what is happening behind the scenes in hearts of the people in crowds. Jesus is talking to his disciples and explaining to them that they are all hearing the same messenger, and they are

¹ Craig Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary – New Testament, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Publishing, 1993), 82.

² John MacArthur, The MacArthur Commentary – Matthew 8-15, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1987), 346.

hearing the same message; but they are not all “hearing” in the way that Jesus wants. For many the hearing does not produce life.

The parable of the soils presents four different kinds of people who are near the master and message but they do not hear the word of God the same way. The relevance of this parable could not be understated because I believe that every Sunday there are people listening to the Word of God but not all are really hearing. So let’s look at each of these categories.

1. The Non-responsive

The first soil describes the person who hears the message but never responds. The text says, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it...” Notice that this person is close enough to be able to physically hear the word about the kingdom but there is a lack of spiritual understanding. This person may know who Jesus is, may know the content of the Bible well, may be able to even explain the gospel to another, and may know what it means to be a Christian. However, the Word never penetrates his or her hardened heart. Their naturally deadened heart is unwilling and unable to respond to truth of the Word. This person has received the truth, but there is no spiritual understanding.

It is so important for you to understand that a real relationship with Jesus is not simply a mental or intellectual understanding. True belief in Jesus involves a miraculous change of the heart – a rebirth – that results in a spiritual understanding that involves the mind but is so much more than just the mind. Knowledge about Jesus or the Bible is never enough. The devil knows the Bible better than any of us; he knows who Jesus is, and he trembles (James 2:19)! But the devil is not a child of God. Therefore the question is not intelligence about Jesus but allegiance to Jesus.

This person fails to respond, and notice the effect: the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. The devil’s activity is to try his hardest to keep people deceived, spiritually blind, and in the dark when it comes to Jesus. Here is how Paul stated it: “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). The devil seizes upon the self-sufficient, self-satisfied, and self-righteousness embedded in the hardened human heart. The wicked one uses false teachers, personal pride, comparison, and the offering of temporary happiness to convince the person that there is no need of Jesus. The result is a person who is unconcerned with the things of God, completely indifferent to the gospel.³ To this person, the gospel is foolishness and not needed. The non-responsive hears the word but does nothing.

³ MacArthur, 357.

2. The Shallow

The second person is directly the opposite of the former because the Word is received immediately and with joy. The last person is unresponsive, but this person is too responsive and too enthusiastic. It almost as if Jesus anticipates that the first soil might cause you to think that aggressive action will solve the problem, but he wants us to see that a lack of excitement is not the only problem when it comes to who really hears. He warns the disciples that emotional enthusiasm or excitement is not necessarily a sign of real belief.

He compares this person to a plant that has a thin layer of soil underneath it, and it sprouts up quickly ("immediately" – 13:5). But the problem is that he "has no root in himself" which means that the changes are external, emotional and not deeply rooted repentance. The proof comes when hardship or testing is brought to bear upon this man's soul. When his "profession" becomes costly or painful he walks away as fast as he "received" Jesus – "when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away" (v 21).

People in this category have a religious experience but true salvation has not come. Time and testing give evidence of that. This has two important implications:

- When we are inviting people to respond to the gospel, we must be careful not to create a false trust in raising their hand in a service, walking an aisle, putting their name on a card, or even praying a prayer. This is especially true when it comes to how we present the gospel to our children. Great skill and discernment is needed to be sure that our children truly understand the gospel. I have seen many, many teenagers or young adults question their faith because of over-emphasis on getting a child to pray a prayer and then getting baptized before the gospel is either fully understood or believed. Now I know there is a balance here; don't stop sharing the gospel with children or others. But simply realize that our main task is to make disciples not believers or receivers.
- The other implication here is in regards to assurance of salvation or how you know if you are truly saved. We don't have time to go into a full treatment of this today, but I just want you to realize that not everyone who says they believe really does. So assurance cannot be mostly based upon actions in the past; it must be what you believe and what lasts in times of difficulty and testing.

Jesus identifies for us that response, emotions, and enthusiasm are not clear indications that a person has really heard. The gospel can fall upon shallow hearts who show that they have no true allegiance to Jesus since they walk away when following Jesus proves costly.

3. The Distracted

Having shown us the problem with responsiveness – either too little or too much – Jesus now turns to the problem of divided allegiance. The third person, like all the others, hears the word of God, and there is growth. He or she receives the word but there is a problem that will only emerge over time. This person may have intellectually grasped the significance of the kingdom message and may have been attracted to Jesus, even liking what he was saying. But the problem here is that there are divided loyalties, a distracted or dual allegiance. The problem here is that the person simply adds Jesus to one of the many things that he or she is attracted to. The text says, “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Matt 13:22).

What is it about the world and riches that are so distracting that they choke the word? I think the best verse in Bible on this is 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

17 As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life (1 Tim 6:17-19).

This passage shows that possessions and things in this world tend to increase our sense of self-sufficiency. Money (at any level) can create feelings of security, exclusivity, pride, and accomplishment. It has a tendency to make us feel god-like, powerful, and triumphant. The close of a deal, a robust investment return, an enviable outfit, prestigious education, or just the feeling that people are serving you can quickly make you act as if you are God!

Jesus’ warning here is a sober one because the security of money and the pursuit of things in the world can choke out the one thing that is critical for true conversion – trust in Jesus. He warns his disciples that it is hard for a rich man to hear because he doesn’t see his true need.

4. The Receptive

Finally, we come to the only soil that reflects true conversion. The characteristic of this man or woman is that the soil is good and he or she understands the word that is given. To understand means that one puts it all together and then acts. Hearing and understanding in the Bible always assume actions that verify that true hearing and true understanding have taken place.

Over and over that Bible talks about fruit as the source of true conversion but the evidence that real conversion has happened.

“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love...Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall” (2 Peter 1:5-7, 8)

More than understanding, more than a statement of belief, more than an emotional experience, more than the perceived blessing of God – real conversion produces a spiritual fruitfulness that is miraculous. A normal harvest in Palestine was usually eight-fold. But this harvest is thirty, sixty or one hundred times.

Notice that the harvest is not the same. Some true converts are more fruitful than others, but the presence of fruitfulness is a non-negotiable. A life transformed by Jesus and filled by the Spirit will produce clear, lasting, and miraculous fruit.

There are four soils and four kinds of persons but only one real believer. Everyone heard the word, some responded, others appeared to grow, but only one was real. What’s the difference? This is point of the entire parable. Who truly believes? The one who produces fruit.

What do you hear?

That leads me then to ask you to take a careful look at your own heart and ask yourself what you hear today.

- I can only imagine that there are some here today whose hearts are like stone. You are careless, spiritually insensitive, and in your heart you think that this is all pretty silly. And I would just plead with you to not harden your heart any longer.
- I can imagine that there are some who are curious, excited, or interested in what a relationship with Jesus can do. Here’s my caution: following Jesus is costly. True conversion is not just praying a prayer; it involves the surrender of your life.
- I can imagine that there are others who claim to know Jesus but their real trust is in something else. Oh be careful! Trusting Christ means trusting nothing else.
- Finally, let me call you to true conversion, the kind of faith in Christ that receives him as Savior and Lord. And let me remind you that fruit is not optional for the true follower of Jesus. The evidence of true belief is fruit.

So not all “hearing” leads to life. Who really believes? The one who genuinely trusts in Christ, is radically changed, and bears fruit.

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