



The Parable of the Four Soils

Matthew 13:2-23

Pastor Justin Deeter – May 30, 2021

Today we begin a new series over the summer on Jesus' parables. I have been working with some other men in the church over the last year in training and equipping others to preach the Word, and I'm excited that those brothers will serve us in preaching over the summer as we jointly teach this series together. It is a good thing to bring other voices into the pulpit. The preaching ministry of the church should not be centered around any one personality, but the Word of God should take center stage.

What are parables? Parables were short, relevant stories that Jesus told to communicate spiritual truths. Jesus used well-known aspects of first-century life to help illustrate and communicate the message of the kingdom. The parables showcase the wisdom of Jesus as the master teacher. But the parables served a unique function in Jesus' ministry in polarizing the crowds between those who hear him and those who truly understand him. It is to that function of the parables I want to look at together today as we begin this series.

Jesus teaches this parable of the sower in verses 1–8 and then explains this parable to his disciples in verses 18–23. Between its teaching and explanation, Jesus speaks to the purpose of his teaching parables. In many ways, the parable of the sower is a parable about the parables. Thus, it makes it a fitting place to start as we begin this series on the parables.

Traditionally called "The Parable of the Sower," the sower really isn't the main point of the parable. I think a better name for it might be "The Parable of the Four Soils." The point of the parable explains the various reactions to the gospel. If the gospel message is good news and true, why do people respond so differently to it?



We will see that the good seed of the gospel can fall upon various soils of the human heart. In other words, the parable is trying to answer the question, “Why do so many people respond so differently to the Gospel?” **In sum, the secrets of the kingdom can only be understood by God’s gracious aid.**

We will first consider the purpose of the parables, focusing on verses 10–17, before then explaining and applying the parable of the four soils.

The Purpose of the Parables (Matthew 13:10–17)

Jesus tells the parable to the crowd. A sower goes out to sow. Some seed fell on the path; birds ate it. Some seed fell on rocky ground; the sun scorched it. Some seed fell among the thorns; the thorns choked it. Some seed fell on good soil and produced fruit. Then Jesus wraps up the parable with, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Amazingly, Jesus doesn’t seek to explain the parable to the crowd or interpret it for them. That’s not the way the parable works. Parables forced the hearer to think about the message, wrestle with its meaning, and thus examine their own hearts. Jesus intends the parable to force people to contemplate and respond to his teaching. Parables were culturally relevant illustrations that functioned like a puzzle box enclosing the nature and purpose of the kingdom of heaven. Yet, only those who have ears to hear the truth can hear it. As Jesus taught by the sea, all audibly heard the teaching of the parable; not all will comprehend its message.

This leads to verses 10-17 of the passage, in which Jesus explains the purpose of the parables. While Jesus taught the parable to the crowd, he explains his purpose in the parables to his disciples. He pulls them in and discloses to them the secret of the kingdom. The word “secret” comes from the Greek word *mysterion*. The word is used similarly by Paul when he talks in Ephesians of how God made known “the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ” (Eph. 1:9). The secrets of the kingdom refer to the hidden purposes of God’s kingdom that must be spiritually understood. The secret isn’t obscure, possessed only by a few entrusted folks. Rather, the kingdom of God is proclaimed publicly through Jesus’ teaching in parables. Yet, few

understand the nature of Christ's kingdom. They see but do not perceive. They hear but do not understand.

In Matthew 13:12-13, Jesus speaks of the polarizing reaction to his teaching in parables. Those who wrestle, engage, and ponder over Jesus' teaching will discover increasing truth. More understanding will be given. They will know the secrets of the kingdom. Yet, for the one who ignores, discards, and casts aside Jesus' teaching will have what little truth received taken away. He says, "For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." (Matthew 13:12, ESV)

Jesus taught in parables because the parables create and expose these spiritual realities—the parables spiritually harden or spiritually enlighten. Look at verse 13, "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." Jesus roots his teaching in Isaiah 6 and quotes this prophecy in verses 14 and 15.

In many ways, Jesus intends the parables to polarize the crowd. He's separating the wheat from the chaff. He is separating true spiritual seekers of Christ's kingdom from phony impostors. Notice what Jesus says in verse 11, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." You see, understanding of Christ's kingdom must be given. Some receive this understanding, and others do not.

We must pause here for a moment and consider how do we gain spiritual truth? How does anyone understand the kingdom of God? How can anyone believe in the gospel? Jesus points to God's sovereignty as the reason any one of us understands the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. As he explains to the disciples, they see and hear, not because of their brilliance but because they are blessed. Blessed by who? Blessed by God. He tells them in verses 16–17, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." Just as Jesus will say a few chapters on in Matthew, in Matthew 16:17, when Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Lord responds, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-



Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

It is God who reveals to anyone the secrets of the kingdom. We can't comprehend the identity of Jesus without God's help and aid. Our sin causes such blindness and such deafness to the truth that it requires the supernatural aid of God to regenerate our hearts and enable us to behold the glory and salvation of Christ. Just as Paul taught the Corinthians, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

So, the parables then identify those who are supernaturally enabled to understand the teaching of Christ and behold the glory of Christ. Yet, there is a lesson as well here in terms of how the Spirit works in bringing us into the knowledge of the secrets of Christ's kingdom. The parables provoke spiritual interest and spur the pursuit of more understanding to meaning. It says in verse 12, "For the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance."

There is a lesson for those of us who know the Spirit of God as our teacher. Our ability to understand spiritual truth is spiritually given. But once we have the Holy Spirit, knowing the truth is like a muscle. If you train and exercise your muscles, they will grow stronger, and you will be able to lift a heavier and heavier weight. However, if you don't use it, it atrophies. It gets weak and shrivels away. Similarly, if we understand the truth that's been revealed, we will have a greater ability to comprehend more truth. The disciples, who have already latched on to Jesus' teaching, have demonstrated that they are true hearers, and Jesus gives them greater insight into his message and kingdom. Truth gives way to greater truth. The more truth we respond too, the more truth we can understand. Those who reject the truth, cannot understand Jesus' parables.

There is also a warning here if you are not a Christian. It is vital that you respond to the truth of God. When we fail to respond to the truth of the gospel, whether it is from a friend or from a sermon, our hearts begin to harden against the truth. Though we hear it, we do truly hear it in our hearts. Before long, truth ricochets off of us, and the result is hard-hearted resistance.

The Parable of the Four Soils (Matthew 13:1–9; 18–23)

In many ways, Jesus gives us a detailed interpretation of this parable because it's so essential in understanding all the other parables. It is the key to understanding all the parables. This is the parable about parables.

Now before we get into the specifics of the parable, we must note that in first-century Palestine, plowing came after sowing. So as the sower scatters his seed, he is not being careless as he's throwing the seed, thus accidentally throwing some on the path. The purpose of the parable isn't to urge us to be discriminatory in sharing the gospel, "Well that guy looks to be like the soil on the path, so I'm not going to share Jesus with him." Or, "Oh well she looks like the superficial seed on the rocky ground, best not share the Gospel with her!" No, that's not the point of the parable. If anything, the parable encourages us to be as widespread as possible with the sowing, but the parable helps give us a framework for understanding the various responses that come after the sowing.

The sower sows the good seed of the Word upon the various soils. This good word is the gospel itself, of how Jesus has come to die on the cross to save us from our sins. It's the message of his kingdom. Jesus came to fulfill the demands of God's Law, and as the messiah, he will lay down his life for sinners so that anyone who would repent and believe in Christ would not perish but have everlasting life. The seed sown is the message of the gospel, the announcement of the kingship of Christ, the heralding of the way of salvation through God's Son.

The gossip is a good seed, a good word! It is news—the best of news! However, not everyone receives the gospel with joy. As the seed is sown, the four soils represent different types of human hearts. The parable asks us both to examine our own hearts while at the same time giving God's church a framework for understanding the variety of reactions to our evangelism.

So as we walk through Jesus' interpretation of this parable, the question that should be in our minds is this: what type of soil is my heart? Keep that question in the back of your mind as we discuss these four types of soils.

1. The Unreceptive Path: The Hard Heart

As the sower sows the seed, some of it falls upon the path. The seed has no time to grow on the hard, compacted soil and a bird quickly snatches it up. Our hearts can become so hard that the gospel bounces off of our hearts, and Satan quickly snatches it away. The image of the path brings to mind the idea of travel, commerce, and busyness. There is so much traffic and activity upon the heart that the word of God cannot take root in their heart. They hear the gospel, but they have no understanding. This person keeps themselves so busy with activity that they do not have time to contemplate spiritual things. They run to and fro at a frantic pace. When they do slow down, they keep their minds busy by the bombardment of media, news, and entertainment options available. No room, no time, no opportunity exists for the gospel to take root. If they hear the gospel, their heart is so trampled down by frantic activity they have no time to consider it. The evil one snatches it away with speed.

This is a frightening reality because you can hear the gospel so frequently taught and preached and yet not understand it. A hard-heartedness can easily seep into active churchgoers. You get into the habit of going to church because that is how your mom raised you, or you want to look moral and important somehow. You sit week after week under the teaching of the gospel, and your heart is so hard that the word just bounces off of you. You leave unchanged, unmoved, and unresponsive to the word of God.

J. C. Ryle had this to say about such people:

"There are myriads of people who claim to be Christians but are in this state of soul. There is hardly a church or a chapel where scores of them are not to be found. Sunday after Sunday they allow the devil to snatch away the good seed that is sown on the face of their hearts. Week after week they live on without faith, fear, knowledge or grace, feeling nothing, caring nothing, taking no more



interest in religion than if Christ had never died on the cross at all. And in this state they often die and are buried, and are lost forever in hell. This is a sad picture, but only too true."

If you are unresponsive to the gospel, then your heart may have been hardened against the gospel. And I pray that somehow God would get your attention before it is too late. Often, what this type of heart needs is a good plowing up to soften up the soil. Your heart needs good breaking with the cutting of the plow. It is a mercy for God to bring tragedy and suffering into your life in order to soften your heart and unclog your ears. With a heart tilled by suffering and softened by pain, you are ready to truly hear the gospel message.

2. The Superficial Gravel: The Shallow Heart

The seed was also sown upon rocky ground. The terrain of Palestine is a rocky one. Much of the land is covered with 2-3 inches of soil over limestone bedrock. As a result, seeds scattered in such areas would begin to take root, but the roots couldn't grow deep into the soil. When the heat of the sun beamed down upon the young plant, it dried out and died. The shallow roots couldn't take the heat.

Such hearts hear the gospel and initially find great joy in it. Filled with zeal, they become quite impassioned about Jesus, but as soon as tragedy or persecution hits, they abandon Jesus. More often than not, these people become the greatest antagonist against Christianity. When they hear about Jesus, they superficially attach themselves to the church, but their excitement does not last. It withers once life becomes difficult and dies out.

Here we must caution against the dangers of emotionalism. Experiencing great feelings doesn't necessarily mean that you know Christ. It's common for people to chase experiences—whether it's a conference, a youth camp, or a worship service. You can chase an experience all you want, but you might not have necessarily gained Christ. Such experience chasers are often like this soil. It's all frothy emotions and crocodile tears, but there are no roots. They never develop a deep faith and trust in Jesus. Thus,

as soon as the heat of the sun bears down upon them, they reveal themselves as the imposters they truly are. As soon as life gets hard, persecution occurs, or suffering strikes, they go from praising Jesus to blaming Jesus. For the true Christian, deeply rooted in the gospel, the heat of the sun strengthens us grow by forcing our roots to go deeper. Sufferings and trials grow and mature the Christian, yet for those who have only superficially attached themselves to Jesus, the heat shrivels them up.

Emotions are by no means a bad thing for the Christian. Indeed, we should have great feelings and love for Jesus, but true faith in Jesus is a deep trust and confidence in God's Word that goes beyond how we feel in any given moment. Only the true Christian can praise Jesus through sorrow and cling to Christ in tragedy.

3. The Worldly Weeds: The Divided Heart

The third type of soil is that of the worldly weeds. This is the divided heart. It's the type of heart that refuses repentance. It's a divided heart because it attempts to add a love of Jesus along with love for the world. But, no matter how hard you may try, you cannot sustain split loves like that. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters." Or, as James puts it, "Friendship with the world is hatred towards God" (Jam. 4:4). Or, as John puts it, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 Jn. 1:15).

You see, true faith, saving faith is a complete and total devotion to Jesus. Those who have divided allegiance to Jesus end up rejecting Jesus in the end. It's not as if they were Christians and then they lost their salvation. They were never Christian at all. They never truly repented of their former way of life. The roots of the world lie beneath the surface of their hearts. As the good seed of the gospel comes to them, it begins to grow, but the thorns and thistles of the world quickly choke out the seed.

For each of these three soils so far, we must state firmly that none of them were truly Christian, though they may initially seem to be Christian. The first soil obviously rejects the seed, and Satan swallows it up. The second soil, the shallow heart, never truly becomes a Christian as the seed of the gospel doesn't last. The third soil, the

divided heart, also never truly becomes a Christian, as the gospel is choked out. Though to us looking at the outside, there may be initial signs of spiritual life; it doesn't last. Time reveals their so-called faith as phony. The roots are too shallow to endure hardship or worldly desires choke out the gospel plant.

These three soils help us understand the various responses to the Gospel message. As a pastor and sower of the gospel, I've seen all of these types of soils. Tragically, I can put the names of people I know in each of these categories. As we share the gospel with other people, it helps us understand these various responses people have to the word of God.

However, there is a fourth soil Jesus gives us.

4. The Good Soil: The Fruitful Heart

This fourth soil is the good soil of the fruitful heart. The message of the gospel comes into their life and begins to take root and grow. Their heart is ready, supernaturally prepared, for accepting the Gospel seed. The soil is soft, ready to receive the word, not hardened like the path. The soil is deep, ready to put down roots deeply, not like rocky like the gravel. The soil is pure, not contaminated by worldly weeds that choke out the gospel from their hearts. The Holy Spirit had gone before and prepared the heart in regeneration for true faith in Christ to take root.

Jesus tells us that this soil represents the one who hears, accepts, and bears fruits. This person hears the gospel and accepts it as true. They hear of what Jesus has done for them, how he is the son of God who came down from heaven, became flesh, and dwelt among us. They hear of his death for the sins of humanity. They hear of his victorious resurrection, conquering sin and death. They hear it and accept it—they truly believe in him, that Christ is the king!

It is only by the power of God that any of us can truly hear this gospel! So the message of the gospel is received, but what is the evidence of authentic hearing of the gospel? Well, Jesus is pretty clear: it is a life lived in fruitfulness. It is what marks the

true Christian experience from the various impostors we've seen in the parable. The seed of the gospel produces fruit thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold!

What sort of fruit does this look like in the Christian life? Well, it means the fruit of the Spirit is evident in your life, and not just evident by continually increasing. Paul tells us: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Galatians 5:22–24, ESV)

Fruit in the Christian life is also displayed through evangelism. A tree produces fruit for reproduction. In the same way, we, through our witness, must proclaim the gospel to others. We speak of what Christ has done for us and invite others to put their faith in Jesus! The mark of the true Christian is Spirit-empowered, persevering fruitfulness.

Final Thoughts

The four soils indicate four types of hearing, with only one soil representing the true hearing and acceptance of the Gospel message. Examine yourself and ask which type of soil reflects my heart?

- The first soil is the unreceptive path. It is the hardened heart that doesn't have any interest in Jesus or the Gospel.
- The second soil is the superficial gravel or the shallow heart. With no roots, as soon as persecution or suffering comes, the heat of the sun scorches them.
- The third soil is the worldly weeds or the divided heart. They attempt to have Jesus plus all the pleasures and desires of the world. Yet, no one can serve to masters, and the worldly weeds snuff out the gospel.
- The fourth soil is the good soil, the soil that is soft, willing to hear the gospel, receives it and produces great fruit!

I pray that today the Spirit would show you the depths of your heart and help you to truly hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ this morning. He has come to deliver you



from your sin and save your soul. Through this sermon (and every sermon), I'm throwing out the seed of the gospel. If you've been coming to Redemption a while and hearing the gospel, I pray that the Lord has brought great fruit into your life as you accepted and received Christ. As you believe the truth, may the Lord give you greater understanding and enjoyment of Christ. May truth beget an increasing knowledge of the truth in your life, manifested by the fruitfulness that comes from Christian maturity!

However, if you've been coming here a while and there is no fruit in your life, the problem isn't with the good seed of the gospel but your heart. Receive Christ. Grow deep roots into Christ. Uproot the worldly weeds that choke out Christ from your life. For some of you, you may have never truly, authentically heard the gospel. The message has hit your ears but never your heart. I pray today you would respond for the first time in saving faith. May the Lord give you to know of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. May he bless your eyes, for they see. May he bless your ears, for they hear. He who has ears, let him hear.