

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message The Parable of the Sower

Scripture Matthew 13:1-23

The Kingdom of God is a theme which runs through the entire Bible. From Genesis we learn that God created a perfect world so that He could dwell among His creation. We learn that mankind was created with Godlikeness in order to have kingdom authority on earth. God was Creator; humans were His representatives. God delegated authority to them so that they had control over all the creatures on earth.

Unfortunately, as you know, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and thereby lost their privileged status in relation to both God and the world around them. They lost their authority to rule over the earthly creation. However, the story of the Bible is that God graciously stepped into their seemingly hopeless spiritual situation. Through many centuries and through a series of incredible supernatural events which culminated in the advent of Jesus, God accomplished everything necessary to save and redeem people from the influence of evil. As a result, humans who place faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ are reconciled with God and become members of His kingdom.

In His public ministry, Jesus' primary objective was to demonstrate and explain the good news of the Kingdom of God. He did these things through the miracles He performed and through His teaching. From the Sermon on the Mount we learn that the members of God's heavenly kingdom are expected to live on earth according to the heavenly standards of God. The Sermon on the Mount was Jesus' explanation of God's standards concerning the character, attitudes, and behaviors of kingdom people.

Another of Jesus' important methods of teaching was through parables. A parable is a story or an illustration which reveals an important truth. Parables frequently begin with a statement such as "the kingdom of God is like ...," hence they are sometimes called an extended simile.

There were two reasons why Jesus began to teach by means of parables. As He engaged with people on His travels throughout Galilee, it became more and more obvious that many of the people in the crowds were not genuinely interested in the spiritual aspects of His teaching. The people were mostly interested in His supernatural healing powers. And there was also another problem. The Jewish religious leaders who came to observe and listen as Jesus taught became increasingly critical of His words and actions.

Not everyone who followed Jesus was a sincere disciple. Too many of the people were spectators. Too few of them were interested in learning about the kingdom of God. Because of this situation, Jesus began to teach through the use of parables. When the disciples asked Him why He did this, Jesus replied: "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them."

There are about 30 parables in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. (*The Gospel of John does not contain any parables.*) Almost half of them give information about the Kingdom. The first of the kingdom parables is in Matthew chapter 13.

Read Matthew 13:1-23 (*This parable is also in Mark 4:1-9, 13-20 and Luke 8:4-8, 11-15*)

The opening phrase of this passage explains the context. Jesus began to teach in parables on "the same day" in which He had several antagonistic encounters. When we look back into chapter 12, we read that the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of "Beelzebub, the prince of demons." In the ensuing discussion, Jesus warned His accusers about the "unpardonable sin" of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (*Matthew 12:22-32*). Shortly after that, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law demanded that Jesus perform a miraculous sign. In His response to their request, Jesus said that no miraculous signs would be performed for the "wicked and adulterous generation" that the religious leaders represented.

Immediately after these encounters, Jesus presented His first parable. He had a twofold purpose in His use of parables. Through parables He was able to introduce truth, albeit in a veiled way. Individuals who were eager to understand the meanings had to be willing to ask questions, and, when they did, Jesus was willing to give detailed explanations.

Parables were also a strategic means whereby Jesus could conceal truth from individuals who were unreceptive to His teaching. During His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made the rather shocking statement, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and then turn and tear you to pieces” (*Matthew 7:6*). Parables were Jesus’ special way of teaching about the kingdom without “casting His pearls” before the people who had hardened attitudes against Him.

By using parables in His teaching, Jesus was able to identify the individuals who had genuine spiritual concerns. They were the ones who sought Him out for explanations and more information. On the other hand, interpretations of the parables remained a mystery to those who were deliberately obstinate (the Pharisees) or only interested in miracles (curious spectators). Blindness of mind and hardness of heart prevented the religious leaders and spectators from seeking truth (*see John 12:37-41*). As opposition toward Him increased, Jesus used parables more and more because the parables did not give His enemies as many direct statements by which to oppose and criticize Him.

Jesus named His first parable “The Parable of the Sower” (*see verse 18*). However, in telling this parable, He did not make the farmer the center of attention, nor did He place a special emphasis on the seed. Jesus focused the attention of His listeners on the variety of soil conditions.

In the Middle East, barley and wheat seed was sown in the fall. After the ground was dug up or plowed in rough fashion, the farmer scattered seed. He carried the seed in a bag which hung from his shoulder. As he walked through the field, he would broadcast handfuls of seed left and right. Using this method, the seed would be spread unevenly and often in unsuitable locations. After the seed was sown the farmer would smooth out the soil and wait for the early rains to fall which would germinate the seed and start the growing process. The farmer would have nothing else to do until harvest time the following spring.

The pathways which ran through the unfenced fields were too hard to receive the seed, which was eaten by birds. "Rocky places" refers to the limestone bedrock that was underneath the topsoil. The seeds which fell on this shallow soil sprouted quickly but the young plants would wither and die because they could not send deep roots down for moisture – the rock prevented this. Other seed fell into areas where thorn bushes grew, which deprived the growing plants of sun and nourishment. Fortunately some of the seed landed on good soil where the conditions for growing were good. The eventual result was a harvest of varying yields.

The same seed could produce no crop, some crop, or much crop, depending on the kind of soil where the seed fell. Only one of the four types of soil produced a satisfactory harvest.

Jesus explained the meaning after being asked by the disciples. The explanation begins in verse 18. He said that it was impossible for the seeds to germinate on the hard pathway, just as the word of God cannot take root in the person whose mind and heart is hardened to spiritual concerns. Each time a person refuses to accept and apply God's word to his life makes it more difficult and unlikely that the truth will penetrate and implant itself in the human soul. The devil has so much control over such people that there is no possibility of belief and salvation.

The rocky ground represented the people who were easily attracted to the gospel and accepted it quickly, but just as easily put it aside. Jesus stated that these people "believe for a while," but that they fall away "in the time of testing." Such people apparently give little thought to the significance and ramifications of their decision to believe. The truth does not penetrate deeply into their hearts and minds. They do not have enough solid conviction and commitment to have an enduring faith. They may be, for a time, taken up with the Word of God, but when the pressures of life increase, they fall away. The word for "fall away" is related to the word "apostasy." For some people, the start of Christian faith is easy, but it becomes impossible for them to sustain it.

In the third type of soil, the seed sprouted and grew, but the stalks of grain had to compete with thorn bushes for the nutrients, light, and space needed to become mature. Jesus said that this was the situation of people who are “choked by life’s worries, riches, and pleasures.” In other words, their loyalty to God is not whole-hearted. Spiritual concerns for them are but one priority among many, and the many other things, which by nature are worldly, prevent the person from reaching spiritual maturity. The thorn bushes prevented the stalks from producing heads of grain. There was nothing to harvest. In the same way, some “babes in Christ” never go on to spiritual maturity. The thorn bushes represent anything that crowds God out of our lives.

Finally Jesus explained the good soil. The good soil represented the person who “hears the word and understands it.” In the parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is quoted as saying that the person “hears the word, retains it, and by perseverance produces an abundant crop.” The word “retain” implied that the person understood and applied the truth of the word to his life. He was a “doer” of the word and not just a hearer. The word “perseverance” was another word which implied application — application over a long period of time.

A “good-soil” person is so committed to the truth that he does not give up or stop short of the goal of maximum fruitfulness. He knows that it takes time for the seed to mature and the harvest to be ready. This kind of person is pleasing to God, first, because of his heart attitude and application of the Word, and secondly, because of the results which are achieved. He is not like the other types of people in this parable who did not have the heart attitude or desire to accept, believe, and apply the truth of God’s word.

In His explanation, Jesus referred to “the word” several times in verses 19 through 23. As a result of the explanation, the disciples learned what would happen when the Word of God was communicated to people. They understood that many people would reject the message, but there was also the assurance of an abundant harvest if the word of God was sown in people’s lives. Jesus wanted His disciples to understand the parable because He was preparing them for their future ministry responsibilities. They would have the future task to sow the Word of God just as He was doing.

This parable provides us with a basic understanding of the missionary task. God expects all those who have responded to Him and entered the Kingdom to be His agents in spreading the good news about His Kingdom to others. Disciples may not be able to discern the receptivity of the listeners, but this is not their concern. They are to cast the seed everywhere. They recognize that many listeners will not respond, but that there will be some true and lasting conversions and transformed lives.

The Parable of the Sower is essential teaching for kingdom people, but the most challenging and helpful part of the passage is in verses 9 through 17. After telling the facts of the story to the crowd on the shore, Jesus concluded with the challenge, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." That was His way of saying, "If you get the point of what I have told you, then apply it to your life."

In verse 12, Jesus stated the sad truth that people who fail to respond to the little glimmers of truth they are given will be unable and unqualified to receive more truth. The crowd was more interested in the possibility of seeing Jesus perform a compelling supernatural sign than thinking about His words. They were not interested in any spiritual changes in their lives. As a result, their already dull and resistant minds would become more and more hardened against the truth that Jesus was teaching.

Jesus explained to His disciples that the Israelites of His era were no different than the people in the time of Isaiah. Isaiah lived about 700 years earlier than Jesus. When he announced the impending judgment of God on the nation of Israel for its unbelief, his preaching only hardened the resistance of the people toward God. The seed of God's word had no root in the lives of the people, and ultimately there was no limit to their rebellion against God. *(The quotation is from Isaiah 6:9-10 Septuagint)*

History was repeating itself in the days of Jesus. Most of the Israelites were unwilling to listen to the words of Jesus. The religious leaders had accused Him of doing the works of Satan. The teachings of Jesus did not change their pre-conceived ideas about the kingdom of God. The unwillingness of the people to consider the truth of Jesus' words added to their rebellious attitudes, and condemned them to remain outside the kingdom. It is always this way: The failure of people to move forward in response to hearing the word of God is really a step backward.

Jesus made a distinction between the people in the crowds and the disciples. The disciples were the ones who were willing to admit that they didn't understand what Jesus was doing and saying, and were willing to ask for clarification. Jesus was willing to work with them because they were not too proud to admit their ignorance and their need for spiritual guidance. The disciples were placing more faith in Jesus than the members of the crowds. They were seeking more than entertainment — that is, hoping that Jesus would perform a miracle, and they were definitely not standing with the religious leaders in refusing to accept what Jesus had said. The disciples were putting trust and confidence in Jesus as their spiritual Teacher.

Because the disciples believed in the person and the work of Jesus, they were eligible for additional revelation of truth. Jesus said that their blessings were greater than those experienced by the prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament. Those men could only look forward to the promised coming of the Messiah, but the Galilean disciples were in the company of Jesus and were hearing and seeing things that the old-timers longed to experience, but could not.

Our position as believers is even better than the early disciples of Jesus. We can look back at all Jesus accomplished through His teaching, His death and resurrection. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit as our guide. We have a completed revelation available for study. We can be God's "farmers" sowing heavenly seed in the soil of humanity. We've a story to tell to the nations. That's our privilege and responsibility.