

The Parable of the Sower

Introduction

The Parable of the Sower is the first of the parables Jesus used to instruct the multitudes, including His disciples, in the truths concerning “the kingdom of God” – the reign of God in the hearts of His people. It appears in all three synoptic Gospels: Matthew 13:3-9; Mark 4:2-9; Luke 8:4-8. Put simply, a parable is **an earthly story with a heavenly meaning**. Parables, or illustrative sayings, are stories which are true to life and which use common, everyday situations to teach spiritual truths. Each of Jesus’ parables instructs us with regard to some aspect of the kingdom of God, or, as Jesus puts it, “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 13:11).

The Four Types of Soil

Although Jesus Himself refers to this parable as “The Parable of the Sower”, it could also be called “The Four Types of Soil”, as it is **the type of soil** into which the seed is sown which is the main focus of the story. The picture is of a farmer sowing seed in his field (Matthew 13:3). As he sows, the seed falls onto four different types of terrain: 1) the way side (footpath), 2) stony ground, 3) thorny ground, and 4) good ground (Matthew 13:4-8).

In Jesus’ explanation of the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:18-23; Mark 4:14-20; Luke 8:11-15), we are not told the identity of the sower; however, in His explanation of the Parable of the Tares which follows it (Matthew 13:24-30), and which involves a similar story-line, we are told that “he that soweth the good seed is the Son of man” (Matthew 13:37), that is, Jesus Himself. “There is no good reason to believe that this identification does not also hold for the parable of The Sower” (William Hendriksen: Commentary on the Gospel of Mark). Jesus explains to His disciples that the seed sown represents “the word of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:19), or, “the word of God” (Luke 8:11); and the four types of soil represent four types of hearer and the condition of their hearts, which results in four different responses to the word of the kingdom.

The Way Side Hearer

We might also describe this hearer as the **hard-hearted hearer**. As the farmer sows his seed, some falls along the well-trodden path (Greek, “hodos”; “a travelled way, road”: Thayer’s Greek Lexicon) which runs through his field (cf. Matthew 12:1); here the soil is hard and compacted, and the seed remains on the surface where the birds come along and gobble it up. Jesus identifies the birds with the devil, “the wicked one”, who “catcheth away that which was sown in his heart” (Matthew 13:19). With this type of hearer, **the word goes in one ear and straight out the other**. His heart is hardened against the things of God and his understanding is darkened, and therefore he gives no attention to what he “hears” (Matthew 13:19). One of the reasons Jesus spoke in parables was a judicial one: the stubborn unwillingness of the multitude to give heed to the word of God: “For this people’s heart is waxed gross (become calloused), and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed” (Matthew 13:15). We might call these people **wilfully-ignorant**. The responsibility for their failure to understand and respond to Jesus’ message lies firmly with the hearers themselves.

A stubborn, persistent refusal to listen to God's voice speaking to us in His word will result in our hearts becoming more and more hardened. We see an example of this in Pharaoh (Exodus chapters 5 to 11), who hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15) against God's voice, and refused to let the people of Israel go (Exodus 5:2); as a judicial consequence, God proceeded to harden Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 10:20). Our hearts become increasingly hardened as we pursue a life of disobedience to God's commands and live our lives with "self" firmly at the centre of it. But it is not only the so-called atheist or irreligious person who hardens their heart against God: people who hear faithful Gospel preaching Sunday after Sunday can become "Gospel-hardened" as they go on refusing to respond to God's call to repent and believe the Gospel. Beware of being a **hard-hearted hearer** of God's message: "To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart" (Psalm 95:7-8).

The Stony Ground Hearer

We might also describe this hearer as the **shallow-hearted hearer**. Here the soil is shallow; just below the surface is a layer of rock (Luke 8:6), so root growth is stunted. Due to the shallowness of the soil, the ground is unable to retain moisture (Luke 8:6), and, as a result, having quickly sprung up, "when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away" (Matthew 13:6). Jesus explains that these hearers give an impulsive, joyful response to the message, and for a time look very promising; but their response is superficial: there is no spiritual depth, no conviction of sin, no real change of heart, and, as a consequence, as soon as afflictions and persecutions come as a result of their profession of faith (Matthew 13:21), they quickly stumble, lacking the persevering grace of the Holy Spirit, and eventually return to their former, ungodly manner of life. We might call these hearers **fair-weather believers**.

Sadly, we see examples of these shallow-hearted hearers at high-pressure crusades where, affected by the atmosphere and emotional music, they are persuaded to come forward, say the "sinner's prayer", sign a decision card, and are told, "You are now a Christian". These "converts" are like the man who told Jesus, "Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest" (Luke 9:57); but Jesus knew the true state of his heart, and, in His reply (Luke 9:58), indicated that this man had failed to count the cost of being one of His disciples (Luke 14:28). Jesus said that a true disciple "must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Beware of being a **shallow-hearted hearer** of the word of God, because you will be unable to cope with the trials and temptations of the Christian life: for "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

The Thorny Ground Hearer

We might also describe this hearer as the **half-hearted hearer**. The soil here contains the roots of thorns which grow up alongside the good seed and "choke" its growth. Jesus identifies the thorns as "the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things" (Mark 4:19), and "pleasures of this life" (Luke 8:14), which result in the hearer being spiritually "unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22). This is **the worldly professor**, who is preoccupied with the things of this life. These people may appear to be religious to the casual observer: they turn up to church **once** on a Sunday, but otherwise their lives are dominated by the desire for, and anxiety about, money, possessions and the things of this world; for these hearers the kingdom of God takes second place (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (riches, material wealth)” (Matthew 6:24). These hearers are like Lot’s wife, who, when she was supposed to be fleeing from the wrath coming upon the city of Sodom, looked back, because her heart was firmly rooted to this world (see our article “Remember Lot’s Wife”). These people fail to heed the warning sounded in 1 John 2:15-16, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world”. Beware of being a **half-hearted hearer** of the message of the kingdom. The King says to such, “My son (or daughter), give me thine heart” (Proverbs 23:26) – all of it!

The Good Ground Hearer

We might also describe this hearer as the **whole-hearted hearer**. Here the soil has been well ploughed and dug up; stones and weeds have been removed, so that the ground is ready to receive the seed. It is “good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold” (Matthew 13:8), or, as Mark has it, it “(yielded) fruit that sprang up and increased” (Mark 4:8). Jesus identifies this heart as one “that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matthew 13:23); Luke says that these are such as “in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15); while Mark says they “receive (the word), and bring forth fruit” (Mark 4:20). The great difference between this type of hearer and all the others is that they “bring forth fruit”. Here we have **the fruitful hearer**. With all four types of soil (hearer) in this parable, the sower is the same – Jesus, the Son of man, and the seed is the same – the word of the kingdom. It is the type of soil, the condition of the heart, which makes all the difference. So what is it that makes the heart capable of rightly receiving the word of God and producing fruit?

Ever since the fall of man, described in Genesis chapter 3, each one of us is born into this world with the same spiritual nature – a dead one! “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). Being spiritually dead we are, of necessity, spiritually blind and deaf, and our hearts are “deceitful” and “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). This doesn’t mean that we are all as bad as we could possibly be: but it does mean that every part of our nature is vitiated and corrupted by sin; neither does it mean that all people are born atheists: everyone, deep down, believes in some sort of “god”; the trouble is that he/it is a figment of our natural, corrupt hearts and imaginations. We wilfully “suppress” the truth about God by our “unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18 margin). What we need, in order to know the true God, is a **spiritual heart transplant**: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away **the stony heart** out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit (Spirit) within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The whole-hearted hearer is like Lydia, “**whose heart the Lord opened**, to heed the things which were spoken of Paul” (Acts 16:14, margin). We need God to come to us, by His grace (unmerited favour), and give us a new heart, in order that we may respond to His word, and believe the things that it says concerning His kingdom. The Spirit of God acts like a farmer: He breaks up the hard ground of our hearts, convicts us of our sin and our alienation from God, and causes us to repent (turn from our sins with sorrow for

our failure to love God and keep His commandments) and to turn to Jesus Christ in faith (trusting in His atoning death which He accomplished on the cross). Here is Spurgeon's testimony as to how the Lord dug up his heart: "My heart was fallow, and covered with weeds; but on a certain day the great Husbandman came and began to plough my soul. Ten black horses was his team, and it was a sharp ploughshare that he used, and the ploughers made deep furrows. The ten commandments were those black horses, and the justice of God, like a ploughshare, tore my spirit. I was condemned, undone, destroyed, lost, helpless, hopeless, – I thought hell was before me. Then there came a cross ploughing, for when I went to hear the gospel it did not comfort me; it made me wish I had a part in it, but I feared that such a boon was out of the question. The choicest promises of God frowned on me, and his threatenings thundered at me. I prayed, but found no answer of peace. It was long with me thus. After the ploughing came the sowing. God who ploughed the heart made it conscious that it needed the gospel, and the gospel seed was joyfully received" (C. H. Spurgeon: Sermon on Isaiah 9:3).

Which Type of Soil are You?

Jesus said, after telling the Parable of the Sower, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9). **What sort of heart do you have?** Has the Spirit of God dug up your hard heart, caused you to grieve over your sin, and brought you to repentance? Has the Spirit of God opened the eyes of your understanding to receive the truths concerning the kingdom of God? Jesus gave His life in order that we might enter God's kingdom; He paid the penalty for sin on behalf of all who truly trust in Him; and He has promised, "him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

How will you know if your faith is genuine? The parable tells us: it will produce fruit; the amount may vary according to our opportunities for service (see the Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25:14-30), but **genuine fruit will be produced**; the Bible calls it "the fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11), and "the fruit of the Spirit (which) is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness (kindness), goodness, faith (faithfulness), meekness, temperance (self-control)" (Galatians 5:22-23), and "the obedience of faith (the obedience to God's word which true faith produces)" (Romans 16:26). This faith will take no heed of the devil's lies (unlike the Way Side Hearer), will persevere through trials (unlike the Stony Ground Hearer), and give you a hope which looks beyond the empty, temporal things of this world (unlike the Thorny Ground Hearer), to the eternal blessings of the world to come.

Is your faith genuine, fruit-producing faith? We may not produce as much fruit for our King as we would dearly wish to, but, as Spurgeon prayed, "Lord, if I cannot reach to a hundredfold, let me at least prove to be good ground by bearing thirtyfold" (Spurgeon's Exposition of Matthew).

May we have this **whole-hearted faith in Jesus Christ**, and may we bring forth "fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (Romans 6:22), to the glory of our blessed Lord, and Saviour, and King. Amen.

We will look at Jesus' next parable, God willing, in our next article.