

The Parables of Jesus
The Kingdom Parables

The Parable of the Sower

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I am going to quote the parable as it appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

<i>Matthew 13:3b-8</i>	<i>Mark 4:3-8</i>	<i>Luke 8:5-8</i>
Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.	Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.	A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

As we will see, Jesus will explain this parable in detail. What I want to do in this study is to go over Jesus' explanation so as to bring out things that may be missed in casual reading. I also want to point out that Jesus gave us His explanation to use as a help to understanding the other parables. And I want to show how we can apply this parable today. But first, it is important to look at what Jesus says between the parable and His explanation.

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A Means to Understanding the Parables

Mark 4:13 records something that Jesus said after giving this parable: "And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?" The first "know" in this verse is from a Greek word that would be better translated here as "perceive." Also, the word for "parables" is preceded by a definite article in the Greek. So, essentially, Jesus is saying, "Did you not perceive this parable? And how will you know all the parables?" In other words, Jesus sees that the disciples did not immediately perceive the meaning of the Parable of the Sower. So, He sees that they will need further instruction if they are going to understand the rest of the parables. His instruction consists in a detailed explanation of the Parable of the Sower. Thus, we see that understanding the Parable of the Sower is a key to understanding the rest of the parables (as we will see in the next article in this series, the Parable of the Tares, which Jesus also explains, is also helpful).

The Explanation of the Parable of the Sower

Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Sower is found in Matthew 13:18-23; Mark 4:14-20; and Luke 8:11-15. Each of these writers brings out different elements of Jesus' explanation, so I will give a combined account of the explanation. To help with organization, I will divide the parable into five sections. The information in the first section applies to the entire parable. It is the explanation of the seed. The next four sections are Jesus' explanation of the four types of people He illustrating.

I. The Seed: Mark 4:14 says, "The sower soweth the word." Luke 8:11 identifies the word a little more by saying, "The seed is the word of God." In Matthew 13:19, which I will quote below, notice that the word is called "the word of the kingdom."

We see, then, that Jesus very explicitly says that the seed in the parable is the Word of God as it is sown or preached throughout the world.

Seed=Word of God preached in the world

II. The Way Side: Matthew 13:19 says, "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side."

So, someone sows, or preaches, the Word of God. Some people do not understand it. As Luke 8:5 points out, they step on it in total disregard. When this happens, the "wicked one," whom Mark identifies as Satan and Luke identifies as the devil, comes and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts, "lest," Luke adds, "they should believe and be saved."

When the sower sows the seed, some of it falls on the way side (Greek, *hodos*—road). The way side represents people who don't understand what they hear. The fowls of the air represent Satan, the devil, who picks the Word of God out of these people.

Way side or road=people who don't understand
Fowls or birds=Satan, the devil, the wicked one

III. The Stony Places: "But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended" (Matthew 13:20-21). Luke 8:13 says this differently enough that I will quote it: "They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away."

Some of God's Word is heard by people who are immediately fascinated with it. But these are shallow people with no moisture (Luke 8:6) who, when they are tested through tribulation or persecution (pictured by the scorching sun), fall away. The stony places with no depth of earth and moisture, then, are these shallow people, and the sun is the persecution.

Stony places with no depth of earth or moisture=shallow people
Sun=tribulation and persecution

IV. Among the Thorns: "He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22). Luke 8:14 adds enough further information that I want to quote it and add some comments in brackets: "And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth [*poreuomenoi*—go on their way], and are choked [*sunpnigontai*—utterly stangled or drowned] with [*hupo*—under] cares [*merimnōn*—distractions, that which causes one to be drawn in different directions

and causes anxiety] and riches [*ploutou*—abundance] and pleasures [*hedonōn*—the word from which we get the English word, hedonism] of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection [*ou telesphorusin*—bring nothing to maturity or completion]."

The seed among the thorns, therefore, are they who hear the word but are so drowning in the distractions, cares, issues, abundance, and pleasures of this life that the seed does not grow to maturity or completion.

Among the thorns=people drowning with the things of this life
Thorns=the things of this life

V. *The Good Ground*: "But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Matthew 13:23). Notice that these people not only hear the word, but they also understand it. "Understand" is *sunīōn*, which means to put together, to comprehend. Remember, people who receive the word joyfully but do not understand it (and often even seem to be proud of not trying to understand it) fit the description of the stony ground, not the good ground. Of the people who are the good ground, Mark 4:20 says they "receive" the word. This occurrence of "receive" is translated from *paradechomai*. This is the only place in the three accounts of this parable where this word is used. It means to receive with deliberate approval.

Luke 8:15 says, "But that on the good [*kalē*—good as to its inner quality] ground are they, which in an honest [*kalē*] and good [*agathē*—good as beneficial in its effect] heart [*kardia*—this word often means "mind," and since the context deals with understanding and keeping the Word in the mind, "mind" is likely the meaning here], having heard the word, keep it [*katechousin*—keep it in the mind, commit it to the memory], and bring forth fruit with [*en*—in] patience [*hupomonē*—staying with it]."

Thus, the good ground represents people who not only hear the word but also understand and deliberately receive it and keep it in their minds. In fact, the good ground is like their good hearts, and they are able to bring forth fruit according to their abilities.

Good ground=the people [or their minds] who understand the word
Fruit=the results of the Christian life

I will now further discuss the lesson of the parable, then I will show how it can help us understand the other parables, and then I will close by showing how we can apply this parable to our lives.

The Lesson of the Parable of the Sower

As we have just seen, this parable tells us that there are some people on whom the Word of God has no effect, some people upon whom it has a superficial effect that cannot stand up to tribulation or persecution, some people who may have a passing and even long time acquaintance with the Word of God as nominal Christians but for whom the Word bears no fruit, and some people who have a depth (as we will see, this is a God-given gift) that allows them to comprehend and receive the Word of God and bear fruit.

The lesson of the parable is, in fact, based on this diversity of people. As the Gospel is preached, there is always a mixture of people in the world. Some have no understanding of the Gospel, and they ignore it, treat it contemptuously, and reject it. Some may seem to become zealous Christians for a time, but they are unable to internalize the Word. Because they have not made the Word of God the basis of their world view, the source of all of their values, and what they live for, when the going gets tough they return to the world. Others may also claim Christianity, but the Word of God cannot grow and bear fruit in them because of their worldliness. Some of these people may go to church every week, and some may even be in the ministry with large churches. But because the Word of God bears no fruit in them, they do not understand the Bible or how to live life in a Christian manner. If they preach or teach, it is largely error, and their ministries are run on worldly models, not Scripture.

And then there are those who, when they encounter the Gospel, joyously receive it, put it in their minds, understand it, and bear Godly fruit. But how does this happen? What makes this last group of people different from all the others?

An Illustration of What Was Happening in Jesus' Own Ministry

In the introductory article to the kingdom parables ("Introduction to the Kingdom Parables," <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/parkingintro.htm>), I pointed out that the understanding of the kingdom parables was for Jesus' inner circle, not the people Jesus called "them that are without" (Mark 4:11) and the "others" (Luke 8:10). Notice that I used the same word, "others" (the last word in the paragraph above) to describe all of

the people illustrated in the parable except the last group. I did this on purpose. These other people in the parable—the people for whom the seed of the Word bears no fruit—are the same kind of people to whom Jesus spoke the parable. In fact, this parable is specifically a parable of Jesus' ministry—it pictures the types of people He encountered, although any preacher of the Gospel will encounter the same kinds of people.

Something to notice about this parable is that, unlike the parables that follow it, Jesus does not begin it with saying, "The kingdom of heaven [or, kingdom of God] is like...." The reason for this, I believe, is because it was a parable of the immediate moment. Although its principles could be applied to whenever someone preaches the Gospel, Jesus' immediate intention for this parable was to tell the multitudes, in parable form, what He tells His disciples immediately after stating the parable: "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matthew 13:11 and continue reading to verse 17). The disciples' eyes are blessed (verse 16) because they are the good ground. The others' eyes are closed because they fall into one of the other categories of people in the parable.

But how is it that the disciples' eyes are opened and the others' eyes are not? What is the difference between the good ground and the wayside, the stony ground, and the weedy patch?

In Acts 16:14, we read of Lydia, "whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul." Here we see the difference. Lydia "attended unto" (*prosechein*—"gave full attention to," "held to," even "became addicted to") the Word of God spoken by Paul because God first opened her heart or mind. The difference between the good ground and the wayside, the stony ground, and the weedy patch is God's miraculous and sovereign act of opening a person's mind. This opening of the mind is similar to opening or tilling the ground. It softens and gives depth of earth, gives the gift of saving faith, and imparts the Holy Spirit so that the seed of the Word can take deep root and draw upon the "moisture" of the Holy Spirit to grow.

This is the same thing Paul speaks of in Titus 3:5-6: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior." Notice also 1 Corinthians 2, verses 9-10 and 14: "But as it is

written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.... But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." The wayside, the stony ground, and the weedy patch are all different reactions of the natural man to the Gospel. Some reject it outright, others accept it on their natural strength for a short time, and others seem to accept it but are really more dedicated to the world than the Word. The Word will flourish, and grow, and bear fruit only in those whose minds God has chosen to open.

The bottom line is that, in the world, as the Gospel is preached, we will encounter all of these kinds of people. And, even among those who call themselves Christians and even among those who attend the assemblies, we will have those who have stony grounds, those who are choked with thorns, as well as those with good ground.

Using the Parable of the Sower as a Key to the Other Parables

If we are to understand the other kingdom parables, we must apply the lessons we have learned from the Parable of the Sower. We must see that in this kingdom age, the Word of God is to be sown or spread throughout the world. As the Word is preached, there will always be a mixture of people—those who are truly called and prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive the Word, and all the rest. In this world, as the Gospel is spread, these people will co-exist, the kingdom will grow, Satan will have his agents to try to take away the Word, God's people will see the value of the kingdom as it is preached and act upon it, and in the end of the world God will separate His kingdom people from this world's people. We should also remember the meaning of the symbols (such as fowls of the air, fields, etc.) from this and other parables that Jesus explains so that we can know what those same symbols mean in other parables.

Application of the Parable to Our Lives

What can we take from this parable and apply to our lives today? This parable teaches us that in this world there are different kinds of people and that they are shown for who they are by the preaching of the Gospel. Who these people are is determined by God, not us. The parable never shows people moving from one category to another, for example, the stony ground never becomes good ground. This parable

shows us God's sovereignty. No amount of preaching the Gospel changes someone from being in one group to being in another. Yes, people can change from indifference or even, as with Saul on the road to Damascus, from hostility to embracing the Gospel. But the change is a work of the Holy Spirit that God works in those whom He has elected in eternity to salvation. Many Christians today seem to have forgotten this lesson. They have forgotten that Jesus told His disciples that when a city did not hear their message, they were to leave and shake the dust of that city off their feet (Matthew 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; Acts 13:51).

Today, we should realize that no amount of pleading, no heaping up of altar calls week after week, no heights of entertainment, and no church growth business models can add anything to the work of the Holy Spirit. Notice in Acts 17 that when Paul preached the Gospel in Athens, after a few people believed, Paul left. Even though he was asked to speak again, he got out of there because he recognized that the Holy Spirit had done His work, and any further "conversions" would have been false. We must pray for such discernment.

Since we will always have these different groups of people, we must also expect that we will always be mocked and persecuted by the wayside people. It is a fruitless diversion of our time and resources away from the Great Commission to try to change these people by continually preaching at them or trying to change their morals through political action or debating with them over various moral, political, or scientific issues. Jesus did not say to browbeat the carnally minded, but to preach the Gospel and disciple those who believe.

We should also learn from this parable that many who call themselves Christians are not truly converted. I'm not saying that we should go on a witch hunt trying to judge, but we should expect that some will fall away in persecution and some will get choked out by the pleasures and cares of this world (including, I might add, getting caught up in peripheral political and moral issues that distract people from the Gospel). Jesus said, "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (see Matthew 7:13-20). While we are not to be condemning, we are to be discerning. We must be careful with whom we ally ourselves and what causes we take up. We want to stay strong, lean, and focused so that we do not even temporarily get pulled off course by what could well be the majority who will be amongst us until the end of the world.

The next parable we will examine in this series will be the Parable of the Tares and Wheat.