

Parable of the Sower **Pastor John E. Dubler**

Another parable concerning the importance of properly hearing and receiving the gospel of the kingdom is presented in **Matthew 13: 1-23**. [See also the parallel passages: Mark 4: 1-20 and Luke 8: 4-15].

The importance of this particular parable could hardly be overstated, especially since the Lord referred to it as being foundational in regard to understanding *all parables*. Thus the need for careful reading and understanding is magnified by His statement recorded in Mark 4:13, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?”

Unless this parable had been explained to us by the Lord Himself, it is doubtful we could understand it, apart from the Holy Spirit’s revelation. Even with His explanation there is a notable volume of debate about what it “really” means. But God has blessed us with the interpretation, given to the disciples once they were away from the crowd. Should we fail to grasp its meaning and act upon it, we indeed stand the strong chance of misunderstanding all other parables.

This parable, then, focuses on the problem of hearing, understanding and receiving the gospel of the kingdom. What could be more important or consequential? Our very fruitfulness and productivity as disciples hinge upon the understanding and implementation of these words.

The Central Message

The key to producing fruit as a disciple is *hearing and understanding* the gospel message. It is the *heart attitude* of man that will determine whether or not he will receive the message and thus bear fruit, whether it be 30, 60 or 100-fold.

Elements of the Parable

There are three elements: First, the seed, which is the Word of God. Second, the sower, who is the Lord Jesus or anyone who ministers the gospel message in Spirit and in truth. Third, the four types of soil, which clearly represent the heart condition of the hearers of Jesus’ gospel message. Of course the soils merit closer inspection.

The Four Soils

The fact that there are four categories of soil here does not represent in any way a number or percentage of those in the crowd of hearers that will become true disciples: one in four, for example. The number may be higher, or more likely lower, even much lower.

First: The seed sown beside the road. The Word is preached but not at all comprehended by the hearer. This man’s ears function well enough, but his hearing fails in that he cannot seem to grasp the Word which has been preached to him. It “goes in one ear and out the other,” as our proverb declares of a person who hears without comprehension. Why have these people even

come to listen in the first place? Many motives might be assumed. Perhaps they were forced to come by parents or well-meaning friends. Perhaps they have only a self-centered desire to be with friends; to see others and to be seen. For them a play or party will do as well as the event or church where the gospel is preached, for they have not come to carefully listen. They are not seeking a message of hope and thus they never allow such a message to sink in. Perhaps they come only from habit, or worse, because they are driven by guilt. All such mindless motives provide easy prey for Satan's schemes. This failure to comprehend spiritual



things is the very essence of seed which falls beside the road. It does not enter the warmth of the earth, that is the heart of man, but abides alone on a hard surface—the hard heart of a flippant and heedless man.

The birds. In His explanation of the parable, Jesus tells us that the birds are the evil one. Satan is waiting, lurking round the edges of this man's heart, waiting his chance to snap up the seed once it has been sown by the preacher. Listeners must be careful not to delay receiving and acting upon the Word preached. Do not say to yourself, "I will consider this later, or perhaps I'll get the recording of this message and hear it sometime when it is more convenient for me." By the time that you get back to the message, the seed of the Word will have been gobbled up by the voracious birds. Satan does not wait long before snatching it away.

Second: The Rocky Places. The man illustrated by the rocky soil hears and initially quite joyfully receives the Word, but he fails to follow up with meaningful discipleship. When the promised trials and tribulations emerge, he withers away. The rocky soil is not solid rock, or it



would be identical to the beaten path, with the seed not even entering the soil nor sprouting. Here there is a little soil, though its depth is not sufficient to sustain a good root structure. This soil, and thus the heart of this man, is therefore shallow and unproductive. His regard for the Word exists to start with, but it is not lasting.

[Photo credit: Affiliation of Christian Geologists,
<http://www.wheaton.edu/ACG/index.stm>]

Notice that this man experiences an initial rush of good feeling. "This is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy . . ." (v. 20). He is very happy to hear a good Word from the heart of the Lord preached to him, but his regard for such spiritual things and even for the Lord Jesus Himself is based on feelings, not faith. Thus he has no victory over temptation or sin. He "has no firm root in himself," no commitment which would provide a pathway for the Holy Spirit to minister His grace and keep him in the hour of temptation. He has no power to resist temptations or be sustained, even in minor trials. He is agreeable enough and even excited about what he has heard, but the reaction is emotional, not rooted nor grounded in faith.

To avoid the peril posed by this type of soil, the hearer, once he receives the gospel, must be immediately discipled. Putting Christ first in all one does, becoming separate from the world, praying, developing a love for the Word of God (through reading, memorizing and meditating), and fellowshiping with other believers are all foundational parts of becoming a true disciple.

Third: The Thorns. The seed in this case is growing in decent enough of soil, but unhappily, other seeds are also growing in the same soil. These other seeds are not compatible with the production of good, healthy grain plants. If allowed to grow alongside the good seed, they will eventually grow up, take over and choke out the good plants. These are the thorns of which the Lord speaks. The thorns, as He defines them, are two categories of worldly concerns: first, the worry of the world, and second, the deceitfulness of wealth. These thorns are not a minor



concern and cannot be trifled with. The world, after all, promises every happiness and has a strong appeal. Unfortunately, the man whose heart condition is depicted by this type of soil eventually yields to these temptations and falls away.

Taking a closer look at the thorn plants we find first the “worry of the world.” The word “worry” is in the Greek: *μεριμνα* [merimna], meaning to be drawn in different directions and distracted,

and hence signifying anxiety of heart and worrying. Worries of the world are material concerns: what we shall eat, what we shall drink and what we shall put on, to paraphrase Matthew 6:25-20. The same word for worry is used in Philippians 4:6 where we read “Be *anxious* for nothing . . .” Certainly it may be said that worry is a cancer which eats away at our confidence in God as provider.

In this regard, consider Matthew 6:25-30:

For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? 27 "And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? 28 "And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, 29 yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 30 "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!¹

Not willing to allow us to be drawn in two directions and subject to anxiety about worldly affairs, Jesus gave us two easily visible and common daily reminders not to worry: The birds of

¹ Matthew 6:25-30 All quoted passages are from the New American Standard Updated version; used with permission.

the air and the flowers of the field. Thus we should turn all our cares into prayers, worrying about nothing and praying about everything. I like to use the common penny, found on the sidewalk, parking lots or simply dropped on the floor in all conceivable places to remind me of God's care for us. Unless the penny is caked in filth, just pick it up and read these words, "In God We Trust." That serves to remind us that God is watching over us. When we acknowledge Him in all our ways, He directs our paths. His name adorns our money, even the very lowest coin of the realm. Shall we say "In God we trust" with our lips and not believe it in our hearts?

The second thorn plant is called by our Lord, the "deceitfulness of wealth." No substance ever made more promises it cannot keep than wealth. By its very nature it can be a strong deceiver, promising happiness, companionship and family joy. But it can provide none of these things. One has only to read about lottery winners to know that wealth chokes the life out of souls who were formerly at least sure of who were their friends. The man who turns loose of family and friends to grasp at money and the illusions that hang upon it is pitiable indeed. Jesus said, "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Matthew 6: 32-33.

The thorny soil is the condition of a man's heart that reflects to us a love for creature comfort, possessions and wealth. This contaminated soil is ground zero for the root of all evil which is the love of money. No wonder then that the love of money is the chief competitor for the love of God. Jesus' answer to being drawn in two directions over the deceitfulness of wealth is to wholeheartedly serve only one master. Consider:

Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Luke 12:15 "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

Psalms 19: 9-10 "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. **They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;** sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb."

Jeremiah 9: 23-24 "Thus says the LORD, " Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD."

Fourth and finally, we see the good soil. The characteristics of this man's heart (represented by the good soil), are three:

- 1.) He hears the word. He is carefully attentive to it and is listening with the kind of attention a man gives to instructions when he knows his very life depends upon it. He is sparing no pains to make sure he hears the Word. In the process he will not forsake "the assembling of yourselves together as is the habit of some," (Hebrews 10:25), but regularly attends the

preaching of the Word, knowing that careful hearing with implementation will spare him many pains.

2.) He understands the Word. This man will go to a great deal of effort to ensure that he understands properly what he is hearing. He is not afraid to make inquiry and to diligently search out a matter for himself in scripture. Like the Berean Christians, he “receive[s] the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” Acts 17:11-12.

3.) He brings forth fruit. The Word of God, when carefully listened to, understood and implemented cannot return void. It will accomplish what God desires and the purpose for which He sends it (Isaiah 55:10-11). It is a transforming word. Consider:



Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:1-2. [Photo credit: Somerset County, UK. <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/>]

The man whose heart is represented by the good soil is not a worldly minded man, but spiritually minded. Therefore he endures even great afflictions and difficulties, knowing that it is by God’s grace, namely, “Christ in you the hope of glory” Colossians 1:27.

This man has a noble and trustworthy heart according to the parallel passage for the Parable of the Sower which is found in Luke 8:15.

“But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.”

Unlike the man who is indifferent he carefully hears.

Unlike the man who receives the word with joy but does not endure the heat, he with gladness of heart receives the gracious offer of salvation and sends down deep roots of discipleship.

Unlike the man choked by worldly concerns he seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Additional Discussion From the Text:

Matthew 13: 1-3 That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. 2 And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the

whole crowd was standing on the beach. 3 And He spoke many things to them in parables, . . .”

Jesus left Peter’s house in Capernaum and walked a few hundred yards to the edge of Lake Kinneret (The Sea of Galilee) and there He sat down. It wasn’t long before a crowd had



gathered around Him; no doubt individuals toward the back were jostling to get a better position from which to hear. So, to control the crowd and to amplify the acoustics, He got into one of the fishing boats and sat down. No doubt He had a small fleet of boats from which to choose.

Zebedee, the father of James and John ran a small fishing business, and Peter may have had his own craft as well. Thus a boat became His pulpit while the people (the church) were standing on the beach. He had previously preached the Sermon on the Mount on a small hillside not far from this

spot. Other venues for His preaching included Capernaum’s synagogue and the Temple in Jerusalem. Nor should I neglect to mention that He also preached from Calvary’s cross, in seven statements of great import and lasting impact. [Photo credit: The Jesus Film Project <http://jesusfilm.org/>]

The marvelous detail with which this setting is recorded indicates to us the nature of a classic eye-witness account. Surely the Gospels are trustworthy; unquestionably the Word is God-breathed.

And so the greatest teacher of all time and the Savior of the world, the Son of God, sat down to teach. The Hebrew custom being opposite ours, the teachers sat while the listeners commonly stood. Those who were in attendance heard more than one parable that fine day on the shores of Kinneret.

“He who has ears let him hear” (v. 9.) This phrase also summarizes the meaning of the parable. “He who has ears let him hear,” means “pay attention—this is an important message.” Just having ears isn’t enough; one must have a willing eagerness to hear. Sadly, many people are willing only to be ignorant or even hostile and indignant toward gospel message. Let that not be said of us. These are they who stop up their ears and are purposely deaf. Of them the Word says, “Their heart is covered with fat, But I delight in Your law” **Psalm 119:70.**

Why do you speak to them in parables? (v. 10-17).

And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"
11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 "For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 "In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, [quoting Isaiah 6:8-10]

'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING,BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;
YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;
15 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,
WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,
OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,
HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'

16 " But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17 "For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The disciples did not understand and wisely, they asked the Lord for an explanation. For our sake it is wonderful that they did not remain silent. In our study of the Word, we can follow their example by asking our teacher, the Holy Spirit, to interpret for us whenever we lack understanding. Has the Lord not promised, "Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you?" Matthew 7:7.

Mysteries concealed and revealed. The Lord explains His use of parables in this way, "To you it has been granted to know the *mysteries* of the kingdom of heaven." v.11. The Greek word for *mysteries* is μυστήρια (musteria). This is not an incomprehensible cult secret or cabalistic rite, but truth that is divinely revealed. The meaning of the root word for μυστήρια is "silence." Literally the word means, "to shut the mouth." The parables can be that way, silent and shut up, until the mystery is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus spoke to them in parables to veil or conceal the truth from the insincere, mocking and hostile. But though initially a mystery also to the sincere, eager and trustworthy, dauntless pursuit of the truth is rewarded by revelation through the Holy Spirit's teaching.

Jesus' use of parables does not make His meaning more clear, as some incorrectly assert. A parable obscures the meaning and makes it more difficult to ferret out. Many times even the disciples who walked with Jesus on earth had to ask for the meaning to be explained to them.

But why conceal the clear meaning of the truth in such a way? The answer is in the nature and composition of the crowd. There were present and listening every type of person from mockers to the very sincere. In order to teach such a mob without segregating them He had to take care not to "give what is holy to dogs" or "cast his pearls before swine" Matthew 7:6. Keep in mind that Jesus did not explain the parable until He was back in the house in private with His disciples. The peril was obvious to Him. If He spoke plainly, those who sought His destruction would turn and tear Him to pieces. Meanwhile, the sincere seekers of truth would not give up until they really understood, while the casual listeners and those devoted to His demise would fade away. In addition, we should keep in mind that Jesus "hour had not yet come," (John 2:4) and so He was doubtless taking care to reveal only what was appropriate for the moment.

Therefore He chooses a method that reveals truth to the honest seeker and conceals the truth from those who would use His words against Him.

More about the condition of the hearer's hearts. Finally, Jesus tells them that His approach fulfills prophecy of Isaiah (v. 14).

Isaiah 6:8-10 reveals the condition of the hearer's hearts:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" 9 He said, "Go, and tell this people:

'Keep on listening, but do not perceive;
Keep on looking, but do not understand.'
10 " Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
Their ears dull,
And their eyes dim,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts,
And return and be healed."

Of course the parable is all about the condition of the hearer's heart. In Isaiah's case, he was told by the Lord to "go," but was also warned in advance that the people would not listen to him when he went. Notice the three things required in this prophecy: hearing, seeing and understanding. If the hearers turn from their ways and return to God's ways then they are healed. Indeed, in our case, those truly saved are healed of many maladies, body, soul and spirit.

The prophecy from Isaiah 6 which the Lord quotes tells us "The heart of this people has become dull . . ." The King James Version puts it more graphically to our ears: "For the people's heart is waxed gross." The Greek for "become dull" is *επαχυνθή* (epachunthee) meaning to make fat or thick. It was not God that rendered their hearts dull and insensitive, but they themselves, by refusing to listen. The more they heard the less sensitive they became until they, like the deaf cobra could not be "charmed." (Psalm 58:4). Did the Lord wish not to heal them? No, for He wept over Jerusalem, knowing the things that could have brought peace to her. (Luke 19: 41). By saying, "Otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them," He merely notes that when they choose to become hard they will not be healed. To argue otherwise misses the entire meaning of both the parable and the prophecy of Isaiah, and turns the meaning from righteousness to iniquity.

A beautiful literary form. We must not conclude without taking note of a beautiful Hebrew chiasm², constructed with great care.³

² Chiasm. (Kai-az-um, singular, chiasma , plural). A literary form that appears as an inverted and mirrored relationship between phrases or elements of a passage. [Greek chi "x."].

³ Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol.8, (Regency: Grand Rapids, 1984) p. 306.

But first, what are some examples of chiasmic structures in scripture?⁴ Chiasma vary from very complex in the books of Daniel and Revelation, to simple sentences. Here are some simple forms. Notice the inversion within each statement:

Matthew 19:30: "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first."

Mark 2:27: The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath:

Another from Matthew 7:6 helps us understand that it is the dogs that "tear you to pieces" while the swine "trample [you] under their feet.

A "Do not give what is holy to dogs,
B and do not throw your pearls before swine,
B' lest they trample them under their feet,
A' and turn and tear you to pieces"

Here then is the chiasm we find in the Parable of the Sower: 13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables;

- 1 because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.
- 2 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,
- 3 You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;
- 4 You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;
- 5 for the heart of this people has become dull,
- 6 With their ears they scarcely hear,
- 7 And they have closed their eyes,
- 7' Otherwise they would see with their eyes,
- 6' Hear with their ears,
- 5' And understand with their heart and return, And I would heal them.'
- 4' But blessed are your eyes, because they see;
- 3' and your ears, because they hear.
- 2' For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men
- 1' desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

Conclusion: The message of the Parable of the Sower is that we listen carefully to God's Word "he who has ears to hear . . ." In listening we should realize that our heart condition determines whether we receive the word and profit by it, producing 30, 60 or 100 fold.

Psalm 139: 23-24

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

⁴ For a brief explanation of how chiasma function in the Bible, especially with reference to ancient v. modern thought, see: http://www.inthebeginning.org/chiasmus/introduction/chiasmus_intro.htm.