

“The Sower and the Seed”

Background Scripture: Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4; Luke 8:5-15 **Devotional Reading:** Psalm 95

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NIV)

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

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¹⁸ “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize the parable of the sower.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that the wise sower always looks for opportunities to share the gospel.
- **Daily Application:** To state which soil in Matthew 13:19–21 you are most like and suggest a plan for change.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching Methods

An internet search of “teaching methods” quickly gives an avalanche of claimed methods—100 or more. A struggle to narrow those down to manageable types or categories leads to the foundational distinction between teacher-centered methods and student-centered methods. In teacher-centered methods, the instructors are authority figures who deliver knowledge; this is sometimes described as being a “sage on the stage.” In student-centered methods, teachers function more as facilitators; this is sometimes described as being a “guide on the side.” The distinction seems simple enough. But complexity asserts itself anew when varying levels of technology are considered under each method.

Analyzing the teaching methods of Jesus would seem to be simpler because there is little or no technology factor to consider. Yet there is no consensus regarding the enumeration (number) of His methods. One researcher identifies five teaching methods Jesus used, another says there were seven, while a third researcher identifies at least nine! Even so, prominent in *every* such listing is teaching via the use of parables. The current study considers one of the longest of Jesus’ parables.

LESSON CONTEXT

A problem we encounter with parables is how to define what a parable is. One definition that many learned in Sunday school is that “a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Another is that “a parable is a narrative of some real or imaginary event in nature or in common life which is adapted to suggest a moral or religious truth.” The lack of consensus here means that there is also no agreement on the exact number of parables recorded in the New Testament. An example is Luke 16:19–31 concerning the rich man and Lazarus. Many students say that this is not a parable since there is no other parable of Jesus in which a character is named.

Are you confused yet? If so, you’re not alone! Jesus’ disciples themselves had a hard time comprehending both the *why* and *what* of Jesus’ use of figurative language in general and parables in particular (see Matthew 13:10–15; 15:15; 16:5–12; Luke 8:9; 12:41; John 16:29)—much to the consternation (dismay) of Jesus himself (Mark 4:13; 7:18).

By the time we get to chapter 13 in Matthew, Jesus has used figurative language several times (Matthew 5:14–16; 7:1–6; 9:16–17; 12:24–30). This yields a rather complex picture of Jesus when considered alongside the revealing of His

supernatural authority over nature in stilling a storm (8:26) and over spirits (8:28–32). While people loved Jesus and His teachings, He made enemies among the Pharisees and other Jewish elites.

Matthew 13 has been called “the parable chapter” because it has the greatest concentration of parables in the book; this chapter witnesses the first of 17 times that the words *parable* and *parables* are used in this Gospel account. The chapter begins with Jesus teaching the Sower parable. In some ways this is the “paradigm parable” - the one that shows Jesus’ disciples how to understand His parable illustrations correctly, as He intended them to be understood.

Teaching by the Shore: Matthew 13:1-3a

On one of the busiest days of Jesus’ earthly ministry He gave an extended series of parables. In the overwhelming press of the crowd at a house, Jesus could not be reached by people, so He went into a boat from which He taught the multitude while they stood on the shore.

1. What was the teaching location for Jesus during the Parable of the Sower? (Matthew 13:1-2)

In the beginning of verse 3, here Jesus used a common method of teaching in the Near East, as mentioned above to convey spiritual truth through a series of earthly comparisons. Jesus was an expert at this form of teaching. It should be noted, however, that the parable did not always convert unbelievers who were often confused about their meaning. Jesus deliberately adopted the parabolic method of teaching at a particular stage in His ministry for the purpose of withholding further truth about Himself and the Kingdom of heaven from the crowds, who have proved themselves to be deaf to His claims ...from now onwards, when addressing the unbelieving multitude, He speaks only in parables (34 in number) which He interprets to His disciples in private. Jesus’ parables were illustrations drawn from rural village life, close to the lives of His crowds.

2. Why was the use of parables important in Jesus’ teachings? (Matthew 13:3a)

What Do You Think?

In what ways can telling a story—parable or not—communicate the gospel message more clearly?

Digging Deeper

How can the true story of your own salvation inspire others to follow Jesus?

Sowing of Seed: Matthew 13:3b-9

Modern farming has become precise and technical when it comes to getting seeds into the ground. Today, seeds produced solely for planting are available commercially. This was not the case in Jesus’ day. An appropriate amount of grain was set aside at harvest to be used for the next year’s planting. Seeds were a precious commodity, and planting day required preparation. The soil had to be tilled to receive the seeds. After planting day, the soil needed to be moist and warm enough to allow the seeds to germinate and begin to grow. In the few words *a farmer went out to sow*, Jesus created a word picture that resonated instantly with the agrarian life experiences of His audience. All was ready, and the sower headed out to do his job.

No matter how experienced the sower, the method of casting the seeds by hand could not be perfect. Some *seeds* would fall *along* the hard-packed soil of the paths in the field. *Birds* eating seeds is always problematic for farmers. But seeds having no cover have little hope of sprouting and growing. They are just bird food.

3. What parable of Jesus resonated with His audience? Why? (Matthew 13:3b-4)

The second word picture is that of soil characterized as lacking depth because it is *rocky*. Fields in the hilly terrain of Galilee could have varying depths of topsoil. Hard bedrock might be but an inch or two under the surface, with none of the *depth of soil* that the seeds needed to become productive crops. A competent sower would not knowingly spread seeds on this type of soil, but there would be few clues as to the depth of soil based on its surface appearance.

In times of little rain, the moisture of the soil recedes from the surface. Deep roots can still tap the water necessary for healthy growth even in times of no rain, but shallow soil can lose almost all its water content. Seeds might germinate and sprout if they fell on wet, rocky ground that was covered by a thin layer of dirt. But lack of rain and a hot *sun* would cause them to be *scorched* and wither away.

4. What was the result of the seeds that fell in stony places? (Matthew 13:5-6)

A third type of soil the sower could encounter is dirt having noxious weeds already embedded. Modern farmers treat their fields with genetically specific herbicides that kill most noxious weeds without damaging the crop. But the farmers of Jesus' day had no such advantage. A bare field could have good topsoil that was full of weed seeds, and the rich dirt would benefit both the weeds and the crop seeds.

There could be several plants to fit the description of having *thorns*. One possibility is the spiky thistle plants known to this region. When a thistle appears, it must be pulled by the roots or else it will grow back again. Cutting it down is merely a temporary solution. The soil that Jesus envisages might have dormant thistle plants (already rooted) or the seeds of such plants in the soil, ready to germinate. The sower's wheat or barley seeds must compete with these thorny bushes, and his crop will be *choked*, producing puny growth and little grain.

5. What happened to the seed in thorny soil? (Matthew 13:7)

What Do You Think?

What are the kinds of spiritual "soil" that you experience in your community?

Digging Deeper

How will you adjust your proclamation of the gospel to account for the challenges of that "soil"?

All is not lost, though, because some seed is cast *on good soil*. This is soil that is not hard-packed, not shallow, and not full of weeds. Wheat or barley would grow quickly and produce a great return.

The stated return at harvest would have been amazing to Jesus' hearers. We estimate that even the best years in Palestine might have yielded a ten-fold harvest, with most years being six- or seven-fold. Jesus projected multiples of the yields (a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown) of the best years His crowds could remember! This highlights the illustrative nature of the parable. Such a marvelous harvest could only be miraculous, accomplished through the blessing of God.

Jesus closes with what became a signature saying to end a teaching (see Matthew 11:15). We understand it better when we hear it again from the risen Christ in the book of Revelation. There we find the statement, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Jesus looks for those who have "spiritual ears," able to discern the spiritual truths He is teaching. In this case it would mean that some of the hearers (those with *ears* to *hear*) were not left puzzling over this story about farming. They understood a deeper message, a spiritual message that Jesus wanted them to know.

6. What return at harvest was stated for seed cast into good ground? Why would this be considered a miraculous harvest? (Matthew 13:8-9)

Explaining the Meaning: Matthew 13:18–23

In the intervening text of Matthew 13:10–17 (not in the lesson text), the disciples came to Jesus for more information about His parables. They did not understand what His point was, and maybe they did not have the required spiritual hearing. The parable's meaning was important for them to know, though, so Jesus proceeded to explain *the parable of the sower* in detail.

Mark's version of Jesus' explanation is more direct than Matthew's, beginning, "The sower soweth the word" (Mark 4:14). This fits here too, for the main character in the little drama Jesus presented is not intended to be seen as a literal farmer, but as a preacher of *the message about the kingdom*. No one fits this description better than Jesus himself, for He had come preaching the good news about the kingdom of God (see 1:14–15). His preaching was met with various reactions. So in essence, the sower is Jesus working through the agency of His disciples to spread the gospel throughout the world.

Some hearers were (and are) like the hardened soil, with hearts and minds that do not understand even the basics of what Jesus was (and is) trying to communicate. The result: being like seeds that never even sprout. There can be no faith if there is no understanding. The attack comes not from literal birds, but from *the evil one*—Satan himself. It is he who encourages people to dismiss the pleadings and warnings of Jesus as nonsense.

7. What were the meanings of the sower and the hardened soil? (Matthew 13:18-19)

A second type of soil is the hearer who is initially thrilled by the good news heard in Jesus' message about the kingdom. That message is understood and creates *joy* and hope in this person.

Despite this joyous reception, though, there are some who do not take this message (the seed) to heart in a lasting way. “Since they have no root, they last only a short time” and withers away. They do not have enduring faith. Jesus had taught that the kingdom must be received in repentance (Matthew 4:17), a change in orientation toward God and away from sin. Some are buoyed by the joy they experience, but they do not have a change in heart. When there is *tribulation or persecution*, their shallow faith will not survive.

8. Why do people who receive the seed in rocky ground fail to endure? (Matthew 13:20-21)

What Do You Think?

How will you offer discipleship to enthusiastic new believers to help their spiritual “roots” grow deeply?

Digging Deeper

What encouragement will you offer new believers who may face discouragement regarding their spiritual growth?

The third type of reception of Jesus’ message is found in those who are among the thorns (cares of this world), one who never really breaks with his past, and does not forsake their worldly desires for service in the kingdom (example: 2 Timothy 4:10). Jesus would later say that to be His disciple, one has to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

Believers cannot have divided loyalties. We cannot serve two masters equally (Matthew 6:24). A person who is still attached to the god of money (material things) may give the appearance of being a disciple, but he or she will be an *unfruitful* disciple. A wheat plant that competes with weeds and thorns for water, soil nutrients, and sunlight will not flourish or produce. Worldliness and materialism choked the word in his life and he is finally unfruitful (unsaved).

9. How would the seed amongst the thorns survive? (Matthew 13:22)

Three things will happen when Jesus’ message falls on good soil (those with “ears to hear”). First, the people will listen sincerely and earnestly. They will truly hear *the word* of salvation. Second, they will understand the basis of the message and the personal consequences for disbelieving it. Third, this understanding and the faith that follows will be demonstrated in these people bearing *fruit*. They will be disciples who make other disciples, who do good works as service to Christ and His church. Those who seek to serve with sincere hearts will have astounding results. While such evidence may vary in its amount, all true believers will produce some fruit. No fruit means no spiritual life.

10. What are the possible results when Jesus’ message falls on “good soil” (Matthew 13:23)?

What Do You Think?

How can believers focus on the process of bearing spiritual fruit and not get caught up in the amount of spiritual fruit produced?

Digging Deeper

How do you remove the spiritual “birds,” “rocks” and “thorns” that prevent you from bearing spiritual fruit?

CONCLUSION

Four Types of Hearers

A common application for the sower parable is to ask, “What kind of soil are you?” While this question may cut to the heart of being a disciple and give pause for self-examination, the parable is more about the sower than the soils, about Jesus and other preachers who spread the divine seed of God’s Word. Preachers and teachers who faithfully communicate the gospel will meet many reactions, just as the seed encountered several soils.

We will not always be able to know the hearts and minds of those with whom we share the gospel. Even so, the wise and talented sower spreads the seed widely, ever knowing that some seed will not produce fruit. The wise preacher keeps preaching, and the wise teacher keeps teaching—always looking for opportunities to share the gospel. Faith is sometimes kindled and brought to a blazing fire in unlikely people. The most passionate and bitter enemy of the church may be but a few steps away from the walk of a joyous believer.

God empowers our gospel proclamation. We offer words, but God touches those having “spiritual ears” and draws them to faith. We pray for those with “ears to hear” and faithfully proclaim the gospel to “let them hear.”

What Do You Think?

How will you apply the parable’s example of faithful and generous gospel-sowing in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

What new steps will you take to further sow seeds of the gospel among your unbelieving neighbors and friends?

PRAYER

Lord of the harvest, may we remain faithful to the task of proclaiming the gospel. May we not prejudge potential hearers. Instead, we trust that Your Spirit will work to bring others to faith. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Producing kingdom fruit is not optional.