

Parable of the Sower

The parable of the sower is found in the following gospels; Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:1-20, and Luke 8:4-15. Before we unpack this parable, it's important to know that there are people who believe in a false-doctrine known as conditional security. Conditional security means that a person can have eternal life, but later, for one reason or another, can no longer have eternal life. Those who believe in conditional security claim that salvation is maintained by perseverance and obedience, and/or they believe salvation can be relinquished or surrendered by an individual who has it, and/or they believe the statement "***believe for a while***" in Luke 8:13 means "*saved for a time.*" Those who believe in conditional security have often cited this parable as a reason for their belief. I want to boldly state that this parable does not teach conditional security, and neither does any other passage of Scripture. Nonetheless, this is a dynamic parable that deserves careful investigation.

A parable is a teaching technique where a short illustration is given that has a deliberately hidden spiritual meaning. One might ask, "*Why would Jesus teach in parables, if they are not meant to be clearly understood?*" Jesus taught in parables to sift out the crowds; to draw out those who were spiritually hungry from those that were not. In short, after Jesus spoke in a parable, those that were spiritually curious would seek Him for further clarity. Those that were spiritually self-righteous, or spiritually disinterested, would simply walk away and dismiss what Jesus had to say; exposing the fact that though they have ears, they didn't hear.

The parable of the sower speaks of four types of soil, and the impact that sowing seed has on these four types of soil. The four soils represent four different conditions of a man's heart. Examining these four soils gives a true understanding of what Jesus is communicating. As with all passages of Scripture, there is one main thesis; one main point the speaker is trying to communicate. While any Scripture passage can have endless application, it always has one singular thesis. In the parable of the sower, the thesis is that you need to be careful how you listen and receive the gospel! How you handle the gospel either produces eternal life, or it comes to nothing. This is Jesus' invitation, and caution, to study what He says, and seek the true meaning.

Jesus said to His disciples, ***"To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; 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.'*** *"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 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. So take care how you listen; take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him."*

As we're about to unpack the whole parable, here's a spoiler alert. The parable of the sower is three warnings followed by an example of conversion. It's three types of people who may think they're in the kingdom of God, when they are not. It's three types of people who think they've heard and/or embraced the gospel, but they haven't. The parable concludes with a fourth type of person who actually receives eternal life.

To give the whole breadth of the parable, I've combined the portions from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, into one account, so that everything Jesus says about this parable can be viewed in one place. The passages below are a compilation of Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:1-20, and Luke 8:4-15.

1st Soil – The Roadside Soil

“He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered. Those from the various cities were journeying to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, “Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot, and the birds came and ate it up.”

The audience here were Jews who understood farming. When Jesus spoke in parables, the parables had a context that His audience would understand. So, we know these people are familiar with sowing seeds. Sowing is the act of scattering seed onto the ploughed ground, so as to produce a crop. However, in this parable, Jesus uses the word “fell” to describe how the seeds get to the different soils. Sometimes seeds fall; either out of the hand of the sower, or spill from a seed bag because of a clumsy mule. Seeds that fall tend to fall where they don't have a chance to produce a crop. In this parable the fallen seeds speak to the gracious nature of the sower, in that God spreads the gospel liberally; all have access to the truth.

Jesus explains the roadside soil, ***“The seed that the sower sows is the Word of God. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, these are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown. When they hear it, immediately Satan comes, and snatches away what has been sown in his heart, so that they will not believe and be saved.”***

Unpacking the Roadside Soil

Jesus explains that ***“the seed is the Word of God.”*** The seed is the gospel; the good news, the message of salvation. Some ***“seed fell roadside,”*** where no plough had broken up the ground. Roadside is hard, compacted; the pathway through a field where people, animal, and carts tread. As Jesus continues, ***“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it,”*** He refers to a hard heart that treats the Word of God carelessly; not considering it and not conceding its truth. To those with a hard heart, the Word of God is often ***“trampled under foot,”*** showing that it's possible to come in contact with the gospel and engage it, maybe even regularly by way of church or Christian literature, yet without heart penetration. These people might be exposed to the gospel over and over again; further revealing their hard hearts. Eventually ***“birds came and ate it up...immediately Satan comes, and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.”*** Satan is ***“the prince and power of the air”*** (Ephesians 2:2) and does what he can, lest these people believe and are saved. Throughout the New Testament we see that demons gather where the Scriptures are read and heard; we see Jesus and Paul often casting demons out of synagogues.

Summary of the Roadside Soil

There's crop failure, since the heart condition is hard; no understanding. Hearing the gospel shows the person has encountered it intellectually; they have a sense of it, but nothing penetrates the heart. Their hearing is careless, not holding onto the Word. Having a hard heart allows Satan to snatch away what's on the surface.

2nd Soil – The Rocky Soil

"Others fell on the rocky soil, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up. And after the sun had risen, because they had no depth of soil, no moisture, and no root, it was scorched and it withered away."

This is the type of soil that might be directly connected to the roadside; the shoulder or gutter of the hard walking path. Here, the hard path begins to fade off into looser soil, but this soil is crowded with stones.

Jesus explains the rocky soil, ***"In a similar way are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places. This is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary. They believe for a while, and in time of temptation, affliction, or persecution that arises because of the Word, immediately he falls away."***

Unpacking the Rocky Soil

"In a similar way," meaning, just like the roadside soil, no salvation is produced here either. Upon hearing the gospel, this person, ***"immediately receives it with joy/immediately they sprang up."*** Unlike the first type of soil, who had an intellectual response, this type of person has an emotional response to the gospel; immediately excited over the thought of God's blessings. But, as fast as the idea of the gospel creates enthusiasm, equally as fast can that enthusiasm be lost, ***"immediately he falls away."*** This is because there's ***"no depth of soil/no moisture/no firm root."*** This shallow response to the gospel shows that they really didn't consider the need to respond in faith, and having no conviction of sin, this results in no penetration of the heart. ***"They believe for a while,"*** this statement shows that the gospel made some impressions upon them, but not any durable impressions. In Luke's gospel, a closer look at two Greek words will expose their meaning. The word "receives" (***"immediately receives it with joy"***) and "believe" (***"believe for a while"***) are what's in view. The word "receives" is the Greek *Dechomai*: to take with the hand. The word "believe" is the Greek *Pisteuo*: to think to be true. This means that one can willingly turn an attentive ear to a message and "receive" it with graciousness, and "believe" it to the extent of acknowledging its truth, but yet not trust the Word personally so as to experience regeneration through faith. They have enthusiasm for the idea of God's blessings and deliverance, but nothing that indicates any change. They might profess with their lips, but there's no belief in their hearts, and their hypocrisy is shown in a time of trial. This is evidenced by what follows, the proof that salvation had not taken place; ***"and after the sun had risen... in time of temptation/affliction/or persecution arises because of the Word, it was scorched and it withered away...it is only temporary."*** Temporary belief (i.e. ***"believe for a while"***) reveals no true faith at all. They're excited for the ideas of what they can get from the Lord, but are not compelled to repent and turn in faith. When faced with the idea of losing something they value, their real motives are exposed; what they really worshipped was what they lost in the heat. Scorching sun isn't the problem, as all crops face this. Scorching sun (trials) where no faith exists, is the problem exposed here.

Summary of the Rocky Soil

There is crop failure here too because the heart condition is shallow. This type of person has only an emotional response to the gospel; one gets excited having heard about blessings, but has no conviction of sin.

3rd Soil – The Thorny Soil

"Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out, and it yielded no crop."

Here's the type of soil that extends just beyond the rocky shoulder of the roadside. Now we're into some deeper soil, but it's not the groomed/tilled soil used for farming. It's the rough patches on the fringe, soil that's filled with thorns and weeds.

Jesus explains the thorny soil, ***"And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and as they go on their way, the worry of the world, the deceitfulness of wealth, the desires for other pleasures and things of this life, enter in and choke the word, and bring no fruit to maturity."***

Unpacking the Thorny Soil

The barrier to salvation here is a divided heart. Similarly, to Jesus' other parable of the vine and branches (John 15:1-11), fruitlessness is a mark of unbelief. In both of these parables, there are people who appear to be a part of the body of Christ, but who are ultimately exposed as being hypocrites. Those with a divided heart don't come to salvation. These people hear and understand the gospel, ***"the man who hears the word."*** But, ***"as they go on their way,"*** before conversion takes place, the measure of belief they have is choked out by the thorns. Thorns are represented by, ***"the worry of the world, the deceitfulness of wealth, the desires for other pleasures and things of this life, enter in and choke the word."*** The result is that it, ***"brings no fruit/yields no crop."*** Fruitlessness is a demonstration of their unregenerate state. Division is evident; they may profess and sing of Jesus, but their heart is consumed with the love of other things. A person with this type of heart may be compared to a regular church attender who, though they can tell you the gospel, and may worship with their lips, they are always anxious, always in doubt, and display no surrender or Lordship to Christ. They appear to be a part of the body of Christ, but they're not saved. No conversion has taken place, and these people continue in a barren, hypocritical profession.

Summary of the Thorny Soil

There is crop failure here too, because the heart condition is divided. This person believes they can serve two masters, pretending to love and embrace Jesus, while really being in love with the pursuits of the world.

4th Soil – The Good Soil

"Other seeds fell into the good soil, and yielded a crop, and as they grew up and increased, some produced a crop thirty, sixty, and a hundred times as great."

Notice how the first three seeds fell "besides," "on," and "among" their particular landing spots. Here, regarding the good soil, the seeds fell "into" the good soil. Good soil is soil that is ploughed and ready to receive a seed. It's not hard, where the seed would fall beside it. It's not rocky where the seed would fall on it. It's not thorny where the seed would fall among the thorns. When the Word of God goes "into" the heart, it's a good condition. The fourth soil is the only soil that called "good," as it's the only heart condition where salvation occurs. Obviously if salvation had been experienced in any of the other heart conditions, they too would be called good, as even the angels in heaven celebrate when a single individual comes to faith in Jesus, Luke 15:10.

Jesus explains the good soil, ***“But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, who understand it, accept it, and hold it fast; who indeed bear fruit with perseverance, bringing forth thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”***

Unpacking the Good Soil

The good soil represents the heart condition of a believer, who has an ***“honest and good heart.”*** This is a heart that is open and prepared to receive the Word of God; like ploughed soil is ready for the seed. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit who makes one ready; no man naturally has this condition. Distinctions about the good soil are that he will ***“understand it,”*** and, ***“accept it.”*** The heart of this person accepts that the Word is from God, and with faith and humility he believes. But his belief doesn’t stop there, he will ***“hold it fast,”*** meaning he will keep it, despite opposition; he doesn’t doubt it. He is convinced and can’t be persuaded against it. A final distinction is that he will naturally ***“bear fruit with perseverance.”*** This means that he abides in it, which means to be sustained by Christ in all seasons. Jesus said in John 15, that whoever abides in Me bears much fruit, and apart from Me you can do nothing. Fruit bearing is evidence of regeneration. Any knowledgeable farmer will tell you that no seed can produce a crop until the seed dies. Likewise, a believer has died to self and Christ now lives in him. All believers will bear fruit; some ***“thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.”*** Christians don’t produce fruit equally, but ALL Christians will bear fruit.

Summary of the Good Soil

Salvation is the goal when sowing God’s Word. This fourth soil is the only heart condition where salvation takes place, which is why it’s the only soil that’s called “good.” The good soil understands the Word, which is different from the hard soil. The good soil receives the Word, which is different from the shallow soil. The good soil keeps the Word, which is different than the thorny soil. The good soil produces a crop, which is different than the other three.

In each of the gospels where the parable of the sower is given, each writer highlights a different reason why the good soil bore fruit; he understands it (so it is in Matthew), receives it (so it is in Mark), and keeps it (so it is in Luke). Each of these magnifies a deficiency in the other three unbelieving soils. Again, the thesis of the parable of the sower is to be careful how you listen and respond to the gospel. One can think he’s come to a place of salvation when he hasn’t. One can assume he’s in good standing with the Lord, when he’s not. One can think he’s done enough, when he hasn’t yet entrusted himself to Jesus. Each gospel writer makes sure to include the following statement from Jesus, ***“He who has ears to hear, let him hear,”*** (Matthew 13:9, Mark 4:9, Luke 8:8). This emphasizes that a person needs to strongly consider what he’s heard, and if he hasn’t benefited by way of salvation, then the problem isn’t that his ears didn’t work, but that his will was at fault.

Are you sure you’ve understood what you’ve heard? Have you entrusted yourself to Jesus? Do you have any doubt in your mind about going to heaven when you die? The humble and spiritually hungry will seek clarity. Some final applications you might consider, are that you need to pray against spiritual forces in your life. You need to put down a root of salvation in Jesus alone. You need to remove certain distractions from your life; pull your weeds. You need to abide in Jesus, so He can bear fruit through you.