

The Parable of the Soils

The Kingdom Requires Believers' Response

[Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23]

Introduction

The first of the seven parables in Matthew 13 is about a sower and soils. The story is drawn from everyday life in an agrarian society. It is a story any farmer understood. A sower scattered seed and it falls on different kinds of soil. Thus, the result is different. The seed sown on the hardened path produced no fruit, whereas the seed sown on rocky and thorny ground produced some fruit, at least temporarily. However, the seed sown on good soil produced from thirty to a hundredfold. In every case, the seed sown was the same; the condition of the soil determined the result. Such is the case with the kingdom of heaven.

The passage indicates Jesus Christ as the sower sowing seed, which falls on four different kinds of soil. These different soils represent four different kinds of believers. Contrary to the popular teaching today, this seed is not the gospel of God's grace. According to Christ's own interpretation, the seed is the word of the kingdom (Matt. 13:19). The four kinds of ground represent saved people, not lost people. The sower's method of sowing has always been through the Bible, the Word of God.

Therefore, the Parable of the Soils is concerning the teaching of the "kingdom of heaven": the literal, visible kingdom that will be established by Christ for a thousand years when He returns to rule and reign over the earth. Thus, this parable teaches fruit-bearing, not a person's initial response to hearing the gospel of God's grace.

Interpretation of the Parable

The First Soil: The Wayside Believer (Matt. 13:4, 19)

The first kind of ground in the parable is called the "wayside" ground. It typifies those Christians who are not in the way, or the path, where Jesus walks (in the Word, light, etc.). They possess eternal life, but that is all. These may be believers who do not think it is important to attend church, or encourage one another concerning the things about the kingdom (Heb. 3: 12-13; 10:23-24). Some may be even trying to serve God by their own self-efforts. They represent a great percentage of Christians who say, "There are no other important biblical truths that I need. After all, I am saved and cannot lose my salvation. I am going to heaven where all the saved are equal; where there will be no more pain and trials; where everyone will be happy forever. This is enough. Why should I learn more?" With this attitude, the wayside Christian fails to understand the word of the kingdom when they hear it. Consequently, the birds (verse 4), which

symbolically represent agents of Satan (verse 19), come and snatch away the seed before it can root itself in their hearts. Sadly, they are left void of the truths that could have produced hope and joy in their lives and inheritance in the coming kingdom.

This type of believer is found not only in the local church, but also on the teaching staff of many theological schools. They are generally “amillennial” in their theology and teach only the “word of salvation” and church and denomination service. Their number is increasing in the pulpit and the pew, where they tend to dismiss anyone who does not agree with them as ignorant and unscholarly.

The Second Soil: The Stony Ground (Matt. 13:5-6, 20-21)

The second kind of soil in this parable is called the “stony” ground believer. They receive with joy the seed of the word of the kingdom; however, because of stones (shallowness of their life), the seed fails to root itself deeply in the soil of their heart. Consequently, their sudden growth in the truths of the kingdom withers away and no fruit is brought forth. The stony ground believer typifies the average Christian who is excited over the truths concerning the coming kingdom when they hear and understand them; but unwilling to pay the price necessary to inherit the kingdom.

Jesus interprets these stones as believers’ shallowness, or lack of “root in himself” in verse 21. These believers hear the word of the kingdom and receive it with joy; however, when tribulation and persecution come (perhaps the loss of a job, friends, child, etc.) because of the Word, they are offended. The word of the kingdom, which once excited them, withers away because the “ground” is shallow and it can form no root. Saved? Yes! However, that is all; believers who will arrive at the judgment seat of Christ without any fruit. These are those who will have no inheritance in the kingdom because they became offended because of their lack of a proper response to tribulation and persecution.

Overcoming the Shallow Heart

According to James 1:2-4, temptation is necessary to try the faith of Christians, for without its trials and perseverance of those trials, the inheritance of the kingdom (the crown) will not be given (James 1:12). The apostle Peter tells us the same thing when he speaks of the necessity of the “trial of your faith”, that it might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:7). The apostle Paul tells us that we ought to glory in our tribulation, knowing that it works patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope (Rom. 5:3-4).

The Third Soil: The Thorny Ground (Matt. 13:7, 22)

The third type of ground represents the “thorny” ground believers. Scripture tells us that when the seed (the word of the kingdom) fell on these believers, they did not receive it, nor have any joy over it. They only heard it (verse 22), when it was choked

out by the thorns springing up (verse 7). Jesus tells us that the thorns represent the “worry of this age” (literal rendering from the Greek text) and the “deceitfulness of riches” (verse 22). These believers are interested only in the things that characterize this age, and not the one to come. They are interested only in money and all that money can buy: houses, cars, clothes, prestige, etc.

The thorny ground believers are probably the most common of all the Christians in these last days; those who are saved and that is all. Those who are carnal and totally involved in this “age” for what they can get during this lifetime. Their lives are so full of thorns (“worry of this age”) that they cannot, or will not, receive any truths of the word of the kingdom (the age to come). Hence, they become unfruitful (verse 22b).

The Word of God delivers a strong warning to all teachers who go after the deceitfulness of riches and the worry of this age; who “will exploit you with false words” (2 Pet. 2:1-3). James 3:1 sternly warns that teachers will receive a stricter judgment at the judgment seat of Christ.

When examined closely, all three kinds of unfruitful believers appear to be interested only in having a fire escape from hell, while they profit as much as possible from this present age, at ease and undisturbed.

The Fourth Soil: The Good Ground (Matt. 13:8, 23)

The “good” ground represents believers who, after receiving the seed (the word of the kingdom), bring forth spiritual fruit. They have no fear of the tribulation or persecution that could fall on them, because their hope and testimony is that of the coming kingdom of Christ. They also have no worry for this age; and they are generally not involved in environmentalism, protest demonstrations or politics to save the world from its own evil. They recognize the sovereignty of God, which has decreed the end to all things, including the earth; and they know that this earth will be redeemed by Christ for a thousand years before it is consigned to flames.

These believers are also wise concerning the riches of this age. They know those who would be rich fall into “temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9). They know that for a rich man it is difficult to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23). They know that the love of money is the root of all evil, while the love of Christ and hope (anticipation) of the kingdom is the root from which all spiritual fruit springs forth. Their hope is to be a member of the “mysteries of the kingdom”; those who will produce spiritual fruit, earning for themselves eternal riches in the kingdom. Hence, they live by faith, faith that comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).

This parable, finally, teaches there are three kinds of good ground believers: those who produce a hundredfold, those who produce sixty, and those who produce thirty (verse 23b). Perhaps, the amount of fruit that each produces is indicative of how much

truth of the kingdom each sees and to which commit their life. This kind of commitment would automatically cultivate the stones and the thorns out of their lives. These three amounts of fruit also represent three major levels in the coming kingdom: (1) the highest level, reserved for believers bringing forth a hundredfold; (2) the second highest level for the believer bringing forth sixty and (3) the lowest level for those bringing forth thirty. These three levels of rule are seen in other parables of Matthew.

The Parable in the Synoptic Gospels

In comparing this parable in the other Gospels, we see a marked difference in its settings, word constructions and meanings. The Holy Spirit has purposely done this to give a complete picture of the three-fold “salvation” of those who will inherit the kingdom (Matt. 13:3-23; Mk. 4:3-20; Lk. 8:5-18). Like a transparent spiritual overlay, Luke’s parable of the sower shows the fruit-bearing believer by emphasizing the “salvation of his spirit”. Mark’s gospel reveals the fruit-bearing believer by emphasizing the “salvation of his soul” (his submission to the Lordship of Christ over his life). Finally, Matthew completes the triunity of salvation, revealing the fruit-bearing Christian by emphasizing his submission to the word of the kingdom (“the great salvation”, Heb. 2:3).

Points of Difference

- Luke’s parable is the message of salvation. Mark’s message is the message of a Christ-controlled life. Matthew’s message is the word of the kingdom.
- Luke’s parable speaks of justification. Mark’s speaks of sanctification, and Matthew adds glorification in the kingdom.
- Luke’s parable reveals a rest that is given (cf. Matt. 11:28), Mark’s discloses a rest that is found (cf. Matt. 11:29), and Matthew expresses a rest in the future that must be attained, the millennial kingdom (cf. Heb. 4:9, 11).
- Luke’s seed is called the “word of God”. In Mark’s gospel it is called the “word”, and in Matthew’s it is called the “word of the kingdom”.
- In Luke 8, the wayside hearer heard the “word of God” (the word of salvation) and despised it. He did this by treading it underfoot (verse 5), where the birds (agents of Satan) devoured it . . . lest he should believe and be saved (verse 12). In Mark 4, the wayside hearer, who is already saved, heard the “word” (how to have the fullness of the Holy Spirit in his life) and immediately it was taken away by the birds (verses 4, 15). In Matthew 13, the wayside hearer, who is already saved and possibly has a Christ-controlled life, heard the “word of the kingdom” and it was snatched away out of his heart by Satan. This occurred because he failed to understand it (verse 19).
- In both Luke and Matthew, Jesus uses the expression “mysteries of the kingdom”, which emphasizes believers. In Mark, Jesus changes this expression to the “mystery” (singular) of the kingdom, which emphasizes the Holy Spirit in believers (Mark 4:11). This subtle change is explained in verse 13, where Jesus tells us that this mystery (the

Holy Spirit) is the one that reveals all truth to the believer. Therefore, the seed of Mark, called the “word” speaks of a Christ-controlled life by the “mystery of the kingdom” (the Holy Spirit). This same mystery is seen in Colossians 1:26-27, where it is identified as “Christ in you”. We see that one of the purposes of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us is to “make known the riches of glory” and the “hope of glory” (the coming kingdom of Christ).

In view of this comparison between the Synoptic Gospels, and the different salvations they present, those who will participate in the mysteries of the kingdom must first be saved and have a Christ-controlled life (the mystery of the kingdom). Only then will they have a hunger to understand the word of the kingdom. For no one can be filled with this mature knowledge (Gr. *Epignosis*) unless he first spiritually hungers for it. Even then, he must be permitted by God to see it and to experience it (Heb. 6:3). However, once having seen it and experience it, it is a terrifying thing to “fall away” (2 Pet. 2:20-22; Heb. 10:26-31; 12:18-24).

Someone may ask, “Can a Christian who has a Christ controlled life, according to Mark’s parable, but does not see the word of the kingdom, according to Matthew’s parable, enter the kingdom?” Yes! This believer is identified in Matthew’s parable as the fruit-bearer that bore only thirty-fold. Apparently, the higher levels of the kingdom are reserved for those who understand the word of the kingdom and, therefore, bring forth sixty-fold or a hundred-fold of fruit. The higher of these two positions will be reserved for the “faithful and wise” servants (the hundred-fold producers) who will be ruling with Christ “over all His goods” (Matt. 24:47; Lk. 12:44). The lower of these two positions will be for the “good and faithful” (Matt. 25:21-23, the sixty-fold producers) who will rule in the kingdom “over many things”.

Conclusion

Between delivering the parable (Matt. 13:3-9) and His interpretation (Matt. 13:18-23), Jesus explains why He spoke in parables (Matt. 13:10-17). He emphasized “unhearing” ears. Thus, the condition of the soil of your heart is reflected by your willingness to hear what the Holy Spirit is seeking to communicate of Christ’s life and purpose for you. The personal impact of God’s sovereign kingdom power is determined by human response. God’s kingdom can be rejected, temporarily accepted, or fully and fruitfully accepted. This pointed parable vividly pictures the varied response to Jesus’ proclamation of the word of the kingdom from (a) that of the hardened heart of believers to (b) that of the temporarily responsive heart of believers to (c) that of the receptive heart.

It truly is amazing! God’s kingdom rule can be resisted or received (2 Pet. 3:9)! The same seed of the word can have such dramatically different outcomes. Like the sun, it both hardens clay and softens wax!