

Week 41: The Teaching King
Matthew 13:3-23
October 12/13

Summary & Goal:

We are working through The Gospel Era, and this week, we look at a teaching style Jesus employs throughout the Gospels; namely, teaching by parable. Our lesson in Matthew 13 is well-known as Jesus' parable about the sower and the seed. The book of Matthew features many parables and teachings of Jesus; however, its author uniquely delivers and structures the parables in such a way to communicate the Gospel's overarching theme: Jesus is the true King whom the Jews have been anticipating.¹ While each parable carries a tune of its own, each hums to the key of Jesus' absolute kingship as the Messiah. The parable of the sower and the seed explains the grounds for all truth and life; namely, the grounds of perceiving, the grounds for receiving, and the grounds unto believing.

Main Passages:

Matthew 13:3-23

Session Outline:

1. Grounds of Perceiving (13:3-9)
2. Grounds for Receiving (13:10-15)
3. Grounds unto Believing (13:16-23)

Session in a Sentence:

Jesus is the King that brings fruit and flourishing in our life; the first step to receiving Him lies with the grounds of our heart, not with the seed He provides.

Kingdom Connection:

The seed of God's kingdom is scattered far and wide and is available for all people. It is a message of hope and redemption and restoration in Jesus Christ. This 'seed' of the promise as the hope of Israel has been prophesied since Genesis 3, at the fall of humankind. Jesus, Himself, is the 'seed' of Adam and Eve who has come to take away our sin and guilt. However, like any seed—in order for its nutrients to be released into the ground and planted in the soil—it must be broken. Similarly, Jesus is the seed who was broken for us on the cross, that by His wounds, we might be healed and live a life of flourishing. One who accepts this message of redemption will have the kingdom of God planted and rooted within them for new life. This life and transformation are offered to all people—to the Jew and Gentile, to the rich and poor, to the strong and the weak. All are welcomed into the Kingdom of God through the embrace of the 'seed' Who is our salvation.

Missional Connection:

If God, the main sower, sows the 'seed' of the gospel unto all 'grounds' for all people, then we Christians must do the same—regardless of what might seem to 'infertile' or 'fertile' grounds. Sometimes, we do not know the nature of the grounds until we allow the seed to at least be planted and see its development over time. As Christians, we can have confidence and encouragement knowing that our job is not making the seed grow, but simply following after our Sower's example of simply sowing the seeds of the Gospel unto all grounds.

¹ Wilkins, Michael J. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI. 19.

Introduction:

My grandfather has what you would call a ‘green thumb.’ He hails from the small town of Elkin, NC, and he enjoys tending his gardens through the seasons and watching the seeds he has sown months earlier develop into beautiful and vibrant plants, fruits, and vegetables. He would tell you that gardening is a risky business, precisely because there are many variables at play that are simply out of your control as a gardener.

The weather might be too hot or too cold or too rainy, making environmental conditions that are unfavorable for the seed to optimally grow. There might be an overpopulation of varmints or rodents or deer that take full advantage of the crop once it starts to sprout. There might be some seeds that do not take root and germinate, for whatever reason. Many factors could take place that negatively affect the overall potential yield of the garden.

However—and quite encouragingly—the converse is equally true. The weather might remain consistent instead of erratic, creating ideal conditions for the seeds to germinate and sprout. The invasive animals might not come around as much as in previous years. And the seeds simply might produce a higher yield than you would have thought possible.

There are too many factors to control for as you sow, plant, and tend. One must sow and plant—and then wait to see the coming results over time. Jesus gives this same picture of sowing, gardening, and harvesting for describing the nature of the Gospel at work in an individual’s life.

He relates that God is the sower, and the seed of the Gospel falls upon many types of grounds, which He relates to the ‘soil’ of our hearts. In the following parable, Jesus illustrates the grounds of our perceiving, the grounds for our receiving, and the grounds unto our believing—so that we can truly live and partake of His kingdom.

Take a look at the parable, starting in verse 3.

Matthew 13:3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear.” (Chronological Bible, October 5, p.1314)

1. Grounds Of Perceiving

One of the first things we notice about this parable is that there is a seed and different types of ground. More specifically, there is *one type of seed* and there are *four types of ground* that the seed falls upon. Later in His explanation of the parable, Jesus will elaborate upon the meaning of each symbol; but for now, the Gospel is the seed, and the types of soil or grounds describe the heart and how it receives this Gospel message.

To reiterate, Jesus explains that there are not 4 types of seeds, but *one type of seed*. And there are ‘4 main heart postures,’ not one—that are generally common among those who hear the Gospel message.

We live in a culture that would prefer for the reverse to be true instead; namely, that we all have the same posture, but many types of ‘seeds’ or ‘truths’ to choose from. Our culture prefers the ‘soil’ or heart posture of self-authority and spiritual autonomy, and then it wants the freedom to be able to pick and choose which ‘seeds’ or ‘truths’ it prefers to live by.

But the biblical pattern is just the opposite, suggesting that there is one message of truth, and many different postures of heart. Our culture does not like that idea; it resists the idea of absolute truth. In fact, it almost sees it as a threat to the notion of self-authority. Why? Because absolute truth stands absolutely true, independent from and independently over the individual. The response of the individual is to recognize, adhere, and submit.

Our culture says, “*One message, that’s it? How narrow-minded and how arrogant! How bigoted to believe that all people have to submit one idea!*” Our culture does not like the concept of ‘one, individual message for all people.’ Our culture prefers ‘many messages for each, individual person.’ It doesn’t like the notion of ultimate truth or absolute truth that is available for all people.

Why? We do not like submitting to the truth or conforming our lives to the ultimate truth or a higher authority outside of ourselves. We prefer to be the authority and to accept what we want and reject what is not immediately palatable for us. We prefer truth to be conformed to us, not the other way around.

But this is not the message of Jesus’ parable. **Rather, He explains that there is one message of truth, salvation, and life—and it will either be accepted or rejected.** There is no middle ground.

Our culture hates exclusivity because it feels oppressive or manipulative, believing only the said ‘strong’ use exclusive claims to garner power and maintain control. There have been people in the past who have, indeed, used such claims in power-mongering methods. Christianity, however, boasts of an exclusive truth whose exclusive Savior laid down His power and righteousness to save those who were weak and condemned. Jesus, the embodiment of that one truth, loved and served all people, the rich, the poor, the single never married, the divorced, the married, the single parent, the elderly, the children; it didn’t matter the zip code, bank account, ethnicity or race. Jesus, the one true seed, lived His life and gave His life for all people. True, biblical Christianity is not like other ‘exclusive claims’ that have been abused in the past by the powerful.

Christianity is fundamentally **exclusive** in terms of its message of truth and salvation. Jesus is the only way, truth, and life—no one can come to the Father unless it is through Him (Jn. 14:6). However, Christianity is also fundamentally **inclusive** in terms of its scope as it is offered for **all** people (Jn. 3:16). In a sense, Christianity is the most inclusive exclusivity.²

If it is a message of salvation, and it is offered individually to each of us—the point of contention becomes not whether it will be offered to us, but whether we will receive it.

² Idea accredited to Tim Keller.

See, with every other religion in the world, the point of contention rests on you and your performance. They all essentially ask, “Will you measure up to *achieve* being able to attain this seed of salvation?” However, Christianity asks the opposite, “You did not and will not ever be able to achieve salvation, so Jesus did it for you. So now, will you *receive* it or not?”

Jesus is calling for people to stare themselves in the mirror and to confront the real issues in their lives, instead of pointing the blame and shifting responsibility to others or even to God Himself. Before we are ready to receive the seed, we need to first look at the grounds of our heart and audit and correct our perceptions in light of God’s Word.

2. Grounds For Receiving

The question becomes, “Well, why would people receive it? Or, why would people not receive it?” We see this train of thought in the text. Matthew 13 continues:

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

*¹⁵ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.*

(Chronological Bible, October 6, p.1315).

Have you ever wondered, why it seems like God shrouds His message of truth and salvation in enigmatic statements— as if to make it more difficult for us to see and understand?

The spiritual activity of the parable is to unearth what is truly at the core of someone’s heart. For the heart who’s already turned against God and His authority, then the parable will reaffirm their posture of rejection and inability to understand. However, for the heart that desires right standing with God and truly desires truth above all else, then the parable will reaffirm their posture of humility and disclose its meaning.

Why is Jesus doing this? Ultimately Jesus presents the material in this way to get the heart of the issue. He makes it so that only those who truly want to hear—without an ulterior motive—can then respond in trust and obedience.

Philosopher Blaisé Pascal once famously said, “There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.”³

Jesus is not trying to make saving faith unnecessarily *difficult*; He is simply making saving faith necessarily *decisive*. Jesus presents salvation as something whereby people must lay down their terms and conditions in order to lay hold of salvation. As theologian Michael Wilkins explains, “The crowd—and each person—must make a decision, and the parables force the issue.”⁴

The transition in verse 16 becomes highly significant:

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

Why are these listeners and responders ‘blessed’? Was it because of anything that they had achieved? No, it was simply because they opened their hearts to believe and receive. This is why the Gospel is Good News to those who have a bad past; to those who have weary hearts; to those who are burned out or burned up; and to those who are enslaved to the delusion that they must always measure up. It is Good News because all it requires is an admission of weakness, repentance of sin, and dependence on Christ.

It does not take a certain age, IQ, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, cultural background, or even degree of good morality in order to do that. It simply requires trusting Christ, which transcends all human stratification systems.

The answer as to why these people were blessed is because they saw and responded to Jesus as He truly was—Lord and Savior. And we have the same opportunity, and we have an even greater picture of the resurrected Lord and Savior.

That is the ‘grounds’ for receiving the message. Is your heart there?

What are *your* terms or grounds for receiving this message? Is your heart predisposed or does it possess presuppositions against God already; or is it presently ready to receive whatever God may have to offer?

Truly, the ‘grounds’ of our hearts can vary and shift many times throughout the course of our lives. But Jesus further explains to His disciples how each specific type of ground symbolizes and corresponds to each type of heart.

3. Grounds Unto Believing

In the parable, Jesus’ describes that there are 4 main ‘grounds’ of our hearts that indicate whether or not we will truly receive His message of salvation.

1. Path
2. Rocky Ground

³ I am unsure of the exact source for this quote, but he did say it.

⁴ Ibid.

3. Thorns
4. Good Soil

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.”

Jesus describes that the first ‘ground’ of our heart as the ‘path,’ with no potential for the seed’s growth at all. It hits the pavement with no opportunity for the seed to take root. If anything, it will be quickly picked up and devoured by a bird or rodent.

And what is the spiritual correlation to the ‘path’? It is the simple reality of not understanding the message that they had heard. Like a hardened path, they do not let it penetrate their hardness against it.

For many people who have rejected Christianity, what they are rejecting is not *actual* Christianity anyways. It’s a false, counterfeit of Christianity that they are rejecting... but sadly, they think they are rejecting the real thing! Little do they know, more often than not, they might be rejecting the same things that the Bible rejects as well.

Let’s look at the next soil type:

²⁰ As for what was sown on **rocky ground**, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

Jesus then discusses the second type of ‘ground’ of heart. He explains that the ‘rocky ground’ symbolizes the person who receives the gospel at first, but it does not actually take root.

This type of heart, sadly, describes many people who may be churchgoers, or who have been in and out of the church, Christianity, or other events. These are the types of people who might have raised their hand to make a decision for Christ at a conference; got baptized spontaneously based on emotion; or experienced a ‘spiritual high’ at camp—only to go back to square 1 when they returned home.

Jesus is communicating a strong indictment—authentic salvation is not evidenced by a decision that is made in a moment, but a direction that is taken over time. He says, you will know salvation is true not by the height of the flame in a moment, but in the persistence of the flame over time—regardless of its height.

Here in the rocky soil, you can see that there is at least *potential* for the seed. This heart “receives the message with joy” and “endures for a while.” But as time passes, we see its true colors, often when facing trial or tribulation. I once heard it said, “You can only know the true flavor of the tea bag when it’s placed in hot water.”

Those people who have ‘rocky ground’ are those who we need to pour into the most, and who we need to frequently check-in with about their overall spiritual life. Discipleship can keep them plugged in and engaged—so that they can grow roots.

But there's another negative soil as well.

²² As for what was sown among **thorns**, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

This person considers the Gospel message, but the weeds and the thorns have a greater presence in their life than the Gospel does. The question we all must ask ourselves is, *“What are the things in life that I consider a ‘thorn’ or ‘weed,’ and is it the same thing that God would consider a ‘thorn’ or a ‘weed’?”* Perhaps one of the worst things we can do is to identify thorns and weeds as fruit, and fruit as thorns and weeds.

What does God identify first and foremost as thorns and weeds? He identifies them in two main ways:

1. “Cares of the World”

Do you know what is the biggest excuse for unbelievers? Time. Busyness. “Oh I can’t make time for church, because you know, I’ve got to like... clean my apartment today... and do this other work...” Or, “I mean, football is on TV; it’s my only day to sleep in and relax.” The world in which we live has more distractions than any other time in history. Jesus was being realistic when He said that cares of the world choke the Word. When the seed of the Gospel is planted, the cares/ distractions of the world do not want it to take root. The excuses grow and the seed never takes root, thus being unfruitful.

2. “Deceitfulness of Riches”

The way Jesus primarily describes riches is significant. *Deceitful*. Note he does not convey that riches or possessing great wealth is ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ or ‘sinful’ on its own. Rather, He communicates that accumulating riches can often tempt you into thinking that in them lie the ultimate, the purpose, or the fulfillment of life. To live as if riches were the answer to life would be to live in delusion—to *be deceived*.

No matter how much you accumulate and regardless of what purchasing power you might attain, wealth cannot lead you unto truth and purpose. It simply does not have the capacity to love you, forgive you, help solve your real issues in life, or supply the answers to the most important questions of your design and purpose. To think otherwise would mean to live *deceived*, allured under riches’ spell.

We must ask ourselves the following diagnostic questions:

“Am I identifying the thorns and weeds in my life like God would, too? Am I perceiving the gospel—and rather does it feel—like a thorn or a weed that is ‘choking out’ all my other hobbies and pursuits? Or am I finally realizing that these other hobbies and pursuits and addictions are actually the thorns and weeds, choking out what truly matters in life, the gospel?”

Lastly, Jesus addresses the final type of soil, which is the good soil.

²³ As for what was sown on **good soil**, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Jesus notes that 'good soil' does exist, and it is simply the heart that receives the Gospel for what it truly is, and in doing so, it will produce fruit. In fact, the proof that the soil is good is that it retains the potential for yield. There may be varying amounts of yield in each person, but there must be yield to validate whether or not the seed has truly taken root.⁵

The message of the parable, in light of the good soil, becomes clear: when the environment is suitable, the seed *will* take root. *The seed will not fail*. The point of contention is not the seed's ability to save and produce fruit and yield bountifully; the point of contention is our recognition of our need and humble embrace of the Gospel.

Conclusion

Many of us have had hearts that looked like hardened paths, rocky ground, thorny soil, and good soil at some point.

Consider that you were once with rocky soil, with no depth or no natural longing for God or the things of God. Or consider that you were at one time a 'thorny soil' as it were, that was teeming and overpopulated with many thorns and weeds—the cares of the world and the pleasures of life with wealth.

Perhaps a tragedy hits our life: a job loss; a relational break-up; or a chronic illness. At the moment, we hated its pain and repulsed against the loss it brought. But perhaps God was accomplishing something in that moment that was greater than you or I ever thought.

Perhaps, God was plowing up the bad, rocky, and thorny soil in your life the sharp blade of suffering. But the process—as hard it was—nevertheless softened you up to finally see and desire the things of God. God finally—lovingly—broke up the rocks, sliced the weeds, and extirpated the thorns that kept you infertile the most important things in life.

Some of you in our class right now can firmly attest to that. I can as well. And thank God, looking back, He allowed the plow to come into my life because I would not have been able to receive His blessings—the real blessings—otherwise.

We know this is true because it happened with the 'Seed' of Adam, Jesus, as well.

This 'seed' was the promised hope of Israel who had been prophesied about since Genesis 3 at the fall of humankind. Jesus, himself, is the 'seed' of Adam and Eve who has come to take away our sin and guilt. However, like any seed—in order for its nutrients to be released into the ground and planted in the soil—it must be broken.

Jesus is the seed who was broken for us on the cross, that by His wounds, we might be healed and live a life of flourishing. One who accepts this singular message of redemption will, therefore, have the kingdom of God planted within and rooted unto new life. This life and

⁵ Ibid, 481.

transformation are offered to all people—to the Jew and Gentile, to the rich and poor, to the strong and the weak. All are welcomed into the Kingdom of God through the embrace of the ‘seed’ who is our salvation. He was broken for us so that we could partake in His blessings, and sometimes we must be broken so that we can take root and finally partake in His blessings, too.

Let’s pray.