

Exegesis of Matthew 13:1-23 -- The Parable of the Soils

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1. Context

This parable heads the third major discourse in Matthew. Out of the five major discourses, this is the only one addressed directly to the crowds. Matthew also includes a digression (vv. 10-23) to explain to his disciples why he speaks in parables and to interpret the parable. Carson argues that these digressions would have taken place after the public discourse (suggested by the use of the plural “parables”), and that Matthew includes them as parentheses so that the significance of the parables will not be lost to the reader.¹ The theme of the chapter is the kingdom of Heaven and its reception into the world² and relates to the rejection and hostility themes of ch. 12.³

This parable is also included in both Mark and Luke. However, Matthew’s treatment is not only longer than Mark’s (4:10-12) and Luke’s (8:9-10; 10:23-24), it also includes more Old Testament Scripture and is structured with great care.

Bailey argues that the title suggests the focus is on the “sower” ie. Jesus and His kingdom.⁴ But Davies and Allison point out that the sower is only mentioned at the beginning of the parable, suggesting that the theme is not Christology.⁵

Bailey suggests the combination of His own family’s questions (Mark 3:21), the desertion of some of His followers (John 6:66), and the hostility of the religious leaders may have troubled many of His disciples which prompted Jesus to tell this parable.⁶

2. Analysis

v. 1 “by the lake” refers to the Sea of Galilee - probably near Capernaum.

v. 2 At that time it was customary for teachers to sit down when teaching.⁷

¹ D A Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984).

² W D Davies & D C Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 374.

³ D A Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993) 366-367.

⁴ M L Bailey, “The Parable of the Sower and the Soils”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (April-June 1998) 180.

⁵ Davies & Allison, 376.

⁶ Bailey, 178.

⁷ Hagner, 368.

v. 3 A farmer sowing seed in the fields would have been a common sight, and the fate of the various seeds would have been well known.⁸

v. 4 According to Davies and Allison, ἐν τῷ σπειρεῖν (“as he was sowing...”) is a Semitism.⁹ Apparently, paths ran through and around the unfenced fields and the dirt paths would have been too hard to cultivate the seed, making it easy pickings for birds.¹⁰ According to BAGD, παραῖ can be translated “on” in this context.¹¹ Hagner argues that αἱ should be understood as a distributive plural, resulting in the translation “some fell on the path...” and “some fell on the rocky ground...” etc.¹²

Note also, that in Judaism, birds were often used to symbolise both satanic activity and robbers.¹³

v. 5-6 petrῶδη (‘‘rocky ground’’) refers to ground in which limestone bedrock lies close to the surface, resulting in very shallow soil. This means the soil is quickly and easily soaked which encourages rapid germination. However, the shallow soil also heats up quickly and eventually causes the plant to shrivel up due to its lack of a substantial root system.¹⁴

v. 7 Thorns tend to be much hardier and more aggressive as they grow, than most cultivated plants. Therefore, it is not surprising to imagine how quickly a young plant could be overwhelmed and entangled, so that it receives little light and is deprived of nourishment.¹⁵

v. 8 Other seed fell on good soil and produced a crop of varying yields. εἰδου (“produce” rather than “give”¹⁶) is in the imperfect tense, implying that the soil “kept producing.” Carson points out they are not extremely high, symbolic of the fertility of the Messianic Age, but well within ordinary expectations.¹⁷ The same seed produces no crop, some crop, or much crop according to the soil's character.¹⁸

Davies and Allison note that the various fates’ of the seeds are arranged chiastically:¹⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Davies & Allison, 383.

¹⁰ Carson, *Matthew*.

¹¹ BAGD, παραῖ III.1.d

¹² Hagner, 369. Cf BAGD, οἱ, II.2.

¹³ See Bailey, 180, and references there cited.

¹⁴ Carson, *Matthew*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Louw-Nida, 13.128.

¹⁷ Carson, *Matthew*.

¹⁸ Carson, *Matthew*.

¹⁹ Davies & Allison, 385.

- A the seed which never sprouted because it was carried off by birds
- B the seed which lasted only a while before withering
- C the seed which grew up but ultimately became choked by thorns
- C' the thirtyfold crop
- B' the sixtyfold crop
- A' the hundredfold crop

v. 9 “He who has ears, let him hear” indicates to the listener or reader that the parable points to a deeper meaning.²⁰ It warns them that the parable requires careful interpretation, and a positive response.

v. 10 It is assumed the disciples approach and question Jesus privately. Carson notes that this may have actually occurred at the end of the discourse,²¹ but Matthew inserts it here to emphasise the varied responses of people to Jesus’ teaching. Note that in this context, there is no reason to limit the “disciples” to just the twelve. Jesus had many more disciples than just the twelve.

v. 11 According to the consensus of modern scholarship *musthriōn* refers to the presence of the kingdom in Jesus and His ministry.²² Carson notes that Jesus’ answer cannot be legitimately softened, since “at least one of the functions of parables is to conceal the truth, or at least *to present it in a veiled way.*” Carson argues that the *o(ti* is not “recitative” (ie. equivalent to quotation marks as in NIV) but fully causal, especially in light of the disciples’ “Why?” They ask, “Why do you speak...?” and Jesus replies “*Because* the secrets of the kingdom have been given to you, but not to others.” Carson also points out that *o(ti* is never used in the NT as “recitative” after the formula *o(de a)pokriqeij eipen* (“he replied”).²³

Jesus’ reply does not mean that truth is only given to a select few and to no-one else. Rather, the truth is only given to those who are seeking to be disciples. In any case, Davies and Allison point out that after the resurrection, the disciples were given the commission of proclaiming to all the world, the mysteries they had received (Matt 17:9, 28:18-20).²⁴

v. 12 The object of both *o(tij ... ekei* (“whoever has”) and *o(tij ... ouk ekei* is the “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom.” To those who already have knowledge of the kingdom, more will be given, making them abound, much like the seed that landed in the good soil. To those who have not allowed the knowledge of the kingdom to penetrate, whatever knowledge of the kingdom they do have will be taken from them, in the same way the birds carried off the seed that landed on the path. Thus Davies and Alison point out that the awarding of further illumination or further darkness depends on

²⁰ Hagner, 369.

²¹ Hence the disciples’ reference to the plural “parables”.

²² Davies & Allison, 389.

²³ Carson, *Matthew*.

²⁴ Davies & Allison, 390.

the status of the hearer. Knowledge is rewarded with more knowledge and ignorance is rewarded with more ignorance.²⁵ The root of the problem is people's unwillingness to receive Jesus' message.²⁶

v. 13-17 Hagner notes that the participles *blepontej* and *akouontej* could be understood concessively: "although hearing" and "although seeing" (as in NIV) but the finite verbs *blepousin* and *akouousin* imply a wilful closed-mindedness, as does the quote from Isa 6:9-10.²⁷ Again, the use of *o#i* makes it clear that the parables are a response to the people's unbelief. Parables are used precisely because the people see, yet do not *really* see, and because they hear, yet do not *really* hear. Indeed, Jesus did not speak in parables to outsiders until He encountered hostility. Therefore, the emphasis is unambiguously on human responsibility.²⁸

Matthew does not include the additional clause "otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" which is found in Mark (4:12). Davies and Allison suggest that this was because Matthew did not want to leave the impression that Jesus predetermined the fates of sinners.²⁹

Here begins a large chiasmus which extends all the way to v. 17. The reason why Jesus speaks to them in parables is:

- A because *seeing, they do not see* and *hearing, they do not hear*, nor understand.
- B In them is fulfilled the *prophecy* of Isaiah:
 - C "You will be ever *hearing* but never *understanding*.
 - D You will be ever *seeing* but never *perceiving*.
 - E For this peoples *heart* has become calloused;
 - F they hardly *hear* with their *ears*
 - G and they have closed their *eyes*,
 - G' otherwise they might see with their *eyes*,
 - F' *hear* with their *ears*,
 - E' understand with their *hearts*,
 - and turn, and I would heal them."
 - D' But blessed, are *your eyes*, because they *see*,
 - C' and your *ears*, because they *hear*.
 - B' For I tell you the truth, many *prophets* and righteous men
 - A' longed to see what you *see*, but *did not see* it, and to hear what you *hear*, but *did not hear* it.

In F, the shift from passive to active in *hkousan* suggests the people did not *want* to understand. In addition, the centre of the chiasmus (GG') highlights that it is because the people have closed their eyes that they do not see the truth.

²⁵ Ibid, 391.

²⁶ Hagner, 373.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Davies & Allison, 392.

²⁹ Ibid, 393.

A-D use the second person plural, but E-E' (including the *mhōte* clause of v. 15) use the third person plural. Therefore, Carson argues that “this makes it at least possible to interpret the “otherwise” clauses, not as the people's purpose (they have closed their eyes lest they see and turn and be healed), but as God's judgment (they have closed their eyes as the result of divine judicial action, otherwise they might see and turn, etc.).”³⁰

- v. 18** *uñeiþ* is emphatic and reinforces Jesus' call to listen and comprehend the meaning of the parable, especially since there were many who longed to hear such teaching yet didn't get the opportunity. *thñ parabolññ* is elliptical (“[the meaning of] the parable”).³¹ The title “parable of sower” is an allusion to the opening words of the parable, not an indication of the main subject.³²
- v. 19** The “message (*lōgōj*) of the kingdom” is the gospel. The focus of *lōgōj* is always on the *content*.³³ Jesus' interpretation is clear. A seed sitting on a hardened path is unable to penetrate its surface. In the same way, some people hear the message about the kingdom they, yet do not let its truth penetrate, and before they really understand it, the devil has snatched it away.
- v. 20-21** A person who receives the gospel impulsively, without considering its demands and requirements, often receives the truth “with joy.” However, such commitment is usually based on emotion only. Because there is no depth to their commitment, external pressures, trouble, and persecution cause their enthusiasm to dissipate and their faith to dry up. Carson points out that such temporary disciples are always numerous in times of revival and were so in Jesus' ministry.³⁴
- v. 22** It was commonly known that thorns hindered plant growth, since they kept out the light and tangle themselves in the other plant's roots.³⁵ The “thorns” represent the worries of this life (literally, this “age,” in contrast to the age to come) and “the deceitfulness of wealth,” (*h(α)path tou-ploutou*) which, according to Carson, may also be rendered as “the delight in wealth,” since in late Greek *αpath*, which earlier meant “deceitfulness,” came to mean “pleasure” or “delight,” usually involving sin.³⁶ This person hears the gospel but simply never allows it to control him. Other commitments in life take priority, slowly choking (*sumpniþei*)³⁷ and squeezing out their young faith. Worries about worldly things or devotion to wealth cause their spiritual life to be quenched. The result is that they fail to bear fruit (*akarpoj*) making them practically useless. In addition, the notion of

³⁰ Carson, *Matthew*.

³¹ Davies & Allison, 399.

³² Hagner, 379.

³³ See BAGD 1.a.b and Louw-Nida 33.260.

³⁴ Carson, *Matthew*.

³⁵ Bailey, 182.

³⁶ Carson, *Matthew*.

³⁷ Louw-Nida 22.22 “to cause serious trouble to, with the implication of dire consequences and probably a weakened state - ‘to cause severe hardship, to oppress, to overwhelm.’

“deceit” indicates that these “thorns” are so subtle that a person may not be aware that they are slowly being choked.

- v. 23 The person who receives the gospel and understands its full implications is the one that bears fruit. Note, however, that not every seed that lands in good soil produces the same crop. In the same way, not every person who receives the gospel produces the same amount of fruit. Some will produce significantly more or less than others.

3. Paraphrase

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea of Galilee, waiting to begin teaching. Such large crowds gathered around him that he had sit in a boat and teach, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he started telling them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow seed in a field. As he was scattering the seed, some fell on the hard path bordering the field, and since the seed was exposed, the birds came and carried them off. Some fell on bedrock with only a shallow covering of soil and it quickly germinated. But when the sun came up and the temperature rose, the plants got scorched, and shrivelled up because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorn bushes, which eventually grew up and overwhelmed the plants, shutting out the light and entangling their own roots in the plant’s roots. But other seed fell on good fertile soil, where it produced a good crop of varying yields. Whoever, hears this parable should seek to understand what it is saying and carefully consider how it should impact your own life.” His disciples came to him privately and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” Jesus replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you disciples, but not to these other people. Whoever has some knowledge and understanding of the kingdom will be given even more, making him abound, and whoever has very little knowledge and understanding of the kingdom, even that will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables:

“Because seeing, they do not see and hearing,
they do not hear or understand.”

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“You will always hear but you will never understand;
you will always see, but you will never perceive
For the heart’s of the people in this generate have become hard and calloused;
they have chosen not to listen,
and they have willingly closed their eyes in ignorance.
Otherwise they might truly see, and truly listen,
and come to understand and turn to follow Christ. In that case, Jesus would heal them.”

But your eyes are blessed by God because they truly see, and so are your ears because they truly hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men eagerly desired to see the things you have seen but did not see it, and to hear what you have heard but did not hear it. Now you listen carefully then, to what the parable of the soils

means: People who hear the good news of Jesus Christ but do not let it penetrate their hearts, allow the evil one to come and snatch it away. This is the seed that landed on the hard path. The seed that fell on bedrock with a shallow covering of soil, is the man who hears the good news of Jesus Christ and immediately makes an emotional decision to embrace it. But since their commitment has no depth, it doesn't last very long. As soon as trouble or persecution comes along their faith quickly disappears. The seed that fell among the thorn bushes is the man who hears the good news of Jesus Christ, but the worries of this life and the deceitful pleasure of wealth take top priority and quench any spiritual life. Such a person bears no fruit at all. But the seed that fell on good fertile soil is the man who hears the good news of Jesus Christ and fully comprehends its implications. He produces a good crop, of varying yields.

4. Theological Significance

Hagner suggests that Jesus is the sower,³⁸ but this would make the parable too anachronistic. More likely the sower represents any proclaimer of the gospel. But in any case, the focus of the parable is on the soils not the sower.³⁹ Some commentators have attempted to identify which of the seeds represent those who are truly saved, but again, this misses the point of the parable. In some cases, it is not clear and Jesus makes no reference to such matters. Rather, it is the fate of the seed that is important, and this is dependent on the type of soil in which it lands.⁴⁰ It is the situation and fate of the seed that represents a person's response to the message of the kingdom.

Hagner correctly points out the placement of the seeds is not an accident (unlike sowing) nor is it determined by God.⁴¹ The evil one can only take away the seed if people reject it or do not allow it to penetrate. Carson comments that the parable not only describes the kingdom advancing slowly and with varied responses to its proclamation, but it also challenges hearers to ask themselves what kind of soil they are. Those with hardened hearts will lose what little they have and will not be a part of the messianic kingdom, and for them the parable is a sentence of doom. Those who have ears to hear, to whom more is given, they will perceive and experience the kingdom in its fullness, and for them the parable conveys the mysteries of the kingdom.⁴²

Carson adds that "the interpretation, like the parable itself, ends positively. And we must not fail to notice that the soil that produces only a small crop is nevertheless called 'good.'"⁴³

5. Main Point

The main point of the parable is to describe how different people respond differently to the word of God. For the seed that does produce fruit, there is also a great deal of

³⁸ Hagner, 379.

³⁹ Carson, *Matthew*.

⁴⁰ Hagner, 369.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Carson, *Matthew*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

diversity in the *amount* of fruit produced. Because of human free will, not all people will respond to the gospel of the kingdom, and those that do will respond in varying degrees. As Davies and Allison note: “Opportunity does not guarantee response, proclamation does not abolish sin.”⁴⁴ The parable also demands that each person examine themselves in order to determine which soil they are.

6. Application

Christians need to be aware of what causes rejection of the gospel so that appropriate evangelism techniques can be used to provide the greatest challenge to people. The church as whole and each local church in particular, needs to develop evangelism techniques and programs which force people to see the sense of the gospel and their need for salvation. Christians cannot allow people to simply brush the message aside without thinking about it, or reject it because of the way it is presented.

Churches must also develop and implement discipleship programs so that new converts fully understand what the Christian life is all about and know what God expects of them. It is important that young Christians become solidly grounded in truth as early as possible.

When people are being counselled for salvation the implications and demands of being a disciple must be fully explained. It is very easy to resort to “easy-believism” when we are desperate to see new converts.

Christians must be constantly reminded of what their commitment entails and warned about the trappings of this present age. Disciples need to regularly examine themselves to see if God is truly the most important thing in their life. They also need to check for possible thorns that may be subtly encroaching on them. If the Christian is distracted or smothered then they will not bear fruit, and are therefore useless to God.

When people do become Christians we should not expect them all to bear fruit immediately. Hearing comes first, then understanding, then fruit-bearing naturally follows.⁴⁵ Neither should we expect every disciple to bear the same amount of fruit, since every person is different. In any case, all fruit is good fruit.

Finally, it is entirely up to the individual to determine what kind of soil they are like. Those who seek truth and knowledge will be given it in abundance. Those who reject it or treat it with indifference will become even more ignorant.

⁴⁴ Davies & Allison, 403.

⁴⁵ See Bailey, 184.