



MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

1 On that day Jesus went out of the house & was sitting by the sea. **2** Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat & sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore. **3** Then he told them many things in parables, saying, “Consider the sower who went out to sow. **4** As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, & the birds came & devoured them. **5** Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn’t have much soil, & it grew up quickly since the soil wasn’t deep. **6** But when the sun came up, it was scorched, & since it had no root, it withered away. **7** Other seed fell among thorns, & the thorns came up & choked it. **8** Still other seed fell on good ground & produced fruit: some a 100, some 60, & some 30 times what was sown. **9** Let anyone who has ears listen.”

18 “So listen to the parable of the sower: **19** When anyone hears the word about the kingdom & doesn’t understand it, the evil one comes & snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the one sown along the path. **20** The one sown on rocky ground – this is one who hears the word & immediately receives it with joy. **21** But he has no root & is short-lived. When distress or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he falls away. **22** Now the one sown among the thorns – this is one who hears the word, but the worries of this age & the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, & it becomes unfruitful. **23** But the one sown on the good ground – this is one who hears & understands the word, who does produce fruit & yields: some a 100, some 60, some 30 times what was sown.” (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23)

1. Overview of Parables in the New Testament

a. Parables communicate unknown spiritual truth through ordinary, known events

- “Though parables can contain a variety of figures of speech, many times they are simply **stories that attempt to teach spiritual truth (which is unknown to the hearers) by using a comparison with something known to the hearers.** In general, parables usually advance a single idea, though there may be many parts & characters in a single parable & subordinate ideas may expand the main idea

further. **The beauty of using the parable as a teaching device is that it draws the listener into the story, elicits an evaluation, & demands a response.**" (NET Bible note)

b. Parables 'reveal' & 'conceal' truth – it all depends on the hearers' inward condition

- **"Why cloak the important message of God's kingdom? Why not just be clear? Through riddles & parables, Jesus could make really bold claims that 'reveal' truth to people who were open-minded... The parables would also 'conceal' Jesus' message from those who were against him..."** (Tim Mackie, *How To Read The Parables*)

c. Parables invite hearers to respond

- **"Jesus didn't tell parables to make everything clear, rather, he wanted to provoke the imagination, & invite people to see what God is doing in the world from a new perspective."** (Tim Mackie, *How To Read The Parables*)
- **"The parables are Jesus putting the ball in your court. Depending on your response, you get out of it what you come to it with. Are you open? You hear the invitation. You respond, & you get more. For those who have rejected Jesus, the parable will just reinforce what they already think."** (Tim Mackie, *Parables: How To Listen*, July 16th, 2017)
- **"Parables are most often puzzling. Their meaning is never totally straightforward & clear... There's a big part of today's culture that values being concise & to the point, & Jesus was almost never any of those things... Often Jesus' parables feel more like riddles, or little puzzles, or detective stories that you have to figure out."** (Tim Mackie, *Parables...*)
- **"The point of the parable of the sower is to illustrate the various responses to the message of the kingdom of God."** (NET)

2. Background To The Parables in Matthew 13

a. Jesus was confronted by Israel's religious leaders

- **"The confrontations between Jesus & the religious leaders in chapters 11 – 12 culminated with the scene where Jesus pointed to his disciples as his closest family & declared that whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother & sister & mother (12:50)."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, p. 472)

b. People were expecting Jesus to bring in a political & militaristic kingdom of God

- **"Many in the crowd that followed Jesus around were hoping for the arrival of the Kingdom with an overt display of political & militaristic might. Their attraction to Jesus was not based so much on what Jesus intended in announcing the arrival of the kingdom, but on what they expected to get out of it – the blessings of the Messianic age... The hope for physical & material blessings hardens them from recognizing their own spiritual condition."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 492)

c. Jesus speaks in a relevant manner to rural people

- **"This parable... draws from natural agricultural conventions, as one would expect from a teacher sensitive to rural Galilean hearers. Most Palestinian Jews, like most other Mediterranean people, worked in agriculture; perhaps 90 percent of the Roman world was rural. With only two large cities, Galilee's population primarily resided in agrarian villages & towns."** (Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 443)

d. Jesus uses the parables in Matthew 13 to force a decision regarding himself

- **"With a mixture of attitudes toward Jesus within the crowd – some leaning toward becoming Jesus' disciples, while others leaning toward following the Pharisees & opposing Jesus, & still others riding the commitment fence – Jesus uses the parables to force a decision."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 493)
- **"Through his parables [in chapter 13], Jesus tests the hearts of the crowd to reveal whether the message of the Kingdom has taken root & is producing fruit or whether it has been unproductive."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, 493)
- **"The parable of the sower creates an important context for the parables that follow in Chapter 13. The parable makes it clear that people respond in different ways to the message of the kingdom. Not all respond in faith & obedience; & of those who do, not all endure & bear fruit. But there are other ways of explaining the diverse responses & their causes. The parables that follow offer these explanations."** (Craig Evans, *New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Matthew*, p. 296)

3. The Parable of the Seed & the Four Soils (Matt. 13:3-9)

a. What condition are you in at present? (v. 9)

- **“A diverse crowd was following Jesus.** Some are following him because they **love him**. Others will soon **plot to kill him**. Some are **indifferent** & think he’s weird, but **curious enough to come to listen**.” (Tim Mackie, *Parables...*)
- **“[Jesus] told a parable to draw in, to force them to think for themselves, to reflect & do some soul searching that they wouldn’t have otherwise done.** Some would think Jesus is crazy as he tells the parable of the sower. Others would have seen people healed & lives turned around by Jesus. They would lean in more to consider what he said further. For those who already think Jesus is stupid, the parables will only convince them more that he is stupid. For people who are open-minded & are willing to hear a voice other than their own, parables are an invitation to something deeper & something more. This is the function of the parables. **They are puzzling stories that invite you in.**” (Tim Mackie, *Parables...*)
- **“The concluding words of verse 9, ‘Let the person who has ears hear!’,** alert the reader to the fact that **the parable points beyond itself to a matter of deep concern. The story has to do with receptivity.** It amounts to an appeal **to hear positively & to respond appropriately** (? 43).” (Richard Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, pp. 103-4)
- **“Notice that the sower, the seed, & the method of sowing are the same in each case. This strongly suggests that the point has to do with the reception of the seed** – whether one is hard-hearted, soft-hearted, distracted or attentive will affect how & whether one receives the message Jesus is proclaiming.” (Ben Witherington, *Smyth & Helwys Commentary: Matthew*, p. 261)
- **“This parable & its interpretation...give the most extended treatment of the reception of the word of God.** The kingdom is a kingdom of the word, & the parable is a parable about **receiving the word.**” (Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 175)

b. The sower

a. “The Sower” is Jesus & secondarily faithful preachers/teachers/ministers

- **“Jesus himself is the Sower, but the parable has immediate application to the disciples’ ministry & ultimate application to the later church’s proclamation.**” (David L. Turner, *Matthew*, p. 341)
- **“The Sower in the parable primarily represents Jesus, but in a secondary sense every faithful preacher of the gospel.”** (Mark 4:14, *ESV Study Bible*, p. 1900)
- **“The Sower is Christ & his ministers of truth preaching the seed of the Word of God...”** (William W. Parker, *Rightly Dividing the Word*, p. 73)

b. The parable’s focus moves from sower to seed

- **“Many commentators place primary emphasis on the sower in this parable...However, the sower appears only at the beginning of the parable. This figure sets in motion the parable, but then the focus shifts to the soils. The parable does accentuate Jesus’ arrival with the gospel message, but it also emphasizes significantly the contrast between good & bad soils & their response to the seed.”** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 474)

c. The seed fell on four soils (vv. 4a, 5a, 7a, 8a)

a. The seed

- **When anyone hears the word about the kingdom** (Mt. 13:19)
- **The Sower sows the word.** (Mk. 4:14)
- This is the meaning of the parable: **The seed is the word of God.** (Lk. 8:11)
- **“The parable of the Sower interprets the seed as the word.”** [Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories...*, 213]

b. Soil along the path

- **“The background for this well-known parable, drawn from a typical scene in the Palestinian countryside, is a field through which a well-worn path runs.** Sowing would occur in late fall or early winter (Oct. – Dec.) in the rainy season, looking for sprouting in April or May & a June harvest.” (NET)
- **“The ‘way’...in a field represents one of the footpaths running through or around it. Some of the grain...fell on or beside it...exposed...to hungry birds, which would devour grain..., & continue to feed however possible until the harvest.”** (Craig Keener, *Op Cit*, 444)
- **“The seed falling on the beaten earth beside the path, where it could not penetrate, may be the few grains which inevitably go beyond the intended range in broadcast sowing...This seed is totally wasted.”** (R.T. France, *New International Commentary of the New Testament: Matthew*, pp. 471-2)

- c. Soil in a rocky area
- **“The rocky ground in Palestine would be a limestone base lying right under the soil.”** (NET)
 - **“The sower’s field in this parable includes some land where the soil is shallow over some rock. Palestine includes much land like this, but though seed springs up quickly on such soil that holds its warmth, the seed readily dies because it cannot sink down roots.”** (Craig Keener, *Op Cit*, 444)
- d. Soil among thorns
- **“Palestinian weeds like these thorns could grow up to 6 feet in height & have a major root system.”** (NET)
 - **“This third scene is similar [to the second], but this time the danger comes not from the inadequate resources in the soil, but from competition. The...growth of the thorns shows that there is nothing wrong with the soil here; the problem is that it is already occupied & there is no room for a new type of vegetation. The plants do not necessarily die, but they can’t produce grain because of the competition for light & nourishment.”** (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, p. 472)
 - **“The plants battled for nutrients from the soil, & the wild thorny plants were well adapted to rob whatever they needed from the soil. As the thorny plants grew up with other plants, they choked out the less hearty agricultural plants.”** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 475)
- e. Good soil
- **“The average Palestinian harvest may have yielded seven & a half to ten times the seed sown. Thus while even a hundredfold harvest is not ‘miraculous’ for some parts of Palestine, harvests yielding thirty to a hundred times the seed invested are extraordinarily abundant, & one rarely exceeded one hundredfold.”** (Craig Keener, *Op Cit*, 444)
 - **“...[It] is not legitimate to state...that only one quarter of the seed was successful. Presumably,...the majority of the seed falls into good ground & produces a crop.”** (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, p. 472)
- d. What happened to the seed in each soil? (vv. 4b, 5b-6, 7b, 8b)
- a. It lay on the surface of the soil & was eaten by birds
 - b. It grew quickly, but withered under the sun’s heat
 - c. It was choked by the thorns
 - d. It produced a good harvest
- e. The warning to the hearers
- **“The translation ‘had better listen!’ captures the force of the third person imperative more effectively than the traditional ‘let him hear,’ which sounds more like a permissive than an imperative to the modern English reader. This was Jesus’ common expression to listen & heed carefully (Matt. 11:15; 13:43; Mk. 4:9, 23; Lk. 8:8; 14:35).”** (NET)
 - **“Those who have ears, let them hear (13:9). This parable, in its cultural...context, poses questions to its [hearers]: Are you good soil?...It is performative language that tries to deconstruct the [hearers’] old world & open them to a new way of seeing.”** (Charles H. Talbert, *Paideia Commentary of the New Testament: Matthew*, p. 167)
 - **“‘He who has ears, let him hear.’ This alerts the audience that a deeper meaning is intended. The parables have a theological purpose in the plan of God...This summons ‘to hear’ means either (1) that not everyone has ears to hear or the ability to hear, or (2) that those who do, do not always use their ears or hear.”** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 476)
4. Jesus Interprets the Parable of the Seed & Soils (Matt. 13:18-23)
- **“What was true of the crowds that followed Jesus would also prove true among subsequent generations of disciples, in ways relevant to Matthew’s audience (7:21-22). Whether the message went in one ear & out the other (13:19), whether someone began the Christian life eagerly & then abandoned it because it entailed too much hardship or persecution (13:20-21), whether one accepted the gospel but then backslid into complacency, seduced by other interests (13:22), such crowds are useless to the kingdom. Yet others will more than make up for the seed invested in them, becoming true disciples of the kingdom & spreading the true message of the kingdom to others.”** (Craig Keener, *Op Cit*, 448)
 - **“In the narrative context the primary point of this paragraph [vv. 18-23] is to explain the mixed response to the Galilean ministry of Jesus as chs. 11-12 have outlined it. The disciples were to take courage at that time from recognizing that there is fruitful as well as unfruitful seed, & that where the seed has not grown the fault lies in the soil rather than in the**

message itself. But the types of soil are described not in terms of any particular group or groups...but in general categories which may be applicable in many different times & situations within Christian history...**The careful spelling out of the successive agricultural hazards therefore probably justifies the use...even within the disciple community, to examine their own openness to God's message...The slogan 'Whoever has ears, let them hear' (v. 9) invites such an application.** Unreceptiveness, shallowness, & preoccupation with this age are problems not exclusively experienced by those outside the group, & even within the disciple community there are different levels of fruitfulness." (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, pp. 482-3)

a. Listen to the parable

- **"The emphatic 'You therefore' with which the explanation opens links it closely with vv. 11 & 16-17, where it is 'you' (the disciples of v. 10) who have been given the privilege of knowing the secrets in explicit distinction from 'them' (the crowds), & 'you' who have the privilege of seeing & hearing what even God's special people in the past have not been able to perceive."** (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, 483)

b. The seed is the word about God's kingdom

- **"The key interpretive phrase is 'the [word] of the kingdom' (abbreviated to 'the [word] in vv. 20, 22, 23)...It is this [word] which Jesus has been proclaiming since 4:17, & which has been received in such a varied way in the narratives of chs. 11-12. This parable therefore aims to explain that varied response to Jesus' proclamation. In every case the [word] is 'heard'; what matters is what happens next."** (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, p. 484)
- **"Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God is the setting for each of the four types of soil..The seed represents the message about the kingdom (13:19)...Thus, all of Jesus' seeds are good, so the emphasis falls on the type of soil, whether it is good or bad."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, pp. 479-80)

c. Soil or heart? (vv. 19b)

d. Consider the obstacles to the seed's growth

a. Unreceptiveness

- **"In contrast to the disciples, some in the crowd have hardened their hearts about Jesus' message. The hardness of heart prevents the seed...from taking root, & they cannot understand its truth."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 480)
- **"The failure of the first seed to penetrate the earth symbolizes lack of 'understanding,'...The inability to get below the surface...is here attributed not...to the purpose of God, but to the 'evil one'."** (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, p. 484)
- **"Verse 19 refers to the active work of Satan & perhaps reveals to us something of [Matthew's] view of the cosmic warfare that is going on in regard to the spread of the gospel. The activity of Satan is then likened to the activity of a scavenger bird. The failure here is blamed not on the seed nor even primarily on the soil but on the external intruder that comes and takes away the seed."** (Ben Witherington III, *Op Cit*, pp. 264-5)

b. Shallowness

- **"In Jesus' last days in Jerusalem nothing will be seen of these enthusiastic followers from the early days, while the disciples, even if they fail at the last moment, are at least still there with Jesus. Note that these people are said to 'hear' & 'receive' the message, but not to 'understand.' The problem is lack of roots 'in themselves'; their enthusiasm is based on external stimulus, not on inner conviction, & so it will not last when the external is no longer there."** (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, p. 484)
- **"The seed sown on rocky places with shallow soil signifies the type of heart that has sufficient receptivity to allow the seed to sprout up, but it is not deep enough to develop any root. It is important to recognize that the life is in the seed, not in the soil. When the environment is suitable, the life in the seed will begin to germinate...This type of heart exhibits a superficial reception of the gospel, but it does not take root. This is like those of the crowd who have not made a personal commitment to be Jesus' disciple. The seed of the gospel message was not able to penetrate to produce the change of regeneration in the person's heart."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 480)

c. Preoccupation

- **"The third type of soil is crowded with thorns. This type of heart receives the gospel but has competition from the world...The message of the gospel is not able to transform the person into a true disciple because of his or her competing priorities. The 'worries of this life' indicate that the person has not yet placed the kingdom above all else & so tries to manage his or her own life...The 'deceitfulness of wealth' combines with worry to choke out the life of the seed for the one who is trying to manage his or her own life apart from God & is tempted to find the solution in worldly resources."** (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, pp. 480-1)

- *“The noun behind ‘deceitfulness’ can be used to **express both ‘pleasure’ & ‘deception’** (Col. 2:8; 2 Thess. 2:10), which may be combined here to warn how **wealth can be a deceptive pleasure.**” (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 481)*
- *“**A concern with possessions betrays a focus on ‘this world’ which is in tension with commitment to the kingdom of heaven...That tension is symbolized in the ‘choking’ of the grain; there is not room for both God & Mammon to take priority in a person’s allegiance. The idea that wealth is ‘deceitful’ is well established in Wisdom literature (Prov 11:28; 23:4-5); it promises a security which it cannot deliver.**” (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, p. 485)*

e. Good soil/heart

- *“Only the fourth soil is called ‘good’. This represents **the person who not only hears the gospel message but understands it & allows it to take full root in his or her heart so that it can produce fruit. This soil represents a true believing disciple...The fruit produced is the outward evidence of the reality of the inward life of the kingdom.**” (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 481)*
- *“Here is a direct antithesis to v. 19: the ‘understanding’ which was explicitly absent there is now at last achieved. **The bearing of a crop indicates that this ‘understanding’ is not to be interpreted as a purely intellectual grasp of truth; it is rather the lifestyle commitment which the [‘word] of the kingdom of heaven’ demands & which has been thwarted by adverse circumstances & divided loyalties in the previous two scenes.**” (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, p. 485)*
- *“There is a clear, unmistakable distinction made between those who are outright hardened against the gospel message in the first soil & those who produce fruit in the fourth soil. But there is a **perplexing middle ground in those who initially receive the word but who then fall away. Some hear the word & fall away because of the trials & hardships of life, & others get sucked into the priorities of the world over Kingdom values. This is a warning to those who respond to the kingdom to guard against & be prepared for those things that prevent them from producing fruit.**” (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 502)“*

5. Application

- *“**Each time a person hardens his heart against the gospel, he deceives himself into thinking that he knows the truth about reality & rationalizes his conclusion about Jesus. This is done by those who believe the gospel to be too exclusive for modern pluralistic tolerance. It sounds so narrow-minded to speak of only ‘one’ way to God...This is what it means, however, to really want God to be the God of our lives. Dallas Willard writes somberly: ‘The ultimately lost person is the person who cannot want God. Who cannot want God to be God. Multitudes of such people pass by every day, & pass into eternity. The reason they do not find God is that they do not want him or, at least, do not want him to be God. Wanting God to be God is very different from wanting God to help me.’**” (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 496)*
- *“**Believers also must be wary, because rejecting the truth of the gospel can lead to a heart hardened against God...Jesus’ interaction with his disciples allows us to see that they must also maintain an openness to the truth embedded in the parables for them to continue to understand & obey...Jesus admonishes, ‘He who has ears, let him hear,’ because it is only in hearing & obeying the truth that a person’s heart is given over to the rule of God’s kingdom & the possibility of personal growth in Christlikeness.**” (Michael J. Wilkins, *Op Cit*, p. 496)*
- *“**The scorching sun represents the fact that following Jesus will not always be fun. It is no guarantee against ‘suffering’ – the term often includes, but does not exclusively mean, trouble caused by other people. Indeed, it brings trouble of its own, since the same ‘message’ which brings enlightenment can also bring persecution from those who do not accept it. These ‘rootless’ people, for all their initial enthusiasm, are in the end no less neutralized than the “snatched” seed of v. 19 as far as the kingdom of heaven is concerned.**” (R.T. France, *Op Cit*, pp. 484-5)*
- *“**A look at the word ‘fruit’ as Jesus & the New Testament writers use it provides insight... [T]wo in particular stand out. The first [is in John 15]...in which Jesus calls himself the true vine & characterizes his disciples as branches. The point he makes is complementary to the parable of the Sower: as the branch is not able to bear fruit unless it remains in the vine, so they cannot bear fruit unless they remain in him. In other words, the response most needed is that of simply abiding in the power of the Word himself – which means, in terms of the Sower, neither***

putting obstacles in the way of the seed nor involving ourselves in the search for other, more plausible responses to it." (Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage & Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, p. 77)

- "The parables of the kingdom need to be **understood & believed so that we might follow Jesus more faithfully & live for His kingdom.**" (David Platt, *Christ-Centred Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, p. 193)
- "The parable of the sower makes clear that **the difference that determines reception of the gospel is the soil, i.e., the condition of the recipient.** In this parable the seed & the sower are the same in each case, but the soil varies. **The story could be a realistic representation of the response to Jesus' ministry.** Many did not respond favorably to his message, but the few who did produced remarkable fruit...The explanation given in vv. 18-23 makes clear that there are a variety of factors hindering hearing: Satan, the lure of wealth, trouble, persecution, worries." (Ben Witherington III, *Op Cit*, p. 259)