THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1–23

Key Verse: 13:8

“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Benjamin Franklin famously said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” This time of year people want to be good teachers or good students. But how do we really learn? In today’s passage Jesus is teaching crowds and his disciples. It contains one of his most famous parables. Countless scholars have created very complicated interpretations of its meaning. But in the church, down through the centuries, this parable has been used over and over to challenge Christians to self-reflection: How am I responding to God’s word? What kind of heart-soil do I have? Today we want to think about three very important questions: What made the disciples different from the crowds? How can I cultivate my own heart to be like good soil? And, because people respond so poorly, is there any real hope for ministry? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Matthew’s Gospel has some major sections. In chapters 5–7 is Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount, in which he teaches his disciples how to live as kingdom members. In chapters 8–11 Jesus is healing all kinds of people, not only physically but also spiritually. But in chapter 12 we see growing opposition to Jesus. This is the backdrop for today’s passage. Look at verse 1. It begins with the phrase “That same day…” From 12:22 we see Jesus responding to people who opposed him. The Pharisees, the official religious leaders of the day, try to discredit his ministry and poison people’s minds against him. Some want to see a miraculous sign from him, presumably so that they could believe, even though he had just performed such a sign. Finally, his mother and brothers show up, wanting to take charge of him, thinking he had lost his mind (Mk3:21,31). He refuses to go out of the house to see them; instead, he stays focused on being with his committed disciples. Now, that same day, Jesus goes out of the house and sits by the lake. Surely all this opposition was on his mind. The “house” was probably the house of Simon Peter, in Capernaum, which Jesus used as a base of operations, and “the lake” was the Sea of Galilee.

Look at verse 2. It says “Such large crowds gathered around him…” Opposition from the religious leaders didn’t seem to be working. Ever since he started his ministry large crowds had been coming to Jesus (4:25; 8:1). Why? It was because he was healing every disease and sickness among the people (4:23). No doubt many were still coming for his healing. Others really liked the way he taught. He taught with authority, not as their teachers of the law (7:29). With authority Jesus told people their sins were forgiven (9:6). And he backed up what he said with amazing miracles (9:8). But honestly, many came just to be entertained; they wanted to see or hear something exciting (11:16–19). The crowd on the beach grew so large that Jesus got into a boat and sat down, while all the people stood on the shore (2b). It was a beachside cove with acoustics in which his voice could carry and a large crowd could actually hear him speak.

Look at verse 3a. Despite people’s expectations, at this time he chose not to heal but to teach. It says he was telling the crowds “many things in parables.” In this case, a parable isn’t like an illustration to help people understand better; it’s more like a riddle people have to figure out. What was his parable? Read verses 3b–8. As usual Jesus created a parable from everyday life. Sowing seed and working for a harvest was a main activity for most common people. He told this parable in way it would really connect with people. It includes common frustrations for those who had to plant food to survive: birds, rocks, thorny weeds, and poor results. It also includes a common hope: good soil and a fruitful crop. But in telling this parable Jesus intentionally didn’t clarify his main point. Why? Read verse 9. As he did before (11:15), Jesus was calling out to people to get them to really think about what he was saying. He also was using this form of teaching in a generally superficial and rather hostile environment to reach out to people who were genuinely interested in learning from him.

Read verse 10. The disciples probably were expecting him to go on to explain what his parable meant, but he didn’t. He just gave the parable and said, “Whoever has ears, let them hear.” It seemed strange to stop so abruptly. So why was Jesus speaking to the crowds in parables or riddles? Read verse 11. Jesus is saying his disciples are different from the crowds. The disciples have the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but the crowds don’t. So what is this knowledge, and why do the disciples have it and the crowds don’t? This knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven is revealed to disciples by God the Father (11:25,26; cf. 16:17; 19:11). Why does God give disciples this knowledge? It’s **not** because they’re smarter than everybody else. It’s because they’re not just **listening** like occasional spectators; they’ve chosen to **do** the will of God in their lives (12:50; cf. Jn7:17). They’ve responded to God’s call with **obedience**; they’ve left everything to follow Jesus as first priority and learn from him (4:18–22). Also, the disciples are “poor in spirit,” meaning they’re repentant and eager and willing to learn (5:3). The disciples are willing even to be persecuted because of righteousness (5:10). God reveals spiritual truths only to those who are that serious, that eager and willing, that committed. Read verse 12. Jesus gives this same warning later, to those who thought they were smarter than him (25:24–29). This verse tells us Jesus’ educational principle: Invest in teaching spiritual truth to those who are truly committed to learning from him. Jesus goes on to explain why he was using parables or riddles. Read verse 13. This is a loose quotation from three places in the Old Testament (Dt29:4; Jer5:21; Eze12:2). This verse expresses God’s frustration with his people. He gave them eyes and ears, but they failed to see or hear what he was telling them. Why did they not see, hear or understand? It wasn’t because they had not heard God’s word; it was due to their rebelliousness (Eze12:2). Our rebellious sinful nature can at any time get in the way of our learning from Jesus.

Jesus then says that the crowds’ poor response actually fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy. Read verse 14. The expressions “ever hearing” and “ever seeing” imply that the people heard the word of God often; they’d had it explained to them again and again. But they never really grasped what God was telling them. Why? Read verse 15a. The expression “they have closed their eyes” tells us that they refused to accept the truth. This verse pinpoints our problem: our hearts become calloused. A callous is a thickened, hardened area of skin that forms after being subjected to constant friction. We usually get callouses on our hands and feet—not on our heart. In the original Greek, the word “calloused” means fat. It suggests being spoiled. God’s blessings can make our hearts proud, complacent and so comfortable that we became insensitive to him (Dt32:15). We can hear God’s word so many times that we become calloused to it. We know what his message means, but we’re not willing to accept it. In light of this, the key to spiritual understanding is not intellectual ability, but the heart. Read verse 15b. This part of the verse tells us God’s heart and God’s hope. God is longing for people to turn to him and be healed. Here, “turn” means to repent. When we hear God’s word, we shouldn’t persist in our stubborn, sinful ways. We should turn to God and ask him to heal us. If we do, he won’t hold back his kingdom from us; he’ll surely welcome us in and heal us. In the midst of dealing with calloused people, Jesus was so comforted by his disciples. They had many weaknesses, but they could actually see, hear and understand what he wanted them to learn (16). Humanly speaking Jesus’ disciples didn’t seem very special, but Jesus said they were more blessed than many prophets and righteous people before them, because they could actually be with the Messiah and learn from him firsthand (17). It was also a gentle encouragement to them not to take it for granted.

Finally, Jesus explains his parable. Read verses 18,19. Here, the first soil is like the path. It describes people whose hearts are too hard to receive the good news of the kingdom. What does it mean to have a heart like a path? A path is a place that is overused. Our hearts can become as hard as a path when we feel like people have been using us. Our hearts can become hard when we get hurt, when we doubt others’ love, or doubt God’s love. Our hearts can become hardened by our own pride. Our hearts especially can become hardened by sin’s deceitfulness, which is why we can’t survive as isolated Christians; we need spiritual encouragement every day (Heb3:13). Verse 19 tells us that the devil is actively trying to remove God’s word, the gospel, from our hearts. We need to be spiritually aware that he’s our real enemy.

Read verses 20,21. The second soil, the rocky place, describes a heart that’s good only on a superficial level; underneath the surface, this heart is full of rocks that prevent God’s word from taking deeper root. With such a heart, people can’t last long in Christian life. So what are these rocks? They can represent unresolved old life problems that we’ve buried down deep. They can be rocks of fear that make us afraid of making too deep a commitment. They can be rocks of selfishness that make us want to escape trouble or persecution. It’s hard to dig deep down to deal with these rocks and get them out. It tells us that to grow spiritually isn’t a quick and easy matter, or about looking good outwardly; we’ve got to be willing to struggle hard with inner problems.

Read verse 22. In this third soil, the thorny place, the plants grow the most thus far. The seed penetrates the surface and grows down deep. The problem is, there are thorns also growing there. Jesus calls them “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.” This describes one of the major challenges in Christian life: the challenge to apply the Bible’s teachings to our practical lives. God’s kingdom can sound good, but we face many worries in this life. How will I survive? What about my property and my finances? What about my children? Wealth’s deceitfulness has two components: for poor people, wealth is a deceptive hope for happiness. For rich people, wealth is a deceptive security. These things can grow subtly in our hearts. So, like weeds in the garden, we’ve got to pull them out as soon as they appear. We’ve got to be like a diligent gardener, checking our hearts each day and repenting of our worries and false hope in wealth. It’s tragic that many grow to a certain level but remain unfruitful because they didn’t pull out these thorns.

Read verse 23. This interpretation is simple and quiet. Good soil produces “understanding”—real spiritual understanding. Why is this soil called “good”? It’s because it’s receptive, deep and pure. No hardness, no rocks, no weeds. This is the kind of heart Jesus wants us to cultivate within us. Doing this is more important than anything else we may be doing outwardly (cf. Pr4:23). We need to be asking God for a new heart and a new spirit (Eze18:31; 36:26). We need to be asking God for the humility to really repent and accept his word, and for the faith to obey it (Jas1:21,22). Read verse 23 again. It tells us that real fruitfulness comes not from our hard work or effort, but from spiritual understanding.

Read verse 8 again. Many are like the path, like the rocky or thorny place. But Jesus wants us to have hope that there is good soil out there, people truly receptive to the gospel message. May God renew this faith and hope in us. May God renew our commitment to cultivate good heart soil toward his word.