

It's All About Soil

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like... Discovering the Mysteries of Kingdom Life

Matthew 13:1-23

April 3, 2016

Well, let me begin by first saying thanks for coming back to church after Easter.
WOW, WHAT A DAY

I want to invite you to take a Bible and turn to Matthew 13. Matthew 13 is a very important chapter in the ministry of Jesus.

First, it shows a definite turning-point in the ministry of Jesus. At the beginning of his ministry, we find him teaching in the synagogues; but now we find him teaching on the seashore. The change is very significant. It was not that the door of the synagogue was as yet finally shut to him, but it was closing. He would still find a welcome from the common people, but the official leaders of Jewish orthodoxy were now in open opposition to him.

It is one of the supreme tragedies that Jesus was banished from the Church of his day; but that could not stop him from bringing his invitation to people; for when the doors of the synagogue were closed against him, he took to the temple of the open air, and taught whomever came to listen in the village streets, and on the roads, and by the lake-side, and in their own homes. This was John Wesley's story as well. The founder of Methodism went wherever the people were: village squares, open fields, openings to coal mines, to preach the Gospel. The person who has a real message to deliver, and a real desire to deliver it, will always find a way of sharing it.

The second reason why Matthew 13 is so important is that here we see Jesus beginning to use to the full his characteristic method of teaching in parables. Before this chapter, he had used a way of teaching which had the germ of the parable in it with wonderful pictures to fire the imagination. But it is in this chapter that we find Jesus' way of using parables fully developed and at its most vivid. As someone has said, "Whatever else is true of Jesus, it is certainly true that he was one of the world's supreme masters of the short story."

The third reason why Matthew 13 is so important is that in it, we begin getting a glimpse into what the kingdom of heaven is like. During our series, we will explore 5 parables in Matthew 13 that all talk about the kingdom of heaven, and most start with these exact words, "The kingdom of God is like..."

Today, we are going to look at one of the most famous parables Jesus ever told. It's up there with the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal or lost son.

So look with me if you will to Matthew 13, starting with verse 1.

READ MATTHEW 13:1-9

Here in this chapter is a picture which anyone in the crowd would understand. What in all likelihood happened was that, as Jesus was using the boat by the lakeside as a pulpit, in one of the fields near the shore a sower was actually sowing, and Jesus took the sower, whom they could all see, as a text, and began: "Look at the sower there sowing his seed in that field!" Jesus began from something which at the moment they could actually see to open their minds to truth which as yet they had never seen.

In Palestine, there were two ways of sowing seed. It could be sown by the sower scattering it broadcast as he walked up and down the field. Of course, if the wind was

blowing, in that case some of the seed would be caught by the wind and blown into all kinds of places, and sometimes out of the field altogether. The second way was a lazy way, but was not uncommonly used. It was to put a sack of seed on the back of an donkey, tear or cut a hole in the corner of the sack, and then to walk the animal up and down the field while the seed ran out. In such a case some of the seed might well dribble out while the animal was crossing the pathway and before it reached the field at all.

Jesus first told them in verse 4:

*And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.*¹

In Palestine, the fields were in long narrow strips; and the ground between the strips was always a right of way. It was used as a common path; and therefore it was beaten as hard as a pavement by the feet of countless passers-by. That is how some of the sower's seed fell on the path; it was right there. So any seed that fell there, and some was bound to fall there in whatever manner it was sown, there was no more chance of its penetrating into the earth than if it had fallen on an interstate highway.

Next, Jesus said in verses 5 & 6:

*Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.*²

The stony ground was not ground filled with stones; it was what was common in Palestine, a thin skin of earth on top of an underlying shelf of limestone rock. The earth might be only a very few inches deep before the rock was reached. On such ground the seed would certainly germinate; and it would germinate quickly, because the ground grew speedily warm with the heat of the sun. But there was no depth of earth and when it sent down its roots in search of nourishment and moisture, it would meet only the rock, and would be starved to death, and quite unable to withstand the heat of the sun.

Then Jesus described in verse 7:

*Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.*³

The thorny ground was deceptive. When the sower was sowing, the ground would look clean enough. It is easy to make a garden look clean by simply turning it over; but in the ground still lay the beginnings of weeds, ready to spring to life again.

OUR YARD. FIRST TO TURN GREEN. I WAS THE FIRST TO MOW. SO WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? I'M THE FIRST TO HAVE A FEW DANDILLIONS.

Every gardener knows that the weeds grow with a speed and a strength that few good seeds can equal. The result was that the good seed and the dormant weeds grew together; but the weeds were so strong that they throttled the life out of the seed.

Finally, Jesus said in verse 8:

*Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.*⁴

¹ Matthew 13:4 (NRSV)

² Matthew 13:5-6 (NRSV)

³ Matthew 13:7 (NRSV)

⁴ Matthew 13:8 (NRSV)

The good ground was everything the other soils were not. It was deep and clean and soft; the seed could gain an entry; it could find nourishment; it could grow unchecked; and in the good ground it brought forth an abundant harvest.

Then Jesus said in verse 9:

*Let anyone with ears listen!*⁵

This was Jesus' way of saying, "Look folks, this is not simply a good story. There is meaning behind it... if you can grasp it."

What we see here is this: Jesus using the here and now to get to the there and then.

So what does this parable have to say to us and our spiritual lives in the 21st century?

The first thing is this: the Gospel is meant to go everywhere.

When you have read this parable before or heard a preacher teach about it, did you ever think, "Wow, what a wasteful and inefficient farmer, casting seeds willy-nilly, here and there, without planting the seeds in just the right place?" Three fourths of the seed fall onto unproductive soil without much certain about it.

And that's exactly how we should treat sharing the Gospel. The message of Jesus is meant for everyone. No one is not welcome in the kingdom of God, no one is not welcome in the church, despite what we think sometimes. Our attitudes and prejudices occasionally get in the way. We think this person or that person shouldn't be here, but that was never Jesus' intention. The Bible tells us that He ate with sinners, He touched lepers, He went to people possessed by demons. He went to where the people were.

And so should we: to comfort those in the depths of pain and suffering; to offer love and grace to those who have done so many things that they are even a disappointment to themselves, let alone God and others; to share the message of salvation to everyone... even those who think they don't need it.

The sower of the Gospel casts the seeds whether he or she can, to whomever is available. God intends the Gospel to be spread: liberally, without regard to who might hear it, because God wants all to be saved.

In the last week or so, the group Wycliffe Bible Translators has been in my news feed. Last week, the international pilot's organization I'm part of gave a free airplane to one of its members. No, my name was not drawn, but the one who did receive the airplane was a missionary pilot and now trainer of pilots who were to become missionary pilots for Wycliffe Bible Translators. Hey, if I can't win an airplane, let a missionary get it.

The other news story about Wycliffe Bible Translators was that 4 of their missionaries were martyred last week by Islamic extremists.

When I was at Asbury College now University, I became acquainted with an organization called the Wycliffe Bible Translators. It is a mission organization whose goal is to bring the Bible into the languages of those without it. This is in fact who our missionary Kevin Cline is serving with and what he is doing: putting together a written language for the people he is serving where there is no written language. In college, we had a man come speak to the student body. He had a PhD in linguistics. He was an incredibly well-educated and gifted man. He could have taught in any university in the

⁵ Matthew 13:9 (NRSV)

country. He could have had a comfortable life. But what did he do instead? He spent his life with an obscure tribe that didn't even have a written language. He first had to learn to speak their language. Then he developed a way to put it into writing. He created an alphabet and grammar for it. Then he taught the people how to read their own language. And then he translated the New Testament into that language. And he did all that just so that they could learn about Jesus. Some would say, "What a waste!"

But the Gospel is meant to go into all the world, into every corner. So Kevin is sharing the Gospel in a remote Mexican village that has no written language. Myra's sister-in-law used to go with some other ladies to the local strip club to share the love of Jesus with the dancers.

Every once in a while, we will have a drought during the summer, and much of the seed the farmers planted will not come up, and the seed that did produced promises a scanty yield, if any at all. Grass burns up in the intense heat, and the cattle nearly starve. Many farmers were forced to sell their cattle. Except those who face bankruptcy or foreclosure, few farmers give up. In many cases they could be seen plowing up hopelessly lost crops and planting other seed. They worked in hopes of refreshing rain and an eventual harvest.

If they were so persistent, should sowers of the seed of the Word of God do less? Yes, many will reject our witness. Others will receive it superficially, only to show their true colors when the going gets rough. Some will truly be saved but will yield little or no harvest as they get caught up in the temporal things of this age. But we must persist, knowing that others will be saved and will give themselves wholeheartedly to the service of the Lord, yielding an abundance of souls led to Christ.

Now folks, this is one of those times when I have so much more to share with you than I have time for. I know you're think, "That's every Sunday." But no, I'm only half way through what I want to share about this text. So we are going to pick this passage up next week, same Bat time, same Bat channel.

What I want us to take away today, to think about and ponder through the week, are these questions:

- Is there anyone for whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not meant for? The answer there is "No."
- So if there answer is no, then who in my life have I possibly dismissed as being unwilling or unworthy of knowing the love of Christ?
- And how am I going to be the sower of the seed of life, eternal life, sharing the message along every pathway I go this week?