

# The Four Soils

*Matthew 13:1–23*

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## Entering Matthew 13

This is the fourth year of our study of the Gospel of Matthew, and as we reenter it together, there is a great deal we could do by way of review — where we have been, what Matthew is doing, how he has structured his Gospel. Because our passage today is long, I will save most of that for next week. But there is one piece of context I think is important as we step into Matthew 13.

Jesus' public ministry — from His baptism to the cross — was roughly three and a half years. And in those three and a half years, Jesus did not simply do one thing at a time, as if He had a “miracle season,” then a “sermon season,” then later a “parable season.” He did it all together, all along the way. He preached the good news of the Kingdom — “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” He taught Kingdom life, what it means to live as citizens under the reign of God. He healed the sick and cast out demons. He called disciples and shaped them. He confronted hypocrisy and exposed false religion. He welcomed sinners and forgave sin. He revealed Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God. And yes — He told parables.

When Matthew gathers Jesus' parables together in Matthew 13, I do not believe Matthew is saying, “Here is the moment Jesus changed strategies.” I think Matthew is saying, “Here is a collection of Jesus' parables — what He returned to again and again, because it mattered so much.” That is one reason I find Matthew 13 so encouraging. These parables were not one-off remarks spoken once and then forgotten. Jesus told them again and again, and they were recorded with great care. These are the words of Jesus — Messiah, Son of the living God — given to train our hearts to hear the Word of God.

Our passage today, Matthew 13:1–23, contains possibly the most well-known parable Jesus ever told, and it serves as a kind of introduction to all of His parables in general. Let us open our Bibles and begin.

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## The Parable and the Question Behind It

*“That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.” (Matthew 13:1–2)*

If you go back and look at Matthew 12, you will see that there is real confusion among the people about who Jesus is. He is being accused of violating the Sabbath, of casting out demons because He Himself is demonic, of owing the scribes and Pharisees a sign to prove His identity. Even His own mother and brothers are questioning Him. Simply put, people are not recognizing the power, the work, and the presence of God in Jesus. And it is precisely this blindness — this failure to see who Jesus is, what He is doing, and where God is at work — that leads Jesus to speak in parables. Here is the parable:

*“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. 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, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:3–9)*

The disciples then come to Jesus with a question, and it is a great one:

*“Why do you speak to them in parables?” (Matthew 13:10)*

Here is Jesus’ answer:

*“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 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. 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.” (Matthew 13:11–13)*

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## Why Jesus Speaks in Parables

Let us pause here and hear what Jesus is saying. He is telling His disciples that they are not the reason He speaks in parables. They, as His disciples, already know the secrets of the Kingdom. And what are those secrets? The secret of the kingdom of heaven — the thing that has been

given to the disciples — is this: Jesus is the King. He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He is the Word of God through whom all creation has come into being and has its being. It is only through Him that one knows about, enters into, and finds a home in the Kingdom.

And if you have this secret — if it has been given to you, not merely as an intellectual idea held in the mind but as a living reality held in the heart — your whole life will be different. You will have a new life marked by peace, joy, and life that will never be taken from you.

But there are many, many people who do not have this. They reject the presence and work of God. They are blind to God at work around them. And it is for those people — people who do not have Jesus — that Jesus speaks in parables. This is verse 13: *“seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”* Parables are not told to conceal or hide the Kingdom. They are precisely the opposite — they are the means Jesus uses to disclose, to reveal, to show the Kingdom of God to those who are blind.

Jesus then reaches back to the prophet Isaiah to press home just how deep this blindness runs:

*“You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. 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.” (Matthew 13:14–15)*

What Jesus says here was not only true two thousand years ago. It is true today. We live in a world where people are spiritually blind and deaf — where God can be near, active, speaking, and moving, and people miss Him entirely. We live in a day when people can explain everything in terms of psychology, coincidence, luck, politics, science, or “just the way things are,” and never once consider that the presence and work of God surround them on every side.

Many people go through life with no concept of the holy. They can stand at the edge of the ocean, look at a mountain range, hold a newborn child, sit beside a dying parent, and never once ask, “What does this mean? Who is behind this? Why am I here?” They can experience suffering — a lost job, a struggling marriage, a serious illness — and instead of asking, *Lord, what are You saying to me? Where are You in this?* they only ask, *How do I manage this? How do I cope? How do I get through?* They are not wrong to seek help. But they never turn toward God. They never consider that pain can be a summons, that grief can be a doorway, that hardship can be a mercy meant to awaken the soul.

And then there is the constant noise of our age — the noise of screens, headlines, entertainment, endless scrolling, endless opinions — so much crowding into our minds and eyes that the soul grows dull. People’s ears are filled and their eyes are busy, but the inner life is starved. When your life is formed by constant distraction, you can be standing in the middle of God’s world, encounter His Word, and never see God at all.

That is why Jesus speaks in parables, He tells us plainly. *“This people’s heart has grown dull.”* The problem is not that God has stopped speaking; it is that the human heart does not know how to listen. The problem is not that God is absent; it is that people have trained themselves to interpret and engage with this world as if He were not here.

And so Jesus speaks in parables — not to hide truth, but to open up hearts and minds. A parable is the Lord taking a spiritual truth and setting it down in front of us in ordinary clothes: a farmer, a field, seed, soil, birds, sun, thorns. Jesus is saying: *If you cannot recognize the Kingdom when I announce it plainly, let Me speak to your heart another way. Let Me give you an image you cannot easily forget. Let Me lodge truth in your imagination, so that — by the Spirit — you might finally see what you have been unable or unwilling to see. If everything that exists is made by God and you cannot see His work around you, let Me teach your soul how to witness the presence and activity of God.* Jesus’ parables are God’s gracious pursuit of those who are spiritually blind and deaf. A parable is His merciful attempt to open eyes and unstop ears.

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## What Is a Parable?

So what exactly is a parable? A parable is not a fable, not an allegory, not a moral tale from which we are supposed to extract a lesson. Though there are many lessons in them, that is not what they are primarily doing. A parable is an image or story from everyday life that trains a person’s soul to witness the presence and work of God. Parables teach us to see the Kingdom of God breaking into this world. They show us both God’s action toward us and the condition of our own hearts. And both things — God’s action and our hearts — are being revealed to us in the simple story of a farmer throwing seed upon the ground.

So let us return to the parable and see what it reveals about the Lord and about ourselves. And to help us do that, Jesus Himself explains it.

*“Hear then the parable of the sower: When 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 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. 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. 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.” (Matthew 13:18–23)*

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## **What the Parable Tells Us About the Lord**

First — what does this parable tell us about the Lord? It tells me that the Lord is always at work. He is the Sower who casts the seed, and He is the seed that falls into the ground and dies. He is both.

Notice first that the Sower — God at work — works everywhere, in every life, even in the lives of those who do not see or recognize His work. He does not throw seed only on the good soil. He throws it on every soil, every life, every heart. No matter who you are, no matter the condition of your heart and soul, God is at work around you and in your life. The question is never whether God is working — He is. The question is the condition of the heart. Do you have ears to hear and eyes to see?

Notice also the seed. The seed is clearly the Word of God — both the living Word and the written Word. The living Word is the gospel of Jesus Christ: His work upon the cross for you and for me, His death for our sins, His resurrection so that all who believe in Him shall have eternal life. The seed is the gospel. The seed is what Jesus has done for us. But the seed is also the written Word of God speaking into our lives, being planted there. What happens in you when you read or hear God's Word?

And I believe the seed is also the everyday presence and work of God in this world — the things He is doing all around us. The seed is the ongoing speech of God written into the very fabric of creation and providence. When you step outside and breathe the morning air, when you watch the seasons change, when you witness a marriage or a birth or a death — these are moments when God is speaking, when He is sowing seed. His mercies are new every morning; His faithfulness is declared in the sunrise. The heavens proclaim the glory of God, and the skies announce the work of His hands. This is seed being scattered.

God is not only at work in the Bible you read or the sermon you hear on Sunday. He is at work in your Monday morning, in your conversations, in your disappointments and your joys. He is speaking through circumstances, through relationships, through trials and blessings alike. God is always sowing. The seed is always falling. Everywhere. In every life. Even now.

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## **What the Parable Tells Us About Ourselves**

And so the question becomes: do you see Him? Do you hear Him? Is what He is doing finding a place in your life? What kind of soil are you?

Are you like the hard-packed soil along the path, where God's word and work cannot penetrate — where the word itself is snatched away before it even has a chance to enter? This is the person who hears the gospel, encounters God's Word, receives mercy upon mercy from the Lord, and it means nothing. It doesn't register. It doesn't penetrate. They might sit in a church service, hear about Jesus, and walk out unchanged and unmoved, because they are already thinking about lunch or the football game or what they have to do tomorrow. And the more a heart ignores the word and work of God, the duller it becomes — the soil packs down harder — and the more difficult it is for the Word to find any entrance at all.

Are you like the rocky soil — where you hear the Word and rejoice at it, but there is no root? And because there is no root, when trouble or persecution comes, the word is forgotten and faith falls away. This person is led by emotion and desire. They receive the Word with joy, Jesus says. They love the idea of Jesus. They love the comfort of forgiveness. They love the hope of heaven. They love the community, the worship, the inspiration. But the seed never gets down deep. It never penetrates past the surface layer of feelings and personal preferences down into the roots — the will, the conscience, the daily habits, the private life. And when following Jesus becomes inconvenient, uncomfortable, or costly, that person's faith shrivels up and dies.

Perhaps you are like the soil full of thorns — where the seed is sown and even begins to grow, but the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke it out. Jesus names a couple of these thorns specifically. The first is the fears, anxieties, and worries about the things of this world — your future, your children, your health, your plans, your job, your school. These things are important. But excessive worry and fear about them can choke out the power, presence, and work of God in your life. The second is misplaced trust. Jesus is speaking directly to the spiritual danger of placing our trust, our happiness, and our joy in wealth — which is precisely why He calls it *the deceitfulness of riches*. If you believe that wealth and comfort will make you happy and not the Lord, you have been deceived.

Or maybe — by the grace of God — you are like the good soil that hears the Word and understands it, receives it, and trusts it. And when that Word is received and trusted, it grows and bears fruit. *In one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.*

Good soil is not perfect soil. Good soil is receptive soil. It is soil that has been broken up by the plow of repentance, watered by the Spirit, and kept clear of the weeds of worldliness. Good soil is the heart that makes room for God, that prioritizes His Word above convenience, that clings to Christ in suffering, that refuses to let the cares of this world choke out what matters most.

And notice what Jesus makes a point of: good soil produces fruit. That fruit will differ from person to person — *some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty* — but the fruit is real and it is there.

What is this fruit? When Christ abides in you, when the living Word of God is received and trusted, there is much fruit. There is the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control — which grows in a life where the Word has been planted and nurtured and the Spirit is present. There is a growing love for God, seen in a longing for prayer, a delight in His Word, and a hunger for His presence. There is a growing love for people — patience with difficult people, forgiveness when it is hard, service when it is inconvenient, truth spoken with gentleness, mercy shown because mercy has been received. There is obedience: when God's Word confronts you, you submit to it rather than explain it away; when the Spirit convicts you of sin, you repent instead of making excuses; you increasingly order your life around what God has said, not around what feels right or what culture approves. There is perseverance: you do not walk away when it gets hard — you hold on, you endure, you keep coming back to Jesus because you know there is nowhere else to go. There is witness: your life and your words testify to Christ, and people around you see something different — a hope that does not depend on circumstances, a peace that does not make sense, a joy rooted in something deeper than success or comfort. There is holiness: you are being sanctified, the sins that once dominated you are losing their grip, the habits that enslaved you are being broken, and when you do fall, you get back up, confess, repent, and keep walking with the Lord.

This is the fruit. And notice the point of the parable: the fruit does not come from trying harder or being a better person. It comes from the Word taking root in you. The fruit is the natural result of the gospel doing its work in you. You do not manufacture fruit — you bear it. The seed produces the fruit. Christ in you produces Christlikeness. The Spirit of God in you produces the fruit of the Spirit. We are just the dirt that God stoops down and breathes into.

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## **The Invitation**

So what soil are you? Not what soil you want to be — what soil are you?

The good news is that the Sower is still sowing. This morning, right now, in this very moment, God is at work. His Word is being scattered. The gospel is being proclaimed. The Spirit is moving.

If you recognize yourself as hard soil, know this: God can break through and break up that hardness. He can soften what has become packed down in your life. If this is you, cry out to Him — *Lord, I am blind. Open my eyes. I am deaf. Unstop my ears. I do not see You, but I want to.*

If you are rocky soil, I want to invite you to stop living your faith only surface-deep. Let God's Word penetrate your will, your habits, your choices, your private life. Cry out to Him — *Lord, I want to follow You. Grow in me a deep hunger and desire for You.*

If you are thorny soil — if worry consumes you, if the cares of this world dominate your thoughts, if riches have deceived you into thinking they can give you what only God can give — then repent. Turn. Let go of the thorns that are choking the life out of your soul. Choose this day whom you will serve.

And if you are good soil — if the Word has taken root, if Christ is at work in you — then keep going. Keep receiving. Keep believing. Keep bearing fruit. The Sower is faithful. What He has begun in you, He will complete. And remember the promise Jesus spoke to His disciples back in verse 12: *“For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance.”* In other words — it only gets better.

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### **Responsive Reading: The Sower and the Soil**

**Leader:** The Lord is always at work, scattering His Word like seed.

**People:** Lord, help us to see You and hear You.

**Leader:** Some soil is hard, where the Word cannot enter.

**People:** Break up the hardness in our hearts.

**Leader:** Some soil is shallow, where the Word has no root.

**People:** Let Your Word go deep within us.

**Leader:** Some soil is thorny, where worry and misplaced trust choke the Word.

**People:** Free us from the cares that distract us from You.

**Leader:** Some soil is good, where the Word bears much fruit.

**People:** Make us good soil, ready to receive Your Word.

**Leader:** The fruit comes not from our effort, but from Christ in us.

**People:** Plant Your Word in our hearts, Lord, and let it grow.

**All:** The Sower is faithful. What He has begun, He will complete. Amen.