

The Parable of the Soils

This article on Matthew 13:1-23 is edited from the Ligonier Ministries

The Gospel according to Matthew groups Jesus' teaching into five major discourses, and the parables contained in chapter 13 constitute one third of these collections. Out of these parables, the most famous is most likely the parable of the sower (vv. 1–9, 18–23). Although this parable is more commonly known as the “Parable of the Sower”, but a more fitting title will be the “parable of the soils”. The role of the sower in the story is important, but the main point of the parable is twofold: first, to explain why different soils — different people — respond differently to the Gospel and, second, to invite us to faithfully examine ourselves and reflect about the kind of soil we are with the hope that we aim to be good soil.

The parable and its explanation are straightforward. All of the first three people described are ultimately hard in heart, but the hardness is especially clear in the person portrayed in verses 4 and 19 since that individual never shows an interest in the Gospel. His heart has hardened to the point where it resists all penetration by the seed, which is easily devoured by the Evil One and his minions represented by birds.

Those who fall away after professing faith are represented by the second and third soils. Without solid rooting in good soil, plants will wither and die under the sun's heat (vv. 5–6). Similarly, some people appear to be thriving believers until persecution reveals their true conditions (vv. 20–21), just like those in the first century who left Jesus when the going got tough (Heb. 3:12). Others, like plants choked by weeds, are strangled by the cares and worries of this world and the love of riches (Matt. 13:7, 22). This is an especially terrible fate, because the one ensnared in such entanglements does not usually know his dilemma until it is too late, considering himself Christ's follower even though he serves himself (Mark 10:17–22).

Finally, the fourth soil is notably different. This one understands and bears fruit — he accepts and conforms his life to the Gospel (Matt. 13:8–9, 23). The presence of fruit, not its quantity, is what matters. John Calvin says, “The fertility of that soil which yields a thirty-fold produce is small compared with that which yields a hundred-fold...[but Jesus] classes together all kinds of soil which do not entirely disappoint the labors and expectations of the husbandman.” The good soil that bears fruit is a crucial characteristic of a faithful sower.

Matthew Henry writes: “That which distinguished this good ground from the rest, was, in one word, fruitfulness. He does not say that this good ground has no stones in it, or no thorns; but there were none that prevailed to hinder its fruitfulness.” Stones or thorns may be found in the good soil of a true believer's heart, but such obstructions do not finally prevent him from bearing fruit. Despite your remaining sin, is your life bearing fruit for Christ? Let's be faithful, prayerful, and watchful as we continue to follow Christ on our homeward journey.