

A Matter of the Heart

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Pastor E. Keith Hassell

Mark 4:13–20 (NKJV) “And He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. ¹⁶ These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble. ¹⁸ Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰ But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.’”

Why doesn't the same message preached to the same people in the same room on the same day produce the same response? Why do some people receive while others do not? Why do some people get excited while others get put off? Why are some people ready to linger while others are ready to leave? Why do some experience change while others want others to change? Why do some get hungry for more while others are fed up? Jesus tells us why. It is a matter of the heart!

In Mark 4:1-9 Jesus gives the Parable of the Sower. In Mark 4:13-20 Jesus explains the meaning of the parable to His disciples. The emphasis is not so much on the sower but on the soil. Therefore it is more accurate to refer to this as the Parable of the Soils. A parable is an earthly story that has a heavenly meaning. This parable sets forth a simple story that has a profound meaning. Jesus spoke in parables to hide the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven from those who had no real interest in the kingdom while revealing the same mysteries to those who were hungry and seeking. It is accurate to say that the level of a person's spiritual experience is directly proportional to the level of their spiritual hunger. Are you hungry to experience the kingdom of heaven in your life? Are you seeking with all of your heart? Are you expecting more from God?

In Mark 4:3 Jesus prepared His listeners with a command: “Listen!” Not only did Jesus command them to “Listen!” but also to “Behold!” One command has to do with hearing while the other has to do with seeing. The crowd had gathered to hear the parable but not all would hear the true message. Jesus knew that the ability to understand this parable was directly linked to their ability to listen with spiritual perception: “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” (Mark 4:9) Although Jesus gave this command, He knew that most were so spiritually hardened that they would not be able to listen or see the real message of the parable.

There are three main subjects in this parable: the seed, the sower, and the soils. First is the seed. Luke's account tells us that the seed is the word of God (Luke 8:11) and Matthew's account tells us that it is specifically the word of the kingdom of God. (Matthew 13:19) The seed of the gospel of the kingdom of God is designed by God to produce the fruit of the kingdom of God in the heart and life of those who listen and believe. There is power in the seed for those who believe: “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.*”¹

Second is the sower. The sower is the farmer. The sower is anyone who scatters or broadcasts the seed. The sower may be a preacher, a teacher, a pamphlet, or a book. The sower sows the seed indiscriminately and impartially upon every type of soil.

Third is the soils. The soil speaks of the heart. There are four kinds of soils mentioned in this parable: 1) the wayside ground, 2) the stony ground, 3) the thorny ground, and 4) the fruitful ground. Fruitfulness is not a matter of the sower or of the seed. The key to the word's ability to produce fruit in people's lives is the condition of their heart. Jeremiah 4:3 (NKJV) says, “*For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: ‘Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns.’”* Hosea 10:12 (NKJV) says, “*Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, till He comes and rains righteousness on you.*”

The wayside ground represents the *hardened* hearers. Wayside ground is unplowed and packed down areas just outside the plowed field. The wayside ground represents a hardened heart that responds with no faith. They hear the gospel of

¹ Romans 1:16 (NKJV)

the kingdom but give no serious consideration to its message. The word of God never penetrates the hardness of their heart. They do not understand it because they are uninterested, unfeeling, or even hostile toward the things of God. As a result their heart does not embrace the word in faith. Satan comes immediately to pluck up the seed from their heart.

The stony ground represents the *superficial* hearers. The soil in Israel has many stones. Farmers often prepared their fields by removing the stones to make borders around the field. Stony ground is the area of the field where the stones have not been removed. The stony ground represents those whose heart is partially fertile and partially hardened. The stones represent hardened areas of a person's heart in which the word of God is not allowed to take deep root. Stony ground hearers respond to the gospel with a superficial faith. They make a surface, shallow, and superficial commitment to Christ. The stony soil is the heart that initially responds with joyfully receptivity to the message but they are impulsive in their commitment. They are initially excited about what they hear but their understanding is very shallow. Unlike the Spirit-filled joy that comes with true conversion, theirs is an emotional high that endures as long as the feelings and emotions last. They do not understand what it really means to believe and follow Jesus Christ. They do not abide in the word of God so that it can develop a deep root system inside of them. They are persuaded in mind but unconverted in heart. Over time their lack of true commitment is clearly seen. Those who are persuaded in their mind to believe can also be persuaded not to believe. Those who are truly converted are convinced and changed. They are believers only in the sense they are willing to accept the gospel when it makes them happy, when it makes life easy, and when it is convenient. It is opportunistic faith because it assumes the gospel will make life happier, healthier, successful, and prosperous. They do not endure. As quickly as they believed, they become offended by Christ's demands and stumble over the reproach they suffer because of Christ. Thus they abandon their commitment. Genuine saving faith, on the other hand, is proven authentic in the furnace of affliction. Persecution and affliction tests and reveals true converts from false converts.

The thorny ground represents the *uncommitted* hearers. The thorny ground is a crowded heart that responds with uncommitted faith. Jesus is added to their busy life rather than becoming their life. The word of God must compete with other priorities. Rather than being the hub around which everything in their life revolves, the kingdom is just another spoke on the wheel. As a result, other things always end up crowding Jesus out. He is not first place in their life. He is not their first love. He gets their left over time if there is any. Thorny ground hearers are not willing to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus. Jesus is like a lifejacket thrown into the corner of the boat or a spare tire in the trunk in case of emergency. The balance between living for God and maintaining other things in life begins to be difficult. A crowded schedule, pressures of life, and the longing for other things begin to push Jesus and the kingdom to the back of their minds. They express good intentions. They intend to give Jesus and His kingdom the attention it deserves as soon as they have these other priorities under control and behind them. Because the message of the kingdom of God is not made priority, their passion for God subsides. Their heart is like a field overtaken by thorny entanglements. Eventually no one would know that the message of the kingdom had ever found a place in their heart.

The fruitful ground represents the *obedient* hearers. The good ground is an honest and good heart that responds with obedient faith. These are doers of the word and not hearers only. The fruitful ground of the heart has been plowed with humility and repentance so as to break up the hard ground, remove the stones, and turn under the thorns. The fruitful soil not only receives the seed with joy but makes abundant room for it to be embraced, take root, and grow. The fruitful heart allows the seed to bring forth its maximum results. This soil bears fruit—thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. In bearing fruit they reproduce the kingdom in the hearts of others.

The point of Jesus' parable is clear: spiritual fruitfulness is not a matter of the seed or of the one who sows the seed. Fruitfulness is a matter of the heart. Therefore Jesus ends His parable with this command: "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*"