

## **The Parable of the Soils**

### **Part 1**

*Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

*John 1:1-4*

#### **People**

- *1 Corinthians 15:33-34; Ezekiel 36:36*

#### **Ponderings**

- *Proverbs 14:12; Philippians 4:8; Proverbs 23:7*

#### **Priorities**

- *Matthew 6:33*

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



## The Parable of the Soils<sup>1</sup>

### Part One

*Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

Today we are beginning a four-part series exploring just one of Jesus' many parables. I hope I'm correct in saying that you are here because you want to grow in your faith. For you, that might mean you want to grow in your understanding of what "faith" is – you still aren't sure about Jesus, so you are hoping to find out more. Or, for you, that might mean that you are a Christian, and that you want to grow in your relationship to God and in your own Christlikeness. Either way, this parable is for you.

To begin, we should probably be clear on what a "parable" is. A parable was Jesus' favorite way to teach his disciples and us, but that's not to say it was merely a teaching method. A parable is a way to use a story to teach a much, much deeper truth. A parable can be an example story, in which the behaviors of the main character or characters show us what to do or what not to do. A parable can be an extended metaphor, in which the parts of the story communicate a deeper truth, or it can be an allegory – a story that contains several metaphors. But in each case, the point or the lesson or the application of the parable teaches a deeper, spiritual truth that is difficult to understand if you don't have the spiritual openness to receive it.

So, in the parable we will be looking at, it is possible that you will hear the story, but you will miss the point for your life. Would you be willing to take a moment with me, in prayer, and tell God you are willing to hear what he is wanting to tell you today?

#### *Prayer*

This parable that Jesus taught is about a farmer who sowed some seed and the soil that the seed landed on, and what happened to that seed. When Jesus taught in parables, he often used the example of common things that people were familiar with. There's every possibility that, as he taught this one, there was a farmer scattering some seed, so Jesus said something like, "Take that farmer over there, for instance...." Since the culture they were in was mostly agrarian, this was something his listeners would understand. I know we have a lot of people in our church who are employed in ways that have to do with agriculture, whether fruit or hops or something else, so many of you will be able to relate.

The story is recorded for us in Mark 4 and Luke 8, but we are going to look at it from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13.

---

<sup>1</sup> Resources:

Phillip Keller, *A Gardener Looks at the Fruit of the Spirit*, Inspirational Press, 1993

Robert S. Snow, Arseny Ermakov, *Matthew: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, KC, 2019

Ralph Earle, "The Gospel according to St. Matthew," in *Matthew-Acts*, vol. 4, *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Third Ed., *The New Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001)

This parable has a lot of serious application for our lives, no matter who we are.

If you are turning there in your Bible, you might notice that it has a heading that says, “The Parable of the Sower.” That’s only an editor’s note; that’s not in the original manuscripts. Matthew didn’t put that there – your Bible publisher did that to tell you what’s coming next. But that’s actually an inaccurate description of this parable; you could call this the parable of seed, but most accurately, this is “The Parable of the Soils.” That’s because the sower and the seed are constant in this story, but we are given four different types of soil – and it’s the soil that Jesus wants us to learn from. So first, let’s see what the story says. Kaleigh Allen is coming to read the passage to us, and I’m going to ask you to make sure you are focused on what you hear and see, so would you stand as God’s Word is read to us?

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, niv)

This is the Word of God for the people of God! Thank you, Kaleigh. Thank you for standing. Before we break this down, we need to identify the key parts.

First, you might ask, who is the farmer? Well, we’re not told. You can say it’s God, or Jesus, or a Christian who is introducing others to Jesus, whether a pastor or not. Any of those answers could be correct, because the emphasis isn’t on the one doing the sowing of the seed; the emphasis is on where the seed lands and what happens to it from there.

So, what is the seed? The obvious answer is that it is the Word of God. But we can’t miss what that means, so let me unpack it for you, because the word, “word” has some very deep implications.

Jesus says the seed is the Greek word “logos.” Logos is translated, “word.” We need to understand that when Jesus uses that word, logos, he’s not referring to written words on a page. For the Jew, the word “logos” in Hebrew is “dib-ber” (Deeb-bear), and it holds similar meaning. For the Jew, “logos” meant the *entire* Law of God; the entire purposes of God revealed to us. That purpose existed before the beginning of the world. It was the force with which the world was created.

Remember in Genesis we are told that nothing existed, and then for each of the six days of creation, “God said,” and “it was so.” With his word, God spoke everything into existence. Right? Everything exists because of that *word*, is sustained by that *word*, and will be fulfilled through that *word*. The logos, or word, is more than a collection of stories and letters on a page, or even a whole book. The logos is the creating, sustaining, governing, leading, life-giving, saving, rescuing, redeeming, restoring, sanctifying, fulfilling, culminating purpose of God. (*repeat*) You’re going to have to chew on that awhile to let it sink in. But let me help bring the word “word” full circle: all that the logos is, or all that the Word and purposes of God is, is Jesus. Jesus IS the logos. That’s why the Gospel writer John began his account of Jesus with that very word, logos – and at the same time, called us back to the original Word at creation that spoke everything into existence and began the purposes of God. Listen to what John wrote:

In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word (*logos*) was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. (John 1:1-4, niv)

Do you see that? So when Jesus spoke about the seed being the “word,” he meant far more than words in the Bible on a printed page; he was talking about all that we just said – all the purposes of God – which have come to their fulfillment in and through himself, Jesus Christ. So glance through that passage again, thinking about that when you come across the “seed” ... it takes on a profound and deep meaning, doesn’t it?

So next, then, what is the soil? The soil is people. We are the soil. The soil is our hearts, our lives, and the type of soil represents the condition of our hearts and our ability to receive the seed, which is all the purposes of God, which is Jesus. So again, when Jesus talked about how the soil receives the seed, he is talking about how each of us receive Jesus, the revealed Word of God into our lives. And by the way, don’t think he is just referring to the first time you received Jesus and became a Christian; he is talking about the *constant* state of the soil of your soul, *all the time* – because you are always, always able to receive more and more of Jesus and more and more of his purposes in your life through the Spirit. And that can come to you in a variety of ways – through the Spirit working in your inner life, through the reading and receiving of God’s word, through sermons and studies and reading and through other believers, through the Church. Any and all times we have the opportunity to receive more of Jesus, then our hearts will be one of these types of soil. This applies to each of us individually, but also to the heart of us collectively as a church, as his body here at West Valley Church. The heart of this church is soil for the seed, the logos, the word, Jesus. And you need to know that God is constantly tilling the soil of our hearts and of this church, looking for fertile soil to plant his Word in.

It’s also worth pointing out: why does a farmer plant seed...is it to grow just one plant? Isn’t it to produce a crop? Isn’t the point to get the seed to reproduce *as much as possible*, to grow more crops? So if God plants his word in your heart, is it just for *you* to grow? Is it just for *your* sake? No, it is so you can grow to be as fruitful as possible. And if an apple seed is to grow a great crop of apples and more seeds, doesn’t it make sense that a Christian is to grow up and to grow many *more* Christians? So while we go through this series, you will learn how to allow the soil of your heart to be as fertile as possible for God’s purposes to grow in you, but understand it is also so that through you, God can introduce more people to Jesus.

With that in mind, today we are looking at the first kind of people in the parable, and that is *pathway people*.

When I was a kid in grade school I attended Keizer Elementary School for all six years – first through sixth grade. In those days we would walk to school – it was about a mile, but a lot of steps for little legs. So me and my best friend, Tom Clarkson, would walk every day that the weather permitted and most days when it didn't. There was one section where we took a "shortcut" through a field – it was a couple of vacant lots. Even in first grade we understood geometry – that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line (it wasn't for the math; it was to cut down the steps). So instead of going around the empty lots, we went straight through them – us and every kid in the neighborhood. So as you can guess, there was a well-worn path through it. And the dirt on that path – probably five to six feet wide – was as hard as concrete. Twice a day, five days a week at least, there would be hundreds of little Pro-Keds sneakers pounding down the dirt. That dirt got so hard that rain wouldn't even soften it up, and we got lots of rain in the mid-Willamette Valley. I can remember acorns from the neighbor's trees would fall on it, grass seeds from the overgrown grass would fall on the path, and they would dry up or blow away in the wind or be smashed underfoot or consumed by birds and bugs. In fact, we would crack open the filberts and eat the nut (if there weren't too many worms in it). We'd put the acorn on the path and stomp on it to crack it open – that's how hard the path was. More often than not, the birds would swoop in and eat the seeds. There was no way anything was going to grow on that path, no matter how good the seed.

This is the picture Jesus is talking about. Most fields were made up of lines of plants, with paths on either side for the farmer to walk along. So it was inevitable in planting that some seed would fall on the path.

Now, the seed is what? The logos, the word, Jesus. The soil is what? Our hearts and lives. In this first type of soil, Jesus is talking about a kind of person that, no matter how much of God's Word is thrown on them, no matter how much God pours his grace on them, it doesn't do any good. It just gets trampled on or becomes birdfeed for the enemy. For some of us here today – be honest with yourself now – for some of us, the garden of our lives, in places, is beaten hard as a rock.

What is it that tramples the soil of our hearts? I'd like to suggest that there are three big areas of our lives that can trample and harden us and keep Jesus from taking root in us. The first is...

## **People.**

It's important that we ask ourselves, "Who are the people who most frequently pound a path through my life?" "What sort of impact do they make on me?" "Are they hardening me against God or are they tilling the soil of my life?" Often it is the people we choose to associate with that gradually harden our hearts against God until the point that, when we hear his word, we say, "Forget it – that's for the birds!" And that's exactly what Jesus said would happen.

Like it or not, we become like those we are closest too. When I was a youth pastor, I used to get so tired of hearing parents who would make excuses for the teenager's behavior by saying, "Johnny is a good kid; he's just hanging out with the wrong crowd." Time and again I would have to gently remind them, "I'm afraid I have bad news for you. If Johnny is hanging out with the wrong crowd, then Johnny IS the wrong crowd." The same is true for us as adults.

The Apostle Paul addressed this in 1 Corinthians 15. There were those in the church who were teaching false truths and leading people astray. For instance, they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead – they taught that when you die, you cease to exist. So that meant no heaven, no hell, no judgment for us. That also meant that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. So Paul wrote in his letter to warn the Christians to stay away from those people because they were a bad influence. Finally, Paul wrapped it up in verses 33 & 34 -

Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame. (1 Corinthians 15:33-34, niv)

We must be careful about which people we let pave paths through our lives, right? But I want to say something else here that's important to distinguish: there is a big difference between keeping bad company and having friendships with unchurched people. If we are Christians, we *must* have friendships with people who don't know Jesus. Otherwise, how else will they be introduced to him, if we don't love them and be their friends? True, being friends with unchurched people means sometimes life's going to get a little bit messy, because you can't expect them to act like Christians, can you? The point is, Christian, that you can and must have friends who are not Christian. But the people who will trample a path in your life isn't about your friendships with non-Christians. It's about who you choose to have meet your need for spiritual friendship, support, and accountability. If *those* people are not building you up, you are in trouble. Make sense?

Every Christian needs the close encouragement of another believer. That's why small groups are so helpful – you get the chance to know people better and find those life-giving relationships. But if you are pursuing that close friendship and companionship with people who are a bad influence (and some of them might even say they are Christians!), then you will soon find your heart becoming like the pathway – nothing will grow in it.

If you find that this is you, I've got good news: God can not only till up the hard soil of your heart, if you need him to, he will give you a brand-new heart! God's promise to you is:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:36, niv)

You can pray, repent and confess, and ask God to change the soil of your hardened heart!

But understand: you are not a victim of other people pounding a path through your heart; you have the choice. And that's the second thing...

## **Ponderings.**

By this I am talking about our thought lives; what we choose to fill our minds with and what we dwell on. Ask yourself: "What kind of books do I read? What kind of things do I read or watch? What kind of music am I drawn to, and what are the lyrics about? What do I entertain myself with?" Listen, whatever you are drawn toward on Instagram or TicToc, their algorithms are designed to give you more of it. If you are drawn toward things of a sexual nature, they will feed that desire. If you are drawn toward violence or the profane or pornography or political vitriol, they will pound a path in your heart with those things.

Some of the things we read, or watch may not even be extreme like that; the stuff we ponder on might even sound or seem okay, but is it building your faith? Proverbs 14:12 says:

There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.  
(Proverbs 14:12, niv)

No matter how benign something might seem, is it best for you? How does it stack up against God's Word? What we expose our minds to soon becomes the dominant thoughts in our heads. But, in contrast, God's Word tells us:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8, niv)

You and I are what we think about when we're alone – not what we pretend to be in public. *(repeat)* What we are in private is what God sees. We're told in Proverbs 23:7 –

For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. (Proverbs 23:7, nkjv)

If we fill our thoughts with ungodly things, we will find the soil of our hearts getting hardened. We're not just talking about outside influences, either. This also includes the *ways* we think: how we think about life, circumstances, and people. Are you bitter? Are you a complainer? Do you expect and see the worst in people? Do you always assume the worst intent of others? Are you whining that life isn't fair to you? Are you nursing a grudge, feeding your anger against someone because you think you can justify it? In your own thoughts when you are quiet or alone, are you often grumbling or complaining? Do you have a bitter attitude? Do you secretly refuse to forgive someone who's hurt you? Listen: you are beating a path across *your own* heart!

According to an October 29, 1994, story from the Reuters News Agency, a Chinese woman named Zhang began to suffer mysterious symptoms when she turned twenty. She was losing the ability to use her arms and legs. Doctors couldn't find a cause, and the symptoms continued to get worse. Two decades went by, and Zhang began to suffer chronic headaches. Once again, she went to doctors for help. But this time a CAT scan and an Xray found the source of the woman's mysterious symptoms. A rusty pin was outside of her skull, and the shaft of it had penetrated her brain. Doctors performed surgery and successfully removed the pin.

The doctors were amazed that the woman "could live for so long a time with a rusty pin stuck in her brain." After seeing the position of the pin in her skull, they speculated that the pin had entered her skull sometime soon after she was born and before her skull had a chance to harden. The woman couldn't remember ever being pierced in the head by a pin, but she made a full recovery.

Like the rusty pin in that woman's brain, unwholesome thoughts and bad attitudes can lodge in our minds and cause us chronic problems. Left unchecked, they can lead to spiritual infection and death by hardening our hearts, making us unable to receive more of Jesus and God's word. People, pondering, and third...

## **Priorities.**

If we are putting God's priorities first, the soil of our lives will become prime for planting of his Word and fruitfulness. But if we choose the world's priorities, or simply our own priorities over

God's, we will trample the topsoil of our souls. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus made this matter of priorities simple and clear:

Be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things. (Matthew 6:33, gnt)

In other words, Jesus was saying that if we would make God's priorities our first priority, then He will take care of everything else for us – everything we need. Conversely, if our priorities are anything less than God's, it will eventually beat down the soil of our hearts. This is especially true when it comes to how we use our time; our time tells our priorities.

What are we doing when we aren't sleeping or working? Researchers tell us that in the US, the second-largest use of our time is ... television. According to Nielsen, at least in 2018 (before the pandemic), we spent four hours a day watching it. That's broadcast television in real time. We're not talking time-shifting DVR or YouTube or TicToc, just plain TV. And nearly a quarter of that time is commercials. Multiply the numbers out over a lifetime, and you're likely to spend well over two years of your life just watching commercials. TV isn't even a majority of the media we consume. According to the same Nielsen study we spend 11 hours a day consuming media, which includes reading, listening, and watching.

The Roman philosopher Seneca who lived in the first century wrote: "It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested. But when it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death's final constraint to realize that (life) has passed away before we knew it was passing."<sup>2</sup>

The priorities we choose will either pound a path in the soil of our hearts, or will soften our souls.

Okay – quick review: what is the seed? The purposes of God, culminated in Jesus, the Word, so that includes what is revealed about Jesus in the Bible. What is the soil? Our hearts. Jesus, the Master Gardener, desires for our hearts to be tilled soil, ready to receive God's Word, for His Word to take root and produce fruit in our lives that will lead others to him. But people, ponderings, and priorities, if not corrected, can make us pathway people.

Author Phillip Keller points out that there is a very ancient saying in agriculture that says, "The finest fertilizer on a gardener's ground is his own footprints" (*repeat*) The attentive gardener doesn't limit himself to the pathway. His feet don't pound and abuse the same places over and over. He moves gently, tenderly, and carefully over every square foot of ground. And he knows every plant, tree, shrub, and flower in his garden.

If anyone is going to walk through my life, it should be the One who tends me, cares for me, knows all about me, and longs to improve the garden of my life. It should be the Master Gardener, Jesus.

But it is up to me, and it is up to you. God does not choose who influences your life; you do. God does not choose what you watch and how you choose to think; you do. God does not choose your ambitions and priorities; you do. He will certainly help and strengthen you when you let him. He can even give you a heart transplant if you ask him to. The Holy Spirit can tenderize and till the soil of your soul if you submit to him. But the ultimate question simply is, "Do I want to be a

---

<sup>2</sup> Source: Associated Press, "Study: 'Time' Is Most Often Used Noun," CBS News (6-22-06); Byron Reese and Scott Hoffman, "How Do We Quantify the Elusive Concept of Wasted Time?" Lithub (6-1-21)

pathway person? Or do I want the master's footprints to enrich the soil of my heart?" It is up to you. Whichever you choose will soon be evident in your life.

What about your heart? Is there a path or the prints of the master? Is God's Word taking root and bringing fruit, or is it drying up and for the birds? Till the soil of your life. Confess the people, ponderings, and priorities that are pounding a pathway in your heart. Choose the terms that will till the soil. Choose the right people, the correct ponderings, and Kingdom priorities.

*Prayer*

*Benediction (Pastor Casey)*

(Ephesians 3:17-19, tlb)

I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; and may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it. And so at last you will be filled up with God himself.