

Pastor Michael O'Neill

November 12, 2023

The Parable of the Soils **Part 4**

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Ears to Hear

- *Matthew 13:10-17*

Soil to Grow

Fruit to Bear

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Part Four

Matthew 13:1-23

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)

Today we are on the final of four Sundays in our series on the parable of the soils. Willi just read it to us from Matthew 13, and I'd encourage you to open your Bibles to that passage as we continue to explore it in more depth today.

First, let's review: Remember, we aren't really told who the farmer is; it could be God, or Jesus, or anyone who is sharing the Good News of Jesus or God's Word with others. What is the seed? The Word of God, which is the Logos, which is *all* the purposes of God, all of which come to fulfillment in and through Jesus Christ in our lives, who is called the Logos himself. If you don't understand the Logos, I encourage you to go to our website or our YouTube channel to download the manuscript or watch that portion of the first message in this series so you will have a better understanding, because it's very important to know.

What is the soil? It is our hearts. That's the point of this parable that Jesus taught; we must examine ourselves so the soil of our hearts is able to receive more and more of Him into our lives all the time, so we will enjoy abundant and fruitful life as God intended, and so our lives will produce more fruit for God, just like a crop.

So far, we've looked at the first type of soil which Jesus described as the path. We talked about how we don't want to be pathway people, having hard hearts. Remember we said that the things that can pound a path through the soil of our souls are the wrong people, ponderings, and priorities.

Then we looked at the rocky soil, which has the bedrock of wrong belief, the boulders of disobedience, and the gravel of ingratitude.

Last week we looked at the soil full of weeds, which Jesus said were worldly worry, the attraction of affluence, and the magnetism of materials. Any of these, if not placed under the Lordship of Christ in our lives, will choke out the Logos, or the purposes of God in our lives.

We've spent the last three Sundays talking about the bad soil and all the things we want to avoid; things that would cause the soil of our souls to be unfruitful. Finally today we want to talk about the good soil. There's plenty here to help us understand what the good soil is, so let's take a look. Remember to prayerfully examine your own soil as we look at this.

Good soil starts with...

Ears to Hear.

Remember that Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear." So what does this mean? Well, there's an entire section of this passage that we haven't looked at until now which can help us understand what good soil is and what it takes. The passage is between the two that we've been looking at, in verse 10-17, and this is what it tells us:

The disciples came to (Jesus) and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

This is why I speak to them in parables:

"Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:10-17, niv)

Let me start out by saying that this interlude in the parable is a difficult passage to understand – maybe you got a sense of that when we read it. In fact, the word that's translated "secrets" is "Mooste-RI-on" (mysterian) which is where we get the word "mystery" from. It means something that is difficult and impossible to understand.

If that's the case, then what hope do we have of understanding this? It sounds like even the disciples didn't have "ears to hear," since they didn't understand and needed it explained to them. In fact, in Mark's telling of this parable in his gospel, Jesus rebukes the disciples themselves: Jesus said to them:

"Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (Mark 4:13, niv)

But there is a big difference between the disciples and others, and here's the difference: there were those in the crowd who saw Jesus giving this parable and heard Jesus speaking this parable, but they did not *see* Jesus for who he is, and they didn't *hear* enough to let the words sink into their souls. But the disciples *did*. How do we know they were different? Here's how: what did the disciples do? Even though they didn't understand the parable, after Jesus was done stating it, *they asked him what it meant*. The difference between someone with ears to hear and someone without is the willingness to draw closer to Jesus and ask what it means; they *want* to hear it and they *want* to learn and grow.

So Jesus is saying, "Outsiders can't understand what I say; but you know me; you are my disciples; you can understand."¹

In fact, if we aren't willing to listen and allow Jesus to take root in our hearts – if we aren't willing to grow in our relationship with him – then we will lose even what we have of that relationship. This is true in everything. If you are a student in school, if you don't continue to feed yourself with knowledge in a particular field, you will lose it. I know how to do basic math, but I've long since forgotten trigonometry and calculus.

Consider this story I recently read as another example: after the invention of the autopilot, it has helped to make air travel safer and more efficient. But now, aviation experts worry that we've gone too far. One article said that we have shifted so many cockpit tasks from humans to computers that pilots are losing their edge. Without actual flight experience or practice, pilots develop what aviation experts call "skill fade" or "skills decay."

Computers now handle most flight operations between takeoff and touchdown—so "frequent practice" is exactly what pilots are *not* getting. Even a slight decay in manual flying ability can risk tragedy. A rusty pilot is more likely to make a mistake in an

¹ Barclay, pg 66

emergency. Automation-related pilot errors have been implicated in several recent air disasters.

Because of this, a report from the Federal Aviation Administration concluded that pilots have become "accustomed to watching things happen, and reacting, instead of being proactive." The FAA is now urging airlines to get pilots to spend more time flying by hand.² It's just true: *we lose what we don't use*. An athlete who stops practicing will lose whatever skill he or she once had. The same is true in your relationship to Jesus. If you don't continue in your walk with Christ by spending daily time in the Word and in prayer and obedience, you will lose what you once had. Listen, if the Sunday sermon is the sum total of your spiritual food, you are malnourished; you are starving, and your soil is sterile. You are not even holding steady; you are steadily losing your relationship with Jesus. Instead, read the Bible. Pray. Press in.

So don't think that Jesus is saying in this passage that it is God who somehow closes the eyes and stops the ears of people in their ability to understand; *you do that to yourself*. And you can change that; you just have to be open to what Jesus is telling you, to the changes he can make in your life. This is a truth that goes way back to the Old Testament; Jesus is quoting Isaiah here. Here's the amazing thing: if you will open your eyes and your ears to Jesus, you will experience something that even Isaiah didn't. That's why Jesus said in verse 17, "many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."

Good soil starts with ears to hear. Which allows for the next thing you need...

Soil to Grow.

Jesus was very specific about the spiritual aspects of productive people: they are, first, people who hear and receive his Word and all that it implies (that's what we just talked about). But more than simply receiving and accepting that Word, it's very clear that to have a heart that is filled with soil for the seed to grow in means I must respond to the seed in a positive way; I must begin *acting* on it. *I must do what Jesus says*. I'm not going to mull it over; I'm not going to decide if I like it or not. I'm not going to take it into consideration. To do any of those things indicates that *I* am the Lord of my life and I'm just doing Jesus a favor by being willing to consider what he tells me. That is not good soil ground. Soil that the seed can grow in is fertile with faithfulness. It is rototilled with reverence.

One author says, "My positive response results in immediate action on my part. His will be done. His wishes are carried out. His desires are complied with happily. His commands are executed without delay or debate. In short, I simply do what he asks me to do. This is faith in action – the faith of obedience. This is the gateway into the good ground of God's garden. This is to "hear" the Word and have it come alive. This is to have Him implant the good seed of his good intentions for me in the good, prepared soil of my responsive soul."³

² Adapted from Nicholas Carr, "Automation Makes Us Dumb," The Wall Street Journal (11-21-14)

³ Phillip Keller, pg 472

God even helps us in this; he's given us his Holy Spirit to change our hearts and help us obey.

Still, don't think this is easy; your spiritual growth is not going to germinate in the gentleness of a calm greenhouse.

Have you ever heard of "Biosphere"? It was built in the late 80s and early 90s as an earth system research facility in Arizona. In it, scientists attempted to recreate creation. In one interesting experiment, scientists sequestered themselves for two years in their artificial environment called Biosphere 2. One article says this: "Inside their self-sustaining community, the Biospherians created a number of mini-environments, including a desert, rain forest, even an ocean. Nearly every weather condition could be simulated except one: wind.

Over time, the effects of their windless environment became apparent. A number of acacia trees bent over and even snapped. Without the stress of wind to strengthen the wood, the trunks grew weak and could not hold up their own weight.

It's in our culture and nature to shun hardship, but we would do well to remember that God uses it "for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10).⁴

Do you remember the seed that fell on the shallow soil? What happened to it? The sun came and dried up the plant. The sun did that. But let me ask you: does a plant need the sun to survive? Yes! A plant *cannot* survive without the sun. And yet, the very thing that was intended to cause the plant to grow, on shallow soil made it wither. What did Jesus say that the sun is in the parable? It is when trouble or persecutions come. The struggles of life – the struggles of circumstances and trials and the hard thing of obedience – *they are all the very things that will help you grow!* Obedience – acting on what you hear from Jesus, is what makes the soil of your soul good for growth. Obedience to Jesus – even, Jesus says, when you are persecuted *because you are a Christian*. You and I may not face torture or imprisonment for our faith (at least not yet), but when you are an obedient believer in Jesus you are countercultural. You are swimming upstream in the society of this world. If you've been following the news, you know we finally have a new Speaker of the House in Congress. But the media is mercilessly attacking the man, maligning him and his family and his character. Do you know why? Because he professes to be a Christian and he dares to live by his faith. He admittedly has a biblical worldview, but he also acknowledges that not everyone shares that perspective. He approaches the legislative process with that viewpoint, and he works with those who don't agree in order to achieve what is best for our citizens. He understands not everyone agrees, but that in the process, good can result. But because he admits that he is a Christian, many in the media are calling him a "christofascist." It's not popular to be a Christian, and it's becoming less so. And I will admit that it doesn't help us when there are knuckleheads who claim to be Christian that confuse Jesus for their power-politics.

But no matter what difficult circumstances we face, we won't cower in fear, or when opposed we won't attack, because the Bible tells us to:

⁴ Jay Akkerman in Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching (Baker), from the editors of Leadership.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4, niv).

Soil to grow is a heart of obedience that sees struggles as opportunities for the good seed of God’s purpose to grow even more deep and strong and high in its life. With hardships, we press in even closer to Jesus and obey him. So in all things we receive what Jesus tells us and we obey, and as a result, that’s the final part of good soil...

Fruit to Bear.

Jesus talked about the seed in good soil bringing a harvest of a hundred, sixty, or even thirty times what was sown. You probably noticed first that the order seems like it’s reversed; why doesn’t Jesus say “30, 60, 100”? Don’t get too hung up on that; in the other gospels it is listed that way. In fact, in those days a ten-fold harvest would have been a very good one for the farmer, so even if there were only a thirty-fold harvest, that would be three-times better than very good. The point is, God will do a great work in the soil of your life.

So what is the “fruit” that Jesus refers to? If we consider that question in the context of Scripture, there is really two different results that will grow in your life.

The first type of fruit will be in your own character and nature. God will reproduce in your life the fruit and attributes of his own character. God will actually reproduce in you the character and nature of Jesus himself, by the Holy Spirit working within you. When you think about Jesus: his love for people, his compassion, his love for the Father, his kindness, his ability to work in powerful and loving ways in the lives of others – everything you see in Jesus can be in your life, too.

You and I will never be gods, but we can be godly. If you go back to the book of beginnings, in Genesis, you see that God created us to be in his image – to be like him. But the lie of the garden from the serpent – the original sin – was that we would be gods. And to this day, whenever we sin, it is because we are trying to be the God of our lives. The result of that kind of living is dead soil. But if we submit to God and receive his Word – Jesus and his purposes for our lives – with obedience, the result will be godliness – the character and nature of Jesus. According to the book of Romans, the good seed of:

“God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5, niv)

So we will have what the Bible calls “the fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5 which is:

“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Galatians 5:22-24, niv)

God will do that in your life! This is what we call holiness, or sanctification, which you remember from our series in Romans last summer. It is the fruit that is born out of the

good soil of your soul when you have ears to hear and soil for it to grow in through your obedience.

But the fruit doesn't stop with you; the Christ-like character that is reproduced in you is given in order for God to reach and minister to others *through you*, just like he did through Jesus.

In Matthew 9 and in another parable later in Matthew 13, Jesus refers to the "harvest" as the people who accept the Good News of God's love through Jesus. Jesus' final instructions in Matthew 28 involved commanding us to go into all the world, sharing the Good News and discipling people in faith in Jesus, and in Acts 1 he promised us the Holy Spirit so that we could bear witness to others about Jesus. Good fruit to bear in your life means that out of your Christlikeness you are introducing others to Jesus Christ.

How are you doing with that? Is your life showing the fruit of Christlikeness? When was the last time you introduced someone else to Jesus? If you are not seeing that happen, you'd better examine the soil of your soul.

We want to conclude this series with a time of prayer and response. Maybe you'd like to come forward to tell God and us that you are serious about the soil of your soul. It's easy to slip out of here having made a determination in the privacy of your own thoughts. If you struggle, who will know? It's safer that way. But if you determine you want fruit that will last, maybe you'd like to make it public by coming here to meet God at this designated place of prayer. I'll let you make that call, but let's bow our heads and consider the soil.

As you reflect back on this series, what is it you see growing in the soil of your life? Are the great and abundant purposes of God growing in you? Is there anything at all? Is it weak and withering? Or is it being choked out by your other ambitions or desires? Or are you seeing Christlikeness? Are you actively introducing other people to Jesus?

Someone once said that you can count the seeds in an apple, but you cannot count the apples in a seed. Our best efforts might create something countable. But when you allow God to work in your life through the Word that is Jesus Christ, and you submit to the Holy Spirit, God will work in your life, the results of which will be uncountable!

Prayer

(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.