Riddles act like brain teasers. They are intended to tease the brain into more active thought and imagination.

Consider the following riddle: What is greater than God, more evil than the devil, the rich need it, the poor have it and if you eat it, you’ll die? The answer: nothing. Nothing is greater than God and nothing is more evil than the devil. The rich need nothing and the poor have nothing. And, if you eat nothing as a steady diet, you’ll die.

Our second riddle was found in a collection of nursery rhymes in the 1912 edition of *Little Mother Goose*. It’s no surprise this riddle appears in a children’s book of nursery rhymes, since children often fare better than adults in solving riddles. What is it that God never sees, a king seldom sees and ordinary people see every day? The answer: an equal. God has no equal. Kings, as a rule, can’t stand equals, yet we ordinary types are surrounded by equals all the time.

Jesus often taught in riddles. We call them parables. His parables are stories taken from everyday life. Jesus didn’t teach in a formal classroom. He taught his students in the open air. Perhaps, as Jesus teaches by the seashore in our lesson, his attention is drawn to a farmer in a nearby field. See that farmer over there. The kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing seed.

Jesus told stories called parables to help people remember the point of his lesson. It wasn’t as though people were taking notes when Jesus was talking. Jesus told stories so people could remember his teaching.

I can attest to the importance of stories in preaching. People forget the content of my sermons, but they remember the stories. Some of you will recall stories I’ve told months or years ago. You may not remember the point of the sermon, but you remember the story.

Children love stories, but adults love stories also. Sit with older members of your family, and it won’t be long before they start telling stories. Some stories I’ve heard from family members so often I could tell them myself. Did I tell you what it was like to live during the depression? Yes, dad, hundreds of times.
The religious people of Jesus’ day had become a bunch of know-it-alls. They pretty much had God all figured out. The Messiah, they concluded, would liberate Israel from Roman tyranny.

How can Jesus penetrate their well-formed stereotypes and prejudices? He tells stories. Jesus’ listeners become enraptured with his stories. The kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing seed or a king preparing for war or a merchant going on a long trip. Before they know it, Jesus has slipped past their heavily fortified defenses to score a direct hit.

We are people committed to tell the truth. Sometimes we tell the truth straight and sometimes we tell it slant. “Tell it slant” originates from a line in Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Tell all the truth and tell it slant.” Jesus’ parables tell the truth in a subtle, subversive way. His parables come up on his listeners obliquely, on the slant.

Mark records the Parable of the Sower in three sections. In the first section, verses 1-9, Jesus tells the parable without any commentary on his part. The second section, verses 10-12, occurs later, when Jesus has a private audience with his disciples and they ask about the purpose of his parables. In the third section, verses 13-20, Jesus takes time to interpret this parable, something he does only on rare occasions.

The middle section, verses 10-12, is a riddle to many Christians. Jesus answers questions about the purpose of parables with the words, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that ‘They may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’” Come again, Jesus?

It sounds as though Jesus is being purposely vague to people on the outside, which contradicts everything we know about Jesus. But these religious leaders are already convinced Jesus is the “devil incarnate” (3:22). Jesus is not going to waste his breath on hard-hearted people who have already written him off. Only those who want to understand his teaching will get it. Only those with ears listen. If you want to get Jesus’ parables, you will. If you don’t, you won’t.

This Parable of the Sower could also be called the Parable of the Soils. The farmer sows seed into four types of soil. First, the seed is cast along the path, worn hard by foot traffic. Since the seed cannot penetrate the impenetrable soil, it lies helpless on the surface, only to be eaten by the birds. Second, the seed is sown on rocky soil. The seed manages to germinate but can’t put down roots in the rocky terrain, so its tender
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shoots wither in the noonday sun. Third, the seed is sown among the thorns and weeds. The seed must compete with these weeds for sunlight and nourishment, so it fails to reach maturity and produce fruit. But the fourth seed falls into good soil, producing a bumper crop. God’s Miracle Gro produces a yield of 30, 60, even 100 fold.

So what difference does this parable make in my life? I can identify two “take-aways” in this passage. The first concerns the sower and the second centers on the soil.

The farmer’s extravagance in our parable is rather striking. The name for this type of planting is called broadcast sowing. This farmer, with a seed sack slung over his shoulders, scatters seed by hand everywhere; along the hard path, the rocky soil, among thorns as well as good soil.

Why does this farmer bother to sow seed into unpromising soil? I would have been more circumspect about sowing seed. I would have planted the seed in nice, neat rows and saved all my seed for the good soil. But the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is a lavish farmer. He doesn’t only plant in good soil. God sows wildly and extravagantly. He sows seed in hearts as hard as I-495. I bet my Sunday School teachers didn’t have a clue that the seeds of faith they tried to sow in my life would one day take root and grow. Perhaps the people who planted seeds in your life doubted whether those seeds would ever germinate.

Parents, teachers, coaches and instructors, since you never know what seeds you’re sowing today will yield tomorrow, keep sowing. Those of you working with teenagers, you may feel right now the only kind of seed taking root right now in them is wild oats. That’s okay; keep sowing! Some day this seed is likely to find fertile soil.

Fred Craddock tells a story about the time he took a phone call from a woman whose father had died. She had been a teenager in a church he had served 20 years earlier. He would have sworn if there was ever a person who never heard a word he said, this girl would win the prize. She was always passing notes and giggling with her friends in the balcony. But when her father died, she called her former pastor. She began, “Dr. Craddock, I don’t know if you remember me.” Oh yes, he remembered. “When my dad died, I thought I was going to come apart,” she continued. “I cried and cried. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons.” Fred Craddock was stunned. She actually remembered something he said in a sermon? You never know how or when the seed will take root. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like planting seeds. Since we cannot tell which seeds will germinate,
we plant the seeds of God’s Word everywhere. So much for the Sower; let’s revisit the four types of soil in our parable. Jesus begins and ends his parable with the same summons: “Listen!” (4:3). “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (4:9). Jesus stresses the importance of hearing in each of the four soils (4:15, 16, 18 and 20). The four types of soil represent four types of hearts who hear the Word. So what kind of soil are you?

Some of us have hard hearts. Our minds are as hard as asphalt. Isn’t it ironic that the religious leaders in our story are the hard-hearted ones, while the religious outsiders turn out to be the receptive ones?

The Psalmist writes, “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Psalm 95:7-8). I’m convinced many people shut the door on faith not for intellectual objections to the gospel. If truth be told, they really don’t want God messing around in their lives.

Some of us have shallow hearts. I’ve known plenty of people through the years who demonstrate an initial burst of enthusiasm for faith. They come to church hopeful that the Christian life will lead to better health or wealth; maybe even a better job and family relations. But when life doesn’t produce health or wealth, they vaporize. They’re onto something else.

You’ve heard of the phrase fair weather fans, who cheer for a team as long as their team is winning. This town has its share of fair weather fans. Fair weather Christians believe in God as long as the sun is shining. But as soon as life becomes dark and overcast, they give up on God.

Some of us have divided hearts. The seed of God’s Word takes root in us, but competing interests compete for our attention. Even good things, such as making a living or leisure pursuits, take the place of God. This, I believe, is a particular malady for people living in Northern Virginia. We like to play this little game around here called “running ourselves ragged.” No wonder we can’t tell what really matters in life. We’re too busy to find out.

Some people have receptive hearts. When the Word of God is sown in good soil, it finds ready hearts.

What kind of soil are you? Is the soil in your heart hard? Is it shallow? Is it distracted? Is it receptive? Can the seed of faith drop in? Soil can do its marvelous work only when it is receptive to the seed.