

## THE SOWER, THE SEED, AND THE SOIL MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

**Matthew 13** is an important turning point in the ministry of Jesus, as he begins to use parables to teach the multitudes. In fact, 13:10 says, "And the disciples came and said to Him, 'Why do You speak to them in parables?'" The word "PARABLE" is derived from two Greek words: the preposition para, which means "beside" or "alongside;" and ballo, which means to throw, lay, or place. In other words, a parable is a word-picture that describes a spiritual truth by placing it alongside a common reality. And that's what Jesus begins to do here in Matthew 13. And, according to 13:11-17, he begins to teach in parables in order to both conceal and reveal his message at the same time. You see, even though Jesus had clearly proven himself to be the promised and long-awaited Messiah, the leaders of the religious establishment rejected him. And although he remained popular with the people, they only followed him out of curiosity. But they did not put their faith in him as their Messiah. So, at this point, Jesus turns his attention away from the nation of Israel, and begins to prepare his disciples for the ultimate act of rejection: the cross. And Matthew 13 is the intersection of this turning point.

13:1-2 sets the scene. Jesus was sitting by the sea. And a large crowd gathered around him to hear him speak or see him perform a miracle. So Jesus made himself a pulpit by climbing into a boat that was anchored at the shore. He sat down and spoke many things to them in parables, so that the merely curious would not understand, while the sincere people in the crowd would. And the first parable he tells is about a sower, his seed, and the soil. It is told here, in **Mark 4:1-9**, and **Luke 8:4-8**. In Matthew and Mark, this parable is the first in a series of parables about the kingdom of God. And I submit to you that its position in these series of kingdom parables is not a chronological incident. Rather, the parable of the sower is given a primary position in the Gospel narratives because it is, in the words of **ROBERT CAPON**, "the watershed of all of Jesus' parables." In it, Jesus explains how we should view the fact that many people have, do, and will reject his claims to be the Messiah who fulfills the promise of God's rule over heaven and earth.

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Listen to the parable: A certain farmer went to his field, which was several miles away. He carried a heavy sack of seed. But the hope of a good harvest caused him to walk without ever noticing the weight of the bag. And when he arrived at the field, he began to scatter the seed with great enthusiasm. Some fell along the path that separated one field from another. And it became bird food. Some seed fell on stony places, where there was just a thin layer of soil covering the limestone. So the seed sprang up quickly, but it withered away in the heat, because it had no roots. Still, others fell among thorns that sucked up the nutrients the seed needed to grow. But some fell on fertile ground. And it yielded a harvest that was far better than the farmer's wildest expectations.

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Now, this parable was a senseless riddle to most of the people who heard Jesus tell it. They had no idea what in the world he was talking about. And in 13:10-17 Jesus explains that he intentionally designed the parable to be misunderstood, making it an act of both judgment and mercy for those who did not believe. But in 13:18-23, the Lord interpreted the parable for his disciples, which he rarely did with his parables. And together, these twenty-three verses affirm the sovereign authority of God's kingdom, God's Son, and God's word, no matter how people may respond. And the point is this: GOD HAS EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL! So we, as Christian preachers, teachers, and witnesses should never be discouraged. While there will be many who reject the Lord Jesus, the word of God will bear fruit in the hearts of those that God has made ready to receive the truth. So let's take a closer look at how a harvest grows in the field, so that we can understand, embrace, and rejoice over the way the kingdom of heaven grows.

How does a harvest grow in the field?

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## **I. THE SOWER DOES HIS/HER WORK.**

13:3b says: "Behold, a sower went out to sow." But when you read 13:18-23, you discover that Jesus did not tell us who the sower is, even though he does identify the seed and the soil. 13:37 says, "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man." However, that verse interprets the parable of the wheat and the tares, not the parable of the sower. So, although it would not violate the text to say that Jesus himself is the sower in this parable as well, it is wrong to ignore the context of 13:37 and declare that the sower in this parable is the Son of Man. The fact is that Jesus does not identify the sower in this parable. And I believe that the anonymity of the sower is both intentional and important, because it allows the parable to speak to any and every follower of Jesus Christ. Mark it down: God wants to use all baptized believers as spiritual farmers. Yes, every Christian is a sower who goes out to sow the seed.

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Max Lucado, in his book *In the Eye of the Storm*, tells of going on a failed fishing trip. Every year, his family would go fishing during spring break. But one year his mom and brother couldn't go. So he asked his friend Mark to go, got permission from his parents, and began planning the trip. They could hardly wait. But finally spring break arrived. They loaded the camper and set out for the lake. They arrived late at night, unfolded the camper, and went to bed - dreaming of tomorrow's day in the sun. But the next morning, the wind was so strong that they could barely open the camper door. There was no way they could fish in that weather. So they spent the day in the camper playing games, reading magazines, and telling jokes. It wasn't what they came to do, but they made the best of it.

The next morning, the wind was no longer making it hard to open the camper door. Now, it was ice! So they played monopoly again, reread the magazines, and told

some more jokes. But, for some reason, it was a little harder on them this time. And when they woke up the next morning to the sound of sleet slapping the camper, they didn't even pretend to be cheerful. They were downright grumpy and miserable, as their fishing equipment remained unpacked. The next day it was even colder. So when his dad said, "We're going home," no one objected. And Lucado writes that he learned an important lesson that week, not about fishing, but about people. Here it is: When fishermen don't fish they fight. When energy that should be focused on the outside is focused on the inside, it becomes explosive.

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Could this be why so many churches are weak, divided, and unproductive? Could this be why so many Christians are worldly, selfish, and immature? We are not fishing for souls. We are not sowing the seed. We are not fulfilling our mission. You have been greatly deceived if you think that Christianity is about health, wealth, and happiness. Christianity is about exalting the Lord, evangelizing the lost, and edifying the church. In **Matthew 28:18-20**, Jesus states this commission in clear terms: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." So every one of us, as followers of Christ, should be going out sowing seed.

- Sow the seed, until God is glorified.
  - Sow the seed, until Jesus is magnified.
  - Sow the seed, until the mission is satisfied.
  - Sow the seed, until the church is edified.
  - Sow the seed, until Satan is horrified.
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One more thing.

Not only does this text rebuke those of us who are not sowing the seed, but it also rebukes those of us who are doing more than sowing the seed. **Matthew 9:38** refers to God the Father as "the Lord of the harvest." That means that God has everything under control. He is the one who gives the increase. Therefore, we must not fail to do what he has commanded us to do. But also, we must not try to do more than what he has commanded us to do. And all that he has commanded us to do is sow the seed. We are not to manufacture seed. And we are not to modify the seed. We are to take the seed, as it is, and sow it. The power is in the seed, not in our wisdom, resources, programs, talents, or effort. We are not spiritual scientist, who have been commissioned to go into the laboratory and find a way to create better seed. We are just farmers, we have been commissioned to take the God-given seed and plant it in the hearts of men. The seed will do the rest. In fact, that's the second thing that happens to make a harvest grow.

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## II. THE SEED DOES ITS WORK.

Again, 13:3b says: "A sower went out to sow." Then, 13:4-8 goes on to tell us where the seed fell. But before we get to the different types of soil, let's identify the seed. **Matthew 13:19** says it is "the word of the kingdom." **Mark 4:14** says, "The sower sows the word." And **Luke 8:11** says, "The seed is the word of God." In the natural world, it is the life, power, and work of the seed that brings forth a harvest. And in the spiritual world, it is the life, power, and work of God's word that saves lost people. **James 1:21** says: "Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." And **1 Peter 1:22-25** says: "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.'" Mark it down: If there is going to be a harvest of souls, the seed of God's word must be allowed to do its work in the hearts of men.

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DR. JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE pastored the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for 30 years, until he died of cancer in 1999. He was an outstanding Bible expositor, who had an unwavering commitment to the truth, authority, and Inspiration of scripture. And that commitment to scripture resulted in Boice becoming the chairman of the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy. During the ten-year existence of this council, Boice and other evangelical leaders defended the Bible against those who challenged its authority, validity, and credibility. And after this council deemed their work accomplished, it disbanded in 1988. However, in the 1994 edition of his book *Standing on the Rock*, Boice said that the battle over the Bible continued. Yet, he said that the issue of biblical authority was slightly different in the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Boice argued that while the days past saw inerrancy of scripture as the key issue, the days ahead would see the sufficiency of scripture as the key issue.

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It saddens me to report to you that Dr. Boice's ominous warning has come to pass. We live in a day when many Christians profess confidence in God's word, while they turn to everything but God's word for instruction, evangelism, and discipleship. All too often, the Bible is laid aside as the church does its work. And, instead, we depend on entertainment, marketing, sociology, psychology, therapy, extra-biblical revelations, and so-called "signs and wonders." But I stand to tell you that the word of God is sufficient to save lost people, nurture believers, provide spiritual guidance, govern the ministry of the church, and change society.

That's what Paul told his ministerial protégé, Timothy. In **2 Timothy 3**, Paul warned Timothy that perilous times were coming. And after a chapter of bad news, Paul told Timothy how to deal with perilous times. **2 Timothy 3:14-17** says: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed knowing from who you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." I repeat: The word of God is sufficient.

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I submit to you that this reference to the word of God as seed is a condemnation of the power religion that is so popular in contemporary Christianity. It teaches us that the kingdom of God does not grow like a nail that is supernaturally hammered into the world with signs, wonders, and miracles. Instead, it grows like a seed. A seed is small, quiet, and unimpressive. In fact, once you plant it, it disappears in the soil. But when the seed disappears, the farmer does not become discouraged, thinking that the seed has been defeated by the soil. The farmer knows that the seed is alive, powerful, and working underneath the surface. So he waits for the harvest. This is what **ROBERT CAPON** refers to as "THE LEFT-HANDED POWER OF GOD." It's weaker than the right hand, but still powerful enough to get the job done.

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**JOHN CALVIN** was the leader of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation in Geneva, Switzerland. He was concerned that many people were walking in a false presumption of salvation, because they had not heard the true gospel in the Roman Catholic Church. So Calvin committed himself to the sequential expository preaching through New Testament books, so that people could be exposed to the whole council of God. And he was so confident in and committed to verse-by-verse exposition that he didn't even break his series for Christmas or Easter. However, on Easter, 1538, he was forced to break his series when the city council kicked him out of town. And he wasn't allowed to return until September 1541. But when Calvin got to the pulpit of St. Peter's Church, he picked up the exposition at the verse he had left off on over three years earlier. And may the Lord give us that same confidence in the sufficiency of the seed, that the word might do its work in the hearts of men, women, boys, and girls who need to receive the Lord Jesus as the Forgiver of their sins and the Leader of their life.

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### **III. THE SOIL DOES ITS WORK.**

If there is to be a harvest, the sower and the seed must do their job, but the soil must also do its job. And the job of the soil is simply to receive the seed. That's all it does. The farmer plants the seed. And the living seed produces

growth. But the soil is passive in this process. All it does is receive the seed. Now, in 13:19, Jesus explains the parable by saying, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart." The human heart is the soil in which the seed of God's word is planted. And the fact that the heart is the soil means that we are passive in salvation. We are not able to create, produce, or generate spiritual life. We are just dead dirt. The life and power are in the seed.

**James 1:21** says, "Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." James affirms that we are not able to save ourselves. It is the implanted word that saves our souls. All that we do is receive the word. Yet, James says that if we are going to receive the implanted word, we must get rid of the filthiness and wickedness that is overflowing in our lives. Get that. We are not able to save ourselves. But we can and do hinder the word from doing its work in us. And that's the point that Jesus makes in this parable. Notice that the work of the sower never changes and the power of the seed never changes. The condition of the soil is the only variable. The point is that the word of God bears fruit in the heart that is ready to receive the truth.

Imagine this: Two people sit next to each other in church every Sunday and listen to the same message. One is maturing in his faith and learning to walk in the Spirit. His life is productive and fruitful. Meanwhile, the other is not growing; he does not share his faith, and he is not productive. How can this paradox be explained? How can a husband and wife sit in the same pew, but one grows and one remains stagnant? How can two young people hear the very same message, but one comes away excited while the other is totally unmotivated? Jesus addresses this issue in the Parable of the Sower. There's nothing wrong with the word. The seed is alive, powerful, and is capable of bearing fruit in any situation. The problem is that the soil of the heart is not open, ready, or willing to receive the truth of the word.

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I have some bad news and good news for you today.

The bad news is that some soil will not bear fruit. **Luke 8:12** says: "The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved." Don't miss that. The soil that does not bear fruit represents people who are not saved. And of the four soils mentioned in this parable, three did not bear fruit. In spite of the power of the seed, some soil will not bear fruit. And these three unfruitful soils teach us the three enemies of the seed that adversely effects the condition of the soil, so that it will not bear fruit. First of all, the wayside soil is interpreted in 13:19: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path." In other words, the devil works against the soil, so that the seed does not bear fruit.

Likewise, the stony places are interpreted in 13:20-21: "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away." Not only does the devil work against the soil, but the flesh also works against the soil, so that the seed will not bear fruit. Then 13:22 interprets the thorns: "As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." Not only do the devil and the flesh work against the soil, so that the seed will not bear fruit, but so does the world.

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I repeat: The bad news is that some soil will not bear fruit. But here's the good news: Some seed will bear fruit. 13:8 says: "Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.." And 13:23 explains: "But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." Feel the tension of the text. The seed fell on four different soils. But only one of the four soils bore any fruit. Now, that should not be taken as some mathematically exact ratio of who will accept Jesus. Instead, the text is saying that the majority of people who hear the word will not respond. But God has everything under control. In the midst of the wayside, the stony ground, and the thorns, God has prepared and preserved good ground that is ready to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. And in the ancient Near East, the average harvest brought in an eight-fold return. But Jesus speaks here of a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty, which would have been astonishing to the ancient farmer. The point is not that some will do better than others. The point is that God is able to take a few and accomplish more than we can imagine.

Here's the bottom-line: Be encouraged. No matter how much seed may seem to be wasted, in the end a great harvest is sure. So we must never be discouraged, even when nothing seems to be happening. Keep sowing. Don't give up on anybody, no matter how hard, fickle, or weak they may be. It doesn't matter. God is able to change their hearts. The good news is that this parable is descriptive, not definitive. It illustrates how things are, not how things have to be. In other words, wayside soil does not have to stay wayside soil. Stony places don't have to stay stony places. Thorns don't have to stay thorns. God is able to change the heart. So, be encouraged, keep sowing, and trust the seed.

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**Psalm 126:5-6** - "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy. He who goes out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him."

**2 Corinthians 4:1** - "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."

**Galatians 6:9** – “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

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SOWING IN THE MORNING, SOWING SEEDS OF KINDNESS,  
SOWING IN THE NOONTIDE AND THE DEWY EVE,  
WAITING FOR THE HARVEST, AND THE TIME OF REAPING  
WE SHALL COME REJOICING, BRINGING IN THE SHEAVES

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My daddy used to tell a story about a young man who came home one day and told his mother, “Mom, I’m leaving. I want to see the world. And I can’t do that here with you.” But his mother knew he wasn’t ready for the world, so she tried to talk him into staying with her. But he was determined. So she finally said to him, “Son, if you just have to go, take my Bible with you. It may help you on your journey.” He agreed to take it, if that was what it would take for him to get out of the house. He left. But some years later, that old mother saw her son coming down the road. He looked bad, but it was him. He came and sat by her feet on the porch. He didn’t have to say it, but he did, “Mom, life’s been hard on me.” She asked him, “Son, where’s momma’s Bible?” He said, “That’s all I have left.” He handed it to her and she thumbed through it. Son, I told you that this book would have helped you, but you didn’t read it. And I know you didn’t because the money I left for you is still here.”

- I left \$1000 by **Psalm 23**
- I left \$1000 by **Romans 8:28**
- I left \$1000 by **Philippians 4:19**