

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-23

SETTING THE SCENE

When someone doesn't understand something, we often use similes and metaphors to help them make sense of it. I do this often with my children, especially when I am trying to help them understand complex concepts. I find myself saying, "It's like the time you ____." That is the best way to understand parables: they use something well known to explain something that is unknown or not understood. The Kingdom of Heaven was not understood, so Jesus used familiar experiences and examples to explain it. Parables were a common form of Jewish teaching, so it was not strange for Jesus to use them in his teaching.

As you read this parable, it is good to keep a few things in mind. First, because sowing was done by hand during Jesus' time, it was not done in an accurate or careful manner. Today's farmers would probably characterize it as reckless and/or wasteful. Additionally, if you have ever seen pictures, or watched a Ray Vander laan video, you know that Palestine consists of rocky terrain. Jesus' listeners would have understood the soil he describes in the context of this terrain.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read Matthew 13:10-16

According to Jesus, not everyone who hears his teaching will understand. Why is that? (Hint: it has to do with what happened in Genesis 3)

Is that what God wants? (see 1 Timothy 2:4, II Peter 3:9, John 3:16, and Matthew 28:19-20)

How does God help us to understand? (see 1 Corinthians 2:12-14)

When we say the Apostles' Creed, we confess the work of the Holy Spirit in Third Article:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Martin Luther's explanation of this Article in the *Small Catechism* is especially helpful in understanding this confession:

What does this mean? I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

Read Matthew 13:3-4, 18-19

Jesus says some of the seed falls beside the road. The “road” to which he is referring is the narrow path that separates one field from another. These paths were not only used by farmers, they were also used by travelers. Jesus and his disciples were travelling along one of these paths when they picked and ate heads of grain on the sabbath (Matthew 12:1) . Because they were well-travelled, the soil on these roads was packed down and difficult for the seed to penetrate and take root. The seeds remained on top of the soil, making them an easy target for the birds.

What is the seed that is planted?

According to Jesus’ explanation, who snatches away the seed that has been sown?

Read Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21

The next seeds in the parable fall on “rocky places, where they did not have much soil.” It is interesting to note that these are not loose rocks. The farmer would have tilled the ground and removed those. These are places with underlying beds of rock that could not be reached by the plow. Therefore, there is enough soil for the seeds to take root, but the roots remain shallow. This makes me think of the difference between the lilies I have planted in the ground, and the petunias I have planted in my window boxes. I do not need to water my lilies regularly. In fact, I do not water them at all. They are deeply rooted and able to withstand the scorching July sun. My petunias only have about four inches to root, and they need watering every day. Sometimes they need to be watered twice a day.

What happens when the seed first falls on rocky ground?

What type of person is represented by the rocky ground? What causes them to fall away?

Read Matthew 13:7, 22

The third type of seed falls on thorny ground. Again, this ground had been cultivated by the farmer. The thorns were not already present – they grew along with the seed.

What do the thorns do to the seed?

According to Jesus, what do the thorns represent?

Read Matthew 28:18-20

Why is it important for Jesus’ disciples to hear and understand this parable?

Read Matthew 13:8, 23

What is different about the person who receives the Word of God as good soil?

Jesus is not only preparing his disciples, he is encouraging them. Even though some of the seed does not take root, the seed that falls on good ground produces thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold!

APPLYING THE TEXT

When are you the one receiving God's Word?

Are there areas in your life that have been trampled down into hardened soil?

What are the rocks in your life that prevent God's Word from rooting deeply?

What "cares of this world" choke out the Word of God in your life?

When are you the one sowing God's Word?

As noted above, all the ground described in this parable appeared ready for planting. What does that imply for how you should share God's Word?

Do you feel differently about sharing God's Word when you can actually see the hard ground? Rocky ground? Thorns?

