

# Stories with Intent

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS



## Introduction to the Study

*“As part of his campaign, Jesus told stories...They were, for the most part, not simply ‘illustrations’ to decorate an abstract thought or complicated teaching. If anything, they were the opposite. Jesus’ stories are designed to tease, to clothe the shocking and revolutionary message about God’s Kingdom in garb that would leave the listeners wondering, trying to think it out. They were stories that eventually caused Israel’s leaders to decode his rich message in such a way as to frame a charge against him, either of blasphemy, sedition, or ‘leading the people astray.’ Whatever the parables are, they are not, as children are sometimes taught in Sunday school, ‘earthly stories with heavenly meaning.’ Rather, they are expressions of Jesus’ shocking announcement that God’s Kingdom was arriving on earth as in heaven.”*

– NT Wright, *Simply Jesus*

There is perhaps no more characteristic feature of Jesus’ teaching than his parables, and no aspect of his teaching is more memorable and influential than these vivid stories. Yet the parables aren’t simply a clever way that Jesus taught moral and ethical truths. They are an expression in the service of his announcement of the kingdom of God. Parables were the means Jesus used most frequently to explain the kingdom of God, to show the character of God, and to illustrate the expectations that God has for humans.

The parables often were prompted by Jesus’ need to explain what he was saying and doing with the rest of his mission. In other words, what Jesus was saying and doing prompted questions, and many of the parables are his response to those questions. Why does this man eat with sinners and tax collectors? Why does he heal on the Sabbath? Why does he spend so much time with undesirable people? The parables are necessary explainers, but they invite us to *investigate* more. They do that as much as they make anything clear.

Nevertheless, some parables *are* clear as bells, and, while we may discuss backgrounds in length, they do not need explanation so much as *implementation*. They in effect say to us, “Stop resisting and do it,” or “Believe it and pursue it,” or “Go and do likewise.” For example, we don’t need much commentary to know the intent of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Despite the numerous studies of this parable, the story at its core compels us to *stop resisting* and to *live its message*. Still today, the parables need to be allowed to speak, and they need to be heard. How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parable? How will it change our own?

Ultimately, the parables of Jesus are stories with intent. And the intent of the teller—Jesus himself—with all the power and creativity of his teaching is the goal of our understanding. These stories invite us into a new view of reality, and they deserve a fresh hearing from people who are ready to learn and follow Jesus’ instruction.

# The Parable of the Sower

The parable of the sower appears in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 13:3-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:5-15). We'll be reading it in the version that appears in Matthew 13:1-9. Matthew 13, comprising seven parables, stops the forward movement of the Gospel story to reflect on the emerging division between those who join with Jesus in doing the will of the Father and those who reject Jesus and his ministry. The parables catalogue diverse responses, offer some explanations for them, affirm the readers' positive responses, and illustrate how God's kingdom is at work in the world. They also challenge the audience to continue to live on the basis of God's kingdom in the midst of various difficulties until its full purposes are accomplished.

Beginning in 13:3, the word "parable" occurs twelve times in the chapter. The word derives from a Greek word meaning "to throw alongside." That is, basic to the parable genre is the notion of comparison; one entity is set alongside something else to be illuminated by the comparison. Thus "the kingdom of heaven" is "thrown alongside" or compared to and illuminated by the situations that each parable depicts.<sup>1</sup>

The first parable takes place beside the sea of Galilee where Jesus called the first disciples (4:18-22). Jesus addresses the crowds with a parable (13:2), then offers the disciples an interpretation in 13:18-23. This first parable is unusual in that it does not begin, as most of the other parables will, with an explicit comparison introduced in an opening phrase: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ..." Rather the parable immediately narrates its situation:

*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." (13:1-9)*

**Background**<sup>2</sup>: The farmer's practice sounds strange to us. But in Jesus' world it seems to have reflected standard procedure for broadcast sowing. The farmer recognized that his seed would land in many different kinds of soil. But sowing often preceded plowing, and the farmer would simply walk up and down the rows of his field, tossing the seed out by hand; then, using a wooden plow drawn by oxen or donkeys, he would create furrows in the soil so that as many of the seeds as possible could take root.

Jesus is telling a story based on the life experience that many in his audience would have had. What seems unusual to us was realistic to them, except perhaps for the harvest. A thirtyfold yield per seed was scarcely unprecedented, though certainly good. A sixtyfold yield was particularly welcome. A hundredfold yield would have been better than anyone could expect.

The parable ends with an appeal — "let anyone with ears, listen" (13:9). To have ears is an image that points beyond literal hearing to discerning the significance of Jesus' words. And as Jesus will soon explain, those who are willing to receive his message will learn more and receive more.

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*.

<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

# Why Speak in Parables?

**Read Matthew 13:10-17.** Following the parable, the disciples ask Jesus confidentially about why he speaks in parables (“Why are you speaking to them in parables?” 13:10). After all, Jesus offered no help to his audience to understand the significance of the scene he presented. It’s as though the disciples see puzzled faces among the gathered crowd (themselves probably included), and they go to ask Jesus if he sees it too. One can imagine the disciples saying to Jesus, “What are you doing? You have a great opportunity. All these people are here to hear what you’ve been saying about the kingdom of God. Do the Sermon on the Mount again. That was awesome when you did that. Why are you telling parables? You’re not being very clear.”

So Jesus explains, and he shares the open secret (mystery) of the kingdom to his disciples. He refers to those who encountered him in Matthew 11 and 12, most of whom were either apathetic or hostile. But to them, Jesus says, “To you all who have chosen to buy in to the kingdom of God, to you it is granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens.”

Jesus compares his role to the role of Isaiah in Isaiah 6:8-12 (the passage quoted by Jesus in vv. 13-15). All of this, Jesus says, is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. God is speaking to his people, yet most of them don’t pay attention. **In this way, the parables serve a dual function.** They invite people who are inquisitive and open to see the world in a fresh way. But for those who are set in their ways, the parables harden and estrange them from God’s message.

This portrait of Jesus is uncomfortable for some people. **Jesus puts the initiative in the court of the listener to hear and respond for themselves.** When Jesus said, “If you’ve got ears, then listen!” (v. 9) it should alert us to the fact that he meant “I know this isn’t obvious; you’re going to have to think about it!” **Jesus wanted them to wrestle with what he was saying, to talk about it among themselves, to think it through.**

## Jesus Interprets the Parable

**Read Matthew 13:18-23.** After offering an explanation that emphasizes the divisive effect of the parables (13:11-17), Jesus sets about explaining “the parable of the sower” (13:18).

**The seed that falls on the path** represents those who hear but do not understand Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom (13:19). That is, they do not discern in Jesus’ words and actions the presence of God’s kingdom (4:17) or saving presence. But Jesus goes on to say that this non-understanding does not only reflect their “calloused hearts” (13:15). It is simultaneously the work of the the evil one (6:13), who resists God’s purposes by “snatching away” Jesus’ word from the human “heart.” The heart is the center of a person’s willing, thinking, knowing, deciding and doing, the center of their commitments and way of life.

**The seed that falls on the rocky ground** sprouts quickly but dies in the sun, and it exemplifies the person who readily receives Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom but does not endure as a disciple (13:21). In this scenario, the presence of “trouble and persecution” causes the person to stumble. This trouble comes “because of the word.” The person does not understand that God’s kingdom threatens and clashes with the dominant values and structures of the world. It is inevitable that the world strikes back, and when trouble arises, this person has “no root” and “quickly falls away.”

**The seed that is choked by thorns** represents the person who hears Jesus’ word but “the cares of the world and lure of wealth choke the word” and bring it to nothing (13:23). The “cares of the world” signify an anxiety over daily life. This anxiety is expressed in attempts to secure life without reference to God. “The lure of wealth”

exercises a similar hold over the human heart when material gain is the goal and definition of human success. These commitments and desires overcrowd the soil and choke the seed, and the word about God's kingdom is not able to break through and nourish new life. It yields nothing.

**After these three scenarios addressing negative responses to Jesus' message, the fourth scenario concerns the seed sown on good soil (13:23).** This seed and soil represent those who hear and understand the word. Their hearts, the center of their very being, embrace the good news. They fight off the evil one. They endure difficulties and persecutions. They are not defined by worldly cares and wealth. They join the community formed by and committed to God's kingdom and marked by doing God's will (12:46). So they live fruitful lives, signified by the abundant crop.

## Assessing the Condition of Our Soil<sup>3</sup>

**Jesus illustrates how the condition of the soil determines the productivity of the fruit.** The two things have to work in partnership to bring about a harvest. The closing summary of the good seed/soil emphasizes the combination of hearing plus doing, understanding, and bearing fruit. Hearon writes, "As every gardener knows, it's all about the soil. Without good soil, worked with compost, seeds cannot flourish. While the parable of the sower appears to be about the seed, I suggest (because I am a gardener) that it is really about the soil. This means that the parable is really about those who hear the word of the kingdom. We are the soil."

Soil is shaped by its environment, and we see this in the human community too. Some people, whether because of their own choices or because of being walked on over and over again, have hardened the soil their heart so much that it's difficult for any seed to breach the surface, much less take root within the soil.

Rocky soil, says Jesus, are those who, having inadequate roots, "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word . . . quickly fall away" (v. 21). It describes those who lack the rootedness—the staying power—to maintain their faith when trouble arises, especially trouble that comes as a result of one's faith.

The soil filled with thorns easily translates into our overcrowded lives (and perhaps our overcrowded hearts, too); there is no room in an already over-planted plot for anything more. Jesus says, "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke" out the word in these people (v. 22). Their struggle is when it becomes clear that receiving Jesus' word does not remove all of the worries of life and the distractions that come with it—especially the allure of wealth—which choke out the word in us. Wealth is seductive and dangerous and can readily become an obstacle on the way to God. It is far easier to sing hymns about surrendering all than to actually abandon a cherished affluence for the cause of Christ.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our lives and in our church on any given day. This invites us to reflect on a number of questions:

- **What does it mean to be good soil, prepared to receive the word of the kingdom?**
- **How do we assess what kind of shape our soil is in?**
- **What would we need to do for the seed to be able to take root in our bodies and souls?**
- **How will we know if this is happening?**
- **And how might we nurture good soil in those around us?**

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpted from Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

While we set about cultivating good soil, we are not without hope. It is true that seeds landing on hard or rocky ground stand less of a chance of gaining root and thriving but it does, sometimes, happen. There are remarkable pictures of trees growing out of rocks and flowers that push up through the pavement. These tenacious plants offer signs that the word of the kingdom will continue to find a way to grow even on the days when we feel beaten down, or overcome by thorns, or at our rockiest.

## Discussion

1. What is your experience with gardening (whether you've done it yourself or watched/helped someone else)? If you have an experienced gardener in your group, ask them to describe the qualities of good soil. Why is good soil necessary for seeds to grow?
2. What does it mean to be good soil, prepared to receive the word of the kingdom? How do we assess what kind of shape our soil is in?
3. When Jesus said, "If you've got ears, then listen!" (v. 9) it should alert us to the fact that he meant "I know this isn't obvious; you're going to have to think about it!" Jesus wanted them to wrestle with what he was saying, to talk about it among themselves, to think it through. What teachings of Jesus have you wrestled or struggled with and why? How have you grown from these experiences?
4. Jesus' explanation of the parables (vv. 18-23) makes clear that there are a variety of factors that hinder hearing and heeding Jesus' message—Satan, the lure of wealth, trouble, persecution, worries. In what ways have you seen these factors hinder spiritual growth ("hearing and seeing" the word of the kingdom, as Jesus says)? What might make us spiritually blind and deaf to what God is doing in the world today?
5. What would we need to do, as individuals and as a church, for the seed (Jesus' word of the kingdom) to be able to take root in our bodies and souls? How will we know if this is happening?
6. Along with allowing the word to take root in your own heart, what are some ways that you can nurture good soil in those around you this week?