

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM - THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Lesson Aim

To describe the four types of soils and challenge students to identify their own spiritual status in terms of the soils.

Memory Verse

Matthew 13:11 - "He replied, `The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.'"

Lesson Background

We have already taken note of the difficulty associated with the interpretation of parables. As we spend the next twelve weeks looking at most of the parables of Jesus, we will see a great variety of interpretations. But no parable has suffered more from the vagaries of interpreters than the one to be considered this week.

The range of interpretation is made even more strange by the fact that Jesus Himself explains the parable, thus fixing the basic outlines of its meaning and identifying all the major symbols. The variety of interpretation exists, then, not because of symbolism, but because interpreters differ on the number of soils that are thought to represent true Christians. I personally have heard sermons in which one, two, three and even all four soils were spoken of as representing true believers.

This diversity must be considered a serious matter because of the fatal presumption it can engender. Students (or adults) who have been led to believe that fruitless plants are part of God's Kingdom are being confirmed in their hypocrisy. Thus it is vital that the teacher communicate to the students in the strongest possible terms the lost condition of those described as rocky and thorny soils. It is also essential that application not be neglected - students must be challenged to evaluate seriously the "soil composition" of their own hearts.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by handing out a copy of the sheet titled "Symbolism in the Parable of the Sower" to each of your students. Have each student fill in the chart individually. They should list such symbols as: farmer*, seed, path, birds, rocky soil, sun, thorns, good soil, harvest* (only the symbols indicated by an asterisk are *not* specifically identified by Jesus). Then have the students compare lists. For obvious reasons, they should be virtually identical. Having established the basic symbolism, it is now time to go over the parable in detail.

1. The General Setting (verses 1-3).

Jesus was sitting in a boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee, just outside Capernaum, speaking to a large crowd on the shore that included His disciples. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills, and it is possible that Jesus' listeners could have seen farmers on the hillsides doing exactly what Jesus was describing. Seeds were carried in a shoulder bag and scattered by hand as the farmer traversed his field. The seed, as verses 19, 20, 22, and 23 make clear, is intended to symbolize the Word of God. But whom does the farmer represent? He is the one who speaks the Word, whether it be Christ Himself or His messengers.

2. The Path (verses 4, 19).

Fields belonging to different farmers were separated from one another by footpaths, in which the soil would be tightly packed by the constant passage of travelers on foot. Seed tossed onto the path could not penetrate the soil, and would quickly be gobbled up by hungry birds. Ask your students to describe the kind of person symbolized by the path. He would not necessarily be a notorious sinner, but one impervious to the Word. In fact, Jesus found that the notorious sinners of His day responded to the Word, while the religious leaders displayed the kind of impenetrable hardness characteristic of this soil. Pathway people can be very nice, even religious - but the Word of God goes in one ear and out the other (or perhaps, to use another cliché, slides off them like water off a duck's back). These people care nothing for spiritual things. Are any of your students like this?

3. The Rocky Soil (verses 5-6, 20-21).

Much of the region around the Sea of Galilee consists of a thin layer of topsoil spread atop a limestone shelf. Seeds that fall into such soil tend to sprout rapidly, since the shallow soil stays warmer and contains more moisture than deeper soil during the early part of the growing season. When summer arrives, however, the heat of the sun quickly dries out the shallow soil, and the roots of the plants are unable to penetrate the rock to reach water. As a result, the plant quickly dies.

Again solicit from your students descriptions of the person represented by this soil. The rapid early growth suggests a strong emotional response to the Gospel. The stifling sun is the heat of persecution or trial, which, like the storm of Matthew 7:24-27, distinguishes between legitimate and fraudulent conversions. This soil clearly illustrates the danger inherent in decisionism. Assurance of salvation cannot be based on an initial emotional experience, but only on the clear evidence of fruit in a person's life. Emphasize to your students that response to trial and persecution can be significant indicators of a person's spiritual condition.

4. The Thorny Soil (verses 7, 22).

Palestinian farmers typically plowed the seed under after sowing it. Some weed seeds would survive the plow, however, and would spring up and rob the young plants of sun, moisture, and nutrients from the soil. Though the plants might not die, they would be too badly stunted to produce fruit.

Your students may be tempted to conclude that the thorny soil represents a "worldly Christian," one who is "carnal," who has received Christ but is not living for Him. Yet passages such as Matthew 7:15-20 and John 15:1-8 indicate that one who does not bear fruit is not a Christian. If it is true that "you cannot serve two masters," one whose spiritual commitment is stifled by the concerns of this world has no basis for claiming that he belongs to Christ.

It should be noted as well that thorns need not be cultivated in order to grow. All that is required is benign neglect. In fact, in the same way that hard work is needed to prevent the growth of weeds in a garden, diligence is required to keep worldliness from choking a person's spirituality.

5. The Fertile Soil (verses 8, 23).

The last type of soil is the fertile soil, which produces a bountiful crop. What does the fruit represent? Your students will probably suggest ideas such as good works or converts. The best answer comes from Galatians 5:22-23. It is the fruit of the Spirit that distinguishes believers from unbelievers. This fruit cannot be produced apart from the Spirit, and always flows from His presence in a person's life.

6. Why Jesus Told the Parable.

- A.** For the multitude, Jesus was driving them to examine their own condition. Many were following Him out of shallow or false motives. As we saw last week, many in the crowd could not be expected to understand the parable at all. At this point, encourage your students, who have had the parable explained to them, to make an honest assessment of the soil they most closely resemble. What must they then do?
- B.** For His disciples, Jesus was preparing them for the variety of responses they could expect from those to whom they were to minister. In what ways is this parable an encouragement to those who seek to spread the Gospel?

SYMBOLISM IN THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

SYMBOLS USED IN THE PARABLE	VERSES WHERE SYMBOLS ARE FOUND	MEANING GIVEN BY JESUS	VERSES WHERE MEANING IS FOUND	SUGGESTED MEANINGS FOR UN- IDENTIFIED SYMBOLS

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM - THE SOWER

Fill in the following chart based on the Parable of the Sower, then try to think of people you know who could be like the four soils. Into which category do you fit? If it is one of the first three, what do you need to do about it?

SOIL	CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS TYPE OF PERSON	PERSON IN SCRIPTURE WHO FITS THIS CATEGORY
PATHWAY		
ROCKS		
THORNS		
FERTILE SOIL		