Parable of the Seed and the Soils

The infinite, eternal and omniscient God has much to say to us. The problem for us is that we have devil, his cosmic system and our old sin natures distracting us from what God has to say to us. Therefore, it is absolutely critical for us to listen carefully and intently to what God has to say.

As portrayed in the parable of the sower, the soils, and the seed, we can be like the thorny ground, full of thorns and thistles which represent the cares of the world and which choke the Word and cause it to become unfruitful in our lives.

The word “parable” is a transliteration of the Greek noun parabole (παράβολη), which literally means, “to place beside in order to compare.”

A parable is a fictitious or made up story designed to teach a lesson through comparison. When you hear the story, you can relate it to your own life. It is like an illustration for the points in a sermon. It conveys its message of truth through analogy, through comparison or contrast.

Parables are told so that only those who really care will come to know the truth. Not so much because they understand the parable, but because they care enough to ask what it means after the story is finished and hang around long enough to have it explained to them. The others don’t really care and leave.

Remember, the disciples didn’t understand the parables, but they asked what Jesus meant after the crowds left. They had a soft and open heart and understanding is an issue of the heart. Those who have a hard heart also have closed eyes and closed ears and they don’t understand.

Bible scholars have called this parable in Luke 8:4-15, the “Parable of the Seed and the Sower” and the “Parable of the Seed and the Soils,” but the latter is more accurate since the parable is emphasizing the responsibility of the audience when hearing the Word of God being taught.

The seed without the soil is fruitless, and the soil without the seed is almost useless. The human heart is like soil, if it is prepared properly, it can receive the seed of the Word of God and produce a fruitful harvest.

The parable of the “Seed and the Soils” that we are about to read in Mark 4:1-20 also appears in Matthew 13:1-23 and Luke 8:4-15.

The Lord’s parables were designed to convey truth concerning the program for the kingdom of God.

The Greek word that is used for hearing in this parable is the verb akuou (ἀκούω), “to respond to the Word of God for the purpose of making personal application,” and appears 9 times in this parable (8:8 twice, 10, 12 twice, 13, 15, 15, 18).
The unbeliever is to respond to the Gospel message to believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved and the believer is to respond to the Word of God after salvation in order to grow up spiritually and bear fruit meaning Christ-like character.

Rom 10:17, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”

There are 4 different kinds of soil mentioned in the parable, and each of which refer to the different attitudes towards the communication of the Word of God and therefore, the different conditions of the human soul in relation to the communication of the Word of God.

By way of interpretation of the passage, the “sower” is the Lord Jesus Christ but the application for us here in the church age is that the “sower” can refer to any communicator of the Word of God.

The “seed” is the Word of God and the “birds” refer to the kingdom of darkness. The parable of the seed and the soils clearly indicates that the Lord Jesus Christ was not impressed with the great crowds that were following Him. He knew that many would reject Him as Messiah and He knew that many would believe but not grow up spiritually because of adversity and prosperity, but the Lord also knew that there would be many who would grow to spiritual maturity.

The Lord gave this story to encourage His disciples in their future ministry of communicating the Word of God and to train them to expect both rejection and acceptance of their message.

2 Timothy 4:1-3, “I solemnly command you in the presence of the God, even Christ Jesus, who is about to judge the living and the dead and by His brilliant spectacular appearance and His kingdom. Publicly proclaim the Word as a herald in a dignified and authoritative manner which commands the respect and attention of those who hear the Word, prepare and stay ready in good times and bad times, convince of sin and evil with the Word for the purpose of correction, reprimand, encourage and challenge by means of great patience and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires and will turn their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”

The fault in this passage does not lie with the seed or the sower but rather the problem is with the soil.

The Parable of the Seed and the Soils can be divided into 3 sections: (1) The Parable (Matt. 13:1-9; Mk. 4:1-9; Lk. 8:4-8). (2) Reason for the Parable (Matt. 13:10-17; Mk. 4:10-12; Lk. 8:9-10). (3) Explanation of the Parable (Matt. 13:18-23; Mk. 14:13-20; Lk. 8:11-15).

Mark 4:1-4, “He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and
the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, ‘Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up.’”

Matt 13:1-4, “That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, ‘Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.’”

Luke 8:4-5, “When a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable: ‘The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up.’”

The first type of soil is the hardened soil of the pathway. This seed does not penetrate the soil at all, but is quickly snatched up by the birds of the air.

Mark 4:5-6, “Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.”

Matt 13:5-6, “Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.”

Luke 8:6, “Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.”

The second type of soil is the rocky soil, a shallow layer of earth, barely covering to rock below. The seed, which falls upon this type of soil quickly, germinates, aided by the warmth retained by the rock, but hindered by a lack of depth and by a lack of moisture. The seed, which germinates quickly, also terminates quickly.

Mark 4:7, “Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.”

Matt 13:7, “Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out.”

Luke 8:7, “Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out.”

The third soil is the thorny soil, a soil populated with thorns. The seed falling into this soil germinates and begins to grow, but is eventually crowded out by the hardier thorns.
Mark 4:8, “Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

Matt 13:8, “And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.”

Luke 8:8a, “Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great.”

The fourth soil is the fruitful soil, that soil which produces a bountiful crop.

Mark 4:9, “And He was saying, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”

Luke 8:8b, “As He said these things, He would call out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”

The reason for the Lord’s giving of parables is recorded in Mark 4:10-12.

Mark 4:10-12, “As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN.”

The explanation of the parable of the seed and the soils is now given.

Mark 4:13-15, “And He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them.’”

Luke 8:11-12, “Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved.”

Matt 13:18-19, “Hear then the parable of the sower. 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 the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.”

The hardened soil—those alone the path—are those whose hearts have never been open to the gospel, who never responded positively to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The scribes and Pharisees seem generally to fall into this category since the gospel makes no impression on them whatsoever and Satan immediately snatches the gospel from their hearts, so that there is no response, no new birth, no fruit.

Mark 4:16-17, “In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary;
then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away.”

Luke 8:13, “Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.”

Matthew 13:20-21, “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.”

The second soil, the rocky soil, refers to those who have accepted the Gospel message for their salvation but fall away in times of persecution and adversity and therefore, never grow up spiritually and remain spiritual babies.

The phrase “receive the word” clearly indicates that these individuals are those who have accepted the Gospel message and therefore, are believers.

“Receive” is the present active indicative form of the verb dechomai (δεχομαι), “to accept.”

The fact that this refers to those who have accepted the Gospel and are saved is clearly indicated by the adverb euthus (εὐθώς), “immediately, instantly, without absence or delay” which appears in parallel passage in Matthew and Mark.

Adversity can either make you or break you meaning it can either advance you spiritually or make you quit. The attitude of the believer towards adversity will either advance him spiritually meaning increase his faith in the Lord, if he is positive or adversity can cause the believer to quit on the Lord.

These believers respond positively to the word because they think that it is a kind of “prosperity gospel,” a gospel, which promises only good times, blessing, happiness, and bliss.

Now, in many parts of the Israel you can find a substratum of limestone covered with a thin layer of soil. The shoot can grow up, but the roots cannot go down and the sun withers the rootless plant. The sun represents the testing through adversity that comes to all believers to test and strengthen their faith in the Lord. Sun is good for plants if they have roots. Adversity can deepen our roots meaning our relationship and fellowship with the Lord or it can expose our shallowness.

Mark 4:18-19, “And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”

Luke 8:14, “The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity.”
Matthew 13:22, “And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

The third soil, the thorny soil, refers to believers who have never rid themselves of the “cares of this world.” Their concerns for money and for pleasure outgrow their seeking first the kingdom of God, and thus their priorities are reversed.

It is not that the people represented by this thorny soil do not understand the costs of discipleship, but that they are not willing to pay the price. It is not lack of knowledge, which causes them to quit, but lack of commitment, lack of dedication.

The soil mentioned in this passage illustrates the person who does have their priorities in order, and this hinders the harvest of Christ-like character. There is enough soil so the roots can go down but not enough room for the plant to grow up and produce fruit but the plant is crowded out and the fruit is choked. “Cares, riches and the pleasures of this life” are like weeds in the garden that keep the soil from being fruitful.

Mark 4:20, “And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

Matthew 13:23, “And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.”

Luke 8:15, “But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.”

The fourth soil, the good soil refers to believers who have positive volition to the Word of God after salvation, whose lives are uncluttered with competitive interests and values, who have their priorities in order, who meditate upon the Word, persevere in their obedience to the Word of God in the midst of their adversities and therefore, permit the Holy Spirit reproduce the character of Christ in their life.

“Fruit” refers to the production of Christ-like character, which is accomplished by the Holy Spirit in the believer who is obedient to the Word of God and specifically to the Lord Jesus Christ’s command to love and serve his fellow believer self-sacrificially as the Lord loved and served the believer self-sacrificially at the Cross.

Gal 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”
Notice that not every believer produces the same amount of fruit since the production of Christ-like character by the Holy Spirit is in direct proportion to and determined by the degree that the believer is obedient to the Word of God.