

Week 2 – Parable of the Soils – Matthew 13:3-9; 18-23

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:1-9

Introduction

“Oats, peas, beans, and barley grow. Oats, peas, beans, and barley grow. Do you or I or anyone know how oats, peas, beans, and barley grow?”

So goes the old American folk song now mostly found in collections of children’s songs

It’s a simple little song whose lyrics contain a very real truth:

We really don’t know precisely how seeds grow

Oh, for sure a botanical scientist will tell you volumes about seed germination

But the first sentence from the abstract of an article found in the December 2010 issue of *Plant Science* magazine reveals what you’d be in for:

Germination is a complex process during which the seed must quickly recover physically from maturation drying, resume a sustained intensity of metabolism, complete essential cellular events to allow for the embryo to emerge, and prepare for subsequent seedling growth.

Trust me that the rest of the abstract doesn’t get any more exciting and I doubt the article does either

Because really the only thing scientists can do is chart *what* happens during the germination process and *when* it should happen but not *why* or *how* it happens – or for that matter why it doesn’t always happen

Because, as any gardener or farmer can tell you germination is far from a sure thing and many seeds don’t go through the process of becoming a plant that bears fruit

The parable that we will be studying this morning is all about germination

And in the parable Jesus compares the spiritual activity of sowing the Word of God with the natural activity of a farmer sowing seed

In most of our Bibles the parable is likely called **The Parable of the Sower** but the focus is really on the four types of soil that receive the seed

There are also four qualities that make this parable a good place for us to begin our study of the parables:

1. It is easy to understand

After all, Jesus himself basically said in **Mark 4:13**, “If you don’t understand this parable you’re going to find it tough to understand any of my parables.”

2. It is straightforward

When Jesus taught this parable he was speaking to people who were familiar with farming and in it Jesus is giving a simple, direct lesson regarding the varied results of proclaiming the Word of God

3. It is explained

We are blessed that Jesus took the time to explain this parable because he didn’t always – even though we may wish he had

4. It is practical

This parable will never become outdated because it contains important truths that are relevant to all generations

We will begin by noting **three initial takeaways** from the parable that are readily apparent

Then we will look at the lessons it contains regarding **the presentation of the Gospel and the salvation of the lost**

And then we will look at the lessons it contains regarding **the preaching of the Word and the sanctification of believers**

I. Three Initial Takeaways

Sometimes there are biblical truths that are readily observable because they are sort of just lying on the surface
And this parable has three of those surface truths or initial takeaways that are fairly easy to spot

A. The reality of individual responses

First is the reality of individual responses

Every person who hears God's Word will respond to it in their own way and this parable highlights four of those responses

As we consider them we see that none of the four actually *reject* the message

What this parable is meant to show, then, is the difference between positive initial responses – not that all responses will be positive – Jesus certainly takes up negative responses to God's Word and the rejection of it in other places

But what Jesus shows is that even among those who give positive responses to hearing God's Word there will be those who say "Yes" to it initially but don't rightly understand what they are agreeing with

We see this in Jesus' explanation in **Matthew 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.

Then we see that there are those who receive God's Word with joy but fall away either due to tribulation and testing or because the things of the world crowd out the Word

Those are the ones we see in **verses 20-22** –

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. 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.

Lastly, Jesus shares that there will be those who receive the Word to good effect or fruitfully in **verse 23**

So we see that even though all of the initial responses to what was sown were positive, not all were effective

And the only variable in the equation that leads to the difference in effectiveness is the soil that receives the seed

B. The results are influenced by the soil

The seed of the Word is the same and the sower is the same

So we can safely say that the results of the sowing of God's Word are influenced, perhaps even determined, by the soil

Many a Christian has desired to be an effective witness for the Lord and many have actually been faithful to sow the seed of the Gospel only to see no fruit come from their efforts

And they have blamed themselves and determined that they aren't good enough sowers

Now, while we acknowledge that we should endeavor to be approved workmen who rightly handle the word of truth, we also must acknowledge that Jesus says the results of the sowing of the Word is largely based on the type of soil that receives it and cut ourselves some slack

C. The requirement of indiscriminate sowing

And we need to continue to sow the seed of God's Word indiscriminately

That is to say we need to share God's Word with every one

We have been charged with the task of making disciples and our field is the entire world

Look with me at **Matthew 28:19** which says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."

That word “nations” could just as easily read “people groups”

We can't sow only to those who look like us or those who earn like us or those who think like us or any other criteria
And we can't try to sow only on fertile soil because it's not in our power to know what kind of soil any other person's heart is made of

Anyone who has ever planted a garden can tell you that not every seed that is put in the soil actually germinates into a fruit-bearing plant

In fact, it's so much an accepted fact that not every seed will even sprout that the federal government has set standards for germination that must be met for any seeds sold in interstate commerce

And the highest germination rate that must be guaranteed is 80% – and that threshold only has to be met for certain crops – some are as low as 40%

For that reason, planting a seed is said to be something of an act of faith

When writing about gardening, author Henry David Thoreau wrote – *"Though I do not believe a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."*

Notice that he said two very profound things in that statement

First, he said that he didn't expect a plant to spring up where no seed had been planted

And second, he said that once a seed had been planted he was prepared to expect wonders

We know our “seed” – the seed of God's Word, is good seed

But still the first statement holds true – we should not expect to see a harvest of a soul where no seed has been planted

And the second is likewise true – when we have planted a seed we should expect God to do his part with it and use it according to his purposes

In **1Corinthians 3:6-7** Paul uses the planting metaphor to show the division of labor when it comes to God's Word – *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*

So we need to be faithful to sow broadly and trust God for the increase even as we pray for him to prepare the soil of the hearts we encounter to fruitfully receive the seed of the Word

That's the rightful division of labor

II. Lessons Regarding Salvation

Probably the most common perspective on the parable of the sower is that it speaks to evangelism

In that scenario the sower is the evangelist, the seed is the Gospel message, and the soils are the various people who will hear the Gospel message

And that certainly is evident in the passage

Jesus defined the seed that is sown as “*word of the kingdom*” and that certainly includes the Gospel message

Therefore, this parable reveals truths about our evangelistic efforts and some of them may be uncomfortable

Nevertheless, we need to accept that this is the reality under which we labor

This first one may be the most uncomfortable of all but –

A. Not everyone who makes a profession of faith is saved

This means that not everyone who prays “the sinner’s prayer” with us has actually been redeemed

This sounds shocking to Evangelical ears but it really shouldn’t surprise us

After all, we cannot possibly know what is truly going on in the heart of a person – only God and that person know that

That’s why Scripture stresses the need for discipleship and the bearing of fruit in the life of a believer

Look again at the first three types of soil that Jesus describes – all heard the Gospel and all responded favorably

They all initially accepted what they were shown

But the first one really didn’t understand what they were told for whatever reason

Perhaps they possessed a heart that was hardened or a skull that resisted penetration by the truth – Jesus’ metaphor could suggest either

Perhaps they heard what they wanted to hear but really didn’t grasp what accepting Christ means – that it requires one to completely relinquish control and accept Jesus as Lord not just as Savior and all they saw was a surface truth

But whatever the reason, the Gospel wasn’t able to penetrate the soil of their heart so it wasn’t able to effectively save them before the enemy snatched it away

I believe we do people a great disservice when we accept the presence of a raised hand or a repeated sinner’s prayer without probing for understanding and following up with a program of discipleship

Because not everyone who makes a profession of faith is actually saved

Secondly, and in a similar vein –

B. We should not be surprised when people don’t persevere

These people are represented by the second and third soil types

The Gospel is not just “fire insurance”

It was never meant only to change one’s eternal destiny

The Gospel has always been about permanently changing lives in the here and now

Eternal life describes more than just a *quantity* of life – that we will live forever with God after our physical lives end

It also describes a *quality* of life that is available from the moment one truly accepts the Gospel

Sadly, Jesus shows us that there will be those who make a true profession of faith but then drift away

And he says this might be because of persecution that comes their way because of their Christianity or it might be because of worldly enticements or troubles

We believe the Bible teaches that once a person is saved they are saved forever and there is nothing that can change that

But one can certainly be a believer in fact without reaping the personal benefits in the here and now and without having effectiveness or realizing any fruitfulness in this life

Paul speaks of those who are saved and who will enter heaven but only as one who escapes through flames as everything they have done in this life is consumed by the fire of God's testing

And there are likely untold numbers of people who have believed and even started well only to become disillusioned over the months and years as life either beat them down by its troubles or lured them away with its delights

Jesus simply states this lack of perseverance as a fact and doesn't assign blame (except maybe to the evil one)

The sower of the seed – that is the evangelist – isn't to blame for the lack of perseverance of the hearer

Nor does Jesus blame the church they attended or any preacher or teacher they sat under

Neither should we blame anyone else for the person who falls away

In spite of our best efforts, people are going to fall way

But we can rejoice in another lesson from this agricultural analogy that we need to understand –

C. Initial reactions need not be permanent

One great benefit of soil is that poor soil can be improved

That's why gardeners apply fertilizer and compost and continue to till and work to make marginal or poor soil productive

And the soil of a person's heart can likewise change over time

Just as the ground along the path could be turned, softened, and made it into good ground, so can life and circumstances work on the soil of a person's heart

So we can't say that the person who hears the gospel without understanding can never understand and be saved

A false acceptance can later become a genuine acceptance and a shallow acceptance can gain depth

No successful salesperson ever hears the word, "No" as a firm rejection

Instead they hear, "Not now" or "You need to convince me" or "Contact me later"

Likewise, as evangelists, we should never accept an initial response as the last word on the matter

We should never consider a person's unsatisfactory reaction to be permanent as long as they are drawing breath

And that leads us into lesson number 4 –

D. We should be very careful about judging who is and isn't saved

There will be those who accept the Gospel message and seem to spring to life with great immediate growth – only to disappoint us later when they fall away

And there will be those who we think have not accepted the Gospel as there seems to be no signs – but their roots are driving deep and strong below the surface

This parable of Jesus shows us that outward appearances can be deceiving so we must reserve judgment and not attempt to discern who is saved and who isn't based on an initial reaction to the Gospel

Only time will tell what kind of soil the seed of the Gospel fell on

Then the last lesson I want us to see regarding the Gospel is

E. The truths of this parable will always be relevant

We won't render them obsolete through developing better methods of evangelizing

While we should always seek to sow in the best way possible, our job has never been and will never be the fruitfulness of the sowing we are called to do and the truths of this parable are timeless

No matter what we do or what innovations we dream up, the Gospel will continue to bounce off of some while others make a profession of faith that doesn't last

That's the reality of the parable of the sower

The seed of God's Word is of supreme quality but the condition of the soil that receives the seed is what largely determines whether that seed will bear fruit and that is out of our hands as sowers

Our job is simply to continue sowing the Gospel to all we can and then to leave the results of our sowing to God

Without a doubt the parable speaks to evangelism but it also contains lessons beyond the Gospel

III. Lessons Regarding Sanctification

This parable can also be applied to a believer who hears preaching from the Word

And we would err if we neglected to recognize that believers also have hearts that can be represented by each of the four soils at any given time

In this application the sower might be a preacher or a teacher – really it can be anyone who shares truth from God's Word – it can even just be the Holy Spirit that speaks as we read and study Scripture on our own

The hearers would be those who the sower is addressing with the seed being the Word beyond the Gospel – in actuality this could be any teaching found in Scripture

And each believer who hears the exact same teaching could conceivably receive it differently as represented by the four soils

A. Superseded reception

First, we can have hearts like the soil along the path and God's truths bounce off like bullets off of Superman

There can be any number of reasons for this hardness of heart

All manner of things can form callouses on our hearts whether it be the cares of our daily lives, sour relationships, preconceived notions, fatigue, running late and feeling harried when we arrive to hear the Word

Even just having a bad attitude can keep God's Word from being able to penetrate our hearts

And Satan delights in snatching away what we've heard before it can take root and grow

The only solution is preparation

We need to take care to come to church with the soil of our hearts broken up and prepared to receive the seed of God's Word

After all, the sower can only broadcast the seed – the soil is responsible for taking it in

B. Superficial reception

We can also fall prey to a superficial reception of God's Word

This is when our hearts reflect the rocky ground

In this instance we hear a stirring message and accept what God has communicated to us with joy and we react with enthusiasm and compliance

Perhaps we see in what we've heard the solution to a pressing personal problem we're having so we readily commit ourselves to it

But when all our problems don't instantly go away and we face the heat of continued testing and trials we discover that our commitment was shallow as it withers and we decide that what we saw in God's Word just didn't work for us

But I want you to notice this doesn't mean we were insincere

In Luke's record of this same parable he shows Jesus saying that in this case the belief was "*for a while*" – it was genuine belief in what was heard but it failed when put to the test (**Luke 8:13**)

I don't know if it's a product of our culture or something else but we expect instant results and are prone to give up easily when they don't come as quickly or precisely in the way we want

C. Stifled reception

We can also fall prey to the phenomenon of stifled reception

This happens a lot – especially to those who are more prone to be affected by emotion

We hear the Word and we receive it eagerly but over time the cares or enticements of the world simply crowd it out

I've experienced this myself when I've attended conferences or conventions only to have to return to the "real world" right afterwards

As another example – have you ever noticed how quickly the good feelings of a vacation can disappear when you return to work?

It seems we're hardwired for dissatisfaction and prone to distraction

And again, it's not that we were being insincere, but it doesn't take much to knock us off track and even though we have the best of intentions if we're not careful and diligent to push back against them the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches will push the Word of God right out of our hearts and minds

D. Solid reception

Then we see that we can also have hearts and minds that are made up of good soil that results in a solid reception

Good soil rarely happens by accident – just as it takes attention and work to prepare a plot of ground to successfully receive seed and produce a crop so must we attend to the soil of our hearts

Steve Valentine likes to say that Christians need to be "Rested up, prayed up, and studied up" before taking on a spiritual endeavor

And that is a really good condition to be in before hearing the Word of God

Many a sermon is unfruitful and the biblical truths fail to take hold and bear fruit simply due to fatigue

Folks, I understand that we all lead busy, full lives and that the temptation is great to stay up late on Saturday night

After all, our weekends are pretty short

But we do God's Word a profound disservice when fatigue keeps us from giving it our full attention

We also need to be prayed up, as Steve would say, in that we need to ask God to prepare us for receiving his Word

To open our hearts and minds to his truth so that it might take deep root and bear fruit

To remove distractions, worries, cares, plans, and the like so that we can properly focus on what we're hearing

We also need to be studied up on the condition of our heart

Sin will also keep us from receiving God's Word so we need to ask God to reveal any sins that would hinder and then deal with them before God and man if need be

As Christ-followers our hearts can be made up of any of the four soils at any given time

We can't control anyone else's soil and we simply have to be faithful to sow the seed

But we can control our own and it's our duty to prepare to receive what is sown

Conclusion

At the beginning of our sermon this morning I said that this was a simple parable and it is

The imagery is easy to understand and the correlation between soil and human hearts is easy to see

I'm sure the parable served as an encouragement to the original disciples as they labored long and hard only to see relatively few respond effectively because they had been shown that faithfulness to sowing was what was important to God and they could trust God to handle the growth

The same is true for us as we continue on in the relay race of the mission of the church because the harvest is sure

But the parable also compels us to continually ask, "What kind of soil am I?"

And it calls us to action as we recognize our responsibility to be the kind of soil that receives Gods' Word fruitfully

May the believers of Brick Church be known as good soils and good sowers

Let's pray