

## SOIL

The seed is identified as the word of God. One would expect that the different kind of soil would be identified as different kinds of hearers. But that is not the case. The interpretation speaks of the ones sown on the path and the devil takes away the word; the ones sown on the rocks are those without roots; the ones sown among thorns have the word choked out; the those sown in good soil receive the word and bear fruit. The parable encourages those who have experienced failures in their ministries, reminding them that some seed will yield abundantly. The parable says to everyone that it is in the honest, good and patient heart that the word of God comes to full fruition. <sup>1</sup>

### **4: 1-9 Parable of Sower**

Huge crowd came to hear Jesus; various groups of people; eager learners, curious but uncommitted hearers, and rejecting fault-finders. **Jesus knows his movement will not be universally accepted, but he is convinced of its final victory. As Jesus ponders these things, confident that the seeds he sows will produce a harvest even though not all of them will reach maturity. In the sower, Jesus sees an image of himself sowing the word.** <sup>2</sup>

Jesus' kingdom message is being proclaimed and people are responding in various ways. This parable is a lens through which one can see why some are hearing and responding to Jesus while others are not. <sup>3</sup>

**This parable is about a sower.** It applies to Jesus, who is at that very moment sowing *the word*. But it also applies to Mark; by recording Jesus' words, he is also sowing the word. It also applies to anyone who proclaims the word of the kingdom. Within the story, an ordinary sower is doing what sowers do. The parable summarizes in realistic terms what happens when seeds are sown and (sometimes) grow. As a story about farming, the only thing unrealistic is **the size of the harvest** at the end. That is central to the meaning of the parable. <sup>4</sup>

**This parable is also about seeds and soils.** The seeds meet different destinies as the soil conditions either hinder or support the grow of the plants. Interpreters are not in agreement on what kind of farming practices are presupposed. In that farm setting, **do farmers plow before or after sowing?**

- **If plowing takes place before sowing,** the parable seems to say: Some seed never does have a chance. But that is how it is with broadcast seeding. Inevitably, some falls in places the farmer knows are unproductive, along the (permanent) path, where rocks are present, or where plowing has not controlled the weeds.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Luke* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy J. Geddert. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 92.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy J. Geddert. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy J. Geddert. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 93.

- **If plowing takes place *after* sowing**, the parable seems to say: For all the farmer knows, all the seeds can contribute to the harvest. But it doesn't turn out that way. Birds come before the (temporary) path can be plowed. In the process of plowing, rocks are turned up, and not all the weeds are eliminated.

*Either way*, whether the farmer knows it will happen or not, some seeds is lost, either immediately (to the birds), later (among the rocks), or even later (among the thorns). Either way, some seeds, because the conditions are right, contribute to the final harvest. *This harvest will exceed all expectation*. The realistic parable suddenly become unrealistic, at least under first-century Palestinian condition.

The surprise ending provokes each hearer to choose a response:

- That's a crazy story; nobody gets that kind of harvest.
- Well. it shows that Jesus doesn't know much about farming.
- I wonder what Jesus is getting at? To what does the seed refer?
- What kind of harvest can be that abundant?

It is this third reaction that Jesus is after. If his goal were to make things self-evidently plain, he would not use parables. **His goal is to draw the hearers into active, discerning listening and growing understanding**. If they do not grasp it right away, the important thing is to stick with Jesus and above all to be open to whatever will be revealed.<sup>5</sup>

**If the focus is on the abundant harvest**, the parable is clearly about the kingdom of God, and about Jesus' proclamation of it. Then the message would be this:

There may be many obstacles along the way; there may be times when you are tempted to doubt the final victory of God's kingdom. But don't lose courage. A great and glorious harvest, greater than anything you can imagine, will finally be gathered in.

If the focus is on the different kind of soils and the different destinies of the individual seeds, then it is a parable about how to hear the word of the kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

The main message of the sower parable seems to be that a glorious final kingdom harvest is promised, even if there are setbacks along the way. Yet it is also an encouraging word for those sowing the word and struggling to keep courage when they see so much of it bearing no fruit? Are the large number a hit that great number of people will finally accept the kingdom message?

The purpose of the Parable (4:10-12)

4:10 The "Arounders" and the Twelve.

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy J. Geddert. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Geddert. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 94.

Those ... around him and the twelve identify certain kinds of people, without giving clues on how many and which people are in Jesus' audience at any given time. We should probably assume that much of the chapter is addressed to the original large mixed group of people. Jesus is with the arounders and the twelve. These refer to those who are responding with openness to Jesus' teaching. Jesus is proclaiming a kingdom. He shows the kingdom by recruiting disciples, teaching with authority, driving out demons, healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, pronouncing forgiveness, accepting the sinners, challenging the status quo, vanquishing the enemy, renewing the people of God, and creating a spiritual family. It is a kingdom that comes imperceptibly, from small beginnings, but with a great destiny. What is the secret of the kingdom"

- Jesus himself is the kingdom.
- The kingdom will arrive at any moment.
- Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.
- Jesus will be crucified.
- Jesus crucifixion is really an enthronement.
- Jesus will come in glory as the Son of Man. <sup>7</sup>

Jesus' way of proclaiming the *presence* of the kingdom is by making it *present* for those with hearing ears and seeing eyes. First-century Jews had diverse expectations of what the kingdom would be like. Some expected great military conquests, some expected signs in the heavens, some expected visible religious reforms. The kingdom comes secretly; its presence is discerned only by those who recognize God at work in the ministry and message of Jesus. This is what those around Jesus are privileged to understand. Readers discern the kingdom's secrecy as they grasp the real meaning and significance of Jesus' words and deeds. That include hearing the parables of this chapter... In Jesus' entire Galilean ministry, the word kingdom appears only in 4:11, spoken in private to Jesus' followers; and then in 4:26 and 4:30, in parable that outsiders did not understand (4:33-34). <sup>8</sup>

### **Matthew 13: 1-9 Seed and Soil**

It was customary in Palestine to sow seed before plowing the ground, and that is what the sower is doing here, scattering or broadcasting seed by hand. According to the text, some of the seed ends up on the path and is never plowed under. Some falls on rocky terrain, where the soil is too thin to sustain life. Some lands in good soil and sprouts, but is choked out by other plants. Some finds the right soil and conditions for growth, yielding up to a hundredfold return at the harvest. <sup>9</sup>

### **Hearing and Understanding 13:10-17**

#### **Four kinds of hearers (13: 18-23)**

In the parable itself, the primary concern to be the fate of the seed. Here, however, the emphasis falls on the various kinds of soil, which are related to different types of hearers who receive Jesus' word:

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy J. Geddert. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy J. Geddert. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Mark* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 96.

<sup>9</sup> Richard B. Gardner. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on MATTHEW* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 211,

some listeners never make it from hearing to faith. Some respond with a short-lived faith that vanishes when hard times set in.

Some accept the word but allow worldly concerns to suffocate their faith. And some hear, believe, and actually do what God desires.<sup>10</sup>

1) Matthew identifies the word sown as the word of the kingdom (v. 18), which is the subject of each of the parables in the collection. 2) He contrasts the first and last types of hearers in terms of who does and doesn't *understand* (vv. 19, 23), picking up the theme of the previous section. (3) He underscores the fact that hearing should lead to *doing*, adding a verb which here is translated *yields* (v. 23), but which is the same verb used elsewhere for one who *does* God's will.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard B. Gardner. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on MATTHEW* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 213.