

Intro

How do we make sense of different responses to the gospel? How do we make sense of people who profess faith and make a home in the church for a while, and later abandon their faith?

This morning we're going to look at the parable of the sower. I have two aims. First, to model for you responsible Bible interpretation. We'll look at:

- 1) Immediate context...how does the argument fit together?
- 2) Near context...are there any clues from the previous sections?
- 3) Book context...are there any clues elsewhere in the book?
- 4) Whole Bible context...is the Bible clear on the issue elsewhere? (without disregarding the actual words in the passage we're looking at)

Second, to help you process what's happened when people you've known left the church. When I say left the church, I mean left the church altogether. Not left one evangelical church for another evangelical church.

We all know people who were in the church but aren't anymore. People who publicly professed their faith, but now renounce Jesus. People who once professed faith, but now reject the Bible. People who used to be concerned about Christian living, but today aren't convicted by sin. This is deeply personal for some of you and not mere intellectual curiosity.

Body

Passage Focus

I'll give the interpretation. Then I'll explain why. Then we'll consider some applications.

Sower = Jesus

Seed = "word of the kingdom" = Jesus' kingdom message, or the good news of the gospel

Soils = hearers = 4 typical responses to Jesus

1st soil = scribes & Pharisees

2nd/3rd soils = crowds who follow Jesus for a season

4th soil = Jesus' disciples

Parable point: to explain varied responses to Jesus' kingdom message and to challenge his hearers to ask, "which soil am I?"

FCF: immediate dismissal...mistaken understanding...competing desires

Grace given: more revelation is given to Jesus' disciples

13:1-9 = mixed audience

13:10-23 = disciples only

Explanation

Jesus departed from the house where he was teaching his disciples. A large crowd is following Jesus, so he sits down in a boat to teach. A mixed crowd composed of the curious yet uncommitted and his disciples.

Parables (13:10-17)

- Parable = “a short narrative that demands a response from the hearer” – Andreas Kostenberger and Richard Patterson
- Parables are realistic stories used to communicate biblical truths and teach spiritual lessons. . . stories make truth come alive and move hearers toward an intended response
- Focus on the main ideas, not speculating about every last detail

Jesus tells the crowd a parable (13:3-9), then gives private information to his disciples (13:10-17). The disciples wonder why Jesus speaks to the crowds in parables. Jesus responds:

"To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." (13:11)

The giver of secrets is God. God in his free will has chosen to make kingdom secrets known to his disciples while withholding kingdom secrets from the crowds at large. Truth is revealed to some. Truth is concealed from others. Jesus explains further:

For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. (13:12)

The one who has are Jesus' disciples. More will be revealed to them. The one who has not is the curious seeker in the crowd, along the Pharisee. Failure to respond to Jesus in faith and repentance will result in the removal of present blessings (e.g., healings, demons cast out, Jesus' teaching). Israel's rejection of her Messiah results in the kingdom being taken away from national Israel and taken to the world (Matt 21:43).

Jesus continues his explanation:

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (13:13)

Speaking in parables was an act of judgment. The curious seeker and the Pharisee only gets parables. Why? Because they've rejected the kingdom and hardened themselves. In doing so they fulfill prophecy in the sense that rejection in Isaiah's day foreshadowed rejection in Jesus' day. In rejecting Jesus, the Pharisees and the crowds are repeating what took place in Isaiah's day.

This comes from Isaiah 6:9-10 where Isaiah was tasked with proclaiming Judah's rebellion, to further harden them. As Isaiah spoke, Judah became more hardened against God, resulting in exile to Babylon (Isa 6:10-12). Likewise, the more Jesus speaks the harder the Pharisees' opposition. An unrepentant response has the same result: Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome in 70 AD.

“But” (13:16) = Jesus' disciples contrast with the scribes and Pharisees, and the curious crowds who don't repent. The disciples are blessed because they see and hear = they respond. They're experiencing the pinnacle of the OT promises that the saints of old longed for.

At the same time, parables are a call to the curious crowds to believe. The parable ends with a warning:

"He who has ears, let him hear." (13:9) = if you understand what I'm saying respond!

→ mixed audience = hardening some and converting others. . . some will have ears to hear!

1st soil = along the path (13:3-4, 18-19): gospel quickly rejected

Jesus sows the kingdom message. When he does, it's like "*seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.*" The seeds fell on the walking path where the ground was hard rather than on the good soil. Falling on hard ground, the seeds couldn't penetrate the ground and were easy prey for the birds.

The explanation says this is the case where someone "*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 fits with what Jesus said about fulfilling Isaiah in 13:14-15. Jesus' audience is a hardened people who hear the word and can't understand it = the scribes and Pharisees = heard and quickly forgotten without careful consideration

- Some are so hardened to God that when they hear the gospel they can't understand and Satan immediately takes the message away from them. Hardness to God opens a person to Satan's control. 2 Timothy 2:26 speaks of false teachers being in "*the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*" Hardened by their opposition to God, those of the first soil have hearts that can't be penetrated with the word. The gospel's inability to penetrate is attributed to Satan. How does Satan take the message away? In the case of the Pharisees, Satan possibly directed their thoughts against the message, enraging them against Jesus.
- Luke adds:

Luke 8:12 The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

- The first soil clearly speaks of an unbelieving response to the gospel.

2nd soil = on rocky ground (13:5-6, 13:20-21): gospel misunderstood = fall away when persecution comes

Other times when the gospel is sown it's like seeds that "*fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.*" In this case, limestone bedrock lies underneath the soil and close to the surface. The stone traps the moisture, preventing moisture from reaching the seed in the soil. The result is quick growth, but quickly scorched by the sun. Luke says it this way:

Luke 8:6 And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.

Jesus explains, "*this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ 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.*" What stands out is immediate reception and immediate rejection. They love what they hear at first. But persecution drives them away just as quick.

Illustrated well in John 6

This is similar to the episode in John 6 where the crowds hadn't yet believed (John 6:36), but followed as if they were Jesus' disciples (John 6:60-61). However, Jesus knew they hadn't actually believed (John 6:64). These "disciples" found a saying hard (John 6:60) and they deserted:

John 6:66 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. [remember these "disciples" weren't actually disciples...they had never believed]

This is why, in Luke 14, Jesus challenged the crowds to count the cost (Luke 14:25-33). Just like one shouldn't go to war without carefully considering the cost, one shouldn't become Jesus' disciple without carefully considering the cost. The false disciples in John 6 failed to count the cost.

The second soil represents a gospel hearer who fails to count the cost. They thought they were followers, but when they found out what following Jesus really meant they quit. They never actually believed. When opposition to their "faith" comes, they're quickly gone.

Luke 8:13 says, “they believe for a while, and in the time of testing fall away.” ≠ saving faith because truly converted people don’t fall away

Full picture

- 1) Everyone who is justified will be glorified (Rom 8:30; see also John 10:27-29)
- 2) One proof of belonging to Jesus, or proof of being justified, is enduring in the faith (John 8:31; Heb 3:6, 14; 1 John 2:19)
- 3) Being born again, God guards our faith so that our eternal inheritance is secure and can’t be lost (1 Pet 1:3-5), which I take to mean that the Spirit strengthens our faith so we don’t fall away
- 4) Some fall away (Luke 8:13)
- 5) Falling away is proof one has never belonged to Jesus (1 John 2:19)
- 6) Conclusion: those who fall away and never come back never truly believed
- 7) Caution: true believers can fall into sin for a season (see David’s example in 2 Sam 11:1-12:23; Jas 5:19-20)

3rd soil = among thorns (13:7, 13:22): affections lie elsewhere

This time the *“seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.”* The seed fell where there was competition for nourishment. As a result, the thorns got in the way and choked the seed by preventing it from getting nourishment. Mark adds that the seed *“yielded no grain (Mark 4:7).”*

The picture is other things interfere with the gospel. Jesus explains what he meant:

“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.” (13:22)

Mark speaks of “desires for other things” (Mark 4:19) and Luke explains:

Luke 8:14 And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

Four things block gospel reception:

- 1) Cares of the world
- 2) Riches
- 3) Desires for other things
- 4) Pleasures of life

The picture is other things compete with the gospel and win out. The person never follows Jesus because other desires rule their heart. So they fail to bear fruit. Like the person so obsessed with making money or rising the corporate ladder that there’s no room for Jesus in their life. They won’t give Jesus priority. Their heart is elsewhere.

4th soil = on good soil (13:8, 23): believing response

The first three soils represent failure to embrace the kingdom message. The first three contrast with the fourth. The fourth is described this way:

“Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” (13:8)

The crucial contrast is this time the seed fell on good soil, so that the message bore fruit. Jesus explains the meaning:

"As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." (13:23)

Some reasons why the 4th soil and only the 4th soil is a believer:

- 1) Only the 4th soil understands the word = immediate context
- 2) Only the 4th soil bears fruit = immediate context, near context, context of Matthew, NT context

Elsewhere in Matthew, fruit is the mark of a person that belongs to Jesus (Matt 7:15-20; 12:33-37) and obedience is a distinguishing mark of true believers (Matt 7:21-23; 12:46-50)

John 15:8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

- 3) Only the 4th soil clings to the word with an honest and good heart = immediate context

Luke 8:15 As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

- 4) The 4th soil is distinguished from the others in that they endure = immediate context and NT context

→ patience here means endurance = "capacity to continue to bear up under difficult circumstances" – Louw and Nida Greek Lexicon

→ endurance in the faith is the mark of Jesus' true followers (John 8:31; Heb 3:6, 14)

- 5) The context of Jesus audience = immediate and near context

→ scribes and Pharisees = the hardened, the deaf, and the blind with whom Satan takes the word before it can bear fruit

→ curious crowds intrigued by the spectacle who haven't yet committed = those who receive the message immediately and discard it just as quickly...those who never embrace the word because other affections stand in the way

→ "*He who has ears, let him hear*" = a parable directed at Jesus' audience calling for response = who am I?

Application 1: What do I do with the hardened? (soil 1)...continue to witness wisely

- 1) Don't presume their salvation is impossible

The apostle Paul hunted down Christians before he was converted

- 2) So pray for them
- 3) Don't harass strongly resistant people (see Matt 7:6)...they won't listen
- 4) Engage in gospel conversations when they bring up spiritual issues

Application 2: What do I do with people who professed in the past and don't follow today (soils 2 and 3)...call them to repent and believe today

- 1) Don't assume they're saved and assume they're not saved...the evidence of conversion is ongoing faith and repentance, or spiritual fruit...we're after disciples not one-time decisions
- 2) Some people appear to believe while actually failing to do so
- 3) Soil 2 says it's possible to rejoice in the word immediately without actually understanding the word
- 4) Soil 3 says it's possible to hear the word and never bear fruit because of competing affections = people could be with us for quite some time and decide to turn away or continue to gather with us, all the while never having truly believed
- 5) Possibility of misunderstanding = communicate the gospel clearly without leaving essential elements out

6) Gospel here...what's it's not...what it is

- Not attending church enough and reading the Bible enough (we do these things because we trust Jesus and love him!)
- Not joining a club
- Not trying to do the best can hoping to earn God's acceptance
- Is I'm a sinner in need of God's mercy
- Is trust in Christ not myself...trust in Christ as the substitute who took the punishment for my sins
- Trust in a person not facts...trusting in the person of Jesus leads to following him = action

Application 3: How much fruit?...fruit will be present because the Holy Spirit changes sinners

- 1) Fruit produced at different levels
- 2) But fruit always present
- 3) Some passages say a person's sinful practice reveals they aren't saved

Galatians 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

("the Holy Spirit has a product...this isn't what the Spirit produces" – Neal Pottle's response to these verses)

- 4) Sin isn't gone till glorification, so we need to leave room for the presence of sin in the believer's life (see 1 Corinthians where they are addressed as saints but sin is present)

"They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved...Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins, and, for a time, continue therein, whereby they incur God's, displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded, hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves." – Westminster Confession of 1646, Chapter 17

→ great example of putting everything Scripture has to say together instead of using one or two verses to rule out the whole counsel of God

- 5) Presence of the Spirit = change will have occurred
- 6) Presence of faith = change will have occurred (trust creates a response!)
- 7) Change will look different in different people (the outwardly moral kid in a Christian home versus the murdering drug dealer = significant change with significant sin to deal with)
- 8) Am I fighting sin? Is repentance happening?
- 9) Am I trusting Jesus today? Has the Spirit changed my life? → if you have concerns, talk with me
- 10) Direction not perfection is the mark of regeneration = looking for progress and ongoing faith and repentance

Conclusion

- 1) There are diverse responses to the gospel
- 2) The mark of faith is fruit, which comes in diverse shapes and sizes