

THE FOUR SOILS (1)

The Story of the Four Soils

A. Introduction

1. It is a much-loved parable.

It is also a significant parable – because with this parable began a change in the way Jesus taught.

“Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable.” (Matthew 13:34)

“With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.” (Mark 4:33-34)

2. The parable of the sower, as it is called in Matthew’s Gospel, appears also in Mark and Luke’s too.

This in itself underlines its importance.

Yet there is another reason why this parable is important, and that’s due to the foundational role it plays in our understanding all of Jesus’ parables.

“Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?” (Mark 4:13)

3. In the early days of Jesus’ ministry, His preaching and teaching was straightforward and clear.

“From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” (Matthew 4:17)

“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” (Matthew 7:28-29)

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 12:28-30)

“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:50)

Even the meaning of the parables He did teach were relatively easy to grasp.

“He told them this parable: “No-one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old.” (Luke 5:36)

“He also told them this parable: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?” (Luke 6:39)

Then one day everything changed.

“That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables.” (Matthew 13:1-3)

What brought about this change?

B. The Setting

1. Time and time again Jesus had shown, by the miracles He performed, that He was the promised Messiah.

But so far very few people were willing to follow Him – to submit to His rule over their lives.

The religious leaders who were supposed to be waiting for the coming of the Messiah had rejected Him, and this rejection had reached a murderous level.

“But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.” (Matthew 12:14)

This wasn't because they did not know who He was.

“Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11:47-48)

It was because they would lose their status and influence over the Jews if He took up His rightful place as King of the Jews.

2. Now one Sabbath day towards the end of His second year of ministry, Jesus performed a miracle after which everything changed.

“Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” (Matthew 12:22-23)

This miracle really got people wondering whether Jesus was the King they had been waiting for.

The Pharisees, however, had another explanation.

“But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” (Matthew 12:24)

They attributed what Jesus did to the devil, and in doing so, committed the unforgivable sin.

“And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (Matthew 12:31-32)

By deliberately rejecting the truth about Jesus, and by trying to turn others away from Him as well, they lost the opportunity to hear Him speak plainly to them.

He now would only speak publicly in parables.

4. The word 'parable' comes from two Greek words, and literally means “to place alongside”.

Two things are placed alongside each other for the purpose of comparison.

The parables that Jesus told are stories, that by way of comparison, taught His hearers about the Kingdom of God.

And in the parable of the sower, he taught by comparing it with a sower who scattered seed that landed on four different soils producing four (or six!) different results.

5. Why parables?

That's exactly the question the disciples ask, when they approached Jesus in private.

“The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” (Matthew 13:10)

C. The Significance

1. Jesus spoke in parables to reveal the truth about the Kingdom of God to those on the inside and to conceal the truth from those on the outside.

“He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.” (Matthew 13:11)

“He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” (Mark 4:11-12)

2. For those on the inside, like the disciples, who believed that Jesus was the promised King, the parables are going to help them understand more about Him and about His Kingdom.

“Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance.” (Matthew 13:12)

They would have an understanding that not even the most faithful Old Testament believer had.

“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Matthew 13:16-17)

3. For those on the outside, like the religious leaders, who had rejected Jesus and were refusing to see Him as their King, the parables are going to hide the truth about Jesus and His Kingdom.

“This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.” (Matthew 13:13-15)

Even the understanding they did have would be taken away from them.

“Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” (Matthew 13:12)

4. This first parable, the parable of the sower, explains why there are these two different reactions to Jesus.

For the people standing on the shore listening to Jesus, their response to the parable would show whether they were on the inside like the disciples, or on the outside like the religious leaders.

D. The Story

1. The story in the parable is straightforward.

A sower scatters seed which lands on different kinds of soil and produces different results.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:3-8)

2. The explanation of the parable is just as straightforward.

But not everyone hears it.

After Jesus finished the story, He challenged the crowd to listen carefully to what He had just said because there was more to hear.

“He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:9)

Yet only the Twelve and a few other followers did.

“When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.” (Mark 4:10)

They showed themselves to be on the inside and more knowledge about the Kingdom of God was given to them.

3. The sower is Christ, and those who go in His Name.

“The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.” (Matthew 13:37)

Application: Don't abandon the task of sowing – keep sowing the Word of God into the lives of people.

4. The seed is the Word of God.

“The seed is the word of God.” (Luke 8:11)

Specifically, it is the gospel – the message about the Kingdom.

“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom.” (Matthew 13:19)

“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” (1 Peter 1:23)

Application: Don't change the seed – resist the temptation to leave out the hard and unpopular parts of God's Word.

5. The scattering of the seed takes place as God's Word is proclaimed and is heard.

“As soon as they hear it... hear the word... hear the word... hear the word.” (Mark 4:14, 16, 18, 20)

Application: Don't restrict where you sow the seed – we don't know where good soil maybe found.

6. The soils represent the different ways that the hearts of people respond to the word of God when they hear it.

“takes away the word from their hearts... those with a noble and good heart.” (Luke 8:12, 15)

Application: Don't be surprised when people respond differently – the same seed will produce either no crop, some crop, or much crop.