

Heart Matters

Matthew 13:1-23 on January 12, 2020



Please read Matthew 13:1-9 before going any further in this transcript.

When our family used to live out in the country, north of Wilton, we had about a ½ acre garden. We mostly grew beautiful flowers. But, we did try our hand at growing corn, potatoes, beans, and a few other vegetables. I guess we also had a small apple tree. I have to admit: I do NOT have a green thumb! No matter how much I tilled and fertilized our sandy soil, I think we only had one or maybe 2 good years of growing much food. Between the challenges of a short growing season and the pestilence and the various critters who helped themselves to our garden, our family found that growing a crop is challenging! I did like having more deer around in November for hunting season. I guess I'm more of a hunter than a gatherer. God bless those of you who grow food for the rest of us! If it was left up to me, the planet would probably starve!

The first part of Matthew 13 is often referred to as the “Parable of the Sower.”¹ However, even though this parable does indeed center around a sower, Jesus’ main point really isn’t about the sower at all. Now, the seed is pretty important; but Jesus’ focus isn’t really on the seed either. His focus, His main point is really... mostly... on the SOIL. Specifically, on the condition of the soil.² Today, as we consider Jesus’ “Parable of the Sower,” let’s pay close attention to the different soils. What we need to consider carefully today, is that, in this parable, Jesus is talking about something of far great importance than simply planting seeds in the dirt.

Please turn in your Bible to Matthew 13:18, “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:”³ In verse 18 and following, when Jesus goes on to explain the parable of the sower, He doesn’t give us any details about the sower. But, He does tell us about the SEED. The SEED refers to “the message about the kingdom” or “the word.”⁴ In verse 19 it mentions hearing “the message about the kingdom.” THIS message is the seed that is being sown in the human heart. In verse 20 it then refers to someone hearing “the word.” This is basically synonymous with “the message about the kingdom.” Both of these are talking about Jesus’ message, the words of His teaching. Scott Engelstad just preached this last Sunday, “Listen to Jesus!” So, let’s do that. Jesus also tells us what the SOIL represents. The SOIL refers to our human hearts.⁵ Verse 19 clarifies that this seed, this message, “was sown in their heart.” (Or at least it was trying to be!) In verses 18-23, Jesus takes the 4 different soils that He mentioned earlier in verses 4-8, and He uses them to illustrate **4 common heart conditions** that people tend to have. The 1st heart condition is pictured as...

1. Hardened soil. We find this in verse 19, the seed sown along the path. This is where the soil is packed down, hardened from all of the foot traffic and the animals and carts and such.⁶ So what does

¹ For the first part of 2020, we’re going to spend some more time in Matthew’s Gospel. In January of last year, we spent time in Matthew chapters 5-7, learning from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Then, this past fall we spent a couple of weeks in Matthew 10, learning about Jesus sending out His followers in groups of 2, to Enlarge His Kingdom. These two sermon series were based on the first two of Matthew’s five main discourses. By “main discourses,” we’re simply referring to the five key sections of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel. Today we’ll begin looking at Matthew’s 3rd discourse which records Jesus’ Kingdom Parables. After Matthew 13, we’ll then jump to Matthew 18 and then to Matthew 24-25, which will cover Jesus’ 4th/5th key teaching sections. This is going to be quite an adventure, so we need to pray together that our hearts will be teachable and open to all that Jesus would have us learn from him. A call for soft, teachable hearts makes today’s passage particularly relevant as we start out on this adventure through the 3rd/4th/5th key sections of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew.

² Considering this teaching from Jesus in the month of January, in northern MN, makes the condition of the soil particularly challenging for planting seeds. Unless it’s indoors, all of the soil around here is frozen solid. No matter how well tilled or fertilized the soil might be, the soil simply isn’t ready to receive seeds. It is NOT planting season. And yet, our cold, frozen soil only helps illustrate Jesus’ main point all the more: what is the condition of your soil? The expertise and skill of the sower won’t make any difference, if the soil is rock hard and unreceptive to the seed. No matter how high quality your seed is, frozen soil won’t receive it. What is the condition of your soil? (Soil and soul are just 1 letter different from each other.)

³ You probably can’t see this in your English translation, but the Greek uses an emphatic “you.” In other words, Jesus is making an emphasis here, “you, listen up y’all!” Consider also Mathew 13:9, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

⁴ See also Luke 8:11.

⁵ See Luke 8:15, “those with a noble and good heart”

⁶ We might tend to get distracted by the sower here. After all, what kind of farmer would plant seeds along a path? Wouldn’t they have realized that the soil was packed down from all of the traffic? Here are 2 brief side notes: 1. First of all, in the 1st century seed was sown by hand. It was simply tossed by the handful onto the soil, so it was probably not quite as accurate as our modern-day technologies. However, most farmers got pretty adept at hand-tossing, and this seed cost money. So it’s doubtful that they actually wasted all that much seed when planting along alongside a path. 2. The other thing to realize though is that this was a highly agrarian society. So there were fields all over the place. Therefore, there were likely pathways crisscrossing all throughout the various fields, because people needed to get from one place to another. Furthermore, “In eastern practice the seed was sometimes sown first and the field plowed afterwards.” (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1719.) So between the various traffic crossing right through the middle of some fields, and the differing farming practices of that time period, most of Jesus’ initial audience would have understood His

“hardened soil” teach us about our human hearts? Jesus explains it this way⁷ in Matthew 13:19, “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and **does not understand it**, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.”⁸ At first reading, this makes it sound like someone is being punished for simply not understanding something, for not being smart enough.⁹ But one of the reasons that Jesus taught with parables was to cause His listeners to do some further reflection.¹⁰ If the condition of our heart is like hardened soil along the path, then our heart is a heart that is not prepared to receive God’s Word. It’s no wonder that we don’t understand it, we aren’t even ready to receive the word that God wants to plant in our hearts.¹¹ In other words, hard hearts prevent the seed of God’s Word from sinking into our heart’s soil.¹² And this makes it all too easy, for Satan to simply come along and snatch God’s Word away from us, before we even have time to really understand it.¹³

The call to those of us whose hearts are like “hardened soil” is NOT a call for us to SMARTEN up so that we can understand. Rather, it’s a call for us to SOFTEN up. Not smarten up, but soften up the hard-packed soil of our hearts. This is why, just a few verses earlier, Jesus refers back to the OT book of Isaiah and says these words in Matthew 13:15, “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.” In other words, if our hearts weren’t so hard-packed, so tough and so calloused, then we would be able to understand Jesus and the message of His Kingdom. Dear friends, let’s pray fervently that God will soften each of our hearts today. Pray that we’ll truly begin to receive the word that God wants to plant within us. The 2nd heart condition is pictured as...

2. Shallow soil.¹⁴ Don’t picture rocky soil here, as in soil with lots of rocks in it. Rather, picture a really thin layer of soil, right over the top of solid bedrock.¹⁵ So what does “shallow soil” teach us about our human hearts? Jesus explains it this way in Matthew 13:20-21, “The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”¹⁶ Some of us struggle with having a shallow heart. As soon as the heat gets turned up in the Christian life, our faith withers and we fall away. Our hearts abandon God. (It becomes clear that we are a fair-weather fan rather than a fully devoted follower of Jesus.)

point: seeds that landed on the packed down soil of the path would get eaten up by the birds. But as we talked about earlier, Jesus focus in this parable is really not so much on the sower or on the seed; it is on the SOIL.

⁷ By the way, Jesus doesn’t usually explain His parables, but let’s be thankful that here He does!

⁸ Matthew 13:4 says that birds came and devoured the seeds. Verse 19 then equates the birds with the evil one. “Birds regularly symbolize evil and even demons or Satan” in the Old Testament and other Jewish literature. D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 360.

⁹ Just a few verses earlier, Matthew 13:15 quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10, which could make it sound like there is a desire that some would not understand. However, it “simply states the sad truth that those who are not willing to receive Jesus’ message will find the truth hidden from them.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1719.

¹⁰ Parables tend to capture our attention and then make us a participant in the illustration, forcing us to answer some question about ourselves. Thiselton referenced in D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 349.

¹¹ This illustration of the path might also very well have caused Jesus’ initial audience to reflect on something He’d taught them earlier in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus warned them back in Matthew 7:13-14, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” If our heart is walking along the path that leads to destruction, it shouldn’t surprise us that it’s hard for us to understand God’s Word. We’ve made a spiritually reckless choice to put ourselves in exactly the wrong environment for spiritual growth. In other words, we need to position our hearts in such a place where we can not only hear God’s Word, but also ask God to help us understand it and apply it. This is why it’s good for us to prepare our hearts before we even step through the doors of the church, and before we read God’s Word in our quiet times. It’s why I choose to begin with prayer before I start to write my sermons. And it’s why I prefer to pray near the beginning of each sermon, for God’s Spirit to enlighten the text and to help us understand. Check out Ephesians 1:15-18 which is a prayer asking God to give us “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” and for the eyes of our hearts to “be enlightened.” This is one of the Holy Spirit’s roles within the believer. See also 1 Corinthians 2:6-16.

¹² In fact, this is what the 1st soil is trying to teach us: “the seed is taken away before it [even] has time to grow.” D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, pp. 359-360. In fact, we can’t even really say that this is a case of “in one ear and out the other,” because the teaching never got in.

¹³ Consider 2 Corinthians 4:4. D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 360.

¹⁴ See also Mark 4:5 and consider Colossians 2:7 and Ephesians 3:16-19.

¹⁵ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1719.

¹⁶ It’s natural to read this verse and wonder about the Eternal Security debate. In other words, is this verse teaching that a genuine believer in Jesus Christ can turn away and “lose” their salvation? This is a fine question, but it has the unfortunate result of distracting us from what matters more. “What really counts is the fact that people can wind up in hell after at least appearing to be Christians, so all apparently Christian audiences should be regularly warned against this kind of apostasy.” In the words of C.S. Lewis, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: - those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says... ‘Thy will be done.’” These two quotations are taken from pp. 116 and 111 respectively in Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004.

The very nature of roots is that they are underground; they are hidden from sight. The way we find out just how deep someone's roots go, is how well those roots hold fast when trouble and persecution come.¹⁷ Tough times will either drive our roots deeper into Christ, or they will reveal a shallow faith. The cure for a shallow heart begins with an honest admission of our spiritual poverty. Our spiritual poverty causes us to admit our desperate need for Jesus to help us grow in maturity. To help us discipline ourselves in a daily pursuit of a deeper relationship with Him. If we recognize a shallowness in our own faith, there are lots of things we can do to grow in greater maturity. We should begin with prayer, asking God to help us deepen our roots in Him. We can develop healthy spiritual habits like church attendance and going to a Sunday School class or a Formation Group. Or we can attend a small group like one of our Life Groups. We can pick up a Bible reading plan from the church and get reading each and every day.¹⁸ And so on. Shallow soil reveals a superficial faith that doesn't last. It has no real roots to help it hold fast, when the pressures of this life start to heat up. The 3rd heart condition is pictured as...

3. Soil choked with thorns. So what does "soil choked with thorns" teach us about our human hearts? Jesus explains it this way in verse 22, "The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful." Choked NOT in the sense of not getting air, but rather choked in the sense that they can't get enough sun from above nor enough water/nourishment from below. All of these other things are blocking their access to the life-giving nutrients that are needed. The plant is unfruitful; the stalk never grows to a full head of grain. It's a case of arrested development and immaturity. The parallel passage in Luke 8:14 explains that "...they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature."¹⁹ We can't allow the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth to choke out our spiritual growth and progress.²⁰ If the soil of our hearts is being choked out with weeds, then we need to take out our "spiritual weed whacker" and thin things out a bit. We need to let some light shine on our souls! To access more of the water and nutrients that our spiritual roots are dying for.²¹

Most of us desire greater financial prosperity in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. However, financial prosperity can deceive us.²² Notice how Matthew describes it in verse 22, "The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and **the deceitfulness of wealth** choke the word, making it unfruitful." It's the "deceitfulness" of wealth. It's not the wealth, but the deceitfulness of it. In other words, the problem isn't simply having wealth; it's that wealth can be devious.²³ It's a subtle and sneaky thorn that we may not even be aware of. But it is choking out God's work in our lives.²⁴

Verse 22 also mentions how the worries of this life can choke the word. I keep hearing more and more reports of how our electronic devices and social media feeds are raising our levels of anxiety and depression.²⁵ These things are keeping us on high alert 24/7. They leave us precious little time for silent reflection or for giving our full attention to the things of God. In fact, I wonder how many people, even right now, are on an electronic device, listening to this sermon... but not really listening. Not listening to God by the way. It's not about me; it's not about the preacher. It's about what God is trying to teach each one of us right now, in this very moment. Perhaps some of us began by opening our Bible App today and pulling up the text for Matthew 13 on our electronic device. But then, during this very message, some text or email notification popped up and distracted us from God. Even as

¹⁷ Consider Matthew 24:9-10 in Jesus' 5th and final discourse.

¹⁸ Reading plans are also available here: <https://efcbemidji.org/watch-read/resources/category/bible-reading-plan/>

¹⁹ Colossians 1:28 comes to mind, "He (Christ) is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." Presenting everyone fully mature in Christ is why the church exists. We are "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together." "Fully devoted" is another way of saying "fully mature."

²⁰ It's one thing to be immature when we're first starting out as a Christ-follower. But God doesn't want us to remain spiritual babies. Immature Christians are called out in Hebrews 5:11-14. Brother or Sister in Christ, we can't keep living on milk. It's time to move on to solid food. See Ephesians 4:11-16.

²¹ Consider 1 Timothy 6:10-11 and 17-19.

²² 1 Timothy 6:10 reminds us, "...Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

²³ We begin to believe that we are self-sufficient. Without actually saying it out loud, we begin to wonder how much we really even need God.

²⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 361.

²⁵ For example, check out <https://www.webmd.com/depression/news/20160315/could-too-much-cellphone-time-signal-anxiety-depression#1> and <https://time.com/5437607/smartphones-teens-mental-health/>

God's Word is being preached in churches all around the world, I wonder how many people are distracted? Distracted by worries over checking their latest text message, updating their Instagram or Twitter feeds, or getting updates on the latest sports news. Do you hear what I'm saying here? More importantly, are you hearing God? Brother or Sister in Christ, these technologies aren't bad or evil, in and of themselves, but they can become the kinds of things that choke out the Word of God in our lives and make it unfruitful. The 4th heart condition is pictured as...

4. Good soil. So what can "good soil" teach us about our human hearts? Jesus explains it this way in Matthew 13:23, "But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."²⁶ What do you suppose that Jesus means by "produces a crop"?²⁷ At this point it's pretty clear that He's not talking about actual farmland and crops in the field.²⁸ So does Jesus mean that we need to lead 30 unbelievers to faith? Or does He mean that we should start 30 new ministries? Or does He mean something else...? Well, I suppose that the specific crop we produce really depends on how God has gifted us; on what God has called us to do with our lives.²⁹ We are reminded in Romans 12:6-8 that "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."

Regardless of our particular gifting though, the condition of our heart is what really matters. The culmination of this parable is stressed in the final and best soil condition in verse 23: "But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." Let's be clear, even "The soil that produces only a small crop is nevertheless called 'good.'"³⁰ In other words, we shouldn't think here in terms of good/better/best or 30/60/100. Whether it's 30/60/100-fold, the point is that each one of us, should want to become the kind of good soil, that produces some kind of a crop!

There's a danger at this point in the message though. The danger is THIS: that we would leave this sanctuary with a bigger to-do list: "Well, Pastor Jerry said that I need to work harder for God! I guess that I need to get out there and try to produce a 30-fold crop. Maybe if I work REALLY hard, I could get to 60 or even 100 someday!" But, as we've discussed from the very beginning of this message, Jesus' main focus is on the soil. The soil, the soil, the soil! NOT on the sower, NOT on the seed, and NOT even on the crop really.³¹ The crop is just an indicator of the condition of the soil. Merely striving harder to crank out a bigger crop, would really miss the point of this parable. The point is NOT to measure our yields! Nor is it to boast in our own harvest! The point is to make each one of us ask ourselves this question: **Which of these 4 soils is my heart most like?** Jesus' teaching leads us right into some honest self-examination (not examination of the person next to us, examination of ourselves). Indeed if we'd rather avoid answering this question, we've probably already revealed the condition of our own heart.³² **Which of these 4 soils is my heart most like?** If your answer is the "good soil," then praise God! Continue receiving God's Word and bearing fruit as you live for God!³³ And may it be 30/60/100-fold! However, if your answer leans more toward one of the first 3 soils, what are you going to do about it? Will you ask God to soften your hardened heart? Will you pray for his help in deepening your shallow heart? Will you confess that lately your heart for God has been choked out by the idols of worry and wealth?³⁴

²⁶ Luke 8:15, "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

²⁷ "The same seed produces no crop, some crop, or much crop according to the soil's character." D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 351.

²⁸ "a certain unavoidable ambiguity is built into the parables, for it is not always easy to distinguish illustrative details and details that are merely part of the story structure." McNeile in D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 347.

²⁹ Producing a crop is about each one of us doing God's will. Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 218). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

³⁰ See Matthew 25:22-23. D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 361.

³¹ All of these, of course, have a role to play.

³² Even now, as we prepare to make our way out of this room, Satan may be getting ready to snatch the message of God's Word from us. Even now if trouble and persecution are pressing in on us, they may be hindering God's Word from growing deeper roots in our hearts. Even now the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth, may be making God's Word unfruitful in our lives.

³³ Consider Matthew 13:12a and recognize that God has more of His kingdom to give you.

³⁴ This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji on January 12, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson