

# The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13

## Lesson 3. The Parable of the Soils

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

PARS: [ MK 4:3-8; LK 8:4-15 ]

March 10, 2024

### Introductory Remarks

This first parable of Matthew 13 is probably one of the most well-known of all the parables, and although it is a “Kingdom Parable” like the other 7 in Matthew 13, unlike all the others, it does not begin with the phrase, “*The kingdom of heaven is like...*” or “*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...*”.

I want to immediately dispel the popular notion that “kingdom of heaven” refers to the church – it does not. Now that doesn’t mean that many of the points of detail in these parables cannot be utilized to teach Christians how they should live or how things work in real life regarding salvation and sanctification. Nor does it mean that the Church is not present as a dominating force during the inert-advent period. But the Church is not the Kingdom. Our first two lessons I hope have instilled in us this fact that the Kingdom is the one offered to Israel, which they had summarily rejected in Matthew 12, and which the corrupt leaders ratified in John 11:45-53, and decisively voted Him out by having Him crucified by the Romans on Calvary. It was offered, rejected and postponed, not cancelled. These Kingdom parables are told to show what life will be like in between the rejection of Christ and His return, which includes the church age. ①

John Walvoort comments;

“One of the important themes of prophecy in the NT is that pertaining to the course of the present age. Many of these prophecies relate to the organized church, in contrast to prophecies that relate to the body of Christ. The course of the age in general is developed under the prophetic theme of the kingdom of heaven revealed in Matthew 13 with other Scriptures, such as Matthew 24, 1 Tim. 4, 2 Tim. 2,3, and Revelation 2,3 & 17 describing the trend toward apostasy which will have its climax in the future great tribulation. The course of the professing church extends from the first coming of Christ to His second coming to the earth and is a broader revelation than that relating to the body of Christ which properly began on the Day of Pentecost and culminates in the translation of the true church before the professing church comes to its end.”<sup>1</sup>

I tried to find a commentator who commented on why this parable does not start with the phrase, “*The Kingdom of heaven is like...*”, and only A.W. Pink does comment, and he says;

“Thus, because this parable contemplates the period of time covered by our Lord’s earthly ministry these words are appropriately omitted. The first parable forms an introduction to

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Walvoort; The Nations, Israel and the Church, Zondervan Academic, 1967, Pg. 24

those which follow: it describes the work of Christ preparatory to the establishment of His Kingdom among the Gentiles, though the principle of it is of wider application.”<sup>2</sup>

In this parable and the next, Christ explains the meaning of the parables to His disciples. In lesson 2, I presented a brief outline of this parable, so as a reminder, I am copying it here as well;

The Parable of the Sower – Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23 – this parable teaches that the gospel will be preached throughout the course of the “mystery age” with variant responses to this gospel based upon how one’s heart has been prepared to receive it ( by God ). Responders to the truth will be given more revelation.

## The Parable

## Matthew 13:1-9

Verses 1-3 set the scene for us. The size of the gathered crowd is so great that Jesus comes out of ‘the house’ ( we are not told what house but cf. 13:36 – “*back inside the house again*”), and He first sat beside the sea, then moved to a boat, undoubtedly because of the size of the crowd, leaving the crowd on the shore within earshot. The facts of the parable were easy enough, thus was an agrarian society and they knew about planting and growing crops. Sometimes the crop grew well, sometimes unforeseen circumstances like locusts, other insects, hail lack of rain, too much heat, too much cold could make a crop sparse. So the facts were simple, but Jesus’ spiritual application was not, hence Jesus’ explanation to His disciples in vv. 11-17, and 18-23. Note v. 13.

We here today ( most of us ), are so familiar with this passage that we feel we “get it”, and we know what Jesus means. The application has been drilled into us for years – it’s about evangelism, spreading the gospel and the reasons for varied success in giving it out. In a real sense, this parable usually called “The Parable of the Sower” should be called “The Parable of the Soils.” It is really the soils which make the difference, it’s the same seed, good seed, and from each seed comes the same plant. That won’t be the case in the next parable. But all along, perhaps we’ve missed the main point. ②

Since this parable is the first of the series of ‘Kingdom Parables’, we have to determine why this one now? Why, on the heels of the rejection of the King in Matthew 12 is this parable given – ( and this is probably the same day as the rejection of Matthew 12 ) ? As an initial part of Jesus’ explanation ( see v. 11 ) and the phrase “*the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven*”( pars MK 4:11; LK 8:10 ). In other translations, besides the ESV, the word “secrets” is replaced by the word, “mysteries” ( NASB, NKJV, Legacy Standard ), “hidden truths” ( TCNT – 20<sup>th</sup> Century NT ). Note also 13:19 – this verse is a precursor for vv. 19,20,22,23, which is Jesus’ explanation for the symbolism of the parable He spoke in vv. 1-9 – the 4 soils, only 1 of which proves fruitful.

John MacArthur comments;

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<sup>2</sup> A.W. Pink, The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13 , RST, ND, p. 20

“As Jesus tells the story, several things become clear. First, nothing is said about the sower and his skill. There is only 1 sower in the story. The key difference between the seed that is devoured by the birds has nothing to do with the method the sower uses when he casts the seed.”<sup>3</sup>

Some commentators insist that this sower is Christ, based mostly on the sower in the second parable, who is Christ, but that is never stated here, it merely begins with “*A sower went out to sow...*”. It is probable certainly, but is not stated.

So, to continue, look at vv. 3-9. We see what the symbolism is now – but we don’t know who the sower is, but perhaps it doesn’t matter. But is it the church? Missionaries, evangelists, Christ or the Holy Spirit? All we can be certain of is that per Christ’s explanation in vv. 18-23, He is referring to the results of evangelistic efforts.

In the parable, we have 3 things ( or combinations of things ) that make the seeds ineffective for producing a crop. The seeds on the path ( a walkway around the field ) are sitting on a soil that has become hardened by people walking on it, and so birds “*came and devoured it.*” ( v. 4 ). In a spiritual sense – the result is unsaved people.

In vv. 5-6, some seed fell on rocky ground ( possibly beside the path ), and the results are similar – there is not much soil, so the seed could germinate but did not have enough soil below it so it could extend a root and so the plant withers away. Jesus explains this in vv. 20-21 – here there is immediate joy, but with no root established, any endurance is short-lived because tribulation and persecution arises “*because of the Word,*” so immediately, the one whom the seed represents falls away = unsaved. (3)

In v. 7, the soil is full of thorns and weeds, which choke out the good seeds. The explanation Jesus provides in v. 22 is that the thorns represent “*the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches*” and these choke out the Word. The result, unfruitful – unsaved people.

Only the 4<sup>th</sup> soil, found in v. 8 is a good soil – the only 1 of the 4 soils that is good. In it, seeds germinate, take root, are not snatched by the birds, or withered by the sun’s heat, or drawn aside by the cares of the world or dissuaded by persecution or the pursuit of riches. Jesus explains in v. 23. First, the hearer hears the message and understands it, and as a result, bears fruit and yields varying amounts – a hundredfold, or sixtyfold or thirtyfold.

So we need to understand – what is this fruit? John MacArthur cites the parallel passage in LK 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.” He comments that these hearers hold the Word fast, i.e., tenaciously, with perseverance ( patience ).

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, Parables, T. Nelson, 2015; pg. 22

One of the key lessons of the parable, according to Jesus' explanation, is that "the mark of authentic faith is endurance."<sup>4</sup>

According to John 8:30-31, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.*"

The fruit of a committed and persevering Christian is what we see in Gal. 5:22-23; cf. James 2:17-18; Eph. 2:10. The expectation of the fruit in this area is abundance. 100/60/30 – notice the descending numbers, not ascending. In the dispensational view of why this is called a Kingdom Parable, the very action of going out to sow God's Word ( this is what the seed represents ) is antithetical to the Jewish Old Covenant method. In the OC, the nations would come to Israel ( i.e., The Queen of Sheba sought out Solomon to see his wisdom ), and in the Millennial Kingdom, passages like Isa. 2:2-3 & Zech. 14:16-18 predict that the nations will flock to Jerusalem so they can bask in spiritual truth from Christ. Now, however, the seed is being sown in a way that the gospel is heading outward from Jerusalem and Israel – cf. Matt. 28:16-20. To some, since the Kingdom is a long way off, as we will see in our lessons, the gospel will go out, but the return, the success of the message will be less and less ( 100/60/30 ) progressively. Only 1 of the 4 soils is fruitful. We see that today don't we? People are less and less likely to accept a gospel message of an exclusive Saviour, because there are options all around them. To even get them into a church to hear God's Word is a real challenge.

The fruitful soil is not the Kingdom, it is "the Word of the kingdom" ( v. 19 ), so those who are the seeds planted in the good soil are to be "sons of the kingdom" or "kingdom heirs" – cf. 13:38. ( from the next parable but there are some similarities that exist in some points of the parables ). That doesn't mean that every fact can be transferred back and forth from parable to parable. ④

Certainly, the Parable of the Soils reveals that there are going to be different responses to the message of the kingdom, and it reveals why. In fact, the message of the kingdom will be rejected by every 3 out of 4 people, according to the numbers here.

Mark 4:13 tells us that this parable, as it reveals the program, is basic to understanding the other parables, many of which relate in direct correlation to this one.

## The Explanation of the Parable by Jesus – Matthew 13:18-23

James Montgomery Boice sees order in these Matthew 13 parables, as many do, and he makes a point which I think makes a lot of sense. He says that this parable is first because it "deals with the beginning or origins of the kingdom."<sup>5</sup> Boice is not, that I am aware of, a dispensationalist, and he may mean something different by "kingdom" but the point is well taken anyway.

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<sup>4</sup> IBID, MacArthur, pg. 36

<sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, The Parables of Jesus, Moody, 1983, pg. 15

In Jesus' explanation of this parable, found in Matthew 13:18-23, there are soils involved ( 13:3-9 ), and he explains the parable to the disciples. In His explanation we read first of "*seeds sown along the path.*" ( 13:4/13:19 ) The path was walked on by many, compacting the soil, and hardening the surface so the seeds laid on the surface and did not penetrate the dirt, so in the parable itself, birds came and ate the exposed seeds. In Jesus' explanation, the person's heart ( which the soil represents ) doesn't understand the Word ( Boice calls this condition "being hard-hearted ), and the evil one ( Satan ) comes and snatches away what was heard. ( cf. 2 Cor. 4:3-4 ). This, per Boice, means people whose hearts are hardened by sin and aren't interested in the gospel message.

The second soil is where the seeds sown fall on rocky ground ( vv. 5-6 ), and Jesus explains in vv. 20-21. The gospel in this case is heard and received with joy, but due to the rockiness of the soil, there isn't enough soil so the plants cannot sink in good roots. The sun comes up and the plant withers. Jesus' interprets this to mean that there is brief endurance but "tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, and he immediately falls away. Note John 2:23-25; 8:30-32. So some will rejoice briefly and look like a believer, but not having counted the cost ( Luke 14:28 ), they are quickly exposed as unsaved.

The third soil is associated with seed that falls among thorns ( weeds ). The thorns grow and choke out the good seed. Jesus explained, the thorns are "*the deceitfulness of riches and cares of the world*" that make the Word ( the Gospel ) prove unfruitful. Boice says it like this, "Slowly, very slowly, they strangle the buddings of spiritual life within."<sup>6</sup> (5)

So far, three of the four soils have proven unfruitful, and the seeds were wasted and real spiritual life ( which is symbolized by the soil results ) has not been manifested. This is how the path toward the Kingdom will develop in the interregnum. Most people, confronted with the gospel ( the 'seed' if you will ), will reject it outright, or accept it ( seemingly ) but not follow through due to Satanic or worldly interference or tribulation because of their "conversion", or are drawn aside by the lure of wealth, pleasure and sin. This leaves the fourth soil.

The 4<sup>th</sup> soil ( 13:8/13:23 ) produces grain, 100 fold / 60 fold / 30 fold, as mentioned earlier, in descending order. Jesus says this is one who hears and understands the Word and subsequently bears fruit. And the differences in the yield show that not every believer is the same, something we are all aware of as we intermingle with many true believers in our own lives. This soil represents an open heart, one prepared by God to accept the message and respond to it in a positive way.

One thing that is important to note here is that in 13:19, it is called "*the word of the kingdom,*" not the kingdom itself. So it is not the actual kingdom that enters hearts and minds, or Matthew would have said just "the kingdom."

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<sup>6</sup> IBID, p.19

The descending order of the fruitfulness ( 100/60/30 ) tells us that a lack of receptivity in this age is not meant to convey the arrival of the kingdom, since the kingdom will be a time in history when “*the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as water covers the earth* “( Isaiah 11:9 ).

A.W. Pink comments;

“One great design of his opening parable is to teach us the measure of success which the Gospel would receive among the Gentiles. In other words, we are shown what the results of this broadcast sowing of the Seed would be. First of all, most of the ground upon which it fell would prove unfavorable; the hard, shallow and thorny soils were uncongenial to productiveness. Second, external opposition would be encountered - the birds of the air would come and snatch it away. Third, the sun would scorch, and that which was lacking in moisture at its roots would wither away. Only a fractional part of the Seed sown would yield any increase, and thus all expectations for the ultimate universal triumph of the Gospel were removed. The plain teaching of our present parable should at one dissipate the optimistic but vain dreams of post-millenarians. It answers clearly and conclusively the following questions: What is to be the result of the broadcast sowing of the Seed? Will all the world receive it and every part of the field produce fruit/ Will the Seed spring up and bear a universal harvest, so that not a single grain of it is lost? Our Savior explicitly tells us that the greater part of the seed produces no fruit, so that no worldwide conquests by the Gospel, in the Christianizing of the race, are to be looked for. Nor was there any hint that, as the age progressed, there would be any change, and that later sowers would meet with greater success, so that the wayside, stony, and thorny ground hearers would cease to exist or would rarely be found. Instead of that, the Lord Himself has plainly warned us that instead of the fruitage from the Gospel showing an increase, there would be a marked decrease; for when speaking of the fruit borne (6) He said, “which also bears fruit, and brings forth, some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty” ( v. 23 ).”<sup>7</sup>

So, in summary, this first kingdom parable is our entrance into the Kingdom Parables, and lays the groundwork for understanding the thread of thought that runs through the other 7 parables as well as others in other chapters in Luke and Mark. These parables will show us the shaping up of the stages of the interregnum which precedes the Kingdom for a long time ( which we are ourselves a small part of ) before the return of Jesus Christ.

Had Christ not been rejected as King and Messiah of Israel, that kingdom could have begun in about 29-32 AD, but that rejection is now history and Jesus’ rejection and murder are now known and are the reason there will be a second coming. He came as King, but consider that, as of yet, although He sits on His Father’s throne at His right hand, He is “reigning” but that current reign is as our High Priest, and does not fulfill ( in a dispensational understanding of it ) the OT prophecies of an earthly reign of Christ on David’s throne in Jerusalem. ( Cf. Revelation 3:21. )

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<sup>7</sup> Pink cited in Andrew Woods, The Coming Kingdom, pp. 112-113

Yet, some might question Jesus' statement in Matt. 28:18 and wonder if His heavenly reign is not the kingdom. Here is Andrew Woods striking comment on that;

"The mere fact that Jesus was granted all authority just prior to His Ascension does not mean that He was exercising His authority in a regal sense. In other words, receiving authority ( Matt. 28:18 ) and exercising authority are two completely different things. The author of Hebrews indicates that Christ in His present Session following His Ascension was not yet exercising authority in His Davidic reign when he observes, "but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet" ( Heb. 10:12-13 ). By here citing Psalm 110:1 with its inclusion of the word "until," the writer communicates that Christ had not yet entered the time in history when He will exercise authority over His enemies, which will be accomplished in His Davidic reign. Another commentary notes, "All authority has been given to Jesus, although he is not yet exercising all of it ( Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 2:5-9; 10:12,13; Rev. 3:21 ). He will manifest this power when He returns in all His glory ( Matt. 19:28; I Cor. 15:27,28; Eph. 1:10 ).

We find the identical pattern at work in David's life during the interim period between his anointing as king ( I Sam. 16 ) and when he actually began to reign as king ( 2 Sam. 2; 5 ). During this transitional era, David possessed authority that he did not exercise. He twice had opportunity to kill Saul but instead opted not to do so ( I Sam. 24; 26 ). Rather, David entrusted the details regarding his accession to the throne over the nation to God. In a similar way, Christ has been anointed as king at His resurrection and ascension ( Pss. 2; 110 )but has not yet begun to reign as king over the earth. While possessing authority, He does not exert that authority to its fullest extent. He instead faithfully remains at the Father's right hand entrusting the time of His accession to the throne over the earth from Jerusalem to the timing of His Father."<sup>8</sup>

## Summary

There is no problem with the method of sowing or the seed being sown. In the second parable, we will see that there are two types of seed sown, but here, the life is in the seed itself, and the fruit of the hearer does not depend on the person but on the prepared heart which God has made ready to hear and believe. It must be planted in soil that has been prepared for it. In this case, by the Holy Spirit – cf. Ezek. 36:26.

Identifying the sower, is not possible dogmatically, it could be Christ, but we are not told. It involves ongoing sowing – mostly based on the 4<sup>th</sup> soil and the mention of more or less fruit – it does not seem to be a one-time event. For that matter, the other 3 are ongoing too. So, the church, not mentioned until Matt. 16:18, will certainly be involved in the sowing, as will the disciples, apostles, God's Word, evangelists and missionaries, and every day believers who witness for Christ. In the grand scheme of this parable, it doesn't matter because God didn't see fit to tell us, as He does in parable 2.

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<sup>8</sup> IBID, The Coming Kingdom, pg. 238

Another thing this parable tells us is that, contrary to post-millennialists, who believe Christ will return as King only once the church has managed to reach and convert most of the world. But, based on this 4:1 ratio of gospel failure vs success, on a descending progression, and the plain historical facts, that position seems extremely untenable.

We have covered the explanation portions of this parable in a prior lesson so I won't go into detail here. But note the disciples question in v. 10. This question makes it apparent that prior to this, Christ had apparently not taught in parables ( and the Scripture record backs that up ).

## Answers to Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God in the Bible

I mentioned on January 14<sup>th</sup>, that I wanted to add a brief addendum to each parable lesson starting with this one. Jim had asked me a question about when the Kingdom began after the first lesson that really got me thinking about this, and then seeing Andy Woods going through his book, *The Coming Kingdom* – on You Tube, which I used heavily to prepare these lessons, I felt a lot of people in the church hear “the kingdom of God” but don't really understand what it means because it is a phrase we hear a lot, but assume we know what it is, but in reality, in the Bible, it is a very complex topic. Get it wrong, and you'll have a hard time interpreting the entire Bible. Many erroneously assume eh Church is the Kingdom. But it is not. Jesus is never said to be the King of the church ( for one thing ).

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As we will see as we go through our series, although there are no particular phrases “Kingdom of God” in the OT, there are verses that make it clear that the Universal Kingdom over which God rules sovereignly has always existed, since He created all that there is. Note Psalm 93:1-2; and Daniel 4:17. I add this quote below from Andrew Woods where he gives a good general explanation of this.

“At the outset a distinction must be drawn between the universal kingdom and the theocratic ( or mediatorial ) kingdom. Such a distinction is justified since some Bible verses present the kingdom as in a state of perpetual existence ( Ps. 93:1-2 ) while others indicate that the kingdom will be a future reality ( Dan. 2:44 ). Moreover, some verses depict the kingdom as universal in scope ( Ps. 103:19 ) while other verses picture the kingdom as earthly ( Dan. 2:35, 44-45 ). Furthermore, some verses present the kingdom as being directly ruled by God ( Dan. 4:17 ) while other verses depict the kingdom as being indirectly administered by God through a human agent ( Ps. 2:6-9 ). In addition, while some verses present the kingdom as something that is always in existence ( Ps. 93:1-2 ), still other verses predict its arrival as conditioned upon some kind of human response ( Ex. 19:5; Matt. 3:2; 11:14; 23:37-39 ).

Therefore, the universal kingdom is eternal, comprehensive, under God's direct rule, and always in existence. By contrast, the theocratic kingdom is futuristic, earthly, under God's indirect rule, and conditional. Thus, interpreters of Scripture have long observed this crucial distinction between the universal and theocratic kingdom.”<sup>9</sup> This complexity is what makes the Kingdom of God difficult to define.

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Woods, *The Coming Kingdom*, Grace Gospel Press, 2016, pp. 5-6

We will also find that in God's plan and purpose, He has used man in a number of situations in which a specific man rules the world ( or sometimes the nation of Israel ) on behalf of God, at His behest. This is called a "Theocratic Kingdom." The first Theocratic Kingdom was Adam ruling over Eden with Eve. Due to their sin, it ended tragically and plunged the entire world to come into sin. ( cf. Romans 5:12-21 ). Since that time, the world has been ruled in a spiritual sense by Satan. The many phrases applied to him – such as roaming about seeking whom he may devour, and his statement of Matthew 4:8-9, which went unchallenged by Christ, tells us that, although God is certainly in sovereign control over Satan ( Job 1:12; 2:6 ) He is allowing this "prince of the power of the air" controlled access to the entire world until the times of the end – Revelation 20:7-10 ( and cf. Rev. 12:7-16 ). This is still under God's Universal Kingdom.

In future addendums to these lessons, Lord willing, I will try to develop this theme more to help us all understand these Kingdom parables better.

We will now move forward to the next Kingdom Parable – The Parable of the Wheat and Tares.