

Matthew 13:1-23 | “Which Soil are You?”
Preached on September 24, 2023 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 13, and we will be starting in verse 1. *[pause]*

We will be covering the parable of the sower, or more accurately, the parable of the soils.
[pauseeee]

Have you ever been surprised by how people responded to something? *[pause]*

Let's say that you owned a new business, and you were going to be giving people a new product.

So you did your homework and researched and researched to see if there would be interest among people to buy this product. *[pause]*

You even talked to other people in the business field, who shared with you that they really thought that your product would take off and become very popular. *[pause]*

The demand seemed high, so you decided to produce the supply to meet the demand. *[pauseeee]*

Expectations and hopes were high, as you cut the ribbon and officially opened up your business.

You thought that once you opened the door, the floodgates would burst forth with eager new customers, ready to try your new product.

But sadly, the response to your product was not what you were expecting. *[pause]*

You were utterly shocked and surprised to find that not many people actually wanted your product.

There were some who responded well to it, but definitely not as many as you figured. *[pauseeee]*

As time went on, it didn't change -- still the same mostly negative response. *[pause]*

Eventually, the surprise and shock of the mixed responses to your product caused you to give up on the business altogether.

For in your mind, it was a total failure. *[pauseeee]*

Varied responses to something that we think is so good can be discouraging and disorienting, can't it?

Sometimes it boggles our mind, we become confused, and we constantly wonder, “Why?”
[pauseeee]

Have you ever thought that way when it comes to the varied responses to Jesus?

Have you ever wondered why there are so many negative responses to Him? *[pause]*

Maybe you think, “How can so many people be against Someone so good, and dismiss such good news as the gospel?” *[pause]*

We look around at so many people “deconstructing” their faith and walking away, and it surprises us.

We think about all of the people that we grew up with together in church and now stand amazed at how many of them no longer seem interested in church or the things of God. *[pauseeee]*

We could probably all rattle off names of people who used to be so faithful, but now they are nowhere to be found. *[pause]*

Or maybe for you it’s closer to home.

You wonder how so many of your family members no longer seem to be following Christ anymore. *[pause]*

Why does that happen so often?

How could they just give it all up, and no longer seem interested in Christianity? *[pauseeee]*

The same sorts of questions were probably swirling around in the minds of Christ’s disciples at this point in Jesus’ ministry.

For here was Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and He was doing so many miracles and teaching with authority.

Yet people opposed Him, as is seen especially as the scribes and Pharisees rejected Him in the previous chapter. *[pause]*

How could that be?

They probably thought the Messiah would be welcomed by the religious leaders and people with enthusiasm, yet there was this great mixture of responses to Christ. *[pause]*

Well Jesus answers that perplexity by giving a parable about four soils here in Matthew 13. *[pauseeee]*

Now what is a parable?

A parable is a story or illustration that is meant to communicate a spiritual truth.

Many people describe them as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning”. *[pauseeee]*

If you just listen to a parable on a surface level, you won’t get it, but to get it, you must think and pry deeper than the surface. *[pauseeee]*

Now for the parable of the sower, we get the benefit of Jesus giving us the meaning, so that helps us see its meaning clearly.

Let's READ the passage. [READ VERSES 1-23]

This parable itself in its basic story is very easy to understand...

A man sows seed among different types of soil, and the result is dependent on the type of soil that it was sown upon.

But obviously this isn't a story teaching us about the best place to sow seed, but it's a story meant to reveal spiritual truth.

So we must hear Jesus' explanation of it, and what we find is that there are...

Four responses to the Word

Jesus tells us that the seed is actually the word (or message) of the kingdom and the differing types of soils represent how people respond differently to that message. [*pauseee*]

So thinking of this parable's meaning from 30,000 feet (so to say), we see that since there are varying responses to the Word, then we shouldn't be surprised by varying responses to it. [*pauseee*]

For the disciples, they may have been wondering why there was such rejection of Jesus, if He was the Messiah.

And we can wonder the same thing: why is it that so many people don't receive the message of what Christ has done for them?

Yet Jesus shows us that this mixed response to Him is not some wrench in the plan that caught Him off guard. [*pauseee*]

OK, but then what's *the cause* of their rejection? A problem with the seed, the sower, or the method?

Well according to the parable, what's the difference between the responses of each one? The type of soil. [*pauseee*]

Anyone in here have a garden, or have done gardening in the past? [*pause*]

What you find is that certain vegetables either do well or do badly based on the type of soil that you have.

Do you have sandy, silt, clay, or loamy soil? It matters. [*pause*]

So also, in this parable, the problem was the soil, not the sower or the seed.

And so each soil represents a different heart disposition. *[pauseeee]*

So what are the four responses to the word? What are the four soils?

We first see...

I. The path of hardened rejection

Jesus shares that some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate the seed.

He then explains that this is when someone hears the word, doesn't understand it, and the evil one snatches away what was sown. *[pauseeee]*

Think of a path...

A path becomes a path when many people walk on it and over time it becomes hardened soil.

It's not good for seeds to fall on, for they don't seep into the soil, and the birds easily snatch the seed and eat it. *[pause]*

This is a picture of people who when they hear the gospel, they do not accept it. *[pause]*

The reason is because of their hardened heart, like a path.

They do not understand the message because they do not want to understand it.

Their heart is hard, so the word doesn't seep into their hearts, as it should.

Conviction of sin and conviction of the need to be saved doesn't happen, and there is an attitude of indifference to the Gospel.

They aren't receptive to it, but discard it as foolishness. *[pauseeee]*

When this happens, Satan swoops in and takes the seed away because Satan absolutely hates the truth of the gospel. *[pause]*

If he could, he would gobble up every seed sown, so that it can't get into the ground of hearts.

So if you don't let the seed go into your heart with receptivity, then Satan will take advantage of that opportunity to distract you from the truth.

He will take that open door to tempt you to think, "I don't need that stuff. I'm good."

Or, "That was nice, but it's not for me." *[pauseeee]*

Oh, the danger of a hard heart!

When Satan sees a hardened heart, he licks his lips, so to say, and like a bird who sees seed, he swoops in as fast as he can. *[pause]*

He uses deception, distraction, or really anything he can to get that hardened person to not contemplate the gospel truth.

And the person moves on with life, not dwelling upon the Gospel anymore. [pauseeee]

You see, a hardened heart actually opens itself up to Satan, while closing itself off to God.

And what a dangerous place to be in. [pause]

In fact, verses 10-17 shows us further about those who continue to reject Christ: God confirms them in their hardening. *[pauseeee]*

The disciples ask Jesus why He speaks to the people in parables, for parables weren't super clear.

And Jesus explains that He does this because the disciples had received Christ, so God would reveal to them more truth and they would grow in their understanding.

But for those who had rejected the clear signs and truth of Jesus, they would actually lose their capacity to hear even more. [pauseeee]

The way parables are given makes it so that if you are open and receptive, you want to know the truth, so you go to Christ for the answer.

But if you are not open and receptive, you just disregard it on the surface as just a story, and you don't pry into the meaning. [pause]

So what the parables do is if your heart is already hardened, then parables conceal truth, but if your heart is receptive, then parables reveal truth. *[pauseeee]*

Now we must understand that this isn't some mean thing that God is doing to poor innocent people.

Just think of all of the clear signs and revelation they had received up to this point. *[pause]*

Jesus had done so many miracles in their midst and taught so much, yet they rejected Him.

So now God was giving them what they wanted, and confirming them in their rejection.

And the parables act as sort of a judgment upon them for their rejection of Him. [pauseeee]

Maybe this is you.

You have heard the gospel time and time again, but you have never actually responded in repentance and faith in what Jesus did on the Cross. [pause]

Do not keep thinking, "I'll respond some other time."

Or, "I'll have a future chance someday."

Satan may deceive you and distract you so that you neglect the gospel message and move on with your life.

God may say, “OK, you have rejected the clear things of Christ, and you want to be hardened against Me, then I won’t give you further light.” *[pause]*

What a horrific place to be in!

As commentator Stuart Weber says, “It is a dangerous thing to hear and understand God’s truth, and then to consciously choose to disbelieve it.

Such people will become less and less aware of their own doom, as they slide deeper into denial of the Messiah.”¹ *[pause]*

Turn in faith today in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross for sins, and rose again in victory.

Believe in what He did on the Cross, trusting that He is the only way to be saved, and you shall be saved. *[pauseeee]*

So you have the path of hardened rejection, but next...

II. The rocky ground of shallow emotionalism

Jesus tells us that the seed sown on the rocky ground is the person “who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, 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.” *[pauseeee]*

This soil is an interesting one, isn’t it?

The rocky ground actually receives the gospel *with joy!* *[pause]*

By all of our measurements, for such people we would say, “Look, what a success! People are turning to Christ!”

“Look at how people are responding to the Gospel! We had hundreds of hands raised for Christ saying that they received Christ today.”

But Jesus is telling us that not all is as it appears at first. *[pauseeee]*

Some Christians emphasize emotion so highly, and if it seems like people are responding emotionally, then they consider it a success.

But Jesus is showing us that initial emotion isn’t an accurate indicator of the true nature of the heart.

¹ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, vol. 1, *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 193.

There is such a thing as shallow emotionalism, where the person in the height of their emotions makes it appear like they truly believe, but actually don't. *[pauseeee]*

I've seen this time and time again, especially growing up and going to Christian camps.

This is not to say camps are bad and that every response at camp won't last because that's not true, but I'm just pointing out that it can happen easier there.

Teens come back from camp on an emotional high saying how they have changed, yet a month down the road, they are right back where they were. *[pauseeee]*

I remember one specific time in my life when I saw this most vividly.

In my senior year of high school, our class took a week-long trip to a Christian camp. *[pause]*

In one chapel service, the emotions were high, and the speaker tugged at our emotions and pressured each of us to "throw a stick in the fire" showing that we are determined to change our ways. *[pause]*

For me, I didn't see how throwing a stick in the fire indicated much, and felt like the speaker was manipulating us to some degree.

So I didn't go up, while most of my classmates went up in their emotional high to throw that stick in the fire. *[pause]*

Some were crying, and others quiet and reflective. *[pause]*

From all accounts of that evening, you would think my classmates would return home completely different people, following Christ with their lives.

But sadly, a couple weeks go by and they are back to their old ways.

Now it's many years later and as I think about my classmates, many of them have nothing to do with Christ. *[pauseeee]*

How could that be?!

They threw their sticks in the fire!

They seemed to receive the Word with joy! *[pause]*

Isn't all of that an indicator that they would follow Christ passionately for the rest of their lives? *[pause]*

Christ shows us, "They had no root in themselves; they were rocky ground."

For when life gets tough, when persecution comes, they fall away. *[pauseeee]*

You see, shallow emotionalism can happen, where in your emotional high, you think, “Yes! That sounds good to me!”

But when times get tough, and that emotional high is gone, then you say, “Eh, I don’t want this anymore. It doesn’t sound too good now.” *[pauseeee]*

For many, they jump on board because of all the benefits that seem to come along with following Christ. *[pause]*

Sometimes the preacher promises them that their life will just be so much better if they follow Christ.

Or maybe a preacher promises prosperity if only they would put their faith in Jesus.

And in their desire for those good things, they say, “Yes, I believe!”

But in actuality, they don’t believe - there was no root.

And when there’s no root then the rays of tribulation and persecution scorch them, so they wither away, not wanting to face them. *[pauseeeee]*

You see, if you truly believe in Christ, then Christ is your only hope and He is your everything.

And when He’s your hope, your life, your rock, your everything then even if tribulation or persecution comes, you are willing to endure it for Christ.

But if you see Christ as an option, if you see Christ as merely an ATM machine, then when hardship comes, you’re out. *[pauseeeee]*

Those who are rocky ground are only committed when it’s easy.

They are fair-weather disciples, for when times get tough, they think, “What’s with this? I thought following Christ would make my life easier.” *[pauseeee]*

Do you ever wonder why some people no longer follow Christ, though they seemed to earlier in their life?

This may be the reason.

Life got hard or following Christ meant getting made fun of, and they didn’t consider it worth it anymore, for they never truly believed. *[pauseeee]*

What about you?

There may be some here today who are rocky soil. *[pause]*

Do you only follow Christ because of the earthly benefits now, or do you see following Christ as worth *everything?* *[pause]*

Are you committed to Him only when it's easy, or will you follow Him, come what may?
[pauseeee]

The third type of soil is...

III. The thorny ground of competing interests

This is the ground that has thorns in it, so the thorns grow and choke out the plant.

And Jesus tells us that 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.” *[pause]*

So this is someone who once again seems to receive the gospel, but they don't truly believe.

They hear the Gospel, and they appear to be Christians.

But what happens is that time proves them not to be true believers, for they are unfruitful.
[pauseeee]

But what's the cause of their unfruitfulness? Competing interests.

These people are taken up with the cares of the world.

They are so worried about money, possessions, popularity, fun, entertainment, hobbies, and the like that they are pulled away from Christ.

They are deceived into thinking that money and possessions will fulfill them and they pursue them greatly. *[pause]*

You see, for someone like this, Christianity is just one thing among many other things in their life.

And what happens is that other competing interests knock up against following Christ, and they choose those other things regularly.

Eventually the other things “choke out” their professed faith. *[pauseeee]*

Sadly, this is one of the main reasons why we know many people who used to be so faithful, and now they are nowhere to be found.

Other things became more important.

The pursuit and concern about things have beaten out following Christ. *[pauseeeee]*

Listen to this quote by John MacArthur...

He states, “When we think of apostasy, we generally think of blatant and outspoken rejections of Christ and the gospel.

But much more often, apostates merely drift out of our churches without us even noticing.

They may seem like solid believers and loyal members outwardly, but inwardly their loyalties remain divided between Christ and the world.

Their hearts are still fixed on temporal and trivial things.

The pull of the world continually erodes their profession of faith until they eventually disappear from Christian fellowship altogether.”² *[pauseeee]*

Now it’s easy to look at others, but are there indications in your life of any thorns?

Are there competing interests in your life that crowd out your following of Christ? *[pauseeee]*

We cannot be so about the things of this world that we let them grow and then distract us away from Christ...

...But Christ must be our all so much so that we are willing to let go of the things of this world. *[pauseeeee]*

Now if you just left the parable there, this would all be bad news, and a great downer, but thankfully, that isn’t the end, for we see...

IV. The good soil of open receptivity

There are some who *do* respond well until the end.

It’s not all hopeless, for there are true believers, who persevere and bear fruit in their lives. *[pauseeee]*

These are described by Jesus as “good soil” and are the ones who hear the word, understand it, and bear fruit. *[pauseeee]*

You know, it’s so easy to think that true Christianity is merely in our outward professions.

Like, “Oh, as long as you outwardly profess faith in Christ, you must be saved.”

But Christianity is more than mere outward professions, for those outward professions may not be real.

Instead, true discipleship is having a genuine heart trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, which is displayed in perseverance and fruit. *[pauseeeee]*

Now why is a true disciple pictured as good soil?

Well, think with me about good soil.

² https://www.masters.edu/thinking_blog/the-four-soils-among-the-thorns/.

It takes in the seed and allows water to come in and water the seed.

Eventually the seed is able to germinate, take root, and then grow. *[pause]*

There's not a bunch of thorns to choke it out, but the good soil provides room for the seed to flourish. *[pause]*

This is like the true Christian.

They are open and receptive to the Gospel, and allow it to go into their hearts and take root.

They don't allow thorns to compete with the plant, but it grows and grows into wonderful fruit. *[pause]*

You see, the true Christian has been open and receptive to the Gospel, so they have believed and trusted in it. *[pause]*

Unlike the hardened soil, they are receptive to Christ.

Unlike the rocky ground, they allow the truth to take root in them.

Unlike the thorny ground, they do not allow thorns to choke it out. *[pause]*

Basically, they are open and receptive to Christ, and let His truth go into them and grow. *[pauseeee]*

The disciples are examples of good soil.

When they didn't quite understand the parable at first, what did they do that the crowds didn't do, especially later with the other parables?

They pressed into Christ to learn and understand what it meant! *[pause]*

They were open and receptive to the words of Christ, so they went to Him.

So those with good soil are the ones who go to Jesus in faith and say, "Teach me, Lord!" *[pauseeee]*

Are you open and receptive to the words of Christ?

Have you truly trusted in the good news of what Christ has done?

Do you continue to sit at the feet of Jesus, desiring to learn more from His Word in order to grow? *[pause]*

I pray that we all here are that good soil, who have heard and truly understood the Gospel. *[pause]*

So have you repented of your sins and trusted in Christ alone from your heart?

Do you long to learn more from Christ, and want to be shaped by His word? *[pauseeee]*

This parable wasn't given to be a nice little story that we just move on from and say, "That was nice."

No, this parable is given so that we would all do a heart-check.

So...

It's heart-check time: which soil are you? *[pause]*

Some of you know the type of soil in your backyard more than the type of soil you are here.

That shouldn't be us, but we must examine our hearts. *[pause]*

When we do this, we shouldn't look for perfection. *[pause]*

I like this Matthew Henry quote that says, "That which distinguished this good ground from the rest, was, in one word, fruitfulness.

He does not say that this good ground has no stones in it, or no thorns; but there were none that prevailed to hinder its fruitfulness."³ *[pause]*

We may each have a thorn here and there that starts to try to grow in our lives, but the question is, what do you do when you see that thorn?

We may each have a stone here and there, but the question is, do you keep pressing deeper past it? *[pauseeee]*

The key is to dwell upon the seed, that is, dwell upon the Gospel! *[pause]*

Remember what Christ has done for you on the Cross and how He took your sin and nailed it to the Cross.

Remember that only in Him is forgiveness and life because He took your place.

Remember that He rose again victoriously, promising that someday our mortal bodies will be raised to immortality.

Remember the grace of God in Christ Jesus for you! *[pauseeee]*

Who are we that we should deserve such love, such grace, such mercy?!

We don't, yet our Savior powerfully and wonderfully saved us. *[pause]*

Marvel at His matchless grace for you on the Cross, and see that He is worth every tribulation and persecution. *[pause]*

³ Quoted in this article: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/parable-soils>.

He is our Lord and Master, who every knee will bow down to, so how could we not follow Him with our lives?!

He gives us the amazing riches of forgiveness, life, help, and hope, so how could we pursue deceitful earthly riches, instead? *[pause]*

Dwell upon the Gospel, and push past the stone of shallowness, saying, “No, my hope is Christ! I must know Him more!”

Dwell upon the Gospel, and put that thorn of worldly distraction to death, saying, “No, Christ is my all!” *[pause]*

When we do this, when we truly believe, we *will* bear fruit.

Not because we did it in our amazingness, but because the seed of the Word worked in us.