



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Unqualified Discipleship

Matthew 13.3-9, 18-23

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Introduction

1. Two words that we see often in the gospels are “crowds” (ὄχλος; *ochlos* [149x] and “amazed” (θαυμάζω, *thaumazō* [30x], and various synonyms).
2. The two are often seen together. Jesus attracted the people because what he did amazed.
 - a. In Matthew, the crowds were astonished (ἐκπλήσσω, *ekplēssō*) at his teaching and followed him (7.28; 8.1).
 - 1) They saw him heal a paralytic and were “filled with awe” (NIV; φοβέω, *phobeō* - 9.8).
 - 2) They witnessed two exorcisms from a man who was also mute and marveled (9.33; θαυμάζω, *thaumazō*) and were amazed (12.23; ἐξίστημι, *existēmi*).
 - b. The disciples were also often amazed at what Jesus did, as witness their reaction when he stilled the storm (8.27; “marveled” - *thaumazō*).
3. But not all were pleased. Some reacted to his amazing teaching and deeds by turning away from him and others plotted to kill him (see Matt 11.20-24 and especially chapter 12).
 - a. Why did some who saw the same deeds that led others to discipleship go and begin to plot his death (see the reaction to the raising of Lazarus—John 11.47-53)?
 - b. Why were some more receptive to his teaching than others?
4. The parable we will study here helps answer both questions. It is one of Jesus’ most famous and doubtless best understood parables, probably because he himself interpreted it.

Body

- I. How To Read a Parable.
 - A. The fact that Jesus interpreted this parable for his disciples helps us learn how to read and interpret any parable.
 - B. Important steps in interpreting a parable.
 1. Remember that the parables were told in first century Palestine.
 - a. The original hearers understood because the details were “in the air” they breathed.

- 1) In our parable, some see significance in the fact that Jesus says, “Consider the sower ...” [CSB]—as if pointing to a sower the people could see.¹
 - b. Since we do not live in that time and place, we have to make the effort to learn the significance of the details; the more foreign the custom is to our experience, the more difficult is this part of the process. But it is absolutely necessary.
2. Remember that, even at their most enigmatic, Jesus intended for his parables to be understood (cf. Matt 13.11). They were designed to reveal truth.
3. Remember that there were reasons Jesus told the parables he did. Careful study of the context is important, looking to the text for the reasons he told the parables.
 - a. In some passages, there are explicit statements (Luke 15.1-2; 18.9).
 - b. In other texts, we have to read more of the text (both before and after the parable we are studying) in order to understand (Matt 13.3-9 illustrates this point).
4. Remember, there have been some far-fetched parable interpretations, often in church Bible classes as people attempt to explain the motives of parable characters, etc.²
 - a. Remember a variation of a previous point: the importance of the original context is paramount; a parable cannot mean now what it could not have meant then.
 - b. Keep in mind also that, while perhaps some who taught that every parable has only one point overemphasized that idea, they did so in response to those who seemed to find in the parables an unlimited number of points.
 - c. Jesus shows in our text the balanced course we need to pursue: different details in his story stand for different things, but they are used that way to drive home a crucial truth about what it means to follow him.

II. “Consider the Sower”—Understanding the Story.³

- A. Jesus told story everyone in his agrarian society would understand.
- B. Notice the manner of sowing.
 1. Broadcasting.
 2. Or a sack with a hole on the back of an animal.
- C. Typical soils.
 1. “Along the path” – in fields that were long narrow strips, the area between them was a right of way and thus used as a common path, as hard as pavement. Given the method of sowing, some seeds were bound to fall there.
 2. “Rocky ground” – not a rock pile, but a rocky ledge covered with a thin layer of soil; because it lacked depth, it retained the moisture it absorbed during the rainy season, but it also would not allow roots to sink deeply.
 3. “Among thorns” – the soil looked good, but also in the ground would be roots of grass and weeds that grew with more speed and strength than good seeds.

¹ Unlike the ESV which omits it, the CSB translates the first word in the Greek phrase, Ἴδου ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων (*Idou exēlthen ho speirōn*). The NRSV translates it, “Listen!”

² See, for example, an experience recounted by Michael Moss who was once visiting in a class in which the teacher invited the group to “see how many lessons we can get” from the parable they were discussing. As the class began to list several, the teacher recorded them on both sides of a large reversible chalkboard (C. Michael Moss, *When God Reigns: A Study in the Parables of Jesus* [Webb City, MO: Covenant Publishers, 2004], 11).

³ For more on the soils, with references to other studies of the text, see my discussion of Luke’s account of this parable in “A Call to Hear, Accept, & Do (8:1-21),” *Truth for Today*, Vol. 40, No. 9 (February 2020): 24-29.

4. "Good soil" – some soil was fertile, with room for roots to sink down, and was unencumbered by competing plants.

D. The nature of the harvest.

1. A ten percent yield was considered good.
2. Jesus would have surprised them with his 30, 60 and 100-fold total.

III. "Hear Then the Parable"—Understanding the Point.

A. Jesus' interpretation helps with this; consider the key elements as he saw them.

1. Seed – "the word of the kingdom" (Matt 13.19; see Luke 8.11).
2. Soils.
 - a. "Along the path" – hears the word, but does not understand; the seed is snatched away by the evil one (πονηρός, *ponēros*; v. 19).
 - b. "Rocky ground" – hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; but it has no firm root so that when affliction or persecution arises, this person immediately falls away (v. 21; literally, "is tripped up" – σκανδαλίζω, *skandalizō*, "not a gradual loss of interest, but a collapse under pressure"⁴).
 - c. "Among thorns" – hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it out so that it becomes unfruitful.
 - d. "Good soil" – the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.

B. What was Jesus' point?

1. Remember the context.
 - a. Despite early success and excitement (Matt 8-10), Jesus was facing increased opposition to his message (Matt 11-12).
 - b. Many were like the people in Isaiah's day, not unable to hear, but unwilling to do so (13.10-17).
2. It is evident from this context that Jesus intended to say something about the receptivity of the hearers.
 - a. Notice that the seed does not change.
 - b. It is the soils that differ; even the best seed will not grow in some hearts.
 - c. That does not mean it will be unproductive: where it does grow, it will produce abundantly (though not the same in every case even there; we do well to remember that even "the soil that produces only a small crop is nevertheless called 'good' [cf. 25.22-23]").⁵
3. But there is probably also a secondary application, particularly for later readers of Matthew's account.
 - a. Proclaimers of the word should take heart in knowing that:
 - 1) The fault is not with them when people are unreceptive, and
 - 2) Their work with good soil will not be in vain.
 - b. They must be patient, even as they are diligent in their sowing.

⁴ R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 219.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Matthew chapters 13-28*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version, paperback edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 315.

- C. Let us think of some applications of these two points.
1. What is the condition of our hearts?
 - a. Calloused, unable to hear new truth or unwilling to be moved to change?
 - b. Given to sporadic bursts of service with little or no persistence in following through?
 - c. Distracted by the concerns of this world, wealth, etc? This may take the form of being so busy with the urgent that we neglect the important.
 - d. Or open, eager, always seeking growth, new insights (not that the message is new, but rather our ability to understand it – see 13.11-12)?
 2. What of our commitment to teach the word?
 - a. Do we understand that it's up to us to sow, and up to God to give the increase (see 1 Cor 3.5-9)?
 - b. Do we understand that we may not always realize the good we are doing?⁶
 - c. Do we understand the need for patience and the corresponding need to not decide that, since the word is not working, we had best try something we devise to attract hearers?

Conclusion

1. Simon Kistemaker offers this succinct summary of the teaching of this parable: "The Word of God is proclaimed and causes a division among those who hear; God's people receive the Word, understand it, and obediently fulfill it; others fail to listen because of a hardened heart, a basic superficiality, or a vested interest in riches and possessions."⁷
2. Craig Blomberg cited and then added this cautionary comment to Kistemaker's point: "The parable provides a sober reminder that even the most enthusiastic outward response to the gospel offers no guarantee that one is a true disciple. Only the tests of time, perseverance under difficult circumstances, the avoidance of the idolatries of wealth and anxiety over earthly concerns (recall 6:25-34), and above all the presence of appropriate fruit (consistent obedience to God's will) can prove a profession genuine."⁸
3. How is your heart?

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⁶ This reality was brought home to me when I was working as a Bible teacher in a Christian high school. A young lady who was one of the sophomores in the classes I taught one year—and who had raised several good critical questions during my lectures—was baptized at the church she attended after the school year ended (I was a member of a different congregation in the area). A teaching colleague who also attended her congregation assisted the girl as she changed into the baptismal garments. To my surprise when I learned of it, the colleague related to me that the girl told her that my class had been influential in her decision.

⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told*, paperback edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980), 40.

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 218.