

THE SOILS (MATT 13.1-9, 18-23)

Kingdom Stories: The Parables of Jesus

I. REVIEW

A. As a church, we are committed to pursuing God's presence and his purposes for Kansas City. We desire to see more of the kingdom of Christ established in our own lives, our families, and even in the world around us. This is an essential part of what we believe it means to fulfill the mission that God has given to his people: *to give witness to his kingdom and expand its boundaries in the world.*

B. The reality of the kingdom of God was central to the message and ministry of Jesus. The gospel writers summarize Jesus' message as the proclamation of the kingdom breaking into the world.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1.14-15)

C. Believers are often confused about the nature of the kingdom of God and what it means to live in accordance with the reign of Christ; what it means to give witness to his kingdom; and what it means to partner with God's grace to see the kingdom bring transformation in our world.

D. The primary vehicle that Jesus used to illustrate the nature of the kingdom and its effects in the world was simple stories called parables. Through these stories, Jesus both reveals the "mysteries" of God's kingdom for those who have been given ears to hear, while also concealing the truth of the kingdom from those whose hearts remain hardened in sin.

E. As we look at these stories, we must ask the Lord for the spirit of revelation to understand the nature and glory of his kingdom in this world as well as that our hearts would love his kingdom and his ways, even when they are different than what we might desire.

¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸having the eyes of your hearts enlightened (Eph 1.17-18)

II. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER, THE SEED, AND THE SOILS

A. In both Matthew and Mark, this parable is the first parable of the kingdom that Jesus tells the crowds. In each of these gospels this parable begins a series of parables on the nature of the kingdom and is uniquely situated as the grounds for Jesus' instruction on the purpose of parables.

B. This parable is one of the few in the Gospels that receives a specific and detailed interpretation from Jesus. This further emphasizes the importance of this parable.

C. In Mark, Jesus emphasizes the importance of understanding this parable in relation to the nature of his parables and the kingdom in general.

¹³And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mark 4.13)

D. The essential purpose of this parable is to highlight the *relationship between the proclamation of God's word (the message of the kingdom) and its effects in the hearts of people*. In some ways this parable illustrates the reality of what was unfolding in Jesus' own day, as the religious leaders were increasingly rejecting his message. It also gives insight to how the word continues to work in the world in this age. This parable is designed to give us sobriety in relation to our own reception of the word, as well as provide helpful perspective as we seek to understand the activity of God's kingdom in the world.

III. THE WORD OF THE KINGDOM

- A. This parable is about what happens when people hear the word of the kingdom. Because of this, we must begin with understanding the content of the word of the kingdom in order to understand how this parable illustrates an aspect of how God's kingdom relates to this world.
- B. Last week we defined the kingdom of God as the *reign of God realized by men in the world*.
- C. This understanding of the kingdom is rooted in the creational intent of God. From the beginning, God purposed to administrate his sovereign reign over all things through the instrumental rule of mankind. He did this by making mankind in his image in order that we might have relationship with him (*communion*) and subdue the earth and rule over it (*dominion*).
- D. Adam's sin brought profound curses into the world with regards to mankind's ability to live in relationship with God (*communion*), but also excludes us from our ability to rightly fulfill the commission to subdue the earth under the righteous rule of God (*dominion*).
- E. God promised that he would send a Savior to bring forgiveness for sin and restore man in relationship with God (*communion*) and promised that he would send a King who would judge God's enemies, reclaim mankind's authority over the earth, and realize God's righteous rule over all creation (*dominion*).
- F. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God fulfilled his promises to send a Savior and a King. The word of the kingdom is the *proclamation of the good news of what God has done in Christ*. It is not a call for us to try and find the truth. It is a call for us to listen to the truth.
- G. The message of the kingdom is that God — knowing mankind, everything that we have done in sin, and our absolute inability to do anything to raise our state and fulfill our ultimate need — devised and accomplished a plan of redemption wherein men and women might be delivered from our sin and welcomed as citizens into his heavenly kingdom.
- H. Paul declared that the word of the kingdom did not consist in cleverly devised speech or the persuasive wisdom of this world. Rather, the message of the kingdom is a proclamation of the historical truth that Jesus Christ was crucified and raised again in order to destroy the works of the devil, be installed as the rightful king over all the earth, and open the door of salvation to any and all who would call upon his name.

¹And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (2 Cor 2:1-5)

IV. IMPORTANCE OF HEARING

- A. Jesus concludes the telling of this parable with the important statement: "*he who has ears, let him hear*." This phrase highlights the reality that the proclamation of the gospel must be met with a response.
- B. The appropriate response to the message of the kingdom is *faith*.
 - 1. Saving faith is a gracious work of the Holy Spirit given to those who have been born again (regenerated) by the power of the Spirit.

³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God..."

⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God... ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:3-5, 8)

¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved... ⁸For by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not by your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph 2.1-2, 4-5, 8)

2. Saving faith is the act of looking to Jesus and his work as the only hope for our salvation. This includes a personal understanding of, delighting in, and trusting in Christ Jesus and his work as offered in the gospel.

⁹if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... ¹³For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom 10.9, 13)

²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 11.2)

3. Saving faith expresses itself in the posture of responding to the message of the gospel in true repentance and a posture of loving submission to the sovereign Lordship of Christ.

³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and the labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved of God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. (1 Thes 1.3-5)

- C. Paul declares that there is an essential relationship between faith and hearing.

¹⁴How then will they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... ¹⁷So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom 10.14, 17)

- D. Elsewhere, Jesus exhorts his followers to be sober-minded and cautious of what they listen to. There is an important relationship between what we allow ourselves to listen to (shape our judgments, affections, evaluations) and what we believe.

²³“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” ²⁴And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. ²⁵For the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” (Mark 4.23-25)

V. THE FOUR SOILS

- A. Jesus illustrates the mysterious tension between the potency of the word and the necessity of hearing the message with understanding faith through this parable. The fact that there are several types of soil that fail to produce fruit highlights that there will be a way in which the kingdom seems to not ‘succeed’ in its proclamation. However, this parable illustrates the seeming failure is not because of any impotence in the word, but rather in the nature of the soil.

- B. *The seed along the path:* Jesus begins the story by highlighting the seed that falls along the path. This would be soil that is matted by foot-traffic that would not allow the seed to penetrate the soil at all. The proximity of the seed to the surface makes it vulnerable to birds that come along and eat away the seed before it has time to enter the soil and begin its work. Jesus clearly teaches that these are hearts that remain hard in the hearing of the message of the kingdom, for whom the devil comes and snatches away the word before it has any opportunity to become effective.

³even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Cor 4.3-4)

- C. *The seed in rocky soil*: The second type of soil is stony or rocky soil. In the picture, this allows for the seed to spring forth quickly, but does not allow for the seed to send down roots. Because of this, the sun rises and scorches the plant.
1. Jesus instructs that these are people who hear the word and seem to receive it with joy and vigor. Yet, as time continues, the hardships of this life or persecution because of the word cause them to fall away.
 2. We must allow sober-minded wisdom to temper our propensity to exalt in the fast, the big, and the love of immediacy when thinking about the work of the Lord. We ought exult in every place where the Lord is at work, while seeking to understand that the Lord is not impressed by immediacy and momentum. Rather, the Lord is after long-standing fruit.
 3. The Lord will bring trial, testing, and hardship in order that the reality of the heart is revealed. This is his discipline in love, in order that those who are his might be made recipients of his glorious holiness.
- ¹⁰For [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. (Heb 12.10)
- D. *The seed among thorns*: The third type of soil would allow for the growth of the seed itself but is full of other thorns. The other thorns grow up and choke out the life of the good seed and leave it fruitless.
1. Jesus says that there is a type of hearing of the word that will give ascent to the truth of the word yet will continue to be consumed with the cares of this life, the deceitfulness of riches, and the love for other things.
 2. Elsewhere Jesus demonstrates that his followers must have a “singular” eye toward his kingdom, that they cannot serve two masters, and that they must orient their affections and ambitions toward seeking his kingdom before everything else.
- ²²if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light... ²⁴No one can serve two masters, for he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money... ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt 6.22, 24, 33)
3. The thorns of this world have the power to choke out the fruitfulness of the word by distracting our hearts, by stealing (consuming) our time and energy, and by keeping our affections and desires disordered toward the things of this earth.
- E. *The seed in good soil*: Jesus illustrates the final type of soil as those who hear, understand, and respond to the word in such a way that the potency of Christ’s kingdom grows up like a fruitful vine within their lives. This speaks of those who receive the word with faith and understanding and respond accordingly. Fruitfulness in Christ’s kingdom speaks of a life that is submitted in wholeheartedness to Christ and his ways and seeks to walk by his grace in a spirit of trust and obedience to all his purposes.
- F. The possession of a heart that is “good soil” is only given as a gift by the gracious mercy of the Lord. No one, of their own merit or strength, has soil that receives and responds to the word in faith and humble obedience throughout their lives apart from the gracious, regenerating work of the Spirit of God.
- G. Yet, we must understand the truth that *faith looks like something* in our lives. God graciously gives us a new heart by the Holy Spirit and allows us to freely receive the gift of salvation given in Christ. He allows us by the same gift to humble ourselves to him as Lord and seek to walk in a manner pleasing to him. This means that “today” we demonstrate the reality of our faith by looking to Jesus, calling upon his name, repenting of our sins, turning to him again, and posturing our hearts to submit to him in a spirit of obedience — asking him for the gracious power of the Spirit to change us and renew us in his image.