

# Matthew 13:18-23

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-13/matthew-1318-23/>

*Jesus explains to His disciples the meaning of the Parable of the Sower. The first soil is like a heart that is hard was from the outset and fails to receive God's word altogether. The second soil is like a heart that is afraid and loses its joy over the immediate sufferings it encounters. The third soil is like a heart that cares more for the lesser goods of this world than the eternal goods of Heaven's kingdom and is rendered unfruitful. But the fourth soil is qualitatively different. It represents a heart that trusts, fears, and loves God and it bears much fruit and produces exponentially more in proportion to its faithfulness.*

The parallel gospel accounts of this teaching are found in Mark 4:13-20 and Luke 8:11-15.

After Jesus answered the disciples' question about why He speaks to the crowds in parables, He explained *the parable of the sower*. This is one of a few parables that scripture includes a record of Jesus's explanation. This explanation might be included to tell future readers "If you don't understand the parables, perhaps you need to address what sort of soil your heart is."

This is a *parable* about the human *heart* as it pertains to *the kingdom* of heaven (Matthew 13:11). *The kingdom* of heaven does not concern unbelievers, and so *the parable of the sower* only indirectly concerns unbelievers, by way of application. Unbelievers are, by their choice not to believe, like the rocky soil.

Only believers—those who have received the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus (John 3:16)—may enter *the kingdom* of heaven—the inheritance and reward for their faithfulness.

The way believers are born again is through the simple faith of belief (John 3:14-16). The way they enter *the kingdom* is through obedience to God (Matthew 7:21). *The parable of the sower* primarily concerns believers, who are either faithful and bear *fruit* or who unfaithful because of their doubts, fears, or lusts.

A person's life and their faithfulness is largely a projection of their *heart*.

"As in water a face reflects the face,  
So the heart of a person reflects the person."  
(Proverbs 27:19)

Throughout the Bible, the *heart* is depicted as the fountainhead of a person's life (Proverbs 4:23). All of a person's loves, fears, and whom they trust issue from their *heart* (Psalm 119:10, Proverbs 3:5; Proverbs 28:14, Romans 10:10). *The heart* is where the choice is made. Perhaps that is why our *heart* is the first thing we are told to love the LORD our God with, in the greatest commandment.

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

(Deuteronomy 6:5)

The *heart* predisposes a person to whether or not they can *hear* and receive a message. Its inclinations greatly influence the mind and its thoughts and opinions. If the *heart* is closed to a message or against someone from the outset it is very difficult for that person’s mind to *hear* and consider *the word* their opponent shares.

That is why having a pure *heart* is so vital. A pure *heart* trusts God, fears God, and loves God above all other things. It is purity of *heart* that enables people to see God (Matthew 5:8). There are three basic things any human can choose: 1) who or what to trust or depend on 2) what perspective, attitude, or mindset to adopt and 3) what actions to take. *The parable of the sower* will primarily be shaped by the perspective that has been chosen by the *heart* upon which the *seed* of God’s word is sown.

In Jesus’s original telling of *the parable* (Matthew 13:3-9) there were four scenarios with four kinds of *soil* where the sower’s *seed* falls:

- 1.) *beside the road*,
- 2.) *on the rocky places*,
- 3.) *among the thorns*, and
- 4.) *on the good soil*.

Likewise, there were four literal outcomes that corresponded to the four soils:

- 1.) the birds ate the seeds *beside the road*,
- 2.) the seeds failed to take *root* in the *rocky places*,
- 3.) the *thorns* choked out the seeds sowed among them,
- 4.) but the seeds sowed among the *good soil* yielded a crop between a hundredfold and thirty-fold.

Throughout His explanation, Jesus explained the symbolic meaning of these elements as they relate to His *kingdom*.

The *seed* is represented by *the word of the kingdom*. This means the message, the propositions given concerning the *kingdom*. *The sower* is someone who proclaims the good news about *the kingdom*. The falling-of-the-seed is the hearing about *the kingdom*-gospel by the crowds. This would include any aspect of the *kingdom*, but likely would primarily include *kingdom* instruction on how best to live. How to treat one another. How to choose priorities in life. How to deal with

forgiveness, and how and when to make judgements—all the things Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount.

The four types of *soil* are four types of hearts that hear *the word of the kingdom*. And just as the falling-of-the-seed upon the different types of *soil* produced four different outcomes in the parable's literal meaning, so too, do they produce four different outcomes in the parable's symbolic meaning.

This is a *parable* primarily about the *heart* and *kingdom* productivity of unfaithful and faithful believers. To the degree that unbelievers may be included in *the parable of the sower*, they would be represented by the first type of *soil*. Paul stated this to the unbelievers in Athens:

“and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”

(Acts 17:26-27)

God has created the world with a witness to unbelievers, and God has given each human the capacity to “seek the Lord.” It is the fundamental choice to seek God, apart from self that applies to the first scenario. However, the first scenario can apply to anyone.

The first scenario is about hearts that do not trust Jesus. In it, He equates *anyone who hears the word of the kingdom* but *does not understand it* with the hard ground *beside the road*. This *seed* never penetrates the ground, just as the *word* never penetrates *the heart*. This scenario represents the hardest of hearts.

But *the seed* that fell *beside the road* mainly represents the many believers who do *not understand the kingdom* offer. We must remember that Jesus is teaching about *the kingdom of heaven* in this *parable*. He is concerned with faithfulness and the *fruit* that faithfulness *produces*. Jesus is not teaching a *parable* about how to spend eternity with God, which is earned not by works or demonstrated by the *fruit* of faithfulness. That gift is received as by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is possible for believers to have hard hearts against God. And the hardness of a believer's *heart* can cause him to dismiss and resist the Spirit's invitations and to *not understand the kingdom*.

Because *the seed* remains upon the bare hard ground, “birds came and ate them up” (Matthew 13:4). So too does *the evil one* come and *snatches away what has been sown in his heart* before it even begins to sprout. In Matthew's Greek verse it is interesting that there is no definite article before *evil* “Poneros.” The lack of the article suggests that it is not necessary to attribute the snatching *away* to the person of Satan. In Luke's Gospel however, Jesus does teach that it is “the devil”—“Diablos”—who takes away the word from their heart (Luke 8:12). And in Mark's

Gospel, Jesus calls the evil one out by his office “Satan”—“Satanas” (Mark 4:15). Satan means “the Adversary” or “the Accuser.”

The *evil* described in Matthew is not specific. It could refer to any number of things. It could be a person’s *evil* desires, it could be *evil* temptations, it could be *evil* demonic forces, or it could be *the evil one* himself. Whatever the *evil* may refer to, it would never have had the chance to come snatch away the *seed* had *the heart* received *the word* in the first place.

As was mentioned previously, to the extent that unbelievers show up at all in *the parable of the sower*, they are regulated to the first type of *soil*, alongside believers who have hard hearts. But the remaining three scenarios appear to be exclusively about believers. Scenarios two and three represent two more types of unfaithful believers while scenario four represents faithful believers.

How can a believer have a hard heart, that is infertile and does not receive the word of God? This is simple. Any believer can choose a perspective that “I know best, and will figure out things for myself.” With this perspective, there is no openness to correction, which is much of what God’s word is about. The Bible says of itself that it is an instrument of teaching and correction.

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”  
(2 Timothy 3:16)

Someone who thinks they don’t need to learn anything from God is not open to be taught. Someone who is focused on justifying themselves is not open for reproof. And someone who has chosen a perspective that “I know best” is not open for correction. This would be a *heart* that is not open to receiving the word of God. Believers have the capacity to choose to walk in the Spirit, but also retain the ability to walk in the flesh, and sow to the flesh (Galatians 5:13; 6:8). Which perspective we choose is an issue of our *heart*.

The second scenario is about hearts that fear men more than God. In it, Jesus equates *the one who hears the word*, and *receives it with short-lived joy*. The initial *joy* evaporates *when* he encounters *affliction* and *persecution* he encounters for holding to *the word* (Matthew 13:5-6). This scenario is like *the seed* that fell *on the rocky places*. The seeds that fell *on the rocky places* initially grew but because they had *no root* were scorched by the sun and withered away before they could bear *fruit*.

So too, do these hearts burst with *joy* when they hear the good news about *the kingdom* of heaven. Unlike the *soil beside the road*, these hearts are open. And they *immediately* respond to the sower’s wonderful message. Yet the *joy* does not last, because this kind of heart *has no firm root in himself* that enables their *joy* to endure the *rocky afflictions* and difficult *persecutions*.

*The rocky places* are the painful trials a person faces because they seek to follow Jesus and enter His *kingdom*.

Apparently, fear of *affliction or persecution* is a common shortcoming for many hearts. Jesus repeatedly warned His disciples to steel themselves in Him against these fears. One of the primary fears humans have is the fear of rejection. The thin soil desires the things of God, and has joy in them, but is not willing to endure rejection of people and the world, so fails to follow in God's ways.

Much of the Bible emphasizes the immense rewards God has for those who are faithful witnesses, and who are willing to endure rejection, which is a form of death. Death is separation, and when we lose a relationship with someone, or endure rejection from someone, it feels like death. But this is the essence of a vibrant testimony. The Greek word often translated witness or testimony is the word from which we get the English word "martyr." To be a faithful witness for Jesus is the path to the greatest fruitfulness, and therefore the greatest reward of life. Jesus spoke of this trial many times, a few examples follow:

"These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."  
(John 16:33)

"And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul ["pusche"]; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul ["pusche"] and body in hell [Gehenna]."  
(Matthew 10:28)

The Bible often speaks of painful situations and urges faithful endurance. Hearts that focus only on the immediacy of these *afflictions* quickly forget their *joy* and the *joy* set before them that could be theirs if only they would faithfully endure (Hebrews 12:1). By focusing on the suffering (instead of the reward to come), they become *unfruitful* and forget their *kingdom* citizenship and calling (2 Peter 1:8-11). They do not recall that the proof of their faith is more precious than gold (1 Peter 1:7).

They are strangely surprised by *the rocky afflictions* and fiery ordeals and do not remember that to the degree they share in the sufferings of Christ that they also will be able to rejoice in exultation at the revelation of His glory (1 Peter 4:12-13, Romans 8:17-18). They only consider the prospect of God's *kingdom* to be *joy*, but they dread the narrow gates of *afflictions* and *persecutions* by which God bids them to enter the *kingdom* (James 1:2-8, Matthew 5:10-12, Matthew 7:13-14).

The author of Hebrews warns his readers against having hearts of *rocky soil*.

“For you... accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better and lasting possession. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.”

(Hebrews 10:34-35)

This passage in Hebrews addresses believers, who know they have “a better and lasting possession” for themselves in heaven to not “throw away your confidence” because they would lose a “great reward.” This would be an example of someone who joyfully accepted God’s *word*, paid a significant price for following faithfully, and now is wavering. Hebrews exhorts them to continue on, and not grow weary in doing good, that they might reap a full reward in heaven.

Suffering and the threat of suffering cause many hearts to lose their *joy*. This is because this kind of *heart has no root in himself*. It requires being rooted *in* the power of Jesus and His Spirit for *joy* to last beyond the superficial circumstances of whatever is immediate. Notice how this type of *heart immediately receives the word with joy* and it *immediately falls away* during times of *affliction or persecution*. Everything about this *heart is only temporary*. It lacks the perspective and power that only God can provide to it. It lacks a *firm root in Him*. It still has too much of a root in gaining reward from the world.

The Bible tells us that instead of being destroyers of *joy, affliction or persecution* are occasions for *joy* for the person who is firmly rooted in Christ! (Matthew 5:10-12; Romans 5:3-5; Philippians 4:4; James 1:2-5). However, in order to gain perspective this requires a *heart* decision. It requires us to decide that “God’s ways are best for us, no matter what we see in this life.” That is why James tells us to “Consider it all joy” when we encounter difficulty. When we choose a perspective that all God allows into our lives is for our good, and an opportunity to grow and prosper, then we have a fertile *heart*. When we simply are seeking what feels best in the moment, we are like the thin *soil*, with little room for roots.

The third scenario is about hearts that love the rewards of the kingdoms of the world more than the rewards promised by God. In it, Jesus equates *the one who hears the word*, but whose *worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word* with the *seed* that is *sown among the thorns*. These seeds *among the thorns* may or may not have sprouted. Some have no place to sprout because *the soil* is already crowded with *the thorns* of worldly concerns. Others sprout only to a limited extent before they are *choked* out by *the unfruitful* competition. In the end these hearts bear no *fruit* (Matthew 13:7).

The *thorns* represent the temptations to pursue the pleasures, honors, and *wealth of the world*. These pursuits are empty, and their promises are marked by their *deceitfulness*. The world presents *wealth* as the path to the greatest honor and reward of life. But the world’s presentation is nothing but *deceitfulness*. The heart represented by the thorny *soil* is a *heart* that has been deceived into misunderstanding the true meaning of wealth. God desires that we have all the wealth we desire. But He makes it clear that the path to that wealth is through His *word*, the *sown seed*.

One of the clearest passages that teaches this is the letter to the Laodicean church in the book of Revelation. Jesus tells them they have been deceived by the riches of this world. They think they are rich, but actually are miserable and poor. Then God says: I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich (Revelation 3:18).

In Revelation 3, Jesus is telling this church how to switch mindsets, and choose a heart perspective that will gain them true wealth. That is to recognize that true riches come from God. He tells them “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline” (Revelation 3:19). *Jesus* goes on to tell the Laodiceans how to gain this gold, all the gold they desire: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20).

True riches are possible when we choose a mindset that lasting wealth comes from listening to the voice of Jesus, and spending intimate time with Him, as we would with someone at a meal. In order to gain true riches, we must root our desire for gain in spiritual places, rather than in the fleeting riches of this world.

Solomon says it is vanity to pursue the pleasures of wealth (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, 18). Paul warns that those who want to get rich will plunge into ruin and destruction (I Timothy 6:9). These hearts give into the lesser goods of this world and in pursuit of them forsake God’s best and perfect good for their lives (I John 2:16-17). They are like Esau, who gave up his future inheritance for a bowl of soup now (Hebrews 12:16).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invited His followers to not spend their lives worrying about worldly goods, but to seek first His *kingdom* and His righteousness (harmony) (Matthew 6:25-34). He assured them that those who chased worldly honors already had their reward in full (Matthew 6:2). And He would later stress to His disciples how insignificant those rewards would be even if they were attained.

“For what good will it do a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what will a person give in exchange for his soul?”  
(Matthew 16:26)

In His explanation of the parable’s third scenario of the thorny ground, Jesus says that these *thorns* are not only material *wealth*, but also the *worry of the world*. *The worry of the world* is also translated “care of the world.” It is paired with “the deceitfulness of wealth.” It seems to carry with it the idea of “being concerned with gaining the world’s approval” or “adopting the world’s definition of success.” The idea of the *worry of the world* seems to be to care about the things *the world* cares about. This could include:

- Keeping up my image, so people think well of me.
- Making sure I fit in, so people think well of me.
- Showing people that I am a “good person” by going along with whatever they are saying is “good”

It is an anxiousness to be in agreement with the things *the world* wrongly declares to be good. Such *thorns* produce not good *fruit* but *worry*. The moral fashions and opinions of man quickly change. This produces anxiety because one's standing in society (or history) is fickle.

The standard of the world's righteousness ("dikaiosune") is always changing. What makes a person popular and approved by men today can often condemn and cancel him tomorrow. It is impossible to gain lasting harmony or approval in worldly systems. Those who seek its plaudits are bound to be pricked by its *thorns* and suffer great anxiety and become *unfruitful in the kingdom*.

What is good or righteous by the world's standards is also illusory. When we manage our image to gain the approval of others, we are in actuality creating a false impression in order to manage our own imagination. We never really know what someone else thinks, we merely imagine what they think. So we are actually creating an illusion of affirmation rooted in a false presentation of ourselves. Since deep down we realize the fragility and falsity of this, it leads to anxiety. The alternative is to *root* our lives in the reality of what is true. That leads to the fourth scenario, the good soil.

In the fourth and final scenario of *the parable of the sower*, Jesus equates *the one who hears the word and understands it with the good soil*. The quality of *the good soil* and the good heart is altogether different from the first three types. It trusts God and is open to receive the word (unlike the first heart). It fear of God is courageous. It is bold to endure afflictions (unlike the second heart). And it loves God and forsakes the comforts and applause of this world in exchange for heaven's crowns (unlike the third heart). This heart bears fruit and produces exponentially more in proportion to its faithfulness and opportunity—*some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times* as much.

Jesus does not tell us why some that are faithful produce more or less. It may be that some are more faithful in the *kingdom* than others. Or it may be that some have more opportunity to bear more fruit—as is described in *the parable of the talents* (Matthew 25:14-30) where the three servants were given three different amounts of money to invest. One of the principles of the parable of the talents is that to whom much is given much is required. So perhaps this is just a recognition that there are differing levels of accountability, according to the gifts and opportunities dispersed. Regardless, all who have *the good soil* are rewarded. When Jesus used examples of what sorts of deeds in this life would be rewarded he often chose the most mundane of efforts, things most anyone could do, such as giving a cup of cool water in Jesus's name (Matthew 10:42).

The primary point of these parables is to be as faithful and productive as you can for *the kingdom* for the short duration of this life on earth. Moreover, the fact that some *brings forth thirty, some sixty, and some a hundredfold*, reveals that there is more quantity and diversity of outcome within *the kingdom* than outside it. Notice how the outcome for all of the first three scenarios was precisely zero.

It is important to recognize that in all four scenarios *the sower, the word, and the opportunity to hear the kingdom message* are the same. The only variable is *the heart* that receives or does not



receive *the word*. Jesus's point is that it is a person's *heart* determines whether or not they will enter *the kingdom* and how much *fruit* it will bear. To believe in Jesus is to be born again. To enter the kingdom is to walk in His ways.

Finally, because this *parable of the sower* is about the condition of the *heart* of believers as they pertain to *the kingdom of heaven*, all four scenarios may apply to believers. And just as dirt can be hard, filled with rocks, overgrown with *thorns*, or *good* during different seasons, so too may a believer's *heart* at any particular point in time be embittered by doubts; afraid of *affliction* or man's *persecution*; *choked* by *the worry of the world*; or *good*, bearing much *fruit*. Over the course of his walk with God, it is possible for a believer to have all four hearts toward God at different points in his life. The great message here is that we have the opportunity at any time to alter our *heart*, receive *the word*, and gain the productive life that it yields.

In light of this fact, James's admonition to believers is a fitting application for this commentary.

"Therefore, ridding yourselves of all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls."  
(James 1:21)

The word translated "souls" in James 1 is the Greek word "psuché" (G5590) which is translated "life" about half the time. This verse from James offers a resolution for the fundamental problem believers have, as presented by James: we carry our temptation with us everywhere we go, because temptation does not come from circumstances, but from our own lust. James' proposed solution has two steps:

- Learn to listen to other people (James 1:19).
- Listen to God, and receive His word into the good soil of your heart.

It is interesting that James recommends the path to turn our hearts to *good soil* begins by learning to listen to other people. When we receive the word, to the point where it becomes "implanted" then we have changed our *heart* to receive *the word sown by the Sower*. The result is that it saves our lives, in this case from our own lusts. The *soil* of a *good heart*, with *the word* of God implanted, is the way to transform our lives from being slaves of the lusts of our own flesh, that we may *sow* to the Spirit, and gain the immense rewards of the Spirit.

### **Biblical Text**

**Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or**

**persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.”**