

**Bible Study of the Parables in Matthew's Gospel**  
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**Parables in Matthew's Gospel - Introduction**

No.1

I once saw a Musical play at the theatre which was all about the hardships endured, and the dangers faced in the coal mining industry, where I worked after leaving school. It ended with a song which had the following lines – “Close the coalhouse door – there's blood inside.”

It was a reminder of the cost in blood, tears and sweat – and often lives – to mine the coal to keep the home-fires burning. After the song the singer said in closing the play – ‘It's only a story.’ But for me it was more than a story. It was a reminder of the cost paid by the men who mined the coal in the darkness and depths of the earth.

Just like a Parable – which is a story - but is more than a story?

Jesus used parables often as He taught the people the truths they needed to know about God and life. In fact in Mark's Gospel we read in **ch.4v2** that as the people gathered to hear Jesus that ‘He taught the people many things by parables’. **vv33-34** go on to tell us ‘with many similar parables Jesus spoke the Word to them, as much as they could understand.’ Jesus never spoke above people's heads – and Mark says – “He did not say anything to them without using a parable.”

Jesus not only spoke in a way that ordinary people could understand -but when they couldn't understand some deeper meaning in the Parable he taught his disciples privately.

**What is a Parable?** It is an earthy story with a heavenly meaning.

The word is PARABOLE which only occurs in Hebrews other than in the gospels – e.g. Heb.9v9 where in the NIV it is translated ‘Illustration’ - and 11v19 where it is translated – ‘Figuratively speaking’.

So the definition of a parable being an earthy story with a deeper meaning holds – it is an illustration – it is speaking in figurative language. A parable is not just a fable (story). It often tells of some occasion, or event, that may have actually happened, and from which a deeper truth can be drawn.

The Parables of Jesus are timeless, and so the truth they contain is for us to learn and practice. Many of his parables are used to describe the Kingdom of God and what it is like.

Not everyone gets the message if they are not tuned in to the wavelength of Jesus in his parables. So it happens that some do not understand even the clearest of truths that he taught.

They see, but don't see – they hear, but they do not understand.

There is another word used in the N.T. – PAROIMIA – which means short, pithy sayings – which are not a full story like a parable, but nevertheless are a means of revealing the truth about something that seems hidden. So we have Parables, and what are called ‘parabolic illustrations.’

There are 2 dangers to avoid in seeking to interpret the parables in scripture –

- a) That of ignoring the important features in the story -and
- b) trying to make all the details have a profound or prophetic meaning.

**Read Mark 4 vv1-2; vv10-13**

The Gospel of Mark is one of action and not words, so it is only here in ch.4 that he mentions 3 short parables – vv3-8 the Sower and the Seeds – with an explanation in vv7-20;

A short reference in vv21-25 to a lamp on a lamp-stand; and then

In vv30- 32 - to the Kingdom of God being like Mustard seed as it grows.

Usually at the end of a teaching period Jesus would end with the words of v9 – “He who has ears to hear let him hear.”

Jesus had used parabolic illustrations already in his ministry e.g.

- i. To the woman of Samaria when he talked about Living Water
- ii. To the disciples when he said that ‘the fields are white and ready for harvest.’
- iii. In Nazareth when he spoke about doctors healing the sick
- iv. To the disciples when he called them, to be ‘fisher’s of men’

Such parabolic illustrations are the windows that allow the light you need to see the truth of the full meaning of the message – Every sermon is better with good illustrations.

But at this time Mark tells us that Jesus told the full parable of the ‘Sower and the Seeds’.

He spoke like this to the multitudes, but only a minority in the crowd understood what he meant. Even the disciples were puzzled when he adopted this unique way of teaching, and even with the Parable of the Sower they had to ask him what it meant.

### **Read Mark 4vv10-12.**

These verses have puzzled many, because they seem to do 2 opposite things at the same time.

The disciples would understand what Jesus meant - but ‘those on the outside’ would not.

Then we have quotations from Isaiah 6vv9-10 which was the basis, and the outcome of the message that God sent the prophet to proclaim. Luke and Matthew both repeat the passage.

Why did this happen? Was it because Jesus wanted only a chosen few to understand, whilst the rest went in ignorance of the offer of salvation and forgiveness – or was it for another reason?

The Scriptures suggest that it was because the hearing by the ears of the listener was alright, but the listening in their hearts was not - because they were hardened by unbelief. Cp.Matthew13vv14-17

The hearers had a calloused – hardened hearts – and that means they only hear with their ears, but not deep within where the meaning is needed. People turn a hard heart to Jesus because they don’t want to hear how to be made right with God, because they don’t think that there is anything wrong with them. We have a saying – “There is none so deaf as those who won’t hear – or so blind as those who won’t see.”

The difference a parable makes to the hearer depends on the hearer’s relationship with Jesus.

To those whose hearts are closed to the truth, they will never begin to ‘see it’ – but to those close to Jesus – in this case his disciples – he said – ‘It is given to you to know the mysteries’. Mark 4 v11  
“The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you.”

### **Read Mark 4 vv21-25.**

Here he uses the lamp as his illustration of illumination.

A lamp – in this case an oil wick in a lamp - is not put under a bowl or a bed – the original says ‘a bushel’ – i.e. a bucket. If you do 2 things will happen –

- i. There will be no light as long as it burns –and
- ii. After a while, starved of oxygen, the light will go out and be no use to anyone.

Parables are like lamps that illuminate as long as they are visible to all.

There are many secret things in Scripture - but they are hidden there to be found by those who seek with all their heart. The purpose of the parable is to draw the listener into the story, so that they might find their way to understand its deeper meaning and higher mysteries.

Jesus did not use parables to prevent people seeing - but to help them see. He did not want to prevent them, from hearing, but to quicken their power to hear listen and learn. He did not keep men away in ignorance from the grace and mercy of God which brought forgiveness - but he drew them towards understanding it as well as receiving it.

So as we come to these wonderful parables and in our following Studies we will see that nothing is hidden that the Spirit of God can bring us to know.

Where to begin is a problem as there are more than 100 parables and illustrations in the Gospels and 34 are fully told parables. As the Gospel of Mark has so few we will start with Matthew that has so many. When we have completed these studies of the Parables in Mathew we will after a short break consider the wonderful parables in Luke – and leave the much more spiritual parabolic illustrations in John’s Gospel until later.

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So where do we begin – We will follow Mark’s lead as in ch4 he gives a brief outline of the Parable of the ‘Sower and the Seeds.’

Matthew ch13vv1-23 gives us a fuller telling of the story and so is where we begin the series,

### **The Parable of the Sower - Read Matt 13 vv1-9**

The story in the Parable is clear - and the meaning is also clear - but only to those who want to know the truth.

Each Parable follows the same pattern -

There is the Explanation - telling the story;

Followed by the Exposition i.e. teaching the truth.

But both the Explanation and the Exposition have to lead to an Application of the truth revealed.

### **The Setting for the Parables v1 -**

Jesus left the house where he was staying and went to the Lake shore. This was probably Peter's house in Capernaum - and as on a previous occasion the crowds were so large that Jesus used a boat (probably Peter's boat) as a pulpit. So there he sat teaching the people who stood on the shore. Sitting was the natural posture of a teacher, rather than of a preacher.

### **1. The Parable of the Sower.**

Sometimes called "of the Soils"- or "of the Seed" cp Mark ch4

To be valid a parable must be true to life - and some think that as Jesus told the parable he was observing a sower at work on the hillside behind the crowd who were on the shore.

To be effective a parable must have a point to teach - and maybe sometimes more than one. But we must avoid the trap that many have fallen into by stretching the meaning beyond the bounds of the story itself. In a parable the story is quite short, but very graphic, and the picture it paints is a very familiar one to the hearers

## **Here we have - a) The Sower - b) The Seed and c) The Soil.**

The Story is quite simple - the listeners would be familiar with the sight of a man with a bag of seed on his shoulder, striding up and down a field scattering it with his hands. In doing so he had little control on where it landed - because the field had footpaths crossing it and stony places as well as places with wild vegetation - and of course the bulk of the field which would produce the crop.

This is one of the easier of the parables to understand for 2 reasons -

- i. It is simple and apparent; and
- ii. Jesus gave the disciples the explanation anyway.

### **a) The Sower**

Who is this farmer **v4**? It is the same man as in **v37** "the sower is the Son of Man" -

The Sower is Jesus. He is the one who sows the seed of the kingdom.

Also later it would refer to others whom he delegated to do the same - those described as "Workers together with God".

cp Mark 16 v15 where Jesus sends his disciples out to sow the Gospel seed of the kingdom.

The Sower is the "Lord of the harvest" - and those who work with him.

### **b) The Seed v3b** - the Sower sowed the seed.

It would have been foolish walking up and down the field and not doing so.

**What is the seed?** It is the message - the Word of the kingdom **v19**.

The Word sown is meant to produce life like itself. It has to take root - produce shoots and finally Fruit. The seed is the Word of God.

That Word was at first spoken - then written to be read -and again to be spoken.

Jesus is the Word of God - the "Living Word" who came down from heaven.

Jesus is not only the Sower - He is the seed that is to be sown in the soil of human hearts.

This is better understood after the telling of the parable, when the Disciples become the sowers sowing the seed of the Gospel in hearts to make them part of the kingdom as they bring a harvest which the Lord of the Harvest expects.

cp 1 Peter 1 vv23-25 "For you have been born-again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."

Notice something about the Soil and Seed which is contrary to nature.

Once planted in the soil, the soil transforms the seed. But in spiritual terms when Jesus is planted in the soil of human hearts He transforms the soil (cp Romans ch.11 where the wild shoot is grafted into the cultivated root - which is contrary to nature)

When Jesus, the Word, is planted in you He transforms you. He will make you a child of the kingdom ready to be planted in the soil of the world to produce a harvest of righteousness for him. You become a seed, when the seed is received in your heart and it transforms you.

### **c) The Soil**

The heart of the Parable is the response of the hearer to the Seed of the Word being sown in the Soil of human hearts.

There is only One Soil **cp v38**- but it is seen that there are 4 different conditions of the soil.

These 4 conditions represent 4 different types of hearers of the Word of God.

The facts we should notice are that the Seed is good seed, and it will grow and produce a good crop if it is given the right conditions of a ready and receptive heart.  
1 seed will reproduce itself 30, 60 and even 100 times.

The question we all have to answer is – "How much is the seed reproducing itself in my life"?  
Jesus makes it quite clear that the size of the harvest depends on the condition of the Soil.

**i.) Way-side Soil** - on the path.

This is good soil that has been trodden down hard by many feet walking over it.  
It represents the heart that has become impervious to the Gospel - "Gospel-hardened".  
Usually speaks of the one who thinks he knows everything, but actually "understands nothing" v19.

The seed doesn't grow, because it doesn't get the chance to grow, and because the birds have found an early breakfast - cp.v4 and v19b. The birds here represent the "evil one" - the Devil.  
There is "growing potential" in the seed and in the soil, but the soil which has become hardened has to be broken up by the plough of the Holy Spirit.

This type of soil is "**Solid Soil**" - and it could apply to anyone who will not take the Gospel seriously. **v19** Jesus says that it could apply to "anyone".

When a person's heart gets trodden hard by the traffic of life the seed lies on the surface and the Devil soon sees that it is removed before it has a chance even to fall into a crack in the surface of the path. So the Wayside hearer does not really hear at all, and certainly doesn't understand what is actually going on,

**ii.) The Stony Soil** - rocky places.

This was soil which was shallow - and under the surface was solid rock, but there was no depth of earth **v5**. I can visualise this situation on many Lakeland hillsides. The tiny green pastures once were rough wilderness, but the farmers gathered the stones and used them to build walls within which grass could grow for the as pasture for the sheep.

This kind of heart is not "Solid soil" - it is "Stony Soil"

Jesus said that hearers like this hear the Word gladly and immediately seem to be the kind of people in which the seed can grow fully - but alas, when the seed sends down roots all they hit is bed-rock.

He says that such hearers receive the Word with Joy - but they only produce shoots without roots. They are shallow believers - so that when the sun gets up and pressure is applied to their lives they begin to wilt and wither because they have no roots drawing strength from below.  
They have much Breadth but no Depth. cp v21 - They have no root-system.

There is Joy at the beginning, but it doesn't last long - it withers when the heat comes.  
We all have to stand the heat of trouble and persecution because of the Word - Jesus said that in John 6 v33.

The Devil never bothers hard hearts, but he doesn't like it when the Gospel seed starts to grow and he sets out to shrivel up your new life in Jesus. As long as there are stones in your life they will obstruct the roots going deep enough to sustain you. Stones of disobedience obstruct the blessings and have to be removed.

cp Isaiah 5 v2 - where we read that the vineyard owner will remove the stones from his vineyard and used them build a wall and a watch-tower.

The mortality rate amongst new Christians is too high, because there is often too much dependence on experience and feeling, rather than on Faith and the Word of truth.  
When things get too hot they wilt away and quickly die away too.

### **iii.) Thorny Soil - i.e. Unclean soil. - or this might be called the "Strangled Soil"**

It is good soil, but is choked with weeds. The soil is good - and the seed is sown and takes root and begins to grow - but it has competition. The thorns want as much space as the seeds do.

#### **What are the things that choke out the life in the believer?**

I don't have to guess what they are, or make up a list of things that I don't like.  
Jesus spelled it out for the disciples so that there would be no doubt as to what kind of things strangles the believer's faith. **cpv22** -

#### **i. The worries and cares of this life - Worry defeats many.**

We worry about what might be but which usually never happens.  
If we have nothing to worry about we get worried. The Lord has made provision for our every need, yet we worry to the extent that we stifle our spiritual growth and damage our natural health.

Worry causes us to doubt God and distrust His Word and promises.  
Worry makes molehills into mountains - grasshoppers into giants.  
There are times in many lives where you cannot see the seeds for the weeds.

The real issues that make up everyday life apply to everyone.  
eg. Cares for the family - about work, or no work.  
Worry how to make ends meet. How to replace the kids clothing and plan for their future needs.  
Worry and frustration gnaw at you faith and produce fruitlessness. **v22**

#### **ii. Deceitfulness of money.** This is the other extreme – that of wealth and greed instead of lack of money and need.

The Lord has much say about riches, because that is what keeps many out of the kingdom.  
Money is a hard taskmaster and takes a lot of feeding. People use up an awful lot of time and energy getting it, but somehow never get enough and always want more.

For the believer riches bring responsibility towards God and others.  
When God gives us more than we need it is so that we can use it to meet the needs of those who are less blessed or fortunate than we are. That is why the Bible has much to say about tithes and offerings

Money makes men misers. Money hinders spiritual growth.  
Money can make ship-wreck of a man's soul. The Golden Calf still has a mighty kick.

Luke 8 v14 gives us a 3rd Weed

#### **iii. The Pleasures of this life -**

Pleasures are such passing things - but can do a lot of damage in the passing.

Robbie Burns the Scottish poet said - "But pleasures are like poppies spread - you seize the flower the bloom is shed; or like the 'sna fae's (SNOW FALLS) in the river - a minute white then gone for ever".

Jesus came to replace the treadmill of pleasure, with the real Joy of life.

There is only one way to go in a fair-ground. You pay to get on - you whirl round and round - then you get off where you got one - but with one big difference - someone else has your money.

Mark describes pleasure as "lust for other things" - and when the pursuit of pleasure fills the soil of the heart those pleasures become thorns which, no matter how innocent they look, will always choke the life-giving seed.

Many lives, like many gardens, require constant weeding if they are to be at their best.

We are to ask the Lord about things in our lives, and accept his verdict on whether they are helping us to grow - and if they are not, then they are hindering thorns.

Finally we have.

**iv. The Good soil** - with no hardness - no stones - no thorns,

This soil is ready for the seed and is responsive to it. Jesus says **v23** that these are those who hear the Word and understand it. They hear with their hearts.

It is not a matter of in one ear and out of the other - not in here (ear) and out here (ear)

It is in both ears - and then down into the heart to take root and produce shoots and eventually fruit.

This is anyone - and this could be you.

Jeremiah says - "The summer is ended and we are not saved".

Jesus was for uprooting a fruitless fig tree, but eventually gave it 3 years of grace - when it was fed and watered. After such time should be fruitful - but eventually his verdict was - "It is taking up ground - in which something else would grow"

Many have the potential for bearing fruit, much fruit, and even more fruit ( cp John 15)- but fruitfulness is only possible through pruning when God cuts deep into our lives to make us more fruitful.

We might be satisfied with 30 fold - but Jesus is aiming at 100 fold.

We all have the potential of being 100% for Jesus.

He is the Sower and is sowing the good seed of the Kingdom in order to produce children of the kingdom. He wants the Seed of the Gospel to transform the soil of our hearts.

Good soil can deteriorate if it is neglected and badly managed.

Bad soil can be made good as the hardness is broken up; the stony made clean; and the thorny cleared of weeds. One sows - another reaps - but God make it grow to produce a harvest.

What Jesus is teaching in this parable is clear -

It is easy to hear, but not to listen - to receive, but not to grow.

As the seed is sown some are hard and insensible to it. Others are superficial -and others are too preoccupied with money - or the lack of it. But some are open the Word, and obedient to Christ. They are fertile soil - and so what is planted in their hearts becomes fruitful.

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This is perhaps the easiest parable to understand because we are not left to work it out for ourselves  
**Read vv18-23**

The Sower is Jesus – the Seed is the Gospel – you and I are the soil into which the seed falls – and depending on whether we are hard soil, or stony soil, or soil full of weeds - or Good soil will be

outcome of the harvest. I don't want to be 30% for Jesus or 60 % - I want to be 100% for Jesus.

He that has ears to hear said Jesus – left him hear.

Norman Hiley – January 2009