



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# Exploring Matthew: Finding fertile soil

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### **Matthew 13:1-9**

**1** That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. **2** Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. **3** Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. **4** As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. **5** Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. **6** But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. **7** Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. **8** Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. **9** Whoever has ears, let them hear."

This evening, in our brief mid-winter excursion into the Gospel of Matthew, we arrive at what is certainly one of the best known parables of Jesus. Invariably, it is referred to as 'The Parable of the Sower' when in point of fact it is neither about a sower nor about seed. They are both features of the story, but it is actually a parable about soils.

The message of this parable revolves around the theme of receptivity to God's word, building on the analogy of the receptivity of the soil to the seed that is sown into it.

It is a very descriptive account of an everyday farming scene, familiar to all at the time of Jesus. One writer helpfully retold the story with a few deft touches to enable us to understand it better in our own day.

*A farmer began his sowing. He sowed his seed wherever there was any hope that it might grow. He sowed on ground which people had begun to make into a pathway, on rocky ground, and on ground that was full of thorn-bushes.*

*He sowed also, of course, on the best ground. He sowed everywhere because, like all farmers in that part of the world, he used to plough his land after sowing it. It was his custom to plough up the whole land, the part that had been trodden down as well as the part that had thorn-bushes on it, the poor soil as well as the rich soil.*

*But on this occasion the birds took away some of the seed he had sowed on the path before he could do the ploughing; the sun burnt up the new shoots on the rocky ground; and the thorn-bushes had already begun to spoil more of the crop.*

*In spite of this, however, harvest time showed that his work had not been wasted. As he looked at the harvest from the whole of his land, he saw that it was a big harvest, perhaps bigger than his neighbours expected.*

The positioning in Mark's Gospel certainly would suggest that the parable was told during the early part of Jesus' teaching ministry. Matthew, on the other hand, clearly gathers together seven parables in Matthew 13. There is this extended parable and then six shorter parables.

Mark's earlier position is helpful in discerning what the parable actually might say to us. Very soon after his ministry had begun:

- He was becoming less welcome in the synagogues
- Many religious leaders turned against him
- Some followers were only interested in miracles
- We see the unique teaching methods of Jesus

Jesus chooses to go through the eye of a person to the heart of a person. We have a common agricultural scene that has the ability to speak to people irrespective of their age, education and cultural context.

Have you ever considered what it was that drew people to the ministry of Jesus? If it is true to the New Testament, I am certain that any answer must take into account the teaching ministry of Jesus and how he spoke and acted with authority. His stories were original and powerful, using images that were drawn from everyday life.

This is interesting because so much Christian reflection turns Jesus' teaching into a legalistic listing of 'dos and don'ts', whereas he allowed people to draw their own conclusions to the pictures he painted for them.

This is not to suggest that there is no moral compass in the teaching of Jesus, but the irresistible magnet of his teaching lies in its ability to allow people to draw positive conclusions themselves.

The question of opposition that was beginning to mount against Jesus seems to be confirmed in the Matthean context as well as in Mark. We note that the message of Jesus is being rejected by the religious leaders and their critical spirit was quite disturbing for the disciples.

Another interesting aspect of this parable seems to lie in the fact that it contains some words of explanation later in the chapter. These may well have been a reflection of life in the early church and it is better to consider the passage as 'stand-alone' and use the traditionally-accepted pattern of handling parables—they are presented to us as expressing one complete thought.

The disciples at the time were well aware of the difficulties that were beginning to hinder responses to Jesus. It could be that they themselves were struggling with their own response. But if we keep in mind this larger picture, we will be better informed as to what the parable might have to say to us.

If the point of the parable is the receptivity of the soil, then we can take for granted that the seed is good. One of the best writers on the parables is Joachim Jeremias and he wrote about this particular parable:-

"To human eyes much of the labour may seem futile and fruitless, resulting apparently in frequent failure; but Jesus is full of joyful confidence: God's hour is coming, and will bring with it a harvest of reward beyond all asking and understanding. In spite of every failure and opposition, God brings from hopeless beginnings the glorious end that he has promised."

Let me offer to you four reflections on the different components of receptivity and the quality of soil that is presented to us.

## **THE RECEPTIVITY OF THE PATHWAY – v.4**

Some older versions of our Bible talk about ‘the wayside’ and, whilst this is a fair interpretation of its meaning, it does tend to take us off in the wrong direction.

Around a field would be a pathway, strategically situated so that the sower could scatter the seed indiscriminately. Because it was a pathway of this kind it would be hard-trampled by continuous use and this would prevent growth.

Such a pathway would mean that the soil was unable to receive the seed. Everything seems to be on the surface. One writer commenting on the parable said, “Whatever is kept on the surface of life will be snatched away.”

It would be an interesting exercise to ask ourselves what we consider to be the surface of life. Perhaps another way of putting it would be—What are those things about life that prevent any meaningful depth?

Does the hard pathway remind us of the hard-hearted—those who simply do not warm to the message of the gospel or to the values that flow from the gospel?

The point is that some people are unmoved by the truth of Christ, no matter how it is presented or in what form they receive it.

I add this second dimension because every day in our work at Wesley Mission, we meet those who find it difficult to understand the compassionate ministry that we exercise towards others.

People have become cynical in many contexts and the hard-hearted may well be represented by the receptivity of a well-trodden path. Very often we engage with people without any guarantee of return, simply because we believe we are called to do so.

We must guard against the temptation of tailoring our message and our work in such a way that it is softened and made easier for people to accept. We must always seek to remain true to the authentic teaching of Jesus Christ and in doing so:

- Call for disciples, not mere supporters
- Create a disciple-shaped community
- Call for resilience in the face of opposition

People have different perceptions and controlling views of how they see the world. We must never become impervious to the word of Christ which is our hope. And when it is empowered by the Spirit of God, it can bring life and meaning to people’s lives.

## **THE RECEPTIVITY OF ROCKY PLACES – v.5**

The rocky places which are referred to in this parable would seem to be those areas which have a mere surface covering of soil. They look at first glance as though they are well-covered and indeed the story tells us that the seed ‘sprang up quickly’, but it did not form deep roots.

Seed falling upon such soil will bear little fruit because:

- Too swift a germination produces weak maturity
- Eagerness is fruitless if it hasn't got depth
- A fickle and unreliable response is empty

The challenge of this particular response is that, at the outset, it can look quite promising. If we put this into the context of the life of the early church, there may well have been those making a surface response but, when the going got tough, their commitment would die because of lack of depth.

Human personality is quite capable of making a swift and enthusiastic response which has no lasting purpose. We see such shallowness every day of our lives.

John Hargreaves in his *Guide to the Parables* suggests that the chief message of this parable remains, "Although the power of evil is strong, God is stronger, and he will not fail to rule over humanity." This summation can be said to be a way of interpreting the overarching theme of the thirteenth chapter of Matthew.

Craig Blomberg in his *Preaching the Parables* offered to his readers four ready responses to the ministry of Jesus that may well have been in his mind when he told this parable as he sat by the lake:

- There were his opponents, particularly amongst the Jewish leaders who were hostile to Christ from the outset
- There were the large crowds who may well have been superficial hangers-on
- There was the intriguing case of Judas, the one in the inner-circle of twelve who ultimately betrayed him
- Finally there were those who remained close, even though they were not without their flaws

### **THE DREADFUL THORNS OF LIFE – v.7**

The soil described here is neither hard on the surface nor shallow; it is good soil in so far as its softness and depth is concerned. The problem seems to be those things that grow alongside the seed and ultimately crowd it out completely.

One of the most important lessons any gardener has to learn is the importance of the weeds—or the removal thereof. In these ecological days, there is the belief that perhaps there are no such things as weeds. But the thorns described in the parable of Jesus had a devastating effect upon the growth of the seed in what was good soil, for they "grew up and choked the plants".

This is perhaps the most concerning of the three negative responses in this parable of Jesus. In his commentary, referring to the impact of thorns, Ralph Earle explained, "These things threaten the spiritual life of every Christian and cause the spiritual death of many. These are the strangled hearts, whose lives become overcrowded with things, until God-consciousness is choked out."

In this parable, Jesus pointed out that the farmer did not cease sowing because there was a pathway, because there were rocky surfaces and because there were thorns. This reminds us:

- We must face our hesitations and our fears and continue to engage in the life of Christ
- We must be realistic about the reality of evil and the opposition that may come our way
- We can remain confident, even if we cannot see the end in view

## **THE GOOD AND RECEPTIVE SOIL – v.8**

As Jesus concludes this parable, we come to the good soil. There is not only the hearing of the word, but there is the receiving, understanding and bearing fruit that attends that word. We are told that there is a rich harvest. A number of thoughts are worth reflecting upon:

- Good soil will always point beyond itself to a harvest it produces
- Good soil will always leave us amazed at the crop which exceeds all expectation
- Good soil is the only decent and proper response to God's word and his way

When I read this parable afresh, inevitably my mind turns to the question that you may well share with me—Why does God's seed take root in some lives and not in others? It has led some people to the unhelpful conclusion that they should no longer continue sowing the seed and leave it all to God. We should never discontinue our commitment to share the good news and be engaged in his mission to the world.

As Jesus taught these words, the disciples were beginning to see that even though his truth was receiving negative responses, there was also a good response!

The parable of the sower is not only one of the best known parables of Jesus, but it is often preached. I am, however, reminded by Haddon Robinson, "Preaching from the parables resembles playing the saxophone: it's easy to do poorly!"

The fourth kind of soil requires our attention because there is the seed that falls on good earth, takes root and grows to maturity. This crop, we are told, will bear fruit a hundredfold. Here is the thrust of the story: of course, there will be failures and challenges, but there will also be fruit that grows creatively.

The reason the parable so challenges us is because our efforts are not always measurable. We do not always see the harvest. This can be at many different levels:

- The Sunday school teacher who gives their time to what often appears fruitless, the witness alongside colleagues who are hard to reach, and the many different aspects of personal sharing of our faith
- The difficult and committed work in our community when we share what it means to care for the poor and the marginalised, with little apparent response
- Think of China—in 1959 there were about one and a half million practising Christians in that huge country, but how things have changed ... God has brought about a huge renewal.

How do we explain the effectiveness of God's word in difficult situations? Here we understand the importance of fertile soil.

I suppose the challenging question is—What kind of soil are you? God challenges us to examine the receptivity of our own lives and asks whether we are prepared to become more open through the work of his Holy Spirit.