THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-23
Key Verse 13:23

“But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Together when looking at the main theme of Matthew’s gospel, we find that it is about Jesus’ kingship and his kingdom. His kingship and kingdom were established not by military power or rocket launchers, but by the power of the word of God. In chapter 13, Jesus tells us six parables concerning the kingdom of God. Today he tells us the parable of the sower. May God teach us what kind of heart soil we must have in order to bear much fruit.

Part I: The secret of the kingdom of heaven. (1-17)

Look at verses 1-2. “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.” Probably Jesus went out to the lake early in the morning to have quiet time with God. But it was not possible for him to do so. Many were pushing forward to touch Jesus, believing that they would be healed by touching even the edge of his cloak. Large crowds gathered around him. Jesus felt that he would be pushed into the lake because of the crowd. So he got into a boat and the crowd of people stood on the shore. You can image a beautiful scene of Jesus’ teaching at the Sea of Galilee and the people listening to Jesus’ words from the shore.

Look at verses 3-9. “Then he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced
a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.” Jesus’ message was very short. It was just a morning devotional message which was supposed to last less than 15 minutes. But what a beautiful parable it was! When a farmer scattered his seed, it fell on four different kinds of soil: the path, rocky places, thorny ground and good soil. Even though the farmer scattered the same kind of seed, it bore different results, depending on the kinds of soil it fell on. The farmer worked hard but it seemed that the results were nothing but disappointment. Three out of the four soils—75% of the soil—failed to produce a crop. Only the good soil—one out of the four—produced a crop. But the good soil produced an abundant crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was shown, compensating for all the losses. Therefore, we should not be discouraged if we do not always see results as we faithfully teach the Word. This parable teaches us the importance of having good soil in order to bear much fruit.

After teaching the crowds of people, Jesus went into a house. When they were alone with Jesus, the disciples asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Probably the disciples could not understand the meaning of the parable fully. Even if they got the main gist of the parable, they wanted to know the meaning of the parable in detail. In this aspect, they were different from the crowds. The crowds came to hear Jesus and then just left and went on their merry way. But the disciples, like honor students who stay after class asking questions, came to Jesus and wanted to hear more about this beautiful and profound parable. This revealed that they had a humble learning mind. Even though they were not highly educated from a society point of view, their humble learning minds enabled them to grow to be great teachers and shepherds of mankind.

Verses 11, 12 tell us the privilege given to Jesus’ disciples, that is, know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. They had the privilege of knowing Jesus personally, hearing his words and observing his life. They did not study with a textbook. Jesus was their textbook. They learned from Jesus what to do, what to say, how to love and forgive, how to pray, and how to carry out the work of God. In fact when they learned one secret, they could understand another until they learned everything—all the secrets of the kingdom of heaven—from Jesus. Later, they became expert witnesses of Jesus and expert builders of God’s work. Here we learn that we must be in the school of Christ, Jesus U. In school, we learn many things to be prepared for
professional jobs. At the same time, we must learn many secrets of the kingdom of heaven so that we may not only be saved through Jesus but we also may know how to carry out the life-giving work of God.

But this privilege was not to be given to just anyone who happens by. Verses 13-15 are God’s word to his prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was surprised that God was sending him to such rebellious people. Then God gave Isaiah a few secrets of the kingdom of heaven, that is, principles of God’s work and history: first of all, that there would be a remnant who would accept his message and turn to God; next, that God’s salvation work and history would be carried out through these remnants of God. Applying these secrets of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus refused to be discouraged by the people’s general indifference toward the word and work of God. Rather Jesus was happy to acknowledge his disciples as such blessed remnants of God who had eyes to see the work of God and ears to hear the message of the gospel from Jesus. (16-17) He then proceeded to instruct his disciples in the detailed meaning of the parable of the sower.

Part II: The meaning of the parable of the sower. (18-23)

Look at verse 18. “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means.” According to verse 19, the seed is the message about the kingdom of heaven. Simply speaking, the seed is the word of God. The soil represents people’s heart, and the farmer is Jesus who sowed the seed of the word of God diligently in the hearts of people. My friends, a seed looks small and insignificant. But it has life in it; it has great potential to grow and bear fruit. When the seed is not planted, it remains only a single seed. But when it is planted, it can bear much fruit. Likewise, the word of God has life in it. When it is planted in our hearts, it can transform our lives and bears much fruit. But not everybody who hears the word of God will bear fruit. In fact, most of the people who hear the life-giving word of God fail to bear fruit for one reason or another. The following three kinds of people cannot bear fruit even after hearing the word of God.

First, those whose hearts are like a path. Look at verses 4, 19. “As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up...When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his
heart. This is the seed sown along the path.” A path-like heart is a hardened heart. Such people may come to hear the word of God but the word of God cannot even get into their hearts. They don’t accept the word of God at all. Once their hearts may have been soft, but now it’s became as hard as a path.

What might make one become like this? Pride makes people’s hearts as hard as a path. Nowadays young people live with their own pride, saying, “I am my own man or woman. I am a grownup and I know everything. I don’t need to listen to anybody, not even God. Don’t preach to me.” The problem is that those who are proud don’t know anything—even the meaning and purpose of their own lives. Proverbs 1:7a says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Proud people must become humble by having the fear of God—respect God as God.

Those who grew up in the church also can have a hardened heart towards the word of God. From their young age, they heard about the Bible. So whenever they hear the message, they say to them, “Man, I know this passage; I’ve heard this message more than 100 times. Whatever.” Habitual Christians must accept the word of God from their hearts newly and put it into practice. Then God will renew their hearts and lives according to the word of God. Otherwise, Satan takes away the word of God from their heads as soon as they walk out of the church.

Second, those whose hearts are like rocky places. Look at verses 5,6,20,21. “Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root...The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.” A person with a heart like a rocky place is an emotional person. When he hears the word of God, he accepts it right away with joy, saying many “Amens!” and “Wows!” In his emotional high, he makes a bold promise to God and others that he will give his whole life to God. But when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

The Israelites in Egypt were an example of such people. When Moses delivered the message of God’s deliverance to the Israelites, at first they
thanked God and worshiped God. But when Pharaoh persecuted them, they were quick to be discouraged and would no longer listen to the word of God through Moses. Because of their slave mentality, there was no ability or inner strength to go through trouble or persecution. Once, Peter did not like to hear about suffering. So when Jesus talked about his suffering and death on the cross, he rebuked Jesus. But later he was changed and encouraged the fellow Christians in 1 Pe 4:13, “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” Because he loved Jesus more than himself, he was willing to suffer to take care of God’s flock under his care. Any serious relationship demands commitment. For example, marriage is not based just on romantic feeling but lifelong commitment between two persons. Likewise, our personal relationship with God also demands lifelong commitment. Jesus calls us not only to believe in him but also suffer for him. (Php 1:29) We must make lifelong love commitments to Jesus and be willing to suffer for him by carrying out the mission he has given us.

Third, those whose hearts are like thorny ground. Look at verses 7, 22. “Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants...The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.” Those whose hearts are like thorny ground has an anxious heart. A thorny ground is rich in everything. So those whose hearts are like thorny grounds are rich in their spiritual desires to know Jesus and love and follow him. But at the same time, they also are rich in their worries and worldly desires for wealth, fame, and power.

Verse 22 mentions of worries of this life as one of the thorns. Living in this world, people are anxious with many things to worry. Some worry about their future security. Others also worry about global warming or nuclear holocaust. Those who have nothing to worry over manufacture something to worry about and spend their time worrying for nothing. Verse 22 mentions the deceitfulness of wealth as one of the thorns. People are anxious for money, thinking that money can buy everything. There are many things money cannot buy. We can buy a happy meal but not happiness. We can buy life insurance but not eternal life in the kingdom of God. When Jesus saw his disciples worrying about many things, he told them in Mt 6:31-33: “Do not worry...But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given
to you as well.” Instead of worrying, we must seek God first. Then God will provide us with all we need to serve God's holy mission while on earth.

Unlike the other unfruitful three soils, **those whose hearts are like good soil can bear an abundant fruit.** Look at verses 8, 23. “Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown...But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” The first step of becoming good soil is to hear the word of God. Jesus said in verse 9, “He who has ears, let him hear.” This means that not everybody has ears to hear. We must hear the word of Jesus personally through reading the Bible, writing testimonies and prayer. The next step is to understand the word of Jesus. We cannot understand the word of Jesus with our heads. We cannot grasp its full meaning right away. Therefore, in order to understand the word of Jesus, we must hold it in our hearts. In order to understand the word of Jesus in its true sense, we must live under it and live according to it, committing our lives and future to it, trusting and obeying it to the end even if it means trouble, persecution, or suffering. Then in his time God will bless us to bear much fruit for his own glory as well for our happiness.

Behind the fruitful ministry, there is always one person whose heart is like good soil. Day after day he or she labors for God, holding onto one word of God’s promise, overcoming all kinds of disappointments and doubts, and persevering to the end. Then in God’s time he or she bears thirty, sixty and a hundred times of abundant fruit and gives glory to God.

**In conclusion:** Jesus wants us to understand the secrets of the kingdom of God and bear much fruit. This time we must ask ourselves, “What kind of heart soil do I have?” Moreover, we must pray and find out what we must ‘do’ to become a person with a heart of good soil. May God grant us a heart of good soil and abundant fruit. May God bless COD ministry this year.