

The Parable of the Sower – Matthew 13:1-23

I. INTRODUCTION

A. LOTR

1. Okay, I have to admit it – I’m really excited – the 3rd & final film of the LOTR trilogy comes out this Wed. I already have tickets for the midnight showing.
2. I’m a huge fan of Tolkien and the Middle Earth he created in that masterpiece of fantasy fiction called the LOTR.
3. I’ve read the books, let’s just say, many times, and have watched the first two films several times each.
4. Though they’re fiction – Tolkien used the story to convey truth and the power and beauty of virtue in ways few modern authors have.
5. And this is one of the reasons why they’ve proven to be so wildly popular – in an age when heroes are rare, and virtue virtually extinct from popular culture, the LOTR abounds with the heroic and the classically virtuous – and people are hungry for it!

B. *The Power of Story*

1. Tolkien was a master story-teller. In fact, he virtually created a new literary genre, what today is known as Fantasy.
 2. Yet any literary scholar will tell you that Tolkien broke just about every rule of writing.
 3. If you want to be successful as an author, there are certain rules of story-telling you have to follow. Tolkien didn’t – in fact, he defied them all!
 4. And the story he wrote is arguably the greatest piece of fiction of the modern era.
 5. Critics find all kinds of mistakes and problems with Tolkien’s style, yet when all is said and done, even they bow to the fact that the story he told is a masterpiece and captures both the hearts and minds of those who read it.
 6. There *is power* in a well told story, and no one was a better story-teller than Jesus.
 7. What makes Jesus’ stories even more compelling than JRR Tolkien’s is that while Tolkien’s story took over a thousand pages to tell, Jesus’ stories were told in a matter of minutes, yet they embody truths far more potent than the LOTR.
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8. We’re taking a look at one of Jesus’ more well known stories today – The Parable of the Sower.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1-2

¹On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea.

²And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

1. Mark's gospel tells fills in some of the details:
 - a. this takes place in Capernaum on the northern shore of the Lake of Galilee.
 - b. it's been a long, hard day of teaching and healing,
 - c. including a nasty run-in with the Pharisees and even a bit of a falling-out with His mother & brothers – we'll go into more depth on that on Wednesday.
2. Jesus left the house where He'd spent a good part of the day, probably Peter's house, and walked the short distance to the shore where it was cooler and more relaxing.
3. But the multitude of people wanting something from Him just followed.
4. The crowd was so large they pressed in around Him there at the shore; so He climbed into a boat anchored there, and pushed out a ways.
 - a. Capernaum sits on a cove where the beach rises rapidly from the water forming a kind of theater, and just a few yards *off*-shore, it's quite deep.
 - b. as Jesus sat in the boat and looked back to shore, He'd see a large & expectant crowd and He's in the perfect place to instruct them – so He begins . . .

B. Vs. 3-9

³Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: “Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. ⁶But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. ⁷And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. ⁸But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

1. Try to picture the scene:
 - a. Jesus is sitting in the boat a few yards off shore,
 - b. there's a large and eager crowd standing on the shore just waiting for Him to say something - and Jesus tells them *a story*.
 - c. actually, as we read on, we find he told them 4 stories!
2. It was a bit later that v. 10 took place . . .

C. Vs. 10-17

¹⁰And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

¹¹He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. ¹³Therefore I speak to them in

parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: '*Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive;* ¹⁵ For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'

¹⁶But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; ¹⁷for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*.

1. Matthew inserts this conversation with the disciples here because it explains the reason why Jesus spoke in parables to the people.
2. When Jesus began to speak from the boat, the disciples expected Him to give a straight-forward teaching, as He'd done up to this point.
3. They were surprised by the parables and came to Him later to ask why He switched from teaching to story-telling.
4. He explained –
 - a. it had come to the point now where the opposition against Him had organized and were plotting to destroy Him.
 - b. the multitude of common people were also beginning to divide into different camps in their opinions about Him.
 - c. as His enemies began to make moves against Him, it cause the common folk to ask questions about where they stood in relation to Jesus.
5. So Jesus switched from straight-forward teaching to parables because of this subtle shift in the way people were *responding* to Him.
6. What He says here is this –
 - a. to those who are genuine seekers after God and His truth, the parables He tells will *illustrate* that truth and show them the path to Life.
 - b. but for those who are hardening *against* Him the parables will *obscure* the truth, and their reaction to the stories He tells will only affirm and reveal the hardness of their hearts.
7. This is exactly what happened.
 - a. when Jesus told parables, there were two reactions –
 - b. the group that believed in Him rejoiced at the powerful way He taught.
 - 1) the parables were for them wonderful illustrations;
 - 2) they gave them handles by which they could grasp the truths of the Kingdom and put them into practice.
 - c. but for those who *rejected* Jesus and the truth He brought, the parables became a convenient excuse for them to *ignore* Him.
 - d. they said, "Why can't He speak plainly?!"
 - e. but Jesus *had* told them plainly – and they rejected both Him and His message.
8. The parables were a form of both *grace & judgment*.
 - a. they were *grace* to those who believed because they were illustrations of

- the truth that helped them understand
- b. but they were *judgment* to those who rejected Jesus because in their opposition to Him they would not spend any effort in *trying* to understand, therefore they would find them hard.
9. And this is why Jesus says in v. 12 -
- For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.**
- a. those who receive truth in the Person and teaching of Jesus, and *act* on it, will receive more.
 - b. but those who *reject* the truth will ultimately lose whatever truth they do have.
10. God has given many examples of spiritual truth in nature. Really, this is what parables are – true to life stories from daily experience that illustrate a spiritual truth.
- a. and the world around us is jam-packed with allusions to spiritual things.
 - b. creation brims over with object lessons of the invisible.
 - c. what Jesus says in v. 12 is demonstrated in something like a muscle.
 - 1) if you use it, it stays healthy; if you fail to use it, it atrophies and shrivels. Use it, or lose it!
 - 2) in fact, the only way to get stronger and gain more muscle mass is by working the muscle past it's current ability or comfort zone.
 - d. now, I know some of us aren't very keen on this illustration because we aren't very physical; some of us are more in to the intellectual pursuits – but the same thing applies to the mind. Use it, or lose it!
 - 1) the more you stretch your intellect, the more the mind grows and increases it's capacity to process more complex ideas.
 - 2) even the physical organ of the *brain* grows in size by mental stimulation.
 - a) studies have found that children who were stimulated as infants with colorful mobiles above their cribs and who were given puzzles when young, have larger brains and greater intelligence & intellectual capacity than children who didn't receive this kind of stimulation.
 - b) if infants and young children are exposed to classical music or jazz, their brains are larger.
 - c) conversely, there is now solid, statistical evidence that children who spend a lot of time watching mindless television programs like cartoons and kid-oriented entertainment have smaller brains and lower IQ's. ^[1]
11. So take your pick, brawn or brains, even the physical world demonstrates the truth of what Jesus says in v. 12 – Use it or lose it!
12. God confronts us with His truth, and if we do not respond *positively* to it, if we do not take it in, integrate it into our thinking and lifestyle, then our capacity to understand truth and life *diminishes*.
13. We must set ourselves to respond immediately and with Joy to God's Word!
14. And that's the main lesson the parable of the sower teaches, which Jesus now

makes clear to the disciples . . .

D. Vs. 18-19

18“Therefore hear the parable of the sower: **19**When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand *it*, then the wicked *one* comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.

1. One of the things you notice when you visit Israel is how incredibly rocky and hilly the land is. Limestone is everywhere!
2. Yet the millennia of human occupation has seen the land developed into thousands of terraced hillsides.
3. The fields are long, winding, narrow strips of land bordered by well-worn footpaths that are like pavement from all the travel they've seen over the centuries.
4. Jesus pictures a farmer who's gone out to his field with a seed-bag tied around his waist and a strap over his shoulder.
 - a. as he walks the length of his field, he puts his hand into the sack, pulls it forth, and rhythmically scatters the seed.
 - b. the seed falls onto 4 kinds of ground – the first is the *wayside* or *footpath* that borders the field.
5. In Mark's version of the parable, he tells us Jesus said that the seed is the Word of God. Matthew says the same thing in v. 19.
6. That means the sower, in the *first sense*, would be Jesus Himself, Who'd been faithfully sharing the Word of God with them for that first year of His ministry.
7. But the sower isn't limited just to Jesus, it's *anyone* who spreads the Word of God, anyone who shares it with others.
8. And seed is a perfect picture for the Word of God because a seed possesses almost unlimited potential to produce life. *All it needs is the right soil*, which is precisely the lesson Jesus is seeking to get across in this parable.
9. This first soil the seed lands on is the *footpath*.
 - a. seed that lands there finds no opening to penetrate.
 - b. it will just be blown about by the winds, and once the sower has passed, the birds will descend on it and snatch it up.
10. Jesus is referring to those who are too busy with what they call the '*realities of life*' to waste time on '*spiritual things*.'
 - a. the wayside speaks of *commerce, traffic, business*; it's where the merchants' carts went, and the feet of those hurrying to make a deal.
 - b. and as they go, bent on their next appointment, they beat the soil till it's rock hard.
 - c. these are people who are caught up in the frenetic pace of life in the dog-eat-dog world of competition and profits.
 - d. they are the Ebenezer Scrooge's of the world.
11. Just as the seed does come in contact with the wayside, so these hardened hearts will come into contact with the word of God.
 - a. the radio dial in their Lexus will scan and pause on a Christian radio station and they'll hear some Bible teacher reading scripture.

- b. they'll see a billboard a church has put up.
 - c. they'll read an article that quotes a verse or two.
 - d. they'll overhear a conversation between believers.
 - e. they'll get a Christmas card in the mail with a Biblical theme.
12. But the Word never penetrates because they've **decided** to be closed to it.
13. Religion and all that God and Bible stuff may be fine for others, but they simply don't have time for such profitless and time-wasting pursuits.
14. For them, it's all about the here & now – they are truly secular in their outlook.

Into this world to eat & to sleep,

*And to know no reason why he was **born**, Save to consume **corn**,*

*Devour the cattle, flock & **fish**, And leave behind an empty **dish**.*

15. But you know, even the Scrooges have their moments when they're still, quiet, and reflective.
- a. though they may not like it, there are times when their feet must stop and they must sit.
 - b. life throws them a curve; maybe it comes in the form of a business failure, the death of a loved one or some relationship they took for granted that comes crashing to an end.
 - c. and then they're forced to face the questions they've managed to avoid till then.
 - d. it begins to dawn on them they've neglected something important, the unseen part of their lives.
 - e. their stock portfolio may be fat, but their soul is scrawny.
 - f. in the classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*, CS Lewis has an elder demon mentoring a younger tempter in how to distract a man who is in just this situation.
 - 1) Screwtape shares his experience in tempting a man who was reading, and what he read suggested a train of thought that would lead to a consideration of spiritual things the man had neglected all his life.
 - 2) Screwtape said that he suggest to the man that he was hungry and needed to go for lunch.

Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom steps I had got into him a conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of "real life" [by which he meant the bus and the newsboy] was enough to show him that "that sort of thing' just couldn't be true.

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16. The wayside was and is a warning to people on the go, who have no time for thoughtful contemplation of anything other than this moment and how they can maximize either their profit, power, position, or pleasure.
17. If this was a problem in Jesus' day, how much more of a warning is it today in the 21st Century?
18. What would it profit a man if he should gain the whole world, but in the end, lose his own soul?

E. Vs. 20-21

20 But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

1. There are many places in Israel where there's a 2 to 3 inch layer of soil over the limestone bedrock.
2. Seed sown on such ground will spring up rapidly because the sun heats the soil and encourage the rapid germination of the plant.
3. Very quickly a little seedling sprouts, but the roots run into the bedrock quickly and there isn't enough to sustain the plant.
4. As the sun gets hotter, the plant quickly withers and dies.
5. This happens too with some people who hear the Word – there's an immediate emotional reaction and delight at the discovery that there's a dimension to their lives they've never known before.
6. They find that God's timeless Word is relevant to them personally and there's a seeming dramatic turning to the Lord.
7. But as soon as there's the significant challenge they turn away.
8. These are the kind of people who see the benefits of what God offers them and they're real excited at first, but when they realize there's a *cost* involved, that there are some changes that need to be made if they're going to receive the word, they aren't interested any more.
9. They don't want *God's life*, imparted through the Word, so much as they want God to make *their life* better.
10. We've probably all known people like this – people who have an excited emotional reaction to the gospel rather than make a sincere commitment to Jesus.
 - a. these are the people who, when you're sharing with them say,
 - b. "Oh, I tried that - it didn't work for me."
 - c. "Yeah, I was a Christian once. It lasted about a year."
 - d. "I went to a concert years ago and went forward at the end to pray the sinner's prayer. Then I went to youth group or church for a few months, but you know, I guess it just didn't work out."
11. What's sad is that it's from the ranks of just these kinds of folk that some of Christianity's most committed enemies have come.
12. They believe they genuinely gave God a try because they *felt* something emotionally, but because it didn't seem to work for them – God didn't come through according to their expectations, they've now judged God as weak and unworthy of their devotion.
13. One of my very best friends in high school was this kind of guy.
 - a. he made what seemed like a real commitment to Christ and went to church faithfully.
 - b. several years later I asked him how his walk was going and with the most sour voice he mocking laughed and said that he'd given up on all that long ago.
 - c. I was stunned and asked what happened, and he said that he'd asked God to give him a girlfriend and none had been forthcoming.

- d. so, if God wouldn't give him what he asked for, forget God!
- 14. The people represented by the stony soil are purely selfish and self-seeking.
 - a. their initial excitement at the Word of God is because they think it will add to *their life*.
 - b. when they discover it is meant to create *newlife* and that acquiring this new life means *dying to self* – they aren't interested.

F. V. 22

22 Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

1. This soil is potentially good soil, but when the seed springs up, weeds rise up to compete with it.
2. Anyone whose tried to grow a garden knows about weeds.
 - a. they seem to be just about impossible to avoid.
 - b. they grow up around the flowers and fruit you've planted and if they aren't removed, they steal the water and nutrients.
 - c. some weeds actually wrap themselves like vines around other plants and literally choke them. [That's the picture here.](#)
3. The other plants that would choke out the Word of God are the weeds of worry and greed.
 - a. the phrase "cares of this world" is literally – "*distractions of the age.*"
 - b. I don't need to give you examples of how filled with *distractions* this world is.
 - c. every one of us probably feels inordinately pressed & pressured because we have so much to do.
 - d. think of all the gizmos and gadgets available to fill our eyes, ears, and minds with noise.
 - e. and don't worry about being able to afford buying any of those gadgets or gizmos – here's a credit card!
 - f. do you think there might be a master strategy behind all that stuff, behind all the distractions?
 - g. the Bible calls the devil the god of this age – he's the spiritual influence behind so much of the direction of the world.
4. He doesn't want the Word of God producing life and fruit in us, so he keeps us busy with a multitude of distractions and dangles before our eyes and hearts the tempting lure to define ourselves by the world's ideas of success.
5. The soil Jesus speaks of here is the *divided heart*, the heart pulled by two different loyalties – the love of the world, or the love of God.
6. As Jesus said, we cannot love God and Mammon. [Matthew 6:24]
7. John said that the love of the world and the love of God are mutually exclusive. [1 John 2:15]
8. There are some who hear in God's Word the ring of truth and seem to make some progress in spiritual things, but when push comes to shove, they chose a life in the World rather than the Kingdom of God.
9. They're like the woman to whom a young man proposed.

- a. he said, “Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I’m not rich. I don’t have a yacht or a Rolls Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart.”
 - b. she thought for a minute then replied, “I love you with all my heart too, but tell me more about Johnny Brown.”
10. Many people seem to begin well, for some time they pass themselves off convincingly as believers, but the love of the world strangles all vestiges of true faith from their hearts.
 11. Look around – who’s missing today – whose not here because the love of the world choked out the love of God.

G. V. 23

23 But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

1. Of the four soils Jesus gives in this parable, only one produces fruit.
2. And fruit is what the sower was looking for all along.
3. A *seedling* is not what He was looking for.
3. A *weed-choked plant* was not sufficient.
4. The farmer wants *fruit* and anything less is nothing at all!
5. Jesus recognizes that when the seed sprouts and produces fruit, some plants will produce more than others.
6. He is not concerned about *how much fruit* is born, but *that* fruit is produced – fruit is what He’s looking for.

III. CONCLUSION

A. The Point, The Lesson

1. The point of this parable is this – **be careful how you respond to God’s Word!**
2. What’s your reaction to the Word of God?
3. First of all, what’s **your basic attitude** toward the Word of God?
 - a. is the Bible just an outdated tome of disproved stories? Is it a spiritual curiosity?
 - b. is it a religious work for which you have no use because ***you*** live in the real world of cold-hard facts and can’t waste your time on something so, well, irrelevant?
 - c. if that’s your position, you’re the wayside, the footpath of this parable.
4. Did you at one time have an intense emotional encounter with God and went to church for a time,
 - a. but as quickly as it started, it stopped, and up to today you’ve really thought you gave Christianity a try that didn’t work out.
 - b. if that’s you, you’re the shallow soil in the parable of the sower – and may I say, you were never really converted at all.
 - c. you may have tried ***your idea of Christianity*** and found it didn’t work, but you didn’t try Christ!

5. Or maybe your experience with church and religion lasted for a while, but eventually, you lost interest.
 - a. you grew weary of the struggle between what God's word said and what your heart *wanted*, which was the goodies the world had to offer.
 - b. or maybe it wasn't that obvious, maybe there wasn't some great crisis, a battle of competing affections between God and the world –
 - c. maybe you just sort of *wandered away*.
 - 1) besides the extra hours at work so you could afford the new car payments and the two classes you were taking so you could get that promotion -
 - 2) there was the gym membership, and dance classes
 - 3) little Johnny had soccer and Mary had cheerleading – so you stopped attending mid-week study and many Sundays there were games to go to.
 - 4) and then the new season of 24 started so you couldn't go to Tuesday night home group anymore.
 - d. and before you knew it, you hadn't been to church in months, hadn't picked up your Bible in weeks, and prayer was something you only said when stuck in traffic and late to an appointment.
 - e. and while there's a vague sense you ought to be doing something different, the fact is, you're not real sure what it is.
 - f. if that's you, you're the third soil.

B. Fruit

1. What Jesus is looking for is *fruit*.
 2. His word must produce a *lasting change* in us or as far as we're concerned it's better not to have encountered it.
 3. The same sun that softens wax, hardens clay.
 4. God's word will either soften us and produce fruit, or it will harden us in our unbelief – it all depends on the posture we take toward Him.
 5. It's crucial we all understand this today, for we are that multitude standing on the shore of that cove at Capernaum. What Jesus said to them He says to us – Be careful how you hear!
 6. Are you producing fruit? That's the test, the crucial issue.
 7. Going to church is *not* fruit.
 - a. putting a bumper sticker on your car is *not* fruit
 - b. listening to Christian music is *not* fruit
 - c. getting all excited about Bible prophecy is *not* fruit
 - d. buying a big study Bible and getting colored pencils and drawing neat notes in the margin is *not* fruit.
 8. All of that is just the *stalk* and green leaves of a plant.
 9. What about the fruit? Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.
 10. This is the fruit the seed of God's Word produces.
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[\[1\]](#) Dunn, Marva *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*