

## Explanation of the Parable of the Sower (13:18–23)

To sum up, “The general point is that the “message about the kingdom” (v. 19) receives a varied reception among various people, and that during this time of difficulty and frustration there is an implied delay while the seed produces in some soils its various yields.”<sup>1</sup>

**Matthew 13:18 “[You] Hear then the parable of the sower:**

**[You] Hear....** The word “**you**” is not translated but is in the Greek text. “...in light of the great privilege extended to you, which prophets and righteous men wanted to enjoy and the calloused spurn, **you listen**.”<sup>2</sup> This is a very pointed “in your face” comment by Jesus to his disciples—and to us.

**Matthew 13:19 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 what was sown along the path.**

To begin, we might note that the sower is not identified. But, a little later in another parable with similarities to this one, we hear:

“He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.” (Matthew 13:37, ESV)

The interpretation of the parable is about Israel’s response to Jesus and his teachings identified in the various soils. This principle can be applied to all groups across the ages.

**the word of the kingdom....** Verse 13:19 assumes that the “seeds” mentioned in verses 13:3-8 are the **word** or **message** of the kingdom. The Greek word used here for “**word**” is *logos* [λόγος], and can be translated **the message of the kingdom**.

In context, we see that this **message of the kingdom** is what “Jesus has been proclaiming since 4:17, and which has been received in such a varied way in the narratives of chs. 11–12. This parable therefore aims to explain that varied response to Jesus’ proclamation.”<sup>3</sup>

**understand<sup>4</sup>....** The word understand is used five times in this story. The Book of Proverbs gives us a clear grasp on how the Hebrew mind viewed “understanding.”

<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 312). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 312). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>3</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 520). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>4</sup> *understand συνιημι* “To comprehend, understand, perceive. The comprehending activity of the mind ... entails the assembling of individual facts into an organized whole, as collecting the pieces of a puzzle and putting them

*“My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.” (Proverbs 2:1–15, ESV)*

To understand is to be wise, not to understand is to be a fool. For Jesus to say that a person **does not understand it**, is to say that he was a fool and, as such, acted as a fool acts—he found no value in the Word.

**the evil one....** The birds of 13:4 are now identified as servants of “**the evil one**” which is Satan. “Each of the Evangelists refers to Satan in a different way (Mark has ‘Satan’; Luke has ‘the devil’; Matthew has ‘the evil one’) ....”<sup>5</sup>

**in his heart....** It is now clear that this is but an analogy with farming, the actual soil is the heart of man. The actual seed is the word of God.

The use of “understand” and “heart” in this parable corresponds to Matthew’s quote of Isaiah just a few verses earlier.

*“Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “ ‘ “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.” (Matthew 13:14–15, ESV)*

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together. The mind grasps concepts and sees the proper relationship between them. Such understanding includes the moral and religious awareness of man’s heart (Mark 6:52; 8:17; Acts 28:27).” Zodiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 539). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

Here Jesus gives us a parable illustrating what Isaiah was saying. “Matthew will speak of what is happening with the heart fourteen times.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important to remember that each culture has a term that they use to address the inner person. Some have used kidneys and other internal organs. In each case, the culture is using that term to address the real, under the skin, person. In most cases, they did not think that the inner person was found in that actual organ. The Greek world often used the word heart to do this. To the ancients, heart did not have the emotional element in it that we think of today when that word is used. Instead it addressed “the inner person.” Today we tend to use the word “mind” in this way, a non-physical “place” that addresses what we think, believe and feel.

***along the path....*** The path would be a very hardened trail around the boundaries of fields where both people and animals walked. The hardness of the path would make it impossible for the seed to take any root at all. This path reflects the hardness of the heart in many people that, will not in the least, entertain God in their thoughts.

***Matthew 13:20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy,***

***rocky ground....*** Rocky ground differs from the “path” in that the path was so hard that it did not allow any possibility of growth, whereas the “rocky ground” has soil on the rock. It is from this thin layer of soil that the seed grows.

***hears ... and ... receives....*** “Note that these people are said to “hear” and “receive” the message, but not to “understand.” The problem is lack of roots “in themselves;” their enthusiasm is based on external stimulus, not on inner conviction, and so it will not last when the external is no longer there.”<sup>7</sup>

***with joy***<sup>8</sup>.... This is a word with a universal positive meaning, yet in this context it takes an unexpected negative turn. How is it that this joy did not endure?

***Matthew 13:21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.***

***no root....*** The soil provides the environment for germination, but the rock underneath does not allow the roots to go deep where water and nutrition are found. Without root, there is no fruit. The joy was not nurtured with water and nutritious soil. Perhaps we might find in this the picture of feeding on God’s word.

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<sup>6</sup> Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 540). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>7</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 520). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>8</sup> *joy χαρά* “...the experience of gladness....” William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1077.

**tribulation**<sup>9</sup>.... Suffering.

**persecution**<sup>10</sup>.... These have been common to the Christian Church during most of its history. There is no “health and wealth” gospel here.

**immediately**.... There was no wrestling with conscience in making this decision.

**falls away**<sup>11</sup>.... Into sin. Without the substance of a true faith anchored in the soil of God’s word, tribulation and persecution are more than enough to destroy the fledging plant. The intent was to experience joy for the news of the kingdom, not suffering. They only signed on for the good, not the bad.

*“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*  
(Matthew 5:11–12, ESV)

**Matthew 13:22** *As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.*

**cares**<sup>12</sup> or **anxieties** .... Worries associated with one’s material wellbeing.

*“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”* (Matthew 6:25, ESV)

**of the world**<sup>13</sup>.... Or of the age. In using “age” or “era” Jesus is stressing time. One is reminded of those who are always stressing over not enough time to get things done. This suggests the question of priorities, what one is trying to accomplish in the limited hours of the day. The important things drive out the less important. The less important

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<sup>9</sup> *tribulation* θλίψις “...to crush, press, compress, squeeze, ... to break. Tribulation, trouble, affliction....” Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> *persecution* διωγμός “...to follow, persecute, pursue, press toward. Pursuit, particularly of enemies, persecution, hostile prosecution....” Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>11</sup> *falls away* σκανδαλίζω “...to fall into sin.... The *skándalon* is an obstacle to faith and hence a cause of falling and destruction.” Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (p. 1037). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>12</sup> *cares* μέριμνα “a feeling of apprehension or distress in view of possible danger or misfortune—‘anxiety, worry, anxious concern.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>13</sup> *of the world* αἰών “...a unit of time as a particular stage or period of history—‘age, era.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

in this case being the word. "...life has too many other commitments that slowly choke the struggling plant, which never matures and bears fruit."<sup>14</sup>

Another word for world is κόσμος (*kosmos*) which refers to "the universe as an ordered structure—'cosmos, universe.'"<sup>15</sup> This is not the word used here.

A great deal of the context for the cares of this world can be found in—

***the deceitfulness<sup>16</sup> of riches....***

*"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal," (Matthew 6:19, ESV)*

*"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Matthew 6:24, ESV)*

"...worries about worldly things or devotion to wealth (cf. 1 Tim 6:9) snuff out spiritual life."<sup>17</sup>

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed these two issues. For ***the cares***, or anxieties, ***of the world***, Jesus called his people to,

*"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33, ESV)*

And for ***the deceitfulness of riches***, Jesus says,

*"...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:20, ESV)*

***choke<sup>18</sup> the word....*** To the degree the ***word*** is choked, so are we, unto death itself.

"The key issue is responsiveness or non-responsiveness to the message of the kingdom. ... But there is also the possibility of an initial positive response that proves to be less than adequate. Two instances are given.... In the first we encounter the fair-weather disciple who under the pressure of adverse circumstances immediately

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<sup>14</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 314). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>15</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>16</sup> *deceitfulness ἀπάτη* "Deceit, delusion. In the pass. sense spoken of anything which is deceptive, seducing...." Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>17</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 314). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>18</sup> *choke συμπνίγω* "To choke or throttle and thus to suffocate. Figuratively, to overpower...." Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

abandons faith and commitment. This person has thought only of the blessings of the kingdom, having indeed made a simple equation between the enjoyment of them and being a disciple, and is thus unable to cope with the reality of continuing evil in the world. The shallowness of such discipleship underlines the appropriateness of the metaphor. In the second instance the response of discipleship is cut short by the ordinary cares of this life (cf. 8:21) and the seduction of wealth (cf. 6:24; 1 Tim 6:9–10). .... We are thus again reminded in this passage of the absolute claim of discipleship. The word of the kingdom when received fully and without reservation results in an unqualified, constant, and abundantly fruitful discipleship....”<sup>19</sup>

**Matthew 13:23 As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”**

**soil....** The parable uses the soil or earth that farmers sow seeds in to teach a story at a spiritual level. The heart of man is the soil in which the word is sown.

**understands**<sup>20</sup>.... “The comprehending activity of the mind denoted by *suníēmi* [understands] entails the assembling of individual facts into an organized whole, as collecting the pieces of a puzzle and putting them together. The mind grasps concepts and sees the proper relationship between them. Such understanding includes the moral and religious awareness of man’s heart (Mark 6:52; 8:17; Acts 28:27).”<sup>21</sup>

“Here is a direct antithesis to v. 19: the “understanding” which was explicitly absent there is now at last achieved.”<sup>22</sup>

**This is the key word in the passage.** It brackets the Isaiah 6 passage at the beginning of Matthew 13:14 and then at the end of Matthew 13:15. It then brackets Jesus’ explanation of the proverb in verses 19 and 23. It is the key to grasping the meaning of the passage. The person who hears the word and “gets it” bears fruit.

**bears fruit....** “The bearing of a crop indicates that this “understanding” is not to be interpreted as a purely intellectual grasp of truth; it is rather the lifestyle commitment which the “message of the kingdom of heaven” demands....”<sup>23</sup>

“The parable of the sower shows that though the kingdom will now make its way amid hard hearts, competing pressures, and even failure, it will produce an abundant crop.”<sup>24</sup> And what is that crop? “The fruit is probably to be understood as the pattern of conduct

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<sup>19</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (vol. 33A; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 381.

<sup>20</sup> *understands* *συνίημι* (see verse 19) “...from *sún* ... together or together with, and *híēmi* ... to send or put. To comprehend, understand, perceive.” Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>21</sup> Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>22</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 521). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>23</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 521). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 315). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

described in the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7), i.e., the living out of the kingdom of God here and now (cf. 5:13–16; 21:43).”<sup>25</sup>

***a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.*** “Disciples are not all the same, and so equally genuine disciples may produce different levels of crop, depending on their different gifts and circumstances.”<sup>26</sup>

So, why was the parable given? What is its point? “The passage has to be understood within its wider context, this being chapters 11–12. These two chapters relate in some detail the failure of Jesus’ ministry to effect repentance in corporate Israel.”<sup>27</sup> The fact that Israel is rejecting Jesus demands some kind of explanation. Why are they doing this? It is because of the condition, soil, of their hearts.

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<sup>25</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (vol. 33A; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 380.

<sup>26</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 522). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>27</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 402.