April 20/21, 2024

The Four Soils

Kingdom Stories: Living in the One True Kingdom Series

Matthew 13:1-23

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What do you think would happen if Jesus came back and walked the streets of Lincoln, just as He did 2000 years ago? He looks like us, dresses like us, would do public miracles all over town, would live a life of perfect integrity, and would share the message of the kingdom with the people of Lincoln. How do you think that people would respond? Probably about like they did 2000 years ago. That's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Matthew, Chapter 13. This is our third week in the kingdom parables' study. Matthew 13 is a really important turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Almost for certain, everything that happens in chapters 12 and 13 all happens on the same day. There's a growing tension among the religious leaders regarding Jesus. There's a group of followers called His disciples, and there's a lot of people in between, still trying to make up their minds. But at this point, Jesus is going to shift from a ministry to the multitudes, to pouring himself into those that follow Him. And in many ways, this parable explains why. Verse 1:

> **That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.** (*NASB, Matthew 13:1-2)

So at the end of chapter 12, Jesus' family comes looking for Him. It's likely that they went into the house of Peter and spent some time together. Now He's coming out of the house and goes down to the Sea of Galilee. So, everything happening here is clear up North, around the Sea of Galilee, probably around the town of Capernaum, which is where Peter lived. This was typically home base when they were up North, so very rural, very agricultural up there. Jesus goes down to the sea, goes out a little way in the boat, and He delivers this parable to them. Verse 3:

> **And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some *seeds* fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."** (Vs. 3-9)

So you have to understand that when we're talking about this parable, we're not talking about a Nebraska farm that's big with lots of rich soil. We're talking about very small plots of ground, kind of like big gardens with very rocky, dry soil. In this part of Canaan, this part up around Galilee, almost everyone either had a field or had worked in a field. So it would have been an imagery all

of them would have been familiar with. These small plots were unfenced. They had little footpaths that went around them, where they threw wheat or barley seeds. And that's the illustration Jesus is using. Matthew calls it a parable.

Both Ryan and Matt talked a little bit about what a parable is all about. Literally, the word is made up of two Greek words: *to throw* and *beside*. It means *to throw beside*, so it's a story or an imagery that's thrown alongside the truth, either to better understand it, or, in some cases, to actually hide the meaning. So Jesus tells them this parable about four soils.

The first soil is the seed that lands on the roads, probably talking about the walking paths that would have been just hard as concrete, so there's no chance of anything happening there. Think about casting grass seeds in your yard. Some of it gets on the sidewalk or on the driveway, and nothing is going to happen. The birds come; they eat it up. That's the first soil.

The second soil lands on a very thin layer of dirt, and under that is just rock. So, because the sun penetrates the rock, it's very warm and the seed immediately germinates. It looks like something is going to happen, but there's no potential for roots. In that part of the world, if there weren't deep roots, there was no chance, for the sun comes up, scorches it, and it withers away.

The third soil is where the seed that's cast into it has a lot of thorns and weeds, and quickly the weeds take over, and the plant doesn't survive.

Only the fourth soil is referred to as a **good soil**, where the seed bears fruit—some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, and some thirtyfold. There are a handful of scholars that think that a hundred, sixty, thirtyfold is like a miraculous return. But almost nobody thinks that. It's actually just a good return, a good crop. So what exactly that means, I'll get to in just a couple of minutes. As soon as Jesus delivers the parable, He comes back to the shore, and now He has a more private conversation with His disciples.

> **And the disciples came and they said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him *more* shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,**
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> **'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;**
> **YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;**
> **FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,**
> **WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,**
> **AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES,**
> **OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,**
> **HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,**
> **AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,**
> **AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'"** (Vs. 10-15)

So Jesus comes back to the shore and His disciples say, “You know, Jesus, what's the deal with these parables?” It kind of has the flavor of: “You know, if you're going to say something, why don’t you just say it? I don't understand why you're doing this parable thing.” So Jesus is going to explain it to them. In His explanation, you have this tension that appears over and over again in the Bible. It's this tension between the sovereignty of God and what God does, and people's own choices to listen, or to see or to hear. So what Jesus tells them is that they have been granted the privilege to have eyes that see and ears that hear and hearts that receive. Remarkably, they have been granted the privilege to live in one of the most remarkable periods in human history—this short span of time when the God of the universe took on human flesh and actually walked on this earth. And He did miracles before them, and teachings before them, and showed them the way. And by the grace of God, they have eyes to see it and they have ears to hear it…so they're following Him. And the result of that is, Jesus is continually unveiling to them the mysteries of the kingdom.

That word *mystery* is a Greek word that’s used several times in the New Testament, and it carries the idea of something that was previously unknown that is now being unveiled, so that they can know it. It's really important to understand that a mystery is not something anyone could figure out. It could only be known because God is revealing it. If you were here on Palm Sunday, Ryan talked about the people's preconceived ideas about the kingdom, and Jesus was having to explain to them, “It's not what you think.” They were wanting an overthrow of Rome. They were wanting to be set free from the bondage, and what Jesus was telling them is, “That's not the way it's going to be. It's going to start in the hearts of people, and one day the fullness of Jesus' kingdom will come in.” So what Jesus is saying is, because they see, because they hear, because they are following Him, that He is going to continue to teach them and unveil to them more and more the mysteries of the kingdom.

So from this point on, He's going to pour Himself into those that choose to follow Him. But that's not true of everyone. As a matter of fact, it wasn't even true of the majority. Even though He did these miracles in public, they have eyes, but they cannot see. Even though He's telling them the truth that will change their lives, they have ears, but they can’t hear it. And so what Jesus says is, “Little by little, I'm going to take away from them what they have. They're going to understand less and less and less.”

It's very interesting to think about, because so it is today. Do you ever find yourself listening to the voices of the culture, the things people are saying and promoting and believing, and you find yourself just scratching your head, thinking, “What is going on here?” Sometimes it just feels like, “Man, we are living in the Twilight Zone. I don't even know what to say”. This is what's happening here. Those that choose to believe, to listen, to hear, to see, God is unveiling more and more of the truth of His kingdom, and we understand more and more. But to those who don't want to see it, to those who don't want to listen to it, He's taking away truth; He's taking away an understanding, and they just become more confused. They walk more in darkness, and pretty soon it's like, “I don't even know what you people are saying.”

I think there was a time in our country when Christians could kind of straddle the fence. Because of the nature of the culture, the whole “one nation under God” kind of thing, you could kind of live with one foot in the kingdom of God and one foot in the world. But I don't think that's true anymore, because of the way we're going as a culture. We are full speed down the path of becoming

a secular nation, and as a result of that, the divide is becoming greater and greater and greater. Like most places in the world, this has been true for 2000 years, and you can't live in both kingdoms. It's going to force a lot of cultural Christians in America to make a decision: "You're either "in" or "out"! It's either "this way" or "that way"!

Well, this is what Jesus is talking about. So He identifies the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah was talking about people in his day. ***"They have eyes, but they can't see. They have ears, but they can't hear. They have hearts, but they won't receive it."*** And the saddest part of this quote from Isaiah is at the end of the quote, where he says, "***If they would just receive it, and return to Him, He would heal them."*** He would heal them of their despair. He would heal them of their addiction. He would heal them of their emptiness. He would heal them of their hopelessness. This is everything they're looking for, but they don't see it; they don't hear it, so they're going to miss it. But what He says to His disciples is very interesting. Verse 16:

> **"But blessed** (That's a word that means happy, joyful.) **are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desire to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*."** (Vs. 16-17)

What He's saying is that these disciples, these followers of Jesus, are living in this remarkable period of history that the prophets of old longed to experience. They were prophesying the future. "There will come a time when God will become flesh and He'll walk among you, and He'll do miracles." And each of them longed for the opportunity to experience that in their lifetime. But these disciples are living in this remarkable period of history. And their hearts should be full of joy, because with their eyes, they're seeing it; with ears, they're hearing it; with hearts they're receiving it, and it is transforming their lives. Jesus, then, is going to go on and explain the parable. With most of these parables, we have to kind of figure out the interpretation, and sometimes we scratch our heads and are like, "I'm trying to figure this one out." This parable, we don't have to figure out. Jesus just tells us, "This is what it means." Verse 18:

> **"Hear then the parable of the sower. 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 the one on whom seed was sown beside the road."** (Vs. 18-19)

So we'll take this one at a time. The first soil includes those who just don't care, are not interested. They're not only not interested, but they're also maybe even hostile to the message. If Jesus walked through the streets of Lincoln and did all kinds of public miracles, somehow they would dismiss it. "It's not true; I'm not buying it." If Jesus were to teach them, they'd be like, "Yeah, no, I just don't care, am not interested." Those are not people that are walking through these doors. They don't care. They're not interested in a thing someone like me has to say. If anything, they're kind of offended and hostile toward what we believe.

Where I personally bump into these people as a preacher is at funerals. They're not coming to the services, but they come to the funeral of a friend or a work associate, or a family member. Somebody dies, so they have to walk through the doors. And I can do my very best to try to explain the gospel of Jesus, but 30 minutes later it's like they didn't even hear it. Not interested…

didn't hear it…I don't know what you're talking about. It's like casting seed on the driveway. It's just not going to grow there. That's the first soil. The second soil, Verse 20:

> **"The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no *firm* root in himself, b**ut is ***only*** **temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away."** (Vs. 20-21)

The second soil is someone who initially responds and seems to respond joyfully. "This sounds like what I need." This might be a person that's going through a hard time in life. We sometimes refer to these as "foxhole conversions". They're kind of pushed to the end, and it's like, "God, if you get me out of this…" Maybe I just found out I have cancer. Maybe my marriage is falling apart. Maybe I'm battling addiction. Maybe I'm headed to jail. Whatever it is, it's kind of like the genie in the bottle and I'm desperate, and this sounds like it'll work. So there's kind of an immediate, "Hallelujah". But what the text says is soon the sun is going to rise and it's going to get pretty hot. He specifically says **affliction or persecution arises because of the word**, in other words, *because of following Jesus*. At that point these people are like, "Oh, wait a minute here. This isn't what I signed up for. I kind of wanted a genie in a lamp to fix my problems. But if this is going to cost me, yeah, I don't think I'm interested." Basically…*cost me*...meaning Jesus doesn't really fit with the culture. Jesus doesn't align with the values of the culture. "To follow this Jesus, I'd have to be out of step; there's a cost to this." It's very interesting that, at the end of that description, He says they ***fall away*****.** This is the Greek word from which we get our English word *scandalize* or *scandal*; it's to *be offended.* Once I realize that Jesus doesn't fit in with the culture's values, once I realize I'm going to have to be out of step, and people aren't going to like me, I'm offended. "That's scandalous! I don't want that, so I'm out!" The other thing we see a lot of these days is those people who say, "I'm out. I don't need the church, but I am going to reinvent Jesus in my own image. I want a Jesus that fits in with the culture, that aligns with the culture. I want a Jesus that's okay with my lifestyle, I want a Jesus where people in the culture are going to like me." But that's really not Jesus. That's just a fictitious Jesus somebody made up.

The third soil, Verse 22:

> **"And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful**."

So this is the seed sown among the thorns and the weeds. This isn't because of persecution and affliction. This is just because I think the things of the world look better. "I think I'll be happier if I chase the values of this world. I think it's going to be found in money and stuff and pleasure. You know, Jesus is okay, but He's quite a way down on the list of things I think will make me happy. Consequently, I'm out."

I would say, having been a pastor over 40 years, I don't see soil number one walking through these doors; they just don't. They have no interest in what we're doing. I have seen a lot of people in soils two and three over the years. They get excited! They have an emotional experience. Something happens, and they think that sounds like it might be good. But over time, they start to

realize, “I don't know. This is kind of costly, and I don't think I want to pay that cost.” And little by little you see them fade away and disappear. Or they're just determined to pursue the things of this world. “I think that's where it's at. I think that's what's going to make me happy, I think that's what's going to give me significance.” And over time, they just kind of fade and disappear. Over 40 years, I've seen a lot of them come and go…come and go… and none of them transformed by the power of Jesus. It's only the fourth soil where there is fruit. Verse 23:

> **“And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.”**

This is the only soil that is **good soil**. This is the only soil that becomes fruitful. In chapter 12, Jesus said, “You'll know the tree by its fruit.” Over these four decades, I have also had the opportunity to see amazing changes in the lives of people. I'm going to suggest that the overwhelming majority of people in the room this morning, “You're in the fourth soil, and your life has been radically transformed by the power of Jesus.” You're learning and you're changing and you're growing, as Jesus continues to reveal to you the mysteries of His kingdom, and your life has been radically changed by Jesus. You may not even think about that. There may be somebody sitting right next to you, in front of you, behind you, or someone you pass by in the hallway, and you may not have any idea what this person was like 10, 20, 30 years ago. I have a unique vantage point in that I knew them when they were a mess. But I see them today, and they have been radically transformed by the power of Jesus. The idea of 100, 60, or 30…I think is just a way of saying the amount of fruit is going to be different for everyone, depending on a lot of things. I think it's warning us to be careful that we don't become fruit inspectors, trying to figure out if somebody else is saved or not. I can't really figure out soils 2 and 3. My job is to sow the seed, and I don't want to become a fruit inspector. It's going to look different in everybody, and with different amounts for lots of reasons. But at the end of the day, if you've truly experienced new life in Christ, there has to be fruit. Something radically happened. There has to be evidence of a transformation.

So, if Jesus was to come back and look like us, dress like us, and walk throughout the city to do public miracles and to teach and to love people, what would the response be? Probably pretty much the way it was 2000 years ago. There's going to be people that, no matter what, they're not going to listen. They’re not interested. We need to understand that if Jesus couldn't persuade them, neither can you. There's no need to keep arguing with them. They don't want it; they're not interested.

But then there's these two soils where all we can do is cast the seed, and, ultimately, only God knows what's going on. But there is this remarkable fourth soil, where, by the grace of God, you live in a place in time where you heard the message. You have ears to hear; you have eyes to see; and you have a heart to receive. You understand it, and your life has been radically transformed by Jesus.

Those of us that have been Christians for a longer period of time have the temptation of finding ourselves sitting in a very self-righteous posture, where we think *we* get it, and *they* don't. We're smarter; we're better; we're more moral; we’ve figured it out. We kind of end up with a posture

like, “We figured it out, and the rest of them are a bunch of yahoos.” That's not what it is. We're not smarter; we're not better; we're not more moral; we're not more clever. Apart from the grace of God that granted you the opportunity to have eyes that see, and ears that hear, and a heart to receive, you would not get it. For reasons only God understands, He has opened your eyes. He has opened your ears, and you have responded…and your life has been transformed by the power of Jesus.

Right now, this morning, as we speak, there are thousands of people all over our city, and their lives are empty; they're meaningless; they're hopeless; they're addicted; they're miserable, and they're trying to figure out a reason to get out of bed one more day. That could just as easily be you…but it's not. And it's only by the grace of God that it's not. For reasons only God understands, God opened your eyes; He opened your ears; He opened your heart, and you understand it. Your life has been transformed. You have been invited into the kingdom, and your future is more magnificent than I could possibly describe! I hope you don't ever lose the wonder of that. I hope you don't ever cease to be amazed that, “God opened my ears, my heart, my eyes, and I get it…and I believe!” Because that's a remarkable thing, my prayer for you this morning is that when you leave this place, you leave with a smile on your face and joy in your heart…because you get it, and your future is full of hope! And that is amazing!

Our Father, we celebrate the truth of the gospel this morning. We gather this morning as people who are recipients of Your grace and mercy. We get it, not because we're special, but because You opened our eyes and our ears and our heart. And we heard the message, and we believed! Lord, may we never lose the wonder of what You have given us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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SPRING 2024 // WEEK 3

Life Group Questions

Kingdom Stories: Living in the One True Kingdom // April 20-21, 2024

The Four Soils // Matthew 13:1-23

Introduction

We return to Matthew 13 to walk through the parable at the beginning of the chapter, the Parable of the Sower. Jesus speaks to a large crowd conveying a kingdom story that depicts details about the nature of the king, the kingdom, and the king's subjects. As you prepare to discuss the passage with your life group, you will notice that rather than going in verse order, the questions start at the beginning with the parable then skip to the explanation, and then return to the middle of the passage. This is to help you interpret the greater meaning of the story. May we have ears to hear, and eyes to see all that Jesus conveys to us through His Word.

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Due to preferences over a wide range of groups, we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

1) Who (besides Jesus) do you think tells the best stories? What makes him or her a great storyteller?

2) Did you try one of the Personal Spiritual Exercises last week? How did it go? Did God use it in your life in a specific way?

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:

a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth

b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives

c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you

Read the full passage together with your group.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

1) In Matthew chapters 12 & 13, verses 1 – 3, Matthew gives you the context in which Jesus delivers this parable. **What are the contextual details (e.g., location, audience, timing) you notice in the first three verses?**

Remember back to the parables we have studied thus far. **How is the context of the Parable of the Sower different than the others we have discussed? Why might this detail be relevant in studying the Parable of the Sower?**

2) One advantage to the Parable of the Sower is that Jesus not only tells the story (13:3-9) but he also explains the story to his disciples (13:18-23). **Considering the original audience in Matthew 13, what does this suggest about the ways King Jesus values and engages with the crowds versus his disciples?**

Use the parable verses and the explanation verses to complete the chart. Discuss your answers with your life group.

Soil Type	**Seed Outcome**	**Explanation**	**1st Century Representation**	**Current Day Representation**
The Path				
Rocky Ground				

Thorns				
Good Soil				

3) This parable looks at how the word of the kingdom (the Gospel) will be received by people. **As you look at your completed chart, what details do you notice about the kingdom, the King, or who inhabits the kingdom?**

4) As Jesus helps us understand the way of the kingdom, it reminds us that people will respond to the Gospel message differently. Our response is based on the texture of our heart: hard, rocky, sharp, or yielding. **How does the parable cause you to process your own personal story of receiving Christ? Share any personal insights or discoveries you have made with your group.**

How do these details change the way you share the gospel with others?

Think of a specific person that you would like to see come to Christ. **How does the meaning and message of the parable change the way you pray for this person?**

5) The parable is followed by a short conversation between Jesus and his disciples (verses 10 – 17). The disciples were having a hard time understanding why Jesus was teaching in parables. **What are the disciples' questions and how does Jesus answer them?** (To get a better understanding of Jesus' answer, considering reading verses 10 -17 in a common language translation such as The Message.)

When you question God's ways in your life or in the world around you, do you find it easy or hard to go to God with your questions? What helps you gain understanding even in the questioning? Share a specific example of this in your life with your group.

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts. **Next week in Life Group, take a few moments to share how the Lord may have used this exercise in your life.**

Prayer Focus: In study question four, you thought of a specific person in your life that you would like to see come to Christ. Commit to praying for this friend or loved-one in the coming week. Focus your prayers to reflect the change in how you want to pray for them.

Scripture Focus: The Parable of the Sower is recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. To develop a complete picture of this scene, from 3 different authors, read the parable in each book and take note of the similarities and nuances in each text.

Matthew 13:1 – 23

Mark 4:1 – 12

Luke 8:4 – 10

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of “coming together” is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say “Amen” aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?