

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL PRESENTATION (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-25; Luke 8:4-18)

5.2.21

INTRODUCTION

I love stories. I grew up with them, all kinds of stories. I read Aesop's Fables. I read the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson, including such memorable stories as "The Ugly Duckling," "The Princess and the Pea," and "The Little Mermaid." And of course, I read as many of the "Little Golden Books" and other similar things as possible.

I also enjoyed stories on records. I'll never forget listening to "The Little Engine That Could." That was amazing; I'd listen to that record over and over and over again; I still do that with scenes in music, movies and particular parts of stories. And, as I began school, I entered into the world of "Dick and Jane," learning to read through some 16 volumes. And, as you've heard me mention before, my bedtime stories were Bible stories, told through the volumes of "The Bible Story" by Arthur S. Maxwell.

And as I grew up, I'd listen to Minnesota Twins games from the west coast on a little transistor radio I kept under my pillow. I love how the radio guys could paint such a vivid picture just with their words in describing the game and its surroundings. I declare, I could almost smell the grass and feel the breeze in the stands just from their descriptions. And I'm old enough to have listened to a woman named Ethel Barrett who used to tell Bible stories over the radio on Saturday afternoons. She was amazing in how she could make these stories come to such life!

So, what did all these books and stories and records and radio broadcasts have in common? Well, as I was reading or listening, I would almost by reflex put myself into the stories. I was in all those places; I was doing all those things; I was interacting with all those people. That has marked me to this day, becoming the desire to write my own stories and plays, all reflecting that little kid's impression of being in the stories. I do the same thing with movies, too; if I can see myself in a scene, that movie just became a hit.

Today, we are going to be sitting in on a master storyteller — our "radical rabbi," Jesus of Nazareth. His stories are called "parables," and they were His way of explaining the wonders and mysteries of the kingdom of God. We're going to be looking at one of His more well-known stories today, and we're going to be doing it with the combined contributions of Matthew, Mark and Luke, so I'll kind of be combining all their elements together into a harmonized narrative between the three gospels. So, as we begin, let's prepare our hearts **with a time of prayer.**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake — Matthew 13:1. [A] large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town — Luke 8:4a.

OK; first is the setting for this story: Jesus came out of the house in which JHe had been talking with the scribes and Pharisees, and to which His mother and brothers had come to

see Him. He was likely in Capernaum (His unofficial headquarters) at this time. As He left the house, He went down to the “lake” — the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around Him was so large that He got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge — Mark 4:1.

Now wherever Jesus was, a crowd was sure to be there as well. And sure, enough, as Luke tells us, people were coming from town after town. As Jesus saw all these people, He desired to begin teaching them but, because of the press of the crowd, this was going to be difficult if He stayed on the shore. So, He got into a boat and pushed off from shore, eventually sitting down in the boat (the normal posture teaching). Now with the geography of the lake, this would have actually worked to Christ’s advantage to be positioned this way because the Sea of Galilee was the low point in the area, meaning that they were surrounded by the hills coming up from the lake. This would have formed a rather natural amphitheater, so that Christ’s voice would carry well. And if perchance there was a breeze coming from behind Him, that would have carried His voice all the more. And it’s in that setting, as Luke records, that Jesus ***told this parable — Luke 8:4b.***

Mark tells us that He called His audience to attention: “***Listen!***” And once He had their attention, He began: “***A farmer went out to sow his seed — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:3.***

Now a parable is, as Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe defines it, “a story in which something familiar explains something unfamiliar.” The Greek word for “parable” literally means “to place alongside,” suggesting some level of comparison between two things that are alike in some way; in the case of Christ’s parables, the idea was to tie something commonplace with a deep, profound spiritual truth. This parable will be a wonderful example of that idea. Keep in mind this is primarily an agricultural society, so a farmer going out to sow his seed would have had an immediate connection with virtually everybody, many from having themselves done exactly what Jesus is describing, making this story intimately familiar. In fact, from that setting along the shoreline, they may have even been able to see a farmer somewhere in the distance, doing exactly what Jesus is describing.

“As [the farmer] was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up” — Jesus Christ, Luke 8:5b.

A bit of explanation: In first century Palestine, farm fields were actually long and narrow strips of land. They were marked off, not by fences or hedges, but rather by footpaths. The farmer would reach into the seed bag hanging at his side and, in a manner we call “broadcasting” today, scatter the seed from side to side as far as he could. It wasn’t exactly a method known for precision but, as he kept walking while he scattered his seed, this was the best way to get his seed evenly distributed over a large area. But inevitably, some seed would wind up sailing “out of bounds,” so to speak, sailing beyond the boundaries of the field and onto those footpaths, hardened by the foot traffic as well as the climate into something resembling concrete. Over time, any seed landing there either be trampled on by people walking through that area or devoured by hungry birds. In either case, it would never have a chance to sprout.

“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 [because they had no moisture]” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:5-6.

Now this isn't referring to either a rocky slab on the ground or to soil with a bunch of big rocks on it. Farmers of ancient times would no more have left large rocks in areas they were wanting to seed any more than would our farmers today. No; this is referring to a rock bed just under the surface, meaning that there is only a few shallow inches of good soil on top. Anything under the surface would have been virtually impossible for a farmer to detect, nor would any plow blades of the time likely penetrate deep enough. As a result, that particular soil would not be deep enough, or hold water well enough, particularly in that climate, to sustain the desired crop. So, while there might be a quick growth initially seen, the new plant will just as quickly begin to wither away because the roots for the new plant can't get past that undetected rock layer. Particularly as the sun grows hotter, the plant will die without achieving any further growth.

“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up [with it] and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain” — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:7.

Thorns are one of a farmer's worst enemies. Simply put, they take over any field they are in and choke out everything else. And the problem is that weeds have a very dense root system. Even if plowed up, those roots and seeds from the old plant remain alive, ready to show up all over again. And they will take over the soil's moisture and nutrients, plus block sunlight from any plants trying to grow, essentially strangling the life out of anything that is attempting to thrive.

“Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times [what was sown]” — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:8.

Finally, as Jesus finishes the parable, He does so in a note of triumph, for the farmer's seed has finally found the best soil for it — soil that is rich in nutrients, soil with depth that can hold moisture well, with no weeds lurking under the surface to interfere with the desired crop. And the comments regarding what those seeds produced refers to what we today call “return on investment,” meaning the return the farmer would have earned for all the money he had spent on his seeds. So, a dollar (in our words) spent on seed might normally mean 100 dollars on the sale of his crops. In that case, tenfold would be a nice return while 30 or 60 times a normal sale price would be wonderful — and 100 times a normal sale price would be considered an absolutely stupendous outcome!

And then Christ concludes His teaching with, ***“Whoever has ears, let them hear” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 9:9***, the call to attention at the end of this story bringing us full circle from the attention-getting ***“Listen!”*** with which He began. In fact, according to the grammatical structure in the Greek, it is strongly implied that Jesus continued to urge His audience to listen, to pay attention, and especially to look beyond the surface and be

willing to dig into the deeper meaning. He is essentially challenging His listeners to begin an investigation into the story they have just heard.

When He was alone, the Twelve and the others around Him asked Him . . . “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” — Mark 4:10; Matthew 13:10b.

Now it would not have been unusual, following a rabbi’s teaching that, after the crowds had dispersed, the rabbi’s disciples would have gathered around Him to ask questions and get deeper into what they had just been taught. So, by itself, there’s nothing special going on here. But what was unusual was that this was really the first time that Jesus had relied solely on parables to do His teaching. The disciples were curious as to why. His answer is clear, using words His audience would have already known:

He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:11-17 (quoting Isaiah 6:6:9-10)

Basically, Christ provided two reasons:

- 1) First, it was a reflection of the people’s unwillingness to exert themselves spiritually, to be active in their faith, best exemplified by the leadership who had very publicly rejected Christ and prophesied by Isaiah.
- 2) It was something that had actually been prophesied: ***My people, hear My teaching; listen to the words of My mouth. I will open My mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old — Psalm 78:1-2.***

Jesus didn’t use parables to either confuse people or judge them. What He did want was to excite them, to wake them up from their spiritual lethargy by arousing their curiosity about what they had heard. If people were interested and were searching for answers, they would be given the understanding to find those answers. And the more they’d learn, the more they’d want to learn. And the great blessing would be that, as they’d learn more, they would understand more, and so on and so on and so on. They would be able to grasp the “secrets of the kingdom of heaven.”

Now other translations use the word “mysteries” in this verse. But this is not implying some special, privileged knowledge. Nor was Christ declaring His disciples to somehow be better or more deserving than anyone else. Rather, what Jesus is promising is the clarity that will be given to anybody who actively seeks the Lord and desires to learn from Him.

And this was — and still is — a completely open invitation: Anybody who wanted to learn could freely come to Him and learn.

But for those who dismissed these stories as just some silly riddle or as simply junk to be ignored, or for those who wanted nothing to do with Christ and His teachings, they would remain as they were — in ongoing darkness and in continuing unrepentant sin. And the secrets or mysteries of the kingdom of heaven would never become more than that to those who reject Christ — just mysteries that, on their own, they will never understand. It does underscore the fact that nobody is going to understand Christianity unless they are actually a Bible-believing, born-again, child-of-God Christian. It is Christ's Holy Spirit that gives understanding. Without that — ain't happening!

So having now heard the answer as to “why,” the disciples now want to know the meaning of this particular story: *His disciples asked Him what this parable meant. . . . Then Jesus said to them, “Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? . . . Listen then to what the parable of the sower means” — Jesus Christ, Luke 8:9; Mark 4:13; Matthew 13:18.* Jesus expresses some concern: This parable contained basic, fundamental truths. If the disciples were going to understand all the parables that were still to come (and there would be some 39 in all), they needed to understand this one. So, then Jesus proceeds to give one of His most detailed explanations of any parable He ever presented.

He begins with the most basic starting block: *The Seed is the word of God — Jesus Christ, Luke 8:11b.* Now in the context of Christ, this “Seed” will be the “secrets of the kingdom of heaven” that He Himself will be continuing to present throughout His ministry. But here's the cool part: Jesus is absolutely and completely what John wrote in his gospel: *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us — John 1:14a.* Jesus is the seed; Jesus is the word of God. And the sower is anybody spreading the seed, the word of God, out into the world.

Next we start getting into the different soils Jesus mentioned: *When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one (Satan) comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart . . . so that they may not believe and be saved. . . . This is the seed sown along the path — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:19a; Luke 8:12b; Matthew 13:19b.*

Remember that the path is hard as concrete. This is a sadly great illustration of the true condition of an unrepentant heart — one that seeks only after sin and their own selfish desires. This is a heart where the seed finds it impossible to penetrate. A great OT example of this kind of heart is the king Zedekiah — the last king of the nation of Judah before Nebuchadnezzar ultimately destroyed them. As told in the book of II Chronicles: *[Zedekiah] became stiff-necked and hardened his heart and would not turn to the Lord, the God of Israel — II Chronicles 36:13b.* The ultimate outcome of that kind of heart? II Chronicles tells us: *[T]he wrath of the Lord was aroused . . . and there was no remedy — II Chronicles 36:16b.*

The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes [i.e., in the time of testing] because of the word, they quickly fall away — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:20-21.

Remember that this is the soil that fails the seed because it is shallow. This is a superficial response to the seed, a response in joy because “all is well.” But it is not a life-changing conversion but rather an intellectual agreement. But at the first sign of tough times or struggle, that faith, so excited at first, begins to fade away. We know from Scripture that times of testing are sure to come. For the genuine Christian, testing can be a time, as James wrote, of *pure joy . . . because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance — James 1:3*. For somebody not genuinely embracing the word and all it means, they will quickly abandon their brief flirtation with faith and go after something they think will make life easier.

Christ goes on: *Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things [i.e., riches and pleasures] come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful . . . and they do not mature — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:18-19; Luke 8:14b.*

This is essentially a situation where the seed has competition. The hearers may receive the word with all the joy that the rocky ground hearers receive it. But just like weeds under the surface of the ground that are nevertheless beginning to sprout and grow, so also the cares and worries of life in this world begin to compete with the word they have ever heard. They become more impacted by the chances for wealth and advancement; they become more interested in what they can possess rather than how the word can possess them. They will allow all the enticing features of this world to “grow” faster in their hearts than the seed of the word of God. In that environment, the word of God is basically a foreigner, an outsider; it is the matters of the world that control the soil of this heart. Remember the words of Christ: *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:24*. The seed in thorny soil has no chance — the thorns win. Any growth is choked out; no fruit is realized.

But finally, the soil that makes all the sower’s hard work worthwhile: *But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it . . . those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. . . This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:23a; Luke 8:15; Matthew 13:23b.*

As opposed to the other three soils — no faith at all or a temporary, fleeting faith — the good soil welcomes the seed; it is prepared to receive the seed that comes its way. And when that perfect seed meets soil prepared to receive it — WOW! The abundant, bountiful fruit is a sure sign of the perfect combination of prepared, fertile ground and perfect seed. And what fruit does Christ have in mind here? Paul said it well in his letter to the Philippian church: *[T]he fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the*

glory and praise of God — Paul, Philippians 1:11. And it is a fruitful harvest that is always the expectation for the soul sown by the seed of the word of God.

Now while Matthew concludes his telling with the ending of the parable, Mark and Luke stretch it out a bit more, adding a second, brief parable: **[Jesus] said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?” — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:21.** The rhetorical question in Mark becomes a definitive answer in Luke: **“No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light” — Jesus Christ, Luke 8:16.** This absolutely applies to the truths found in the parables Christ is teaching; as Mark quotes Him: **“For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open” — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:22.** And again, Jesus emphasizes that what is meant to happen will happen: **“For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open” — Jesus Christ, Luke 8:17.** Christ is making the point that the only reason something is hidden is that one day it can be revealed — and it will be — which is a critically important point He is making here: He is the “light” that He is talking about, the light that allows people to see. The things Christ was teaching were never intended to simply be maxims for some private club, but instead were intended to be spread throughout the whole world, to radiate the truths of Christ and His word.

And then Christ continues: **“If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear. Consider carefully what you hear,” He continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you — and even more” — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:23-24.** Jesus is very simply telling His disciples that the spiritual results, the fruit, which they are able to bring to harvest will be directly proportionate to the amount of work and effort they put into nurturing the crop. But as they continue to faithfully learn God’s truth, more truth will be given — to learn and to apply. As Mark quoted Christ: **“Whoever has will be given more” — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:25a.** But Christ concludes with a warning for those who do not respond to the truth of His word: **“[W]hoever does not have, even what they have [even what they think they have] will be taken from them” — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:25b.** After all the things of this life and this world are taken away, all that will be remain to be given them will be judgment.

APPLICATION

Parables are a peculiarly powerful means of making a point. What happens is that, initially, you are confronted with a simple picture, something most likely very familiar to you. But then, the longer you look at the picture, the more it becomes a mirror — a mirror in which you see yourself. Now, many people absolutely hate the idea of being made to see themselves. When some of Christ’s parables turned into mirrors exposing the hearts of the Pharisees and others in leadership, their immediate response was to try and kill Him. But there is another option: If we are willing to accept the truth of what that “mirror” is telling us — that we are needy sinners desperately in need of a Savior — that mirror will then turn into a window by which we can see the love and grace of God, waiting to be poured out on us. But then the obligation for what we have experienced kicks in, to

becomes sowers of the seed through which others will become transformed as we have. As Christians, that will always be our role. So, toward that end, this parable gives us several important takeaways to consider:

First, notice that this parable focuses not one bit on the seed, other than to define it. The seed is the word of God. That means that the seed is perfect. David said so, in a verse we have used many times: *As for God, His way is perfect: The Lord's word is flawless — David, Psalm 18:30a*, which reflects these words from Psalm 119: *All your words are true — Psalm 119:160a*, which are both reflected in Christ's "high priestly" prayer from John 17, where He declares so simply and yet so clearly in His words to His Father: *"Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth" — Jesus Christ, John 17:17.*

Second, while the farmer covered all the ground, that is, all four soils, and while it was the farmer's intention that every seed spread bore fruit, only one soil actually bore the fruit he hoped to see when he went into the field. Yet that didn't change his job — spreading the seed. Christ reflected that attitude when He told His disciples: *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" — Jesus Christ, Mark 16:15.* Obviously nobody knows better than Christ that preaching to "all creation" is not going to result in salvation being realized in all creation. The gospel is available to all, God's invitation to salvation through His Son is intended for all, but obviously the fact that Christ pictured four soils, of which only one bore fruit, shows the true reality. But what's important to remember is that, despite the result, the farmer's job doesn't change — spreading the seed, spreading the word. That will always be our role as Christ's ambassadors on earth, being faithful to the moment and to the seed we have been given. That is our role, but the outcome belongs to God. Remember, while God provides workers to plant the seed, and other workers to water it, as Paul said: *[N]either the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service — Paul, I Corinthians 3:7-9a.*

CONCLUSION

Third, and as we close, the focus of this parable is on the soils and, beyond that, the crop — bearing fruit. Three of the four soils bore no fruit; despite the perfection of the seed and the intention of the sower, three of the four places where seed fell produced no crop at all. Yet that is the crucial piece of our life in Christ: bearing fruit. Jesus Himself said so: *"This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples. . . . You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit — fruit that will last — Jesus Christ, John 15:8, 16a.* So that is a valid question, for all of us as individuals and also as a body of believers: Are we spreading seed in the place where God has placed us? And then, are we bearing fruit? Bottom line: Is the place God placed us, the place where He has put us to represent His Son, becoming different because we are here? Let's pray!