

July 16 Lesson: The Sower and the Seed

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

Sunday School Lesson for the week of July 16, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Key Verse:

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

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the collection of teachings in Matthew 13
- To learn about the use of the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew’s gospel
- To get oriented into the parables of Jesus and how they work
- To reflect on Jesus’ use of images and actions involving seeds, farming, and gardening
- To understand why parables work or don’t work depending on whether your guard is up or down
- To learn the meaning of the seeds that fall on the path, on rocky ground, and thorny patches
- To ponder how the lure of wealth and cares of the world choke the word of the kingdom
- To contemplate the renewing of our minds so that we no longer conform to the world
- To contemplate how we might transform our corner of the world
- To make a plan of how we will develop a cultivated life to receive the life of God’s reign

The Word of the Kingdom in Parables

This summer, we are learning about the Righteous Reign of God. In this second unit, which we started in the last lesson, we are exploring the reign of God through the lens of Jesus’ ministry and teachings, and more specifically, the gospel of Matthew. The rest of this unit covers the 13th chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Matthew is known for grouping Jesus’ teachings into collections. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is the most well-known collection. Matthew 13 gives us another collection that is focused on Jesus’ parables of the kingdom.

You will note that Matthew refers to the “reign of God” or the “kingdom of God” as the “kingdom of heaven.” This may have been done out of sensitivity to Matthew’s Jewish audience, which would have wanted to limit reference to the divine name as a way of revering God’s name. To refer to the reign of God as the kingdom of heaven gives us another way of thinking of the same reality. The term “kingdom of heaven” reminds us that the reign of God is fully realized in heaven, but the goal is for the reign of God to come down and break into our daily lives. In other words, when we say “kingdom of heaven” we are referring to more than the heaven we go to when we die as believers. We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in

heaven.” The kingdom of heaven is not simply our destination when we die, the kingdom of heaven is the dynamic reality of God’s perfect ideal which is in heaven now but is also breaking into our world.

In Matthew 13, we get to see Jesus in the role of teacher. Jesus enjoyed great notoriety as a teacher. In a culture where a good teacher could draw a following, Jesus drew an exceptionally large following.

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow.

Such a great crowd gathered that Jesus had to step into a boat tethered at the shoreline just to achieve enough separation from the crowd to teach. Jesus was seated as he taught which was the normal posture used by a teacher in that time and culture. The crowd was standing on the beach.

Think of what it would have been like to be in the crowd. I have taught and have been taught in many different settings. The intimacy of a Disciple Bible Study group going through a 34-week survey of the Bible is an amazing and rewarding experience. I have also been to stadium events to hear gifted Christian communicators. The group dynamics of those large crowd events have their own unique character and experience. In some ways you’re lost in the crowd, but in others ways you sense that you are part of something much bigger than yourself. You get that feeling as if you are part of a movement. I imagine that some of those who were gathered to hear Jesus felt the energy of being a part of a movement. I imagine that the dynamics of the situation would have gone well with the subject matter Jesus was teaching. Jesus was teaching about a kingdom movement.

Teaching in parables and stories was Jesus’ primary mode of teaching. In fact, later in the chapter, Matthew will report: “*Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden since the foundation.’*” (Matthew 13:34-35)

It shouldn’t surprise us at all that Jesus told stories. These stories were drawn from everyday life. The uneducated could understand. They had characters and a plot so that you can see yourself in them and be drawn into the action. The details draw you in because of their vividness and sometimes their strangeness. They are indirect. You don’t feel you are being “preached-to.” Children’s Sermons, for instance, draw in the adult listeners because the message is not intended for them. This kind of indirect communication causes listeners to let their guard down. Parables are open-ended. You sometimes don’t know the precise application so that it teases your brain into active thought. It begins in our familiar world, but presents a different vision of the world. It challenges our everyday lives and perspectives and values.

When Jesus began, “a sower went out to sow,” we know that what follows will be taken from the agrarian life with which everyone in biblical times would be familiar. People were not separated

then like people are now from the means of their food production. Images of farming and gardening surrounded them like water surrounds a fish. They would feel a connection to the world Jesus presented in the parable.

Also, as we delve into the parable, look for the connection between these agrarian images and actions and the kingdom of heaven which is Jesus' focus. Note that Jesus did not say a builder went out to build.

⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears, listen!"

The parable speaks to us even without the explanations that follow. We are taken through four vignettes. In each vignette, it is the same farmer, and there is no difference in the seeds that are sown. Notice that the sower is not doing much other than letting seeds fall. The dynamism present in the story is contained within the seed itself and the earth.

We see this emphasized by Jesus in Mark 4:26-29. Jesus said, "*The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come.*"

The dynamism is both in the seed and the earth. If the person scattering the seed were to time their sleeping to be awake at every hour during the day and night, the person would still not see how the seed works within itself and in its interaction with the earth. This would have been hidden from a first century farmer. The farmer knows not how. The earth seems to produce all by itself. It is a divine mystery. The only answer is God. God is working. The place where the farmer's labor is most definitely needed is in the work of the harvest. God has done the work that counts the most. The human part of the equation is to literally "reap" the benefits.

The parable works so effectively because we see the seeds that fail to bear fruit in the first three vignettes. The listener is provoked into active thought as the listener considers what makes the good soil good after visualizing what made the unproductive soils bad. Even the fourth vignette makes us wonder why the yield differs even with good soil. The listener is left with a mystery, but something about the parable leaves us not fretting about the different yields. It is something we are left to accept, which is not difficult because a thirtyfold yield isn't bad at all. Mystery is not bad because we are talking about a divine mystery. God is the one who brings about the yield. Our role is to be grateful.

When Parables Work and Don't Work

It is good to spend a moment considering what unfolds in the verses (Matthew 13:10-17) between the two parts of our scripture lesson. What is said may shed light on the explanation of

the parable that follows in Matthew 13:18-23. After Jesus told the parable, Jesus apparently took a break. The disciples gathered around him. According to Mark, this small gathering included more than just the twelve. They asked Jesus why he spoke to his audience in parables. Jesus said that it has been given to some to know the secrets of the kingdom but not others.

Jesus then said, *“For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”* (Matthew 13:12) This all sounds disconcerting at first. It sounds like Robin Hood in reverse, but the more you read this the more you realize Jesus was not talking about material things. He was talking about understanding. But why would Jesus take the little understanding somebody has? The reason is that someone can take a little bit of understanding and water down its meaning.

All that I said earlier about parables being accessible to the uneducated is true. But Jesus also meant for parables to be inaccessible to those who were not receptive to the word of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus quoted Isaiah where it talks about a people who will make a pretense of listening but never understand, whose hearts have grown dull and somewhere along the way stopped truly listening to God.

Jesus told parables so that people would leave their guard down and receive the message of the kingdom, but some people keep their guard up all the time or raise their guard as soon as they hear something that might upset the status quo or make a demand upon their lives.

Being able to understand the parables the way Jesus intended for them to be heard requires a whole-hearted response. Jesus wants us to understand the kingdom of heaven on his terms, not ours. Jesus said to the group gathered around him, *“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”* (Matthew 13:16) Jesus spoke of the unprecedented opportunity they had, because they were giving up everything to follow him and were therefore receptive to what he was teaching. There were others in the crowd who were also hearing and understanding, but there were some in the crowd who were not receptive enough to hear Jesus.

The Need for Understanding

By examining the verses between the first part and second part of our scripture lesson, we may be a little more primed to hear the second part. In this second part, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable, starting with the first vignette.

¹⁸ “Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

Jesus tells us that the seed in the parable is God’s word, particularly as it relates to forming our life around the reign of God. God’s word, when it is received as it should, acts like a seed in a believer’s life. Being formed by God’s word is not just about adding bits of knowledge. If this was the case, Jesus could have used “bricks” as his metaphor. Jesus chose to use seeds as his metaphor. Seeds grow and result in multiplication. God’s word forms us and grows within us, so that we become fruitful and bear witness to the reign of God in our lives.

Seeds are full of potential, promise, and opportunity, but seeds that fall upon a heavily traveled path get picked off by birds. Likewise, we can hear God's word with our ears or read it with our eyes, but if no effort is made to understand and apply God's word, then the evil one will snatch it away.

I've heard people testify to growing up in a Christian home, or living in the so-called "Bible Belt," or going to church for years, and not understanding. They were testifying to years in which the word was not connecting with them—until it did. In those years of not understanding, they were not grasping what life is supposed to be when it is lived under the reign and rule of God. Perhaps, they never put forth the effort to understand. Perhaps, subconsciously, they had built up walls due to not wanting their lives to be different. Perhaps, they had bits and pieces, but they never put it together as a lifestyle to be lived out in their everyday lives.

When people only have bits and pieces, and a lack of understanding persists, then it is easy for the evil one to pick off these seeds haphazardly lying on the well-traveled path of life before they have time to grow in our lives. The potential in God's word never has a chance to bear fruit.

How do you think that this potential gets picked off? What prevents understanding from ever taking root? Think of a time when understanding began to take root in your life. What accounted for the difference?

The Need for Deeper Roots

After explaining the first vignette, Jesus moved on to explain the second vignette.

²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

Other people are like the seeds that fell on rocky ground where the good soil is only about an inch deep so roots can't grow. The seeds develop just enough roots below the surface to spring up out of the ground, but because of the lack of soil and deep roots, the sun scorches the plant so that it does not survive. People in the situation like the seeds that fell on rocky ground, heard the word and immediately received it with joy. They experienced an emotional high from the experience. When trouble or persecution comes, however, the lack of spiritual depth causes one's newfound faith to falter.

Added to the trouble are unrealistic expectations—perhaps the unrealistic expectation is that there would never be any troubles. Disappointment is a powerful emotion. In some cases, the trouble to which Jesus referred may have existed in life before our initial experience of faith, but when these preexisting problems did not magically disappear, disillusionment results.

The persecution that comes may be "push back" that a person with a newfound faith gets from friends or relatives. Sometimes, friendships and families cannot endure when someone

undergoes a dramatic change, even when that change comes about as a result of an encounter with God. This is sad, but true. Perhaps the others are envious or jealous. Perhaps your experience is so foreign to them that they feel you have left them behind. Perhaps they feel inadequate in your presence, and they are projecting their own insecurities on you. There are a lot of explanations for this phenomenon but I have heard many share similar experiences.

If, or when, a person's faith falters in these instances, it reveals a lack of roots. For me, a growing root system represents the existence of a growing relationship with God that rests on something more than mere feelings. As I write this lesson, it happens to be around the anniversary of when I gave my life to Christ in 1978. I was about two weeks shy of turning age fourteen. On the ride back in the church van from the Christian music festival that we had attended, where I had made my commitment to Christ, I was on an emotional high to beat all emotional highs. That in itself gave me some confirmation that something real had happened.

I can look to several things that followed that summer and fall that helped give me roots. I continued weekly youth group activities at church, and I felt like when I participated in discussions, I was speaking out of a first-hand experience instead of a second-hand knowledge. At the end of the summer, I was asked to give my testimony in front of my youth group. At the beginning of the school year, my youth minister disciplined me and few other teenaged guys. We used a Bible Study that began introducing to me the basics of the Christian faith. I do not want you to think that I became a perfect little Christian—far from it. In ways that I only somewhat comprehended, I was growing roots in my faith. Roots were growing as time separated me from that initial experience, and as I began falling off “cloud nine.”

As I look back, I am so grateful for the youth ministry of the church that was my first home in the faith. I am so grateful for the adult leaders. I am also grateful for the time-honored means of grace that have been practiced in the church since its founding in the New Testament. As a pastor, I have witnessed youth and even more adults grow roots in their faith. I have seen the “light bulb” turn on within them as they began to have first-hand experience of what they had only known second-hand. Spiritual roots are vital to a life of faith. They are essential to someone who has a newfound faith, and their continued growth is essential to someone like me who has been a Christian for 45 years.

How deep are your roots? Have troubles or push-back from people in your life negatively impacted your life of faith? What would it take to grow deeper roots? How do you imagine this making a difference in handling trouble?

The Need for Transformation in Our Value System and in the World

After explaining the second vignette, Jesus moved on to the third vignette, which is about the seeds that fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

The tangled vines and thorns that choke the word of the kingdom are the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. These choke the word of the kingdom so that it yields nothing. The word that is meant to create an alternative way of life lived under the reign and rule of God gets taken over by the ways of the world. Instead of faith forming our values and our priorities, our values and priorities are formed by the rules of the world. The ability to understand the word of the kingdom gets crowded out by the materialism of the culture, a self-indulgent lifestyle, greed, a preoccupation with status, and a calloused attitude toward members of the human family.

Make no mistake—the word of the kingdom of heaven is meant to create an alternative way of life from that of the world. This alternative way of life is one lived under the reign and rule of God. The reign and rule of God addresses the way we live our daily lives in the world. The apostle Paul said it this way: “*Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” (Romans 12:2) A part of renewing our mind is gaining enough separation and perspective to see the world the way it is and how it is driven by the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.

The word of the kingdom is intended to renew our minds and transform the way we live, so that we do not conform to the world. It is not just about what we do on Sunday morning inside the walls of the church. It is about how we live Monday through Saturday outside the walls of the church. Renewing our minds involves growing in our understanding and developing spiritual roots, and then letting that change our values, our priorities, habits, motivations, and our interactions and relationships with people. We need to do the inward work (understanding), the upward work (developing spiritual roots), and the outward work, which is seeking to transform our corner of the world so that we experience more and more sightings of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

One way to sum up the reign and rule of God is right relationships. “Right” means right in the sight of God. We will have a right relationship with God. We will have a right relationship with our wealth and resources. We will have a right relationship with ourselves in terms of balance. We will have right relationships with all people, whether at home, church, or work or in the public sphere.

What do the phrases “cares of the world” and “lure of wealth” mean to you? What do you think you need to *subtract* and *add* in your life? What do you need to *stop doing* and *start doing*? What thorny vines do you need to *trim away* in order to make your life become more *fruitful and impactful* for the sake of the kingdom of heaven?

The Need to Put it All Together

The fourth vignette, where the seed falls on the good soil, invites us to put together what we learned from the other three vignettes. Good soil is found beyond the path where birds can pick off the seed, or rocky ground where deep roots cannot grow, or the places where thorny vines are allowed to grow and choke the plant.

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

The seed of the word needs to be implanted in souls where there is a hunger to understand the word, a commitment to develop spiritual roots through all the means of grace available to us, and a fierce resistance to the encroachment of materialism and worldly cares.

We are called to a cultivated life. This involves the regular reading of scripture, prayer, reflection, self-examination, confession, thanksgiving, Christian conversation, and works of grace to make our corner of the world a better place for all. No weekend conference can replace a life that is constantly undergoing cultivation to receive the seeds God is planting to grow the kingdom in us. It is also good to engage regularly in reading the written works of those who have gone deep into a life with God. They teach out of their lived experience. They also teach out of their peace and joy, so that we remember this is not meant to be drudgery. If reading is not your thing, listen to audio books.

A great book to read is *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, by Richard Foster. The opening words of the book are so true: “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.” Good soil is deep. We are going below the surface. A surface level life is the path of least resistance. Going deeper requires effort, but the rewards are great—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold rewards.

God is the sower, and we are the soil. God, as the sower, determines the yield. Every divine act of sowing seeds in our lives comes out of the gracious heart of God. God is entrusting that gift to us in the hopes that we will do our part to let that seed grow and bear fruit. The yield God grants depends on how God is able to use us. Seeds should make us think of possibilities.

Which of the first three undesirable soils creep into your life the most? How much of the soil of your life is cultivated? What are one or two things you could do now to cultivate your spiritual life? How deep is your life now? How deep do you want it to be?

Prayer

God, the Sower, Your Son Jesus taught us about the seed of your word and the soils that affect its growth. Help us reflect on the meaning of this parable until we are inspired enough to come up with a creative plan, so that our life might become deeper and bear fruit as we seek to change our corner of the world in the name of Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the “Layered Bible Journey,” at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.