

The Gospel Produces Four Responses

Matthew 13:1-23

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I want you to turn for our study this morning of God's Word to Matthew 13. We're in the middle of a series, a summer series, entitled *Hold Fast, The Forgotten Truths Which We Must Always Remember*. One of those truths is taught to us in the parable I want us to study together this morning. Matthew 13, let me read beginning in 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. 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. 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."

Matthew 13 is part of one very long day in the life of our Lord. The gospel records tell us that early on the morning of that day, you can see this in Matthew 12 beginning in verse 22 and running down through verse 32, Jesus healed a demon possessed man, and the scribes and the Pharisees absolutely rejected Jesus in response. In fact, they were guilty of the unpardonable sin that is attributing to Satan what they knew to be the works of God. They rejected their Messiah. That very same morning, Jesus was teaching in a house in Capernaum and Mark tells us that His brothers showed up, His half-brothers (His younger brothers from the marriage of Joseph and Mary and they) show up at the house there in Capernaum wanting to see Jesus for one reason. They wanted to take Him back to Nazareth, Mark tells us because they thought He was out of His mind. His brothers rejected Him as well.

Now, those two events that morning of that day are truly remarkable, because they tell us that neither the Jewish leaders nor Jesus' human brothers believed the Gospel message that He brought at least at that point. So, Jesus, then in a parable, later that same day, explained why not everyone believes the good news and why some who even appear to believe turn out in the end

not to be His true disciples. Now Matthew gives us the setting, you'll notice verse 1, "that day", that very same day when those events had transpired, when Jesus had been rejected, that day Jesus went out of the house, that is the house there in Capernaum where He'd been teaching when His brothers had come. And He was sitting by the sea, literally, by the lake, the lake that we call the Sea of Galilee, and there He was going to continue His teaching. But the crowds were especially large on that day, notice verse 2, "and large crowds" or "many" literally "crowds" gathered to Him. There were so many people that Jesus couldn't stay on the land without being crushed by the crowd, so He gets into a boat that's anchored nearby, and He sat down in the boat, and from there He began to teach. And verse 2 says, "and the whole crowd was standing on the beach."

This was likely just southwest of the ancient city of Capernaum in a beautiful area called the plain of Gennesaret. It's one of the few areas there on the lake that has a beach, and it's also today as then a wonderful place to grow crops. So as Jesus taught these agricultural parables, they would have been surrounded by fields, making a wonderful visual example as He taught. Verse 3 says, "and He spoke many things to them in parables." Matthew here records seven parables, but clearly, He taught more than that. Mark 4:33 says, "with many such parables, He was speaking the Word to them." Undoubtedly, there are parables Jesus taught that day that are not recorded for us in the gospel records. But Matthew records as His first parable from that day of Jesus' teaching, what we commonly refer to as the parable of the sower. Now that's a bit of a misnomer because this parable is not about the sower, nor is it even really about the seed. Jesus' point in this parable is about the condition of the soils into which the seed falls.

By the way understanding this parable is absolutely crucial. In Mark 4:13 Jesus asks His disciples, "do you not understand this parable, how will you understand all the parables." Jesus said listen, understanding this parable is absolutely foundational to understanding the rest of what I teach. And so, it becomes very important for us. In spite of how important it is, sadly in our day, the truth that this parable teaches has been largely forgotten; and therefore, it qualifies for this series, *Hold Fast, The Forgotten Truths Which We Must Always Remember*. And the forgotten truth which we must always remember is that the gospel produces four basic responses. Always, always.

Now this parable as we want to look at it today, the passage we're looking at is divided into two parts. First of all, in verses 3 - 9 there is the story that Jesus taught publicly to the crowds. And then in verses 18 - 23 we find the interpretation that Jesus explained privately to His disciples.

So, let's start then with the story that Jesus told to the large crowds that had gathered that day.

Verse 3, "Behold the sower went out to sow;"

Now let me give you just a little context geographically, there are two major features of geography that determine Israel's weather patterns. The desert on the east and the Mediterranean on the west. So, from May to September Israel's weather is dominated by the desert on her east, and so the weather is hot and dry. But from October to April the weather is determined by the Mediterranean on her west, and so the climate is wet and cool. Clearly you know when farmers are going to choose to plant and to grow. Farmers prepared their fields, and they planted in the late fall as the rainy season began. Now in this parable this farmer had already prepared his field, and we catch him on the day that he was sowing the seed. What was he sowing? Well, the primary crop in Galilee in the first century was wheat, and so, likely, in Jesus' story, He's looking around Him at fields of wheat and using that as an example in His teaching. So, this farmer is likely planting a crop of wheat.

Now that brings us to the heart of the story which is four different kinds of soils. That's the point. Let's look at these soils. First of all, in verse 4 there is hard soil. "and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up." Typically, in the first century there weren't fences separating different owner's fields. Instead, there would be a foot path that separated one field from another, and if your field was large enough, even crisscrossing your own property, there would be other foot paths so you could tend your crop. Farmers used these paths every day, and often people in the neighborhood who were getting from one place to another, and even travelers on a longer journey would use these paths in order to take a short cut. So, they became hard packed from constant use.

It was common then as the farmer went out to sow his seed (the very basic method was he would broadcast the seed perhaps by hand) for some of that seed (that he threw) to fall outside of the prepared soil onto one of those foot paths. But the seed couldn't penetrate that hard-packed ground, and so almost immediately the birds that were ever present on sowing day would see the seed, swoop down from the skies and devour those seeds that just sat there on the surface of those hard packed paths. That's the hard soil.

In verses 5 and 6, Jesus tells us about another kind of soil, the shallow soil. Verse 5, "Other seed fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil."

As part of this preparation of the field, this farmer would have already cleared any loose rock that were sitting on the surface of his field. And so, Jesus isn't talking about that, He is instead referring to limestone bedrock that was hidden just beneath a few inches of soil; a very common problem in that area of Galilee. Because the soil at that point was very shallow just sitting on top of that bedrock, it would have heated quickly with the sun and with the moisture of the rains it would have provided an almost hot house environment for the seeds that were sown there. They sprang up quickly, and quickly they looked like they would be the healthiest, the most productive plants in the entire field. But, verse 6, "when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away."

Jesus doesn't mean that in one day's time these plants sprung up, and in one day's time they died. Instead, He's basically saying, eventually the rainy season will end. And when the rainy season subsides, the weather patterns change, and now it's being driven by the desert on the east and those hot Sirocco winds begin to blow. The sun blazes down. All the moisture is sucked out of the air, and these plants that had looked so healthy and promising were scorched because they didn't have enough of a root system to support the plant, and as a result the wheat can't get the moisture that it needs, and it died. That's the shallow soil.

Verse 7 introduces us to the third kind of soil, the thorny soil. "Others [seeds] fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out." Now don't think that this is a negligent farmer, that he just left all the weeds in his field. This farmer gives every appearance of being a diligent farmer like a first century farmer would have been. He had already prepared his field and in the preparation of that that field like all other farmers in the first century, he would have gone and pulled out most of the weeds and the thorn plants from his field. He would have gotten up as many as he could. And then typically, he would have set a fire burning across the rest of the field, trying to destroy anything that would hurt his wheat once it was planted. And then he would have plowed the field.

Unfortunately, (in the first century you had a metal plow pulled by oxen and typically) the plow only cut about 4 to 5 inches into the earth, not deep enough. Because the roots of weeds and thorns often grow deeper than that, and so it was very hard to get out all of the roots of the weeds. In addition those seeds that the weeds (that had grown the previous season) had planted in the earth, those sprout up as well. And so, the wheat seed often fell among weed and thorn roots and weed and thorn seeds. And in just a few weeks' time you were growing a mixed crop of wheat and weeds. And as we know all too well here in north Texas the weeds always win. Because their roots grow more quickly, and they steal the moisture and nutrients from the soil.

They steal the space, and they cut off the sunlight, and they quickly choke out the wheat. That's the thorny soil.

There's a fourth kind of soil, Jesus calls the good soil in verse 8, "and other seeds fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundred fold, some 60 and some 30." Much of the seed that this farmer sowed fell into the prepared soil. Soil with depth, soil without thorns and worthless plants growing, and it yielded a good crop. But notice that the seed produced different yields. The average yield in the first century (historians tell us) was somewhere between 8 and 15 to 1. So, a thirty-fold yield was great, you would have taken it any day. A sixty-fold yield was wonderful, and a hundred-fold yield was extraordinary, a once in a lifetime event. Jesus ends this story with these searching words in verse 9, "he who has ears, let him hear." In other words, Jesus finishes telling this basic agricultural story, and He says to the crowd, I want you to deeply consider; I want you to think about; I want you to weigh the implications of what I have just said to you. Then He went on to tell other stories just like this to the large crowds that were gathered, perhaps some of the largest crowds in His ministry.

Now the question is why? Why would Jesus given that opportunity just tell these kinds of stories and not explain them? Well if you're asking that question, you're just like the disciples, verse 10. They had the same question, "the disciples came and said to Him, why do You speak to them in parables?" If I can say it respectfully, they're saying something like this: Jesus You've just received a softball, why would You just tell these stories, we thought You were going to bring the gospel to bear on their hearts. We were praying for a massive, you know, move of the Spirit and people would be saved. Why parables? In verses 11 - 17 where we're not going to spend much time, Jesus gave them two reasons that He told parables and didn't explain them.

By the way, this day marked a turn in Jesus' ministry. From this point forward He'd always used parables, from this point forward He used more parables, and He didn't explain them. Why? For two reasons He says, number one to reveal the truth to those whom God had granted to understand it. Look at verse 11, Jesus answered them, "to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."

A second reason was to conceal the truth from those to whom had not been granted to understand. Look at the rest of verse 11. "But to them it has not been granted [by God, understood.]"

Now this brings us back to larger questions. When people don't respond to the gospel, who can we blame? When people don't respond to the gospel message, who gets the blame? Well, first of all Satan gets the blame, right? I mean, 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of those who believe not lest the light of glorious gospel of Christ should shine unto them." Satan blinds the minds of people to the gospel.

But he's not the only one who gets the blame, the person who doesn't believe gets the blame as well. And this is throughout the New Testament, but listen to one passage, John 3:20, "... everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light" [here's why he doesn't come to Christ,] "for fear that his deeds will be exposed." You see when people don't respond to the gospel, Satan is responsible, he blinds them to the glorious truth of the gospel. But ultimately, they are responsible as well, their love of their sin drives them from the truth.

But Jesus tells His disciples here that there is only one explanation for why some people do respond to the truth, notice verse 11. ... "To you it has been granted...." Jesus takes us back to sovereign election. Now don't misunderstand, if you don't understand the gospel, or if you haven't responded to the gospel, you can blame Satan in part, and you must blame yourself.

On the other hand, if you have come to understand and believe the gospel, you can't take any credit, God has granted you to understand; to really see, to really hear, to really understand: it is grace. Look at verse 16, "... blessed are your eyes because they see; and your ears, because they hear." Was that because they were better than everybody else? No, back to verse 11, it's because it had been granted to them. That's the story and why Jesus just told stories without explanation.

Now that brings us to the interpretation, verses 18 - 23. The interpretation: Jesus here, after He'd finished His public teaching is approached by the disciples, and they ask Him in private what exactly this parable means. What it meant. And Matthew records Jesus' explanation for us here. Notice verse 18. "Hear then the parable of the sower," Let me explain this to you Jesus says. First of all, notice, He explains what the seed is, verse 19, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom...." The seed is the Word about the spiritual kingdom over which Jesus rules. Luke in Luke 8:11, says the seed is the Word of God. So, the seed then is the Word of God, but it is especially the message about the kingdom, or we could say the gospel. That's the seed.

Now who's the sower? Well on that same day Jesus tells another parable, the parable of the wheat and the tares and in verse 37, and in that parable Jesus is the sower. But in this parable He

doesn't make that point, and in fact the sower seems more generic here. The sower is anyone who sows the Word. Anytime you share the gospel with someone, you are a sower, you're sowing the seed.

Now that brings us to the major component in this story, the major focus is on the soils. The focus of this story again is not on the sower, it's not even on the seed. The focus on this story is on the condition on the soil on which the seed falls. So, what are these soils, what does the soil represent in Jesus' story? He explains in verse 19. He says, "the seed has been sown", where? In his heart, in his heart. So, the four soils then represent four kinds of hearts. Four different heart responses to the gospel message. The seed, it's always the same, the true gospel. But the results depend on the condition of the heart. So, let's look at the hearts as Jesus describes them here. First of all, (and these of course correspond to the four soils that we looked at a moment ago) first of all, there is a hard heart, verse 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 the one on whom seed was sown beside the road."

Jesus says, those hard-packed foot paths between the fields represent hard hearts. Jesus said that hard dirt is like when someone hears the gospel and doesn't understand. Now sometimes they really don't understand, in the truest sense of that word. But Jesus doesn't mean that they always fail to grasp the words or the basic concepts. Jesus means this person doesn't grasp it in a life changing way, its truth doesn't penetrate into his heart because it's hard. He hears, but he refuses it. He refuses to think about; he refuses to consider it; he refuses to meditate on it; he doesn't have ears to hear; he simply lets it go away. Now dirt is not responsible for being hard. It bears no moral culpability for being unreceptive to the seed, but people do.

When a person's heart is hard to the gospel, it's because that person has hardened his or her own heart. Like Pharaoh in the Old Testament, he hardened his heart in rebellion against God, he would not hear the Word of God. But it doesn't stay that way because again, like the story of Pharaoh in the Old Testament, when a person hardens his own heart against God, God steps in and like is said of Pharaoh, He hardens his heart. That doesn't mean God works active evil in a person's heart. Instead, God simply withdraws from that person the softening influences that He could bring to bear on that person's life, and He allows that person's heart to grow harder.

And then Satan takes advantage of that hard heart, notice verse 19, "the evil one." Mark 4:15 calls him Satan. Luke 8:12 calls him the devil. So, we're talking here about Satan. Satan comes and he snatches away what has been sown in his heart. Before this person can really think seriously about the gospel he has heard or is willing to do so, so that it leads him to believe,

Satan comes and the word “snatches” is a word of “violence”, he “violently steals it away”. How does he do that, oh he’s very creative, very creative, countless ways.

Exactly who are these people with hard hearts? Well, the hard heart takes many forms, it could be a moral person who’s filled with pride and self-righteousness who says I don’t need the gospel. I’m a pretty good person. My good works will out-weigh my bad at the judgement, I’ll do okay.

It might be a person who’s simply indifferent and apathetic. Oh, yawn, yawn I don’t really care, I’ve got too many things going on in life, too many things that really interest me.

It might be (the hard-hearted person might be) a person who says, I’m unconvinced (as though God hasn’t given enough evidence in their conscience and in the Word to convince them). They sort of blame God, that can be a hard-hearted person.

Other hard-hearted people are into false religion. They’ve bought into one of Satan’s false systems of faith.

Or the hard-hearted person might simply be a person who just loves his or her sin more. I don’t want the gospel because I’m having too much fun.

Some with hard hearts, have hard hearts the very first time they hear the gospel. Others with hard hearts have only heard the gospel a few times. But there are those with hard hearts who grew up in the church and have heard the gospel countless times.

Listen, if you have a hard unreceptive heart to the gospel, if even as you sit there you sense that hardness in your own soul to the truth of what Jesus Himself is teaching in this passage, you ought to be afraid, very afraid because Jesus said to the Jews of His own time there would come a time when they would seek Him, and He would not be found. And ultimately, He says to those who refuse to repent, you will die in your sins. Some people have hearts as hard as those hard-packed paths, utterly unreceptive to the gospel.

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There’s a second kind of heart in verses 20 and 21, we’ll call it a superficial heart. “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places,” Jesus says, “this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself but is only temporary.” Jesus here explains that the rocky soil, (by that I mean that thin layer of topsoil that’s sitting on

top of solid limestone bedrock) describes the person who hears the gospel message, who comprehends it and who accepts it as true. Notice Jesus says, “he receives it with joy.” He has a highly emotional experience in response to the gospel. But what does Jesus mean he receives the message?

Well, in Luke he helps us understand that, Luke 8:13 says, Jesus said this, “they believe for a while.” They believe for a while, for a time. Now Scripture is clear that a person who truly believes, who truly exercises saving faith perseveres in that faith, they never stop believing, so understand then, this is not true saving faith. In fact, notice verse 21, Jesus calls it temporary faith. Why? Well, he has no firm root in himself. In other words, the gospel didn’t sink deep into this person’s heart. This is a superficial response to the gospel. This is a person who hears the gospel and says well that’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard, that’s wonderful, who wouldn’t want forgiveness from their sin, who wouldn’t want to get out of hell, who wouldn’t want all of the good things that God would bring? You see this is often a person who’s attracted to the gospel because of what they can get out of it. Well, wow, you mean if I follow Jesus, He’ll like fix my marriage, and He’ll improve my life and grow my business and make me more successful, and I’ll enjoy health, and He’ll deal with my feelings of guilt? I’ll have a truly blessed life? Great, I’ll try Him.

What happens? Why is this faith temporary? Look at verse 21, “when affliction or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately he falls away.” Now this could be one problem, or it could be two. The word affliction means pressure, usually in the New Testament it refers to the external pressures of this life, the distresses caused by the hardships of life. Hard things come into this person’s life who’s professed Christ, and perhaps they grow angry and bitter at God. But something else can reveal the superficial heart, persecution arises because of the word. This person professes Christ, and then it just doesn’t turn out quite as well as they’d hoped. They discover there’s a price to be paid, they’re insulted, they’re ridiculed. Maybe they lose their position, their wealth, their friends, their family or in extreme cases even their life. What happens, verse 21, “immediately he falls away.” Although for a time he looked like the real thing, looked like a genuine follower of Christ, when the hardships of life come or when persecution because of the word comes, this person, gone. Just repudiate the faith they once espoused. Show that they were never truly a believer at all.

This is a common reality in the New Testament; you see it with Judas Iscariot. You see it with Dimas with having loved this present world turned away from the truth of the gospel. You see it with the fair-weather disciples of John 6 who were all in as long as Jesus was meeting their

temporal earthly needs but as soon as He made hard demands, they were gone. Sadly, there are many who profess Christ who, when they face the hardships of this life or when persecution comes as a result of their faith, they turn, they absolutely reject the gospel that they once received with joy, they walk away. Some hearts are hard; others are superficial.

A third kind of response to the message of Christ is a distracted heart. 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.” Again, this person appears to accept the gospel. If you’re, if you know this person you think aww this is wonderful, this person has professed Christ, but his heart has thorns that begin to grow at the very same time as that wheat seed, as the gospel seed and those thorns choke out the word.

Now what are the thorns that can grow in the human heart that kill the gospel? Notice how Jesus describes it, verse 22, first of all, “the worry of the world.” Literally, the worry of the age. You see this is a person whose mind becomes pre-occupied with the cares of this life, with the cares of the age. And because of that their initial attraction to the gospel dies, slowly choked out by things like careers and mortgages and houses and a million other trivial things that go with the worries of this life.

Another set of thorns that can kill the gospel in the heart, verse 22, “the deceitfulness of riches.” You know, I don’t think we think enough about this. Do you realize that wealth is deceptive? This is especially an important message in the area in which we live, listen how is wealth deceptive? Well if you don’t have it, wealth can convince you that you ought to pursue it because if once you gain it, you will really experience lasting joy and satisfaction. Folks, that’s a lie. Just look around us in the world, how many of the richest most famous most successful people of our world live joyful satisfied lives.

Another way it deceives is if you already have wealth, (and by the way that’s true of all of us here, compared to the 7 billion people on this planet every one of us sitting here this morning is wealthy) if you already have wealth, it can convince you that if only you have a little more, then you’ll truly be happy. That next step up in automobiles, that better neighborhood than the one you live in. Just a little more income, and you’ll have enough expendable income to make life really happy. First Timothy 6:9 and 10, Paul addresses this, he says,

... those who want to get rich [By the way, the issue isn’t being wealthy; we all are. God made us in His sovereignty wealthy. The issue is wanting to get rich],

fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Listen wealth is deceptive. It will lie to you, and it can even choke out the gospel in your heart. Luke adds one other distraction that Jesus mentioned that day in Luke 8:14. Luke tells us that Jesus added this as one of the thorns, “the pleasures of *this* life.” You see the pursuit of pleasure will always choke out the gospel. It doesn’t matter what kind of pleasure it is. If you live for pleasure, it’ll choke out the gospel; might be illicit pleasures like alcohol, and drugs and sex. Or it might be legitimate pleasures pursued to an extreme or contrary to the purpose and will of God in your life. But it will choke out the seed.

Now understand this. In the distracted heart, unlike the rocky heart where there is sort of sudden death of the seed where the person repudiates and walks away, in the case of the distracted heart the death of the seed is slow, almost imperceptible, the gospel just slowly dies in the heart. Sometimes this person stops claiming to be a Christian, occasionally, will even openly repudiate Christ, but the tragic reality is most of the time where there is a distracted heart the person keeps on claiming to be a Christian. But because of the distractions of this life, the seed has died and they’re just going through the motions. Left to grow in the heart the worries of life, the deceitfulness of riches, the pleasures of this life choke out the gospel. And what’s the result? Look at verse 22. “It becomes unfruitful.” The wheat plant never bears fruit, it never produces.

Sadly, I think the most common samples of distracted hearts in today’s world are kids who grow up in the church and in Christian homes. There was a time when the Word had some influence in their lives. There was a time when the Word brought a conviction of sin, when they had some sense of the attractiveness of Christ and the gospel. But before that work had completed in their souls, they began to face the worries that come with adulthood. They hear the siren’s songs of pleasure and of prosperity, and gradually, slowly, almost imperceptibly their spiritual interest fades and then dies. And all that’s left is a childhood profession, and tragically there are many who still cling to that childhood profession for 20 years, 30 years, 50 years even though they have lived most of their life like a pagan. Understand this, when that happens, we are not talking about a genuine believer who wandered away from Christ. We are talking about someone who just seemed to be a real Christian at first. Because as John 15 makes it clear, where there is no fruit, there is no faith. The good seed just fell into bad soil, and the worries of life, the deceitfulness of riches, the pursuit of pleasure killed the seed. Theirs was a distracted heart.

Now there's another kind of heart, verse 23, a prepared heart. "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." Much of the seed that this farmer sowed fell into soil that he himself had prepared, soil with depth, uncluttered by thorns and other worthless plants. It was soft soil, deep, clean. Let me ask you this, what makes for bad soil? What do you have to do to soil to make it hard or shallow or filled with weeds and thorns? The answer is nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just let the curse take its course. What on the other hand, makes soil good for growing a crop? Hard work. Long hard work by the farmer.

I remember when I was growing up after all my siblings had left, my dad had this wonderful idea that we needed a garden, a half-acre garden. We needed to recapture the land behind us that was overgrown with Alabama brush and weeds and thorns. This is before we had a rotary tiller. And so that summer I was the tiller and a half acre of land shovel full by shovel full I turned over with my hands, and then I came back with a hoe after the sun had baked that soil for several days and I broke up the clods, and I raked out the grass and the dead stuff that was there and then came back through and tilled it some more until that soil was ready to plant. It was hard work. So, understand then, soil has to be carefully prepared. So, the good soil in this parable can take no credit, left to itself, it's just like the bad soils. The difference is the hard work of the farmer and in the same way each one of us is responsible for the bad condition of our hearts, and the only way our hearts will ever receive the Word and be good soil and bear fruit is if God prepares our hearts.

I love the way Luke puts it in Acts 16:14, speaking of Lydia. She heard the gospel, and it says the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. What happened there? Why did Lydia respond? God prepared the soil of her heart for the seed. So, what happens in a heart that God has prepared? Well look at verse 23. This person hears, understands; Mark adds accepts. Luke adds "holds fast," and all three gospel accounts say what verse 23 says, this person bears fruit. And that's the key. The good soil bears fruit. The seed may produce different yields in different soils, different hearts. All good soil isn't exactly alike; some bears more fruit than others. But notice good soil always bears fruit. That's what Mark says is good soil that has been prepared by God.

Luke adds, by the way, that the good soil produced with perseverance. In other words, when the gospel falls into a heart that has been prepared by God, there will be a consistent ongoing harvest of Christian character and good works. There will be the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. You will manifest those if your hearts been prepared by God. You will manifest the fruit of the spirit,

Galatians 5. You will manifest righteousness of Philippians 1:11. You will manifest a harvest of good works, Colossians 1:10. You will bear fruit if your heart has been prepared by God. That's what manifests the reality of good soil that's been prepared by God to receive the seed. That's the parable, and that's the interpretation.

Now that we understand it, just a couple of things I want to mention to you just as general observations. General observations, number one: there are only four possible responses to the gospel. Understand this, your heart and every heart that is exposed to the gospel is like one of these soils.

Number two: three of the responses Jesus describes to the gospel here are favorable to the gospel. They're favorable. That doesn't mean, by the way, that more people respond favorably to the gospel than don't. There are more hard hearts than anything else, but three of these are favorable.

Number three: two responses here look like genuine salvation initially, but over time prove not to be.

Number four: only a heart God prepared will bear fruit with perseverance.

And then, finally, this parable is useful in a couple of ways, this parable serves first of all as a grid that helps us understand the different responses when we share the gospel. Listen, when you share the gospel, you're going to get one of these responses because you are dealing with a person who has one of these four kinds of hearts. So, don't be surprised.

It also, by the way, helps us understand why there can be liberal churches and prosperity gospel churches and seeker sensitive churches that are filled with people who claim to be Christians, but frankly, when you look for evidence in their lives, you see very little evidence of it. Well, look at the different soils. People who claim to be in Christ aren't always in Christ.

Secondly this parable serves as a mirror. As a mirror that helps us examine the reality of our own faith. In other words, use this parable to evaluate your own heart. Have you sat here this morning absolutely bored with what Jesus taught? You just don't care. Completely unreceptive to it? Then your heart is like the hard soil.

Or did you profess Christ at some point in the past with great joy, some maybe wonderful religious experience, but then trouble came into your life or persecution came, life got hard, and you just gave up. You just walked away from that profession. Your heart is like the rocky soil as Jesus explains it here.

Have you continued to claim to be a Christian because of some past profession but the worries of life the pursuit of prosperity or the love of pleasure have choked out the word and frankly today there isn't enough evidence in your life to even convict you of being a Christian? Your heart's like the thorny soil.

Or did you hear the gospel, understand it, and as you look at your life over time, you can see the fruit that accompanies true faith? You can see your character growing into the likeness of Christ. You can see good works that honor God in your life. If so, your life is like the good soil in Jesus' parable. Use this parable as a tool, as a mirror to examine your own heart.

Thirdly, this parable serves as an invitation that offers the gospel. Maybe you have to say to me, Tom, look honestly, as I look, I see my own heart in one of those first three soils. That's me. Jesus nailed me.

Don't give up. Listen, your heart can still be the good soil, God can still prepare your heart to receive the gospel and perhaps He's doing that today if you're receptive at all to what Jesus has taught from this passage. Jesus said, he who has ears to hear let him hear. That's an invitation.

If you're willing to turn from your sin and to put your faith in the perfect life and the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, in His resurrection, sealing all that He did; if you're willing to confess Him as Lord and Savior, then understand God can cause that gospel seed to imbed into good soil. He can prepare your heart. He can cause it to grow and bear fruit.

But for all of us, do you see how important this parable is? You see why Jesus said if you don't get this, you don't really understand a lot of what goes on? This can't be a forgotten truth folks. Beloved, hold fast to the truth that Jesus teaches us here, that the gospel always produces these four basic responses. It helps understand so much about what happens in the lives around us.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for our Lord's amazing wisdom. Thank You that in an economy of words, He's told us a story that we will never forget. Thank You that You have allowed us to understand, that He explained it for us and that by His Spirit caused it to be written for our benefit.

Father, I pray that for us who are in Christ that You would help us to use this amazing parable as a grid to see and understand the response of people around us to the gospel message. Father, help us to use it as a mirror in which we examine our own heart. And Lord, help us to see it as an invitation for the person here today who's not yet in Christ, who's manifested one of those three bad hearts, the bad soil. Father, I pray that today that You would prepare their heart to receive the teaching of our Lord and that this would be the day that they truly come to Him in faith and find Him waiting.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.