

The purpose of this leader's guide is to be a tool for ABF and Life Group leaders to follow the sermon series with their group. Our hope is that this guide will give you a head start for your study and will allow your group to respond to what they've heard and apply it for life.

Parable of the Sower

Why Parables?. In Definition the word parable comes the Greek word 'parabole,' which means "a placing beside" and therefore is a comparison or an illustration. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain about 30 of these stories while John's gospel contains no parables but does use figures of speech. A parable is a story taken from real life (or real life situation) from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. They are not fables (talking animals/walking trees). They are not allegories where every detail has hidden meaning. They are basically an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

When Jesus began to teach in parables, it represented a new direction in His ministry. We are told that from when they were introduced, from this point forward, Jesus typically taught the multitudes in this form. He continued to teach his disciples in a plain manner, but the crowds primarily got parables (Matthew 13:11, Mark 4:11). A common misunderstanding is that parables were given so that all people could easily understand, but upon further study this may not be the case. Although parables were more relatable because they were stories about real life situations, they often had hidden meanings needing further explanation. These hidden meanings challenged the sincerely interested to further inquiry, and taught truths that Jesus concealed from various groups/people (Matthew 11:25, Luke 8:10). The parables teach us about the Sovereignty of God (11-12), the responsibility of man (14-15), and the grace of the gospel (16-17).

Structure of Matthew 13:1-23. The first 9 verses the parable of the sower is given. In verses 10-17, Jesus answers the disciples question of why He spoke to the people in parables and finally in verses 18-23, Jesus explains the parable.

Parable of the Sower. At this point, Jesus is still exceedingly popular with the crowds. The crowds are so great that Jesus gets into a boat so that the people can press up to the edge of the water and hear. As Jesus begins, he uses a common agricultural phenomenon, the sower sowing his seed, as a metaphor in the physical world for what happens in the spiritual world. The sower represents the one sharing God's word. The seed represents the word of God, the gospel, and the soil represents the human heart, and the fruit are the results of a life transformed by the word as it takes deep root in the heart.

The Path (Hard/Careless heart) vv. 4, 19: Jesus spoke about the first soil where the seed falls 'beside the road', the path, where the ground has been packed nearly as hard as the road itself. The seed has no opportunity for growth. Like sowing seed on pavement, it is almost a hopeless situation. Jesus is saying that there are hearts like this. The "hard heart" which hears the word of the kingdom but the word does not penetrate. The seeds are exposed and the birds (Satan) comes and snatches away what was sown. The person with this heart refuses to listen and they resist and fight what they hear. They don't want God to rule their hearts and minds. They are oblivious to their spiritual needs and of the judgement to come. This heart could also be described as careless and is deceived. The person with this heart lacks the sense of urgency and fails to realize the stakes that are involved, they fail to act, and the moment passes.

The Rocky Ground (Shallow Heart) vv. 5,6,20,21: The rocky soil is not soil with rocks in it, but is a thin layer of soil that cover great sheets of bedrock. 'Rocky' soil is shallow, without depth (v. 5). Shallow soil tends to warm quickly providing an environment for rapid growth. But because the roots do not go deeply enough, the budding plant withers under the sun's growing intensity. Jesus says this heart receives the word, but does so in a shallow, superficial way. This person hears the gospel and first 'springs up' and receives it with joy. They are overjoyed with what they have heard. The person with this heart however has no firm root. The word never anchors itself in their heart and when a situation of affliction or persecution arises, they fall away (v. 21). A great reference to this is in 1 John 2:19 where it says 'they went out from us, but they were not really of us.' They didn't lose their salvation, they never truly had it. This person can look like a believer, can look healthy, but in fact there had been no real repentance or conversion. True faith does not fall away, but is actually perfected by trials and stands the test of time.

The Thorny/Weeded soil (Strangled Heart) vv. 7,22: Then there is seed that is sown among the 'thorns.' Thorns are what we would call weeds. This is soil that initially looks good, but actually has been turned over, not weeded, and is full of weeds. The weeds grow up with the seed and choke the life out of the seedling. The thorny or strangled heart is a heart which, like the previous heart, receives the word, but the cares and preoccupation of other things eventually overwhelms and hinders any growth. Jesus mentions three different 'cares' or distractions: 1) Cares of this world: This indicates cares for the temporary and material concerns. These things are not necessarily evil in themselves, but when they take priority, they crowd the word out of one's life. 2) Deceitfulness of riches: Cares of the world have to do with survival, but riches have to do with comfort and luxury. This is an endless pursuit of things bigger and better: best clothes, best cars, and best homes in the best neighborhoods. If there is a false God in Oconee County and America, surely this is it. We are a people 'choked' by materialism. Jesus often warned about the deceitfulness of riches and how it can master us (Matt. 6:24, 19:24).

The Good Soil (Open, Fruit Bearing Heart) vv. 8,23: Like the previous two, the person with this heart receives the word, but here it takes deep root. Unlike the others, it perseveres, and most importantly, it bears fruit. The good soil produces holy living and the fruit of the Spirit. It bears the fruit of obedience and love for God and others, and increasing conformity to the image of Christ, resulting in increasing 'fruitfulness' in witness to unbelievers. This does not mean that the good heart is a perfect heart. Some are young, immature, and weak and show the effects of the previous soils. Though not perfect, it will bear fruit; some will bear fruit 30-fold, some 60, some 100. This heart continues to grow. The constant for all true believers is that they WILL bear fruit.

This passage is both encouraging and challenging. The sower and the seed are the same in all four cases. Yet there are four different responses. One might be the finest sower in the world, and yet there are hard, shallow, choked, and good hearts. Neither the sower nor the seed gets the blame or credit. That is great encouragement for those who continue to sow the seed. The simple challenge for true believers is to be faithful to share the word of God. We merely water and plant, but God causes the growth (1 Cor. 3:6,7). The kingdom of God begins in the heart. The question raised by Jesus in this parable is this: how has my heart responded to the gospel? Has the gospel taken root?

General Reflection:

- 1) What does this passage teach us about God?
- 2) What does this passage teach us about mankind?
- 3) What is a command to obey in this passage? What has God revealed in your life that needs changing? What truth can be applied to your life about the gospel?

Personal Reflection/Application

- 4) What do the three soils, where the gospel does not take root, teach us about our hearts?
 - Hard Heart (path): Satan seeks to snatch the truth of God's word from our hearts. Like in the garden, he twists God's word and tries to remove it from our heart. What area in life are you believing a lie?
 - Shallow Heart (rocky): This may be a great indicator if someone is a true believer. A true believer (deep roots) trusts in God's plan, believes the truth of the Word, and believes that God is for our good. How do you respond to trials and tribulation?
 - Strangled Heart (thorns): How do the 'good' things in life, the cares of this world, strangle the Word from growing in your heart?
- 5) True believers have a 'good heart' where the gospel took root but we are still in this body of flesh. How does rebellion (hard heart) or the test of adversity (thorny heart) or the test of prosperity (strangled heart) still play out in our walk with Christ? Which area is difficult for you?
- 6) What does this passage tell us about the mark of a true believer? What are ways people can have a false assurance? What are ways that we can have full assurance (based on a prayer prayed or is it more of an examination of fruit bearing, 2 Cor. 13: 5). A great question to ask about assurance is, How have I experienced God this week? How has my faith made a difference in my walk?
- 7) What is the final test of a true believer (Phil. 1:6)? What does this verse tell us?
- 8) What encouragement can you take away from this parable? What ways are you challenged?

Prayer

As we begin the 'Ready' series, pray and ask God to examine your heart.

For the doubting: How have I responded to the gospel? Has it truly taken root? Pray 2 Cor. 13:5 and ask God to examine your heart. If there is any doubt or lack of fruit bearing in your life, turn immediately to the Lord of the harvest and plead with Him to plow and clear your heart once more. Lord, break up the hard soil and the rocky soil and pull out the weeds and plant your gospel deeply and permanently in my heart that I may bear fruit for your kingdom.

For the believer: Lord, you do not ask me to produce fruit in others, but to simply be a sower who sows the seeds of your word. Give me the compassion and boldness to do this faithfully. Help me to trust you with the results.