

## Four People Went to Church

### Matthew 13:1-23

Imagine if you will four people who come to church. Each of them experiences the same worship service. Each of them hears the same sermon. But each of them has a totally different response.

Why is it that one person responds to the gospel and is deeply moved and all they can think and talk about is sharing Jesus with others while at the same time another person seems to care less that Jesus died for them? You find one person moved to tears by the gospel and another cold and distant.

Not everyone responded the same way to Jesus' message. Some thought Jesus was the son of God, their awaited Messiah. There were others that thought Jesus was a deceiver, even the devil. Why do people respond so differently? What makes the difference? Why does one person come away with a radically changed life and the truth begins to bear fruit in his daily life? While the others go away unmoved, unchanged, and unfruitful?

Jesus sheds some light on this in His Parable of the Sower. This parable gives insights on the various conditions of the heart. The main point of this parable is quite simple. The seed sown is the Word of the Kingdom - the message of the gospel - the Word of God. Jesus identifies that for us in **verses 19 and 22**. Luke tells us plainly in his gospel "**The seed is the word of God**" (8:11). But the Word doesn't have the same effect in every life. The potential of the Word to produce change and fruit is determined by the quality and readiness of the soil - ***the heart that hears the message***.

Now these ideas from Jesus didn't just pop out of the air. He had encountered some rugged opposition to His Word and His works the very same day He spoke this parable. And that opposition is recorded in detail in **Matthew chapter 12**.

Jesus had performed many miracles the day He gave this parable of the sower. Matthew 12:15 says that **he healed all their sick**. In Matthew 12:22 Jesus even heals **a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him so he could both talk and see**. Many people wouldn't believe in Him even though He worked wonders right in front of their eyes. The religious men, the Pharisees, asked Him for greater and greater signs but wouldn't listen to His words. This was the very day Jesus had to warn the religious leaders about ***the unpardonable sin*** - about blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

In other words, this was a day when Jesus, in word and deed, was scattering the seed of His kingdom all over the place. People had wonderful opportunities this very day to see their hearts transformed and stretched and healed. But many ***refused to hear*** and ***refused to see***.

That's why, after the parable of the sower, Jesus had some scathing words of judgement that have troubled many people (Matthew 13:10-15:

***10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "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 he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 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."**

Jesus tells us **why** His words were hidden from so many in these parables. If people didn't **respond to, and embrace the truth He gave them, they would lose the opportunity to receive anything more.** The religious people - the people who should have known the most - had just taken His works of healing and deliverance and attributed them to Satan. He was surrounded by people who only wanted to see Him do neat stuff, but could care less about His authority over their lives.

Jesus is very clear in His words on this subject. That's why, in **verse 13**, He doesn't just say these people **do not see**. He's very careful to say, **"Seeing, they do not see."** And He doesn't just say they do not hear, but **"Hearing, they do not hear."** These aren't people who have lacked information. They are people who have **rejected the plain truth of the Word of God.**

So, Jesus gathers His disciples around Him and explains the meaning of this parable to them.

Now let's look at the meaning of this wonderful parable starting in verse 18:

### **The Seed is the Word of God.** (Matthew 13:19)

#### **SPIRITUAL FRUIT WILL ONLY COME FROM THE SEED SOWN IN THE HEART**

What Matthew records more **indirectly** as the message or the word, Mark records very **directly** - **"The sower sows the Word" (Mark 4:14).** The seed is the Word of God. Everything that grows **starts** with seed. The **soils** vary, but the **seed** is constant. Even in the very best soil, nothing will grow without seed.

Imagine the foolishness of a farmer who comes complaining about the barrenness of his land. He comes to you and says, "I've borrowed a small fortune to buy this land. The previous owner told me it was **good** land. But I think he lied. I've worked that soil. I've irrigated it. I've invested in the best fertilizers known to science. I've been spraying insecticides and pesticides. I've worked from sunrise until it was dark. **And nothing is growing on that land!**"

You say to your farmer friend, "That's very odd. I can't imagine getting absolutely **nothing** for all your effort. What did you plant?"

"Plant?"

"That's right, what **seed** did you sow?"

**"Seed? What do you mean, seed? I didn't know you had to plant seed."**

If you want to harvest, you have to plant seed. True, as Jesus will show in this parable, there are other factors too, but for sure, nothing will happen without seed.

But what is obvious in **farming** is not always so obvious in **spiritual growth**. People aren't as interested in **sowing** as they are in **harvesting**. Many don't want to spend time studying the truth of the Scriptures. They find themselves too busy with other things to spend extended time in prayer and meditation. They want to go to church less and less. But they still want good marriages. They want God's blessing. They want godly children. **Harvesting** they like. It's the **sowing** they're not crazy about.

Some don't see their problems until they start to **harvest** weeds instead of fruit. And then, usually, what they want is a **solution to their problem now without addressing the neglect of the Word of truth that got them into the mess in the first place.**

That's the first great truth and the first great warning of this parable. **Let nothing but Jesus and His Word take center place in your life.** Let no other authority or custom or the pressure of the crowd steer your life. Root yourself, renew your mind, regulate your actions and attitudes by God's Word and nothing else.

**Psalms 1:1-3 - "Psa 1:1 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.."**

The counsel of the ungodly is everywhere. It crops up like weeds and thorns. It will choke out the place of the Word if you're not careful. But the Word of truth, properly received, will bring unlimited blessing into all of your life. It will **"yield its fruit in season"** and **"whatever he does prospers."** That's because the Word is the seed that brings growth.

Now that we have looked at the seed, let's look at the soils.

## **I. The Hardened Heart**

**Matthew 13:3-4 - "And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; {4} and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up."**

**Matthew 13:18-19 - "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 has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road."**

The **road** or the **"wayside"** represents the roads and trails that crisscrossed the agricultural fields of Galilee. Because the soil on the **"wayside"** would be packed down and hardened by much foot traffic, the seeds could not penetrate the soil, but lay exposed so that **"birds came and devoured them."**

Jesus tells us the enemy will steal away the seed - the Word - from our lives if it is not received with understanding. But there's a particular **kind** of understanding He

has in mind. These people weren't **too stupid** to grasp the meaning of the Word. The problem was of a different **kind**.

Jesus said their hearts had **grown** dull. He said people's lives can **become** hard to God's truth. Like a path that has been packed down by lots of traffic, people get busy with the thoughts of their minds and the dreams of their hearts. The seed of God's Word is just one more thing bouncing off the surface of their lives.

I had the opportunity to talk briefly with a young man yesterday about Jesus. He said he was turned off by all that religious stuff. He said that it was okay for some if it made them do good things, but he was too hardened to let it make a difference in his life.

Now you may think Jesus is dealing with atheists here. But they are not the only ones with hardened hearts. Remember, He's talking about how people give their attention to His Word. He's talking about the crowd who hear the truth. He's saying that hearing God's Word is going to be a fruitless experience for many people because, while their bodies are in church, they've already become **distracted and cluttered in their affections and aspirations**.

People can become **desensitized to spiritual truth**. There are people who grew up in church hearing Bible teaching all their lives—but they have long since stopped listening. The Word of God has no effect in their lives. There is no change, no growth, no fruit. They have become hardened to the truth of the Word. It simply bounces off their hard heart and before they even leave the church building the Devil snatches it away. They think about it no more the rest of the week. There are people who actually pride themselves that they are not easily moved spiritually. They can hear God's truth in a **detached** manner.

This is the point Jesus is pressing home in **13:15** - "**FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.**"

And so the first obstacle to overcome if I want to hear the Word of God and make it bear fruit in my life, is **lazy, indifferent, presumptuous listening**. I need to **soften my heart** if I am to properly understand and receive spiritual truth.

## II. The Shallow Heart

**Matthew 13:5-6** - "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. {6} "But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away."

**Matthew 13:20-21** - "The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; {21} yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away."

Farmers were always careful to remove the loose rocks from their fields. However, because of the topography of Galilee, there were many underlying limestone beds. There was enough soil to plow and plant but no depth for plants to take root. Seeds that fell on such "**stony places**" where they "**did not have much earth**" often "**immediately sprang up**" but "**withered away**" and died quickly because the sun "**scorched**" them and they "**had no root**."

Notice that Jesus uses the word ***immediately*** twice in describing these people. They receive the word with joy ***immediately*** (13:5, Mark 14:16 - "...receive it ***with joy***"). Then, Jesus says they "***immediately fall away***" (Matthew 13:21).

Here we have Jesus dealing with the problem of ***short-lived spiritual experience and commitment***. Why do Christians backslide? Why don't all our aspirations and goals materialize? Why don't people end up as well as they start out? That's the issue Jesus is dealing with in these verses.

You can picture the problem Jesus is addressing. The seed enters and begins to germinate. There is the ***emotional excitement*** that comes from that inner awareness of new life and spiritual transformation.

But just as surely as the germination was ***rapid***, it was also ***shallow***. The roots went down into the soil, but only a short way. Then they hit solid rock. Now, nobody saw this going on. The leaves stayed green for a while. The ***outward appearance*** of the life was unchanged. But all the while, ***spiritual drought and death was in the making***.

Soon the holy honeymoon was over. Trials came. People poked fun. Old friends who didn't like the look of the new life began to desert. And the new plant shriveled and died.

But the problem wasn't the persecution. And the problem wasn't anything in the seed. And the cause of the shriveled life wasn't the trial or difficulty. Those things only ***manifested*** what was already going wrong in the life.

Here's what happened:

Somewhere, amid all the excitement of new spiritual life, the Lord began to deal with something under the surface of the life. All the while the new convert was singing choruses and giving testimony, God was trying to reach a level of sacrifice way down deep - under the emotions.

And for whatever reason, while the emotions were stirred, this person's will wasn't dethroned. There are whole churches who teach people to just live by their feelings and impulses. There are whole churches who thrive on keeping people on the edge of their seats with emotional excitement. ***And there is nothing wrong with an emotional quality in our Christian walk***. But sooner or later, God's going to come to some area of my stubborn will that is as immovable and unbreakable as a rock.

Nobody else will know whether I have listened to the Lord or not. Nobody else will see how real Christ's Lordship is ***under the surface of my life***. But that one issue - that one part of life where I refuse to budge, will determine my future survival.

Jesus explains why in **Matthew 13:12** - "For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him."

Most of us understand that Jesus, through the inward work of the Holy Spirit, speaks to our lives and plants truth in our hearts. It's the last part of that twelfth verse that's a bit harder to swallow. Did you know that Jesus will actually ***take away previous benefit from His Word in your life when you cease to live in obedience to what He was revealed?***

It's not just that you won't make any further progress. That seems fair enough. But He actually ***removes*** what has been gained in previous years of discipleship. You don't stay at the same level. You can't.

People fail and fall in all sorts of ways spiritually. God is patient, merciful, helpful and forgiving with repentant sinners. But He is absolutely intolerant of the ***stubborn refusal to yield***. Any area of persistent unwillingness to heed the Word, will shrivel the life of the seed and destroy the possibility of abiding fruit.

### III. The Worldly Heart

**Matthew 13:7** - "Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out."

**Matthew 13:22** - "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."

Sometimes the fields in Palestine were lined with rows of thorn bushes. These became natural fences that kept animals out of the crops. Invariably, some of the seeds "***fell among thorns***." Because there was good soil, they grew. However, before they could grow large enough to produce fruit, "***the thorns sprang up and choked them***."

When I was a kid, we used to sing the Sunday School chorus, "Read your Bible, pray every day and you'll grow, grow, grow." All in all, it was a pretty good song. But it didn't quite tell the whole truth. It isn't enough to read your Bible and pray every day. You have to be doing something else with quite a bit of courage and diligence.

You have to pull out weeds and thorns by the roots. Jesus identifies two parasites that, if left to grow along side the Word, will win every time - ***the cares of this world***, and ***the deceitfulness of wealth***.

You can't just put the Word ***in***. You have to take these two parasites ***out***. Those two weeds are deeply related. They are ***immediate family members***, not ***distant cousins***. The cares of this world are the obvious centers of worldly attention.

**Security, happiness, popularity, pleasure, and all-round well being.** Those are the goals of all citizens of planet earth. We all **feel the pressure** to achieve them.

**The deceitfulness of riches** comes in precisely at this point. We live in a world that is under the sway of the father of all lies. And the biggest and most successful lie he tells is that **riches is the answer to those cares of this world.** Wealth will answer to those concerns in a way nothing else can.

And here's the punch-line from Jesus. ***If you believe that, put your Bible away. It will do you no good. You can't spread the seed of the Word over the soil of that colossal lie.***

Before the Word can bring its fruitful life into the soil of your mind, you must set a brush fire to the lies of the age. This is what the life of faith is all about. Faith means rejecting anything else as ultimately satisfying or meaningful. Faith means carving out all false affections. Faith means building the goals and aspirations of your whole life around the promises of God's Word.

Faith means saying with David - **"The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. {10} They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. {11} Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward."** Psalm 19

Without that attitude there is no point in taking up God's Word because it will constantly be telling you things you won't believe. It's going to tell you to lose all of the paltry rags this world calls life. And they won't seem like rags to you. It will tell you that true joy is found in giving every ounce of energy and strength to spending your life in sacrificial, time consuming effort for Christ's kingdom. And that will seem like nonsense to you.

This Word will tell you that dying is gain for Jesus. It will tell you that you are blessed when people persecute you for Jesus' sake. It will tell you that the hunger for God is better than the hunger for riches.

None of the central truths of the Word is believable to the worldly mind. None of it makes sense to those who give as much time to the world's weeds as they do to the seed of God's truth.

Jesus says that, until the weeds are rejected as lies and ripped up by the roots, they will choke out the preciousness of God's life giving truth.

**1 Timothy 6:9-12 - "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. {10} 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. {11} But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. {12} Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."**

Those are such scary words for prosperous people like us. They are designed to shake us up. We're supposed to assume **we** can be blind and deceived like that. It doesn't happen over night. You don't wake up one morning and renounce Jesus because you want to become a millionaire. It happens slowly, gradually, the way weeds grow.

#### IV. The Fruitful Heart

**Matthew 13:8-9** - "And others fell on the good soil and yielded<sup>a</sup> a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. {9} "He who has ears, let him hear."

**Matthew 13:23** - "And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."

This "**good ground**" was in the middle of the field away from the "**wayside**," the "**stony places**," and the "**thorns**." Because they fell on "**good ground**" and were not hindered, they "**yielded a crop**." There was an abundant harvest.

The person who is "**good ground**" for spiritual seeds responds in three ways: he "**hears the word**," "**understands it**" (he does not reject it), and "**bears fruit**" -- his faith is evidenced by his life.

Not only does a true believer "**bear fruit**," but some will bear "**a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty**." Though all that bear spiritual fruit are true believers, some more fruit than others.

Here's what I think Jesus was saying. It answers to an old fear that all of us have. And Jesus relates the power of His Word to deal with this fear. Maybe your heart is saying something like this today:

"Yes, God has things for other people, but they will never develop in my life. Other people might move on to great spiritual heights, but I'll never get out of this rut."

And then, to make matters worse, the Devil comes along to cement those feelings in our minds. He says:

"That's right. You're a single parent. Your kids never will turn out any good."

"That's right. Your marriage wasn't established on Biblical grounds. You never will find happiness with your present spouse."

"That's right. You will never beat that battle with pornography. You're too weak. You've tried before and you failed. You'll fail again."

"That's right, you've blown it too many times. God has given up on you. You will never have a fruitful Christian life."

"That's right. This sermon will work for other people. But it will never work for you."



I wonder, how many millions of times in millions of ways, in churches around the world today, those words will be whispered by the evil one -- reinforced -- in the minds of people all around the world as the Seed of the Word is planted into their circumstances. I wonder how many people will lose hope before they even start.

Listen to me. The Word has power to multiply in your heart. True, it has to be received in faith and obedience. True, you must root out all competing counsel that would argue with God's revealed truth. But for those who will humbly receive the engrafted Word, James says it will **save your soul!** It will multiply in power beyond all your imagination.

No wonder, at the end of His parable, Jesus says, **"He who has ears, let him hear!" (9)** That's not just Jesus' way of saying, "OK fellas, listen up. I want to tell you something." This is Jesus telling you and me that this is the starting place for everything. It isn't your strength or will power that will win the day, it is the power of God's Word. Welcome the Word. Hear it today. Embrace it with all your might. Don't second guess your obedience to Him.

And watch the fruit grow!

Let's apply this to our lives today:

1) **SPIRITUAL FRUIT WILL ONLY COME FROM THE SEED SOWN IN THE HEART**

2) **THE WORD WILL LOSE ITS POWER IN MY LIFE IF I BECOME TOO ENTRENCHED IN MY OWN STUBBORN PATTERNS OF LIVING**

3) **INTAKE OF THE WORD IS NOT ENOUGH TO ENSURE ITS GROWTH IN THE HEART**

4) **I CAN'T RECEIVE THE WORD IN A FRUITFUL MANNER UNTIL I AM WILLING TO DISPLACE WHATEVER IS IN MY HEART THAT IS CONTRARY TO ITS TRUTH**

5) **IN A GOOD HEART, THE WORD CAN PRODUCE RESULTS FAR BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL'S OWN STRENGTH OR ABILITY**

Invitation: