

# Parable of the Soil

My family and I have seen the recent movie blockbuster, “Indiana Jones & the Dial of Destiny”. In my humble opinion, this final chapter of Indiana Jones’ story is much better than the previous chapter, “Indiana Jones & the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull”, but it does a great disservice to the character of Indiana Jones.

Anyway, there is a scene in the movie which is quite unbelievable —again, in my humble opinion. A ship captain, played by Antonio Banderas, tells the young Teddy character that swimming is easy. All you do is, “reach, then pull”.

Later in the movie, we see Teddy reciting that mantra as he swim after falling into an underground waterway.

Too bad, it doesn’t actually work that way!

In actual fact, when learning how to swim, you progress through stages, adding skill upon skills until you reach swimming competency. You cannot become a barracuda until you have first been a sea otter and then a platypus, and everyone starts out as a guppy!

Similarly, faith is NOT an either/or situation, as if you either have faith or you do not. We all start with a lack, then are helped to recognise we have a lack. Only then will we be ready to learn of and accept the solution to the problem, and so be prepared for light and life and love.

## Explanation

Our scripture focus today has us reading and reflecting on a familiar parable. What makes our scripture focus exceptional is that an explanation of the parable is provided.

### Faith Requires Seeking

The parable begins with a description of the scene:

On that day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore. (Matthew 13:1–2)<sup>1</sup>

As we read this, we are naturally amazed at the description of “such large crowds”. Our attention and imagination is drawn to the sheer, but unprovided, number. We do not ask why there was such a large crowd, whatever that means, but maybe we should. Why did those people gather around Jesus?

They gathered because they wanted to see and hear Jesus because, while they did not understand him perfectly (Mt 16:13–14), and possibly not correctly at all, they recognised in him enough to know he knew something they did not, something they sensed inherently they needed to know and receive (Jn 6:67–69).

On this the prophet wrote the words of God he received,

You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart.  
(Jeremiah 29:13)

While we all agree we would not know God exists without the Spirit revealing him to us, the fact is neither will we come to faith without seeking for God.<sup>2</sup>

“Did not our hearts burn with us?” the disciples on the road to Emmaus asked (Lk 24:32). The words Jesus shared with them, and their experience with him, opened their eyes to see and their ears to hear. They then wanted to see more and hear more, so that their longing would be satisfied.

The crowds gathered to hear Jesus that day because **faith requires seeking and seeking must be sparked.**

### **The Parable of the Sower**

When that large crowd gathered, Jesus taught them many things, including a now well-known parable:

Consider the sower who went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell...  
(Matthew 13:3b–4a)

As I have admitted before, I am no farmer, neither even a gardener; yet, even I am intrigued by this story of a sower planting seed in soil.

What makes this parable especially interesting is that an explanation is provided just a few verses later; however, the explanation presents a different perspective on the parable than what is more likely in this telling. So, we have **one parable and two perspectives** on that parable that are both from Jesus.

That fact alone should get you to pay especially close attention!

Beginning at verse 3, the focus of the parable is on the sower, for Jesus stated, “Consider the sower...” From this perspective then, we learn:

- **The victory of the kingdom of God is certain.** It is the sower doing the work and his work will result in a harvest beyond expectation—a hundred, maybe sixty, at the very least thirty times what was sown. The friends of Jesus pray for the Kingdom to come (Mt 6:10)—AND IT WILL!—for the seed is sown by Jesus and the harvest is God’s doing.
- **The Word encounters many difficulties** between its sowing and the eventual harvest. The friends of Jesus should not be surprised by this, nor feel threatened by it.
- The responses and actions, or not, of those in whom the seed is sown do not themselves hinder the eventual harvest. **Only the presence of “fruit” reveals the quality of the soil**—which is to say, the fruit reveals whether one is a friend of Jesus or not. As a consequence, Christians should not assume they are “good soil”. “You’ll recognise them by their fruit”, Jesus warned elsewhere (Mt 7:20).

Learning these lessons, this parable leads the friends of Jesus to praise that the Word goes out and will return a harvest. The Kingdom will come! It has been promised. **Thank God for the sower!**

### **The Parable of the Soils**

Our scripture focus then continues at verses 18–23, where an interpretation of the parable is provided by Jesus to the disciples (Mt 13:10), but not to the large crowd to whom the parable was originally given. We can take this to mean the parable and this interpretation

were likely given at different times and in different places, as well as many times and in many places.

So listen to the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word about the kingdom... (Matthew 13:18–19a)

While Jesus identifies the original parable was about a sower, in this interpretation he moved the focus to the soil. He describes the soil as a metaphor for one who hears the word sown by the sower:

- When the seed falls on a path, worn by use, it is devoured easily by predators, so will not produce fruit.
- When the seed falls on rocky ground, with some but little soil, it grows quickly, as if joyfully, but dies just as quickly because of the lack of depth to the soil in which it is planted. It will wither under the heat of the day or other distress, having no roots, so will not produce fruit.
- When the seed falls among thorns, it grows but is choked by worries and greed, so will not produce fruit.
- When the seed falls on good soil, it produces fruit not only plentifully but beyond normal expectation—a hundred, maybe sixty, but at least thirty times what was sown. It produces fruit beyond the one who hears, like when a plant's own seed is scattered to produce other plants.<sup>3</sup>

Where in verses 1-9, the emphasis of the parable was on the harvest resulting from the efforts of the sower, in verses 18-23 the parable is meant to cause us to reflect on the question, **“What kind of soil are you?”**

## Application

### Will You Produce Fruit?

Jesus' telling of this parable is not meant to describe stages of faith, as if a person moves from being as hard as a path, to being rocky, then thorny, and finally good soil. In both of Jesus' perspectives on this parable provided in our scripture focus, the seed fell on the ground of a person's heart or mind, and that soil was either hard, rocky, or thorny, or it was good soil that produced fruit.

The point I believe Jesus wanted us to understand is there is soil that produces fruit and there is soil that does not. Whether the plant grows a little or a lot is not the point. The plant is only as good as the fruit it produces.

How much fruit the plant produces is not really the concern for Jesus in these tellings of the parable.

The question posed by this parable then is simple: When you hear the word about God from Jesus, will it produce fruit in your life? Do your thoughts, words, and deeds lead to the benefits of the free, full, and forever life Jesus promised or not?

You are hearing me share the word about God from Jesus, so do my reflections stir anything within you? Are you even now compelled by the Holy Spirit to make a change in your thoughts, words, and deeds? Any change prompted by hearing the Word and the

stirring of the Holy Spirit is going to produce fruit. Do not recoil from that stirring but surrender to it. Follow its lead.

The word sown will yield a harvest. Whether you are just now placing your faith in Jesus or are “growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (Eph 4:13), will you be counted among that harvest? **Will you produce fruit?**

### **Will You Help Produce Fruit?**

And finally, our scripture focus provided a parable of Jesus and a second perspective on that parable from Jesus. One parable, two perspectives. Now, I do not want to suggest I am smarter than Jesus, but allow me to apply my wisdom and vast education to provide another perspective on Jesus’ parable:

Are you a tomato, a cucumber, or an asparagus in Jesus’ harvest? (any VeggieTales fans in the house?)

I am only kidding, of course. But there certainly is more to glean from this parable. Jesus certainly did not intend to exhaust the vast riches of his wisdom and teaching, but invites us to mine deeply this parable. Let us consider another perspective to add to the two perspectives of Jesus this gospel provides.

As I mentioned before, with this parable Jesus was not describing stages to faith; however, the parable does not preclude the option that the bad soil might become good soil. Indeed, the prophet encouraged this when he wrote,

Sow righteousness for yourselves and reap faithful love; break up your unplowed ground. It is time to seek the LORD until he comes and sends righteousness on you like the rain. (Hosea 10:12)

Within the Bible, the images of sowing and soil come up time and time again. In fact, these images will come up again in my sermon next week! Each time these images are used, however, they may be employed differently.

In this prophet’s use of the images, he recognised our part in turning the soil of our life from bad to good. Again, I am no gardener, but I am pretty sure soil cannot apply any effort toward its own progress. Left on its own, soil will only degenerate from good to bad. This leaves us with no other thought than that turning soil from bad to good requires outside intervention.

In the context of Jesus’ parable, he is the sower of seeds. The seeds fall on the ground as it is. In turning bad soil to good then, it cannot progress without help. That is where gardeners come in after the sower.

We might then say, by implication, the friends of Jesus are invited to help turn the bad soil of a person’s heart into good soil (i.e., we are called to make disciples).

What can we do to intentionally prepare the people around us, with whom we have influence, to help change from bad soil to good soil, so that the good Word will produce fruit in them when the seed is sown?

Please note I am not talking about the sowing of the seed, but preparing the soil. How do we prepare people to respond favourably to the good news about Jesus when they hear it?

In terms of people's hearts, it might be a good place to start by asking why and how do they become bad soil, whether hard or rocky or surrounded by thorns? They become bad soil when the cares of this world become overwhelming and they only know how to act like "children" —naïve, immature, self-absorbed, and selfishly manipulating others. They need to be shown a better way, the Way of Love, but I dare say they also need to feel their lack more painfully.

Glen Scrivener is an evangelist and author who has a video on Youtube titled, "What Christians believe...in 90 Seconds!"<sup>4</sup> In his presentation, he describes,

In the beginning, there was light and life and love. Out of this has come a world destined to share this light and life and love, but the world is not like that, is it? When we turn away from the light, there is only darkness; when we turn away from the life, there is only death; when we turn away from the love, there is only disconnection. Do you feel that loss? What have you thought, said, or done to fill those gaps? Has that worked for you?  
(paraphrase)

It seems to me that when we can get people to honestly assess the human condition, they cannot help but recognise something is broken within them, something is lost, there is no hope.

Once they recognise the loss, they then need to be encouraged to long for something more and better; to move from darkness to light, death to life, disconnection to love.

That sense of loss may seem painful to admit, but until one recognises there is a problem, he will not seek a solution. And as it is written,

You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart.  
(Jeremiah 29:13)

That is the description of good soil.

Not recognising the loss is like hard soil; recognising something is broken is like rocky soil; seeking answers in the wrong places is like thorny soil; desperately wanting light, life, and love is good soil.

Helping people feel their lack more painfully will prepare their hearts for the word to be sown and fruit to be produced. **Will you help produce fruit? Will we together help to produce fruit?**

Helping people to recognise their lack and their loss, and showing them a better way will often involve telling stories. Let me give you an example:

This week I attended a book launch. A friend of mine, Dr. Patricia Weerakoon, has written a book, with two other authors, titled, "The Gender Revolution: A biblical, biological, and compassionate response".

You may have heard of Dr. Weerakoon. She is a renowned relationships and sexual health researcher. You more likely know her from her stint on the ABC television show *Agony Aunts* with media personality Clive Robertson and business guru Sally Wilson. It is from that show she earned the respect and affection of the nickname "Auntie Pat".

At the book launch, the MC described how everyone has “an Auntie Pat moment”. What he meant by that is when you first meet or hear Patricia teach that “sex and the wonder of human genitalia are gifts from God that should be celebrated”, you will likely be floored by her forthrightness and uncensored way of talking about a subject one does not normally bring up in polite company. However, her smile and bubbly personality will soon put you at ease and you will wonder at how she unabashedly praises our Creator for the gifts of love and sex.

Now, did you see what I did there? I shared with you a story about Dr. Patricia Weerakoon. Some of you have already started googling her to find out more about her research and advice. Some of you can’t wait to buy her book—I can proudly say I was the first person to buy her book at the launch. Some of you are ‘chomping at the bit’ to go out to morning tea to describe your own ‘Auntie Pat moment’. My wife and I can top all your stories as Patricia did our pre-marriage counselling.

The point is I shared a story of a person that brought to mind your own positive or negative experiences, and led you to wonder how you might have a better sex and love life. You are likely wondering how might Auntie Pat might help you with your dating or marriage relationship. With my story, you were led to consider your own lack or loss and to yearn for something more and better.

When we share the stories of Jesus they are stories of hope! And there are seven stories of hope that are particularly good at helping people to recognise how they are lacking and have lost light and life and love:

1. The woman who wept (Luke 7:36-50)
2. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-17)
3. The men let down through a hole in a roof (Luke 5:17-26)
4. The parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11-32)
5. Jesus being led to his crucifixion (Mark 15:16-39)
6. Jesus’ resurrection and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:1-20)
7. The parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20)

You and I and all of us should know these stories inside and out, so that we are prepared to share them in natural conversation.

If anyone you know expresses even the slightest hint of an awareness of their lack and loss, then whip out one of these stories. In the gentle and respectful telling of these stories, the people around us will be led to yearn for the light and life and love Jesus brings us back to.

I want us all to **be ready to share these stories of hope** and know how to lead people in a simple Bible study beginning with these passages. I hope to soon create videos on our website and use social media to direct people to them, so they might get to hear the good news about Jesus, and how he leads us all from darkness, death, and disconnection to light, life, and love.

# Conclusion

A simple story of hope CAN soften up the ground of a person's heart to spark seeking and faith. We can, each and together, turn bad soil into good soil, and so prepare those with whom we have influence for the Word to be sown and yield the fruit of a life saved and transformed.

This parable, and its multiple perspectives, invites you to consider the quality of the soil of your heart. Are you hearing the good news about Jesus and being stirred to faith? Are you being stirred to make a change in your thoughts, words, and deeds? Let that seed blossom in your life so that you are counted amongst God's great harvest.

## Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Psalm 63:1; 78:34; Isaiah 26:9; Hebrews 11:6; cf., Psalm 14:1–3.
- 3 The conclusion of this parable is likely as allusion to Gen 16:12. “If that is true, then the only place where Galilean farmers would have heard of reaping a one hundredfold harvest was in the “unrealistic” world of the Bible. On this basis, Jesus’ story begins in the ordinary world and concludes in the biblical world of hope and promise.” —M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew”, *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 303.
- 4 *Premier Unbelievable*, 6-Dec-2017, <https://replug.link/54d67860> (accessed 14-Jul-2023).