

INTRODUCTION

Our passage today is a parable Jesus told. Parables are fabricated stories that intend to explain complicated lessons using everyday objects and events. Telling parables was a usual way in Jesus' teaching. Matthew chapter 13 alone contains eight of Jesus' parables. When we interpret a parable first we have to identify the key elements in the story, whether they are characters or things that the author included for special purposes. But if we try to dig out meanings from the supportive elements we may be uncovering lessons that the author did not mean to convey. In some of His parables like the one we will study today Jesus provided His own explanations. That saves us some guessing work in our interpretation. When we are reading a parable we need to ask ourselves in what ways we can relate with the plot. From that we can deduce the moral of the story. We will study this parable from three angles – its content, intent and extent.

EXPLANATION

1. 比喻的內容 The Content of the Parable

Let us first look at the content of the parable. In the story there was a farmer who sowed seeds. We can assume that every seed had the same potential to produce a crop. Therefore, the outcome of the seeds varied only because of the four different soil conditions where they landed. It would be helpful if we use a simple chart (on the screen) to compare the four conditions. The former three conditions produced no harvest. Only the last condition gave rise to some yield. The first condition is in verse 4, where the seeds were dropped on road-side. They ended up being eaten by birds. In verse 5 to 6 Jesus told us that the second condition was rocky places. The seeds quickly germinated but they were soon scorched by the sun. The third batch of seeds in verse 7 were sowed among the thorns. Being squeezed by the thorns the seedlings did not have enough room to grow. The seeds in the above three conditions produced nothing. The only favorable condition was the good soil mentioned in verse 8. The returns were a hundred, sixty and thirty times. Jesus did not explain what led to the different productivity. That might be a minor detail that is insignificant to the moral of the parable. When Luke recorded the same parable in Luke chapter 8 he only said that the good soil yielded a crop of one hundred times. Therefore, the emphasis was that only the last condition produced a harvest. The parable is something an ordinary farmer in Jesus' day could resonate with. We may wonder why anyone would waste his seeds by sowing them on road-side or on rocky places. We should picture in our mind a peasant who only owns a limited farmland with rocks and weeds. To maximize his yield he sows all the seeds he has to cover the field. Therefore, it is very likely that some seeds are scattered in less ideal growing environment. The operation is far smaller in scale than the industrialized farms nowadays where the seeds are spread and the field is neatly tended by machinery.

2. 比喻的目的 The Intent of the Parable

Having looked at the content of the parable now let us study the intent of the parable. The disciples asked Jesus why He spoke to the crowd in parables. Jesus responded in **verse 13**: "This

is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.’” Some people in Jesus days witnessed what He did and heard His teaching but they did not understand the meaning behind the information they received. What caused that? Jesus continued in the next two verses by quoting the message God told prophet Isaiah. Most Christians should be familiar with God’s calling of Isaiah in chapter 6 of the book when Isaiah responded “Here am I. Send me!” What Jesus quoted was within the same message God spoke to Isaiah. Let us read **Matthew 13:15** - “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.” The word translated “otherwise” in the NIV is rendered “lest” in the Chinese Union Version. The original Greek word can have both meanings. If it is translated as “lest” then the verse means that God deliberately concealed the truth to some people because He did not want them to understand and accept it, and repent of their sins. However, if it is translated as “otherwise” then the blame would be on the listeners because they turned a deaf ear to what they heard and a blind eye to what they saw. So was the problem on God’s side or was the problem on the listeners’ side? Let us consider the background of the Isaiah passage. God told Isaiah clearly that the Jewish people would not listen to his call for repentance because of their calloused hearts. Because of their rebellion God would eventually discipline them through wars, famine, plague and exile.

When quoting the Isaiah passage Jesus was saying that the spiritual dull condition of His hearers were just like Isaiah’s audience. People would not repent because their hearts were hardened. However, if Jesus did not want anyone in the crowd to understand about God’s Kingdom then why did He teach them in parables anyway? It is because Jesus’ parables served a double purpose of enlightening those who at least showed some interest in knowing more and at the same time concealing spiritual truth to those who rejected His message. That is why Jesus said in **verse 12**: “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.” For those who wanted to know more, Jesus was willing to share more about God’s Kingdom. Whereas, for those whose hearts were hardened they might walk away, concluding that Jesus’ parables were only amusing stories.

We cannot understand God’s truth unless God reveals it to us. Even today, when we read the Bible and can understand the meaning behind the words, it is not because we are smarter than others. It is because God illuminates our mind. Paul said in **1 Corinthians 2:12-14** that: 12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. That is exactly why we face challenge in evangelism. Every person is a born sinner and non-believer. Our hearts are all hardened and numb to the truth. If it is not because of God’s grace no one can comprehend the gospel and receive salvation. Therefore, Christians should not take pride in our articulation as if we could convince people into accepting Christ. We should not be sad either when seeker friends are not ready to repent. Whom they reject is not you, the messenger, but God Himself. When we convey the gospel message we can make use of parables like Jesus did. The parable of the prodigal son is well-known in any culture. We sinners are like the wayward son in the story; our Heavenly Father is patiently waiting for us to turn back. Moreover, many

Biblical terms that describe salvation carry a wealth of picture behind them. Redemption is a word used in slave trade where a person in captivity can only be set free when a ransom is paid. Justification describes a court ruling where a convict is declared innocent. Reconciliation paints an image where two parties that used to be in conflict are brought back into harmony. In using parables and metaphors in our outreach we help listeners better grasp the gospel message.

3. 比喻的含義 The Extent of the Parable

After we have studied the content and intent of the parable let us now focus on the extent of the parable. In other words, what is the moral in Jesus' parable? Jesus clearly explained to His disciples what the four soil conditions represented. When we look at Jesus' answers we need to ask ourselves an honest question: which condition do I belong to? The first condition is in **verse 19**: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path." Jesus stated that this type of listeners did not understand what they heard. The Pharisees in Jesus' time belongs to this category. They heard Jesus' teaching but they completely rejected His message. Paul described how Satan blinds people's heart in **2 Corinthians 4:3-4**: 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. Are you a soil by the road side? Are you being misled by the god of this age? In your upbringing you are told that there is no Creator and men were evolved from monkeys. The intellectuals of the modern world convince you that there is no absolute truth – you can do anything you want as long as you are not hurting others, and there is no eternal consequence in how you live this life.

Going back to Matthew 13. Let us examine the second soil condition in **verses 20-21**: "20 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." These listeners liked what they heard. They might think that going to heaven after this life was a great news. But they soon faded away because they could not endure the hardship that came with following Christ. Some of us come to the church out of emotionalism. You only like to hear messages that tell you God loves you and He desires you bless your life. However, when hardship comes and you feel that God does not seem to care about you or answer your prayer then you readily conclude that this God is not real. Don't chase after your feeling. God is there whether you feel it or not. Do you want to get close to God because it makes you feel good? Are you ready to pay the price, persevere under difficulty to follow Christ?

Jesus explained the third type of listeners in **verse 22**: "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." They could not walk with Christ because they had too much concern about the things of this world. Paul warned us against the enticement of money in **1 Timothy 6:9-10** that: 9 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. I can think of Judas, the disciples who betrayed Jesus

for 30 pieces of silver as an example of this type of person. Materialism is a huge temptation to us. This world tells us that money is everything because money can buy us comfort and security. Many people are too busy to pursue after money because they want to squeeze out every minute to make more money. But when they are not earning money they are occupied in spending it. Are you one of them?

Only the fourth type of listeners bore fruit after receiving God's Word. Jesus said in [verse 23](#): "But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." Luke filled in with the criteria for getting a harvest in [Luke 8:15](#) – "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." These listeners have "a noble and good heart" and they showed endurance like a farmer works hard all season long to wait for a good harvest. It is clear that only the good soil are the true Christians. Jesus was not talking about our transitional spiritual condition where sometimes we may be look more like one type of soil than the other. He is addressing the eternal destiny of different listeners based on the way they respond to God's Word. This is not the only time Jesus used plant growth to illustrate one's eternal relationship with Him. For example, Jesus stated in the well-known grapevine and branches metaphor in [John 15:4](#) that: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." Genuine life connection between a grafted branch and the vine is evident by active growth. When there is healthy growth there has to be fruit. We may be able to mislead others or even deceive ourselves that we are quite spiritual. But we can never fool our Lord. One day when we meet with Him to settle our account He will make the final verdict whether or not He can find any fruit from us.

CONCLUSION

The moral of this story is very clear – whoever produce a harvest are the true Christians. We are blessed by the opportunity to read God's Word and understand its meaning. The seeds of the gospel are sown. However, you need to make a decision whether you will receive what you heard into your hearts. Don't harden your heart, or else dry soil may turn into concrete. Today is the best moment to make up your mind. Confess your sins to God and accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.