



THE 4 SOILS

For Lent this year, we're going to be looking at a bunch of stories that will be familiar to some of us at least: the Parables of Jesus, a collection of disarmingly simple stories that give us a glimpse into what God is thinking – and doing.

Hence the title of this series, 'The Mysterious Stories of Jesus.'

In the Synoptic Gospels, parables make up a third of Jesus' teaching – so Jesus must have thought they were worth telling (and hearing!). Why did He speak in parables?

- **Parables illustrate.** The word 'parable' comes from the Greek *parabole*. *Para* means 'beside', *bole* means 'to throw', so we're talking about placing an earthly thing alongside a heavenly one in order to explain it.
- **Parables generate.** The Hebrew for parable is *mashal*, or strength – because stories are powerful things. They move, shape, and impact us like nothing else. Hence a great Rabbi had to be a good storyteller.
- **Parables separate.** Sometimes the messages are difficult to grasp; other times they're offensive, so as to separate out the people who want to know from those who don't - a taste of things to come, perhaps?

Today we're going to look at the first parable recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, one that helps to unlock all the others (Mark 4:13). And guess what? We're all in it!

It's called the Parable of the Sower – or alternatively, the 4 Soils ...

Matthew 13:1-23

Jesus here uses an image that would have been immediately recognizable to His listeners: a farmer, sowing seed.

Now, in the ancient world that meant taking a handful of this stuff and throwing it as far as is possible (because every throw was a potential crop). So, he throws the seed, and it lands on 4 types of soil: hard, stony, thorny, and good. And the good soil produces a harvest.

And that's how the story ends. Except that ... it isn't. Because Jesus then adds these words: "He who has ears (a pun that only works in English, by the way), let him hear." I.e. "Listen to what it is I'm *really* saying." And later, in vs18, He explains it all. So, who's the farmer? It's Jesus. And what's the seed? It's the 'message of the Kingdom.' And what are the soils? They're 4 kinds of heart, 4 kinds of people; 4 responses.

Today, we're going to look at those hearts, and consider what Jesus might be saying to us about our *own*.

1) The Hard Soil. This is the path, the ground on the edge of the field – ground that's been stamped on and dried out over time. And because the soil is so hard, the seed just sits there – 'til the birds swoop in and gobble it up.

What is the hard soil supposed to represent? An arrogant heart: the kind of heart that says 'no' to God in a beat, no questions asked. Now that level of hardness doesn't happen overnight: it develops over time, and for various reasons: the desire to be right; to prove we can do this; to be in control of our own destiny. To be 'little gods.'

All of which might sound great – to some people, at least. But spiritually-speaking, it's a dead-end. Because the end result is? No crop. No harvest. No life.

2) The Stony Soil. It's often assumed this is pebbly soil, but no. It's a shallow soil – soil with a limestone-bedrock. And that bedrock means the plants can't root and get the moisture they need. What happens to plants that can't root?

They spring up quick. And then they die.

So, what does the stony soil represent? A shallow heart. Some people can go crazy about Jesus – to begin with. But if there's no depth, if it's just about the latest fad / buzz / book / / band / conference – anything other than Jesus Himself – when trouble comes that faith will just shrivel and die.

And just like before, the end result is? No crop. No harvest. No life. That's the shallow, stony soil.

3) The Thorny Soil. The thorny soil is a soil that's infested with weeds. And those weeds grow up with the plants and strangle the life out of them (and by this point I reckon the audience is thinking, "Man alive, I feel for this farmer").

What is this soil a picture of? A weedy heart. And by that I don't mean gutless, I mean someone whose life is so full of pleasures and pressures they haven't got space for the one thing that would enable them to manage it all: a relationship with the Lord of life Himself. With Jesus.

And because of that, the end result is? No crop. No harvest. No life.

So, it's all looking a bit bleak for this unfortunate farmer. But then, at the end of the story, we get (drum-roll please) ...

4) The Good Soil. What makes the good soil 'good'? It's healthy, it's deep, and it's free of weeds. And it produces a bumper crop – 100, 60, or 30 times what was sown. Now in a good year an ancient farmer would have expected to reap 5-10 times what was sown. But a harvest this big?

This is a super-crop! An 'Isaac-crop' (Genesis 26:12).

So, what is the good soil a picture of? A receptive heart, a person who is willing to listen to Jesus, believe what He says, and follow Him. And the end result is: a miracle! Changed lives, changed attitudes, changed relationships, changed eternities – *everything* contained in those promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. I.e. the Gospel is going to bear fruit. Somewhere. Somehow. In someone. Whatever the odds may be, it *will* happen.

And that is the meaning of the parable. But what is the *moral* of it? What was Jesus saying then, and now? To you, and me?

The Moral Of The Story ...

He's saying that the Kingdom of God is not about a take-over (military or cultural) – it's about a hand-over, a surrender of the heart and mind, and it demands a personal response to Jesus Himself. Because there is, in all of us, the potential for Jesus to do something amazing – something that can transform us, and the world through us (just as every ear of wheat or barley contains seed that will go on to produce yet more ears). But for that to happen, we have to accept *Him* – *all* of Him. I.e.:

It's not enough to just hear about Jesus.

It's not enough to just listen to Jesus.

It's not enough to get interested in Jesus.

It's not even enough to get excited about Jesus.

We have to say 'yes', mean 'yes', and mean 'yes' – for life. Because only *that* will produce the harvest Jesus is talking about.

So, what kind of soil are *you* – what kind of heart? What kind of crop does God want to cultivate in *your* life? And what are *you* doing with the message of Jesus?