

PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-23

Have you ever wondered why the same book or the same sermon will produce strikingly different results in different people? How is it, for instance, that some people seem unable to grasp the simplest and most obvious spiritual truths while others are transformed by them? In the parable of the sower Jesus talks about different types of soil in order to tell us why this happens.

Group Discussion. Describe a firsthand experience—serious or humorous—you have had with farming or with caring for plants in some way. What have you observed about the role of the soil in relation to a plant’s ability to thrive?

Personal Reflection. We all have areas of our hearts and minds where our “soil” is soft and receptive to God, as well as areas where our “soil” is hard and less receptive. Take some time to reflect on areas of receptivity and areas where you would like God to make you more receptive to his love and his will in your life.

The parable of the sower is Jesus’ most important parable because it provides more clues than any other parable as to the nature of parables and how they should be interpreted. The parable is followed by Christ’s own interpretation and discussion of its contents. It is an excellent place to begin our study of the parables. *Read Matthew 13:1-23.*

1. Imagine yourself as a farmer or a farmer’s child at the time of Jesus listening to this story with the rest of the crowd. What immediate responses might you have to Jesus’ use of images of seeds and soil?

2. In verse 10 the disciples ask Jesus, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" How would you summarize his answer (vv. 11-16)?

3. How do parables help Jesus' followers understand his kingdom but hinder the understanding of those who don't follow him closely (vv. 12-17)?

4. In verses 18-23 Jesus explains the meaning of this parable to his disciples. The seed is the message of the kingdom (v. 19). Who is the farmer, and who is the soil?

5. Satanic "birds" destroyed the value of God's word for the first group of people. Why? What did these hearers lack (v. 19)?

6. What can we do to help people understand God's message?

7. Verses 20-21 describe the kind of person referred to as stony or rocky soil. What examples have you seen of people who respond this way?

8. How can we avoid this in our own lives and discourage it in the lives of others?

9. What kind of person does the third type of soil describe (v. 22)?

10. How can we avoid being choked by the weeds and thorns Jesus mentions (v. 23)?

11. Which of the four kinds of soil do you most identify with? Explain.

12. What are some practical examples of how we can become "good soil" (v. 23)?



Thank God for the ways he has opened your heart and mind to his message of love. Invite him to continue to work the soil of your life and to help you be more and more receptive to his love.

NOW OR LATER

In a time of quiet ask God to show you places in your heart and mind where he wants to till, soften, and prepare you to hear his Word. Write a prayer in response to what you sense God is showing you.

THE “LOST” PARABLES

Luke 15:1-32

I *f people really knew me, they would reject me.* To avoid this risk, we often wear masks we think people will like. We hide who we really are, putting ourselves under constant strain.

We often feel this same way about God. We think we are rejected and condemned rather than welcomed and loved. We do our best to please him but feel that we will never measure up.

Group Discussion. Make a list of descriptive words that paint an image of a God who is punitive and harsh. Now read aloud Luke 15:5 and 20. Make a contrasting list of descriptive words that illustrate this portrait of God. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you look at these two images of God?

Personal Reflection. Write a paragraph describing how you imagine God sees you. What does your description tell you about your image of God?

In these three parables about lostness—the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son—Jesus sets us straight about God’s attitude toward sinners. The result is a startling picture of God. *Read Luke 15:1-32.*

1. In these three parables, compare the way the Pharisees see “sinners” to the way Jesus says God sees them.

2. Imagine yourself listening to these stories as a Pharisee. If you were able to hear Jesus, what thoughts and feelings might you have in response to these stories?

3. Imagine yourself listening to these stories as one of the people the Pharisees called a “sinner.” If you were able to hear Jesus, what thoughts and feelings might you have in response to these stories?

4. When reading stories or parables, it helps to imagine the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. What comes to mind when you read the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (vv. 4-10)?

5. Who is represented by the central characters (or objects) in each of the three parables?

6. How do you account for the intense reactions of the shepherd, woman, and father to their losses and discoveries?

7. Describe an incident when you lost or misplaced something valuable to you. How did you feel?

8. Let’s look more closely at the third parable. How might the Pharisees and teachers of the law have felt about each of the actions of the younger son (vv. 13-16)?

9. How might the Pharisees have expected the father to respond when the son returned home?

10. What do the details in verses 20-24 reveal about the feelings of our Father in heaven?

11. How can this portrait of God help us to feel fully accepted by the Father—in spite of our sin?

12. Instead of concluding the story in verse 24, Jesus goes on to describe the reaction of the older son (vv. 25-32). What additional point do you think Jesus wants to make to the Jewish leaders, and why?

13. How can this parable motivate us to love those who are lost?



Thank God for his active, tender, compassionate love for you and for all people.

NOW OR LATER

Put yourself in these stories as the lost sheep and the lost son. Allow yourself to experience God's response to you. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you take in God's love?



THREE

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Luke 10:25-37

We know that one of the two great commandments is that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. What makes a neighbor? geographical proximity? race? religion? sharing the same social or economic status?

Group Discussion. Do you feel guilty when you see pictures of starving people on TV or in magazines? Should you? Explain.

Personal Reflection. Think of a time when you hesitated to respond to someone in need. What kept you from responding?

In this study a religious leader asks Jesus to tell him what it means to love one's neighbor. With his response Jesus overturns our traditional definitions and shatters our stereotypes. *Read Luke 10:25-37.*

1. Put yourself in the place of the "expert in the law" who is questioning Jesus in this story. How might you feel in response to your first two encounters with Jesus?

2. What kind of answer do you think the lawyer was expecting from Jesus when he asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

3. If you were this lawyer, what thoughts and feelings might you have to the story Jesus tells in response to your question “Who is my neighbor?”

4. The situation described in verse 30 was common on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. In what situations today is noninvolvement seen as a wise choice?

5. Why do you suppose Jesus picked a Samaritan, someone from an ethnic group Jews detested, as the “hero” of the story (vv. 31-33)?

6. Describe the Samaritan’s actions from the point of view of (a) personal inconvenience, (b) financial cost, and (c) risk (vv. 34-35).

How do one or more of these factors discourage your own neighborly actions?

7. Christ's question (v. 36) was not intended to prove that Samaritans could be better neighbors than Jews. What was he getting at?

8. "Go and do likewise" (v. 37)—what exactly was Jesus telling the lawyer to do?

9. Think of a time you experienced love from someone which was expressed in a practical way. What was it like to be loved in this way?

10. In what practical ways can we "go and do likewise" today?



Thank God for his all-inclusive love for each of us.

NOW OR LATER

In a time of quiet reflection, ask God to show you someone in your life he is calling you to love in a deeper way. Write your thoughts and feelings in response to what you sense God is saying to you.

Ask God to help you use this week's events as opportunities to express love in unique ways. Keep a journal of what you observe and experience.