

# Interpreting the Parable of the Sower

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(Matthew 13:18-23)

In this session we will look at the explanation which Jesus gave only to His disciples for the *Parable of the Sower*. As He was sitting in the boat Jesus spoke these words to the multitude who were standing on the beach.

**Matt 13:3 - And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow;**

**<sup>4</sup> and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.**

**<sup>5</sup> Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.**

**<sup>7</sup> Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out.**

**<sup>8</sup> And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.**

**<sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear."**

Immediately His disciples asked why Jesus was teaching the crowd this way, and He answered by describing the spiritual condition of the multitude in Israel. A person must hear the word of the kingdom: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" and he must respond with understanding and repentance, believing in Jesus as the Messiah and King. This was the only way to meet the spiritual qualifications for participating in the kingdom of heaven. Unfortunately, the majority of the nation of Israel did not respond with understanding and repentance. Jesus described them as being like their forefathers, whose hearts had become insensitive, whose ears barely heard, and who had deliberately closed their eyes and refused to perceive.

The word of the kingdom had been proclaimed to them, so they heard the message which included truths about the spiritual qualifications for establishing the kingdom. At the end of Jesus' quote from Isaiah 6:9-10 it says, "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." This is why Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables. As He said in verse 13, "because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt 13:13).

Essentially, Jesus told the *Parable of the Sower* to illustrate several of the reasons why the multitude in Israel were not responding to the word of the kingdom. This parable, along with the disciples' question, Jesus' answer, and His interpretation, serve as a transition into the group of six "kingdom parables" which will include "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" that Jesus promised in Matt 13:11. As one Bible scholar has said,

The word of the kingdom had been proclaimed to Israel by John, by Jesus, and by the disciples. This parable notes the blindness and dullness of Israel's response to this proclamation. However, some did understand and were growing in understanding. ... The word of the kingdom received into the heart would yield more revelation and understanding of it. This new revelation is that which the King is about to give in the remainder of Matthew 13.<sup>1</sup>

The *Parable of the Sower* is a parable about why Jesus began teaching in parables.

**Matt 13:18 - Hear then the parable of the sower.**

Literally, this could be translated: "You, therefore, hear." The plural "**You**" is put first in this sentence for emphasis. This focuses His message directly on the small group of faithful followers that He expects will hear and understand. The word "**then**" could also be translated "**therefore**" and it connects this verse to what Jesus had just said when He declared, "Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear" (Matt 13:16). The disciples were part of the small group who "have" and to whom more shall be given (Matt 13:12).

Notice that when Jesus spoke this parable He did not say "The kingdom of heaven is like..." This first parable as well as the final parable in this chapter are unique in that they do not have this phrase identifying the topic or subject of the parable. As one commentator expressed it,

The parable of the Seed and the Sower is the only one of the [first] seven parables that does not begin with the formula, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." and is therefore both transitional and introductory to the other parables, not itself providing any new truth regarding the kingdom of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

This parable is intended to give several examples of issues that can lead to the conditions described in the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10 where it says, "the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes," ultimately resulting in their failure to understand with their heart and turn to the Lord.

**Matt 13:19 - "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 first phrase literally says, "Anyone hearing the word of the kingdom and not understanding." **Understanding** is a form of the same Greek word (*sunīēmi*) which is translated "**understand**" three times in Jesus' previous response to the disciples' question. As Jesus had said in Matt 13:13, "**while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand,**" so this person is one whose heart had become insensitive, whose ears barely hear, and who had deliberately closed his eyes and refused to understand. In the parable Jesus had said, "Some seeds fell beside the

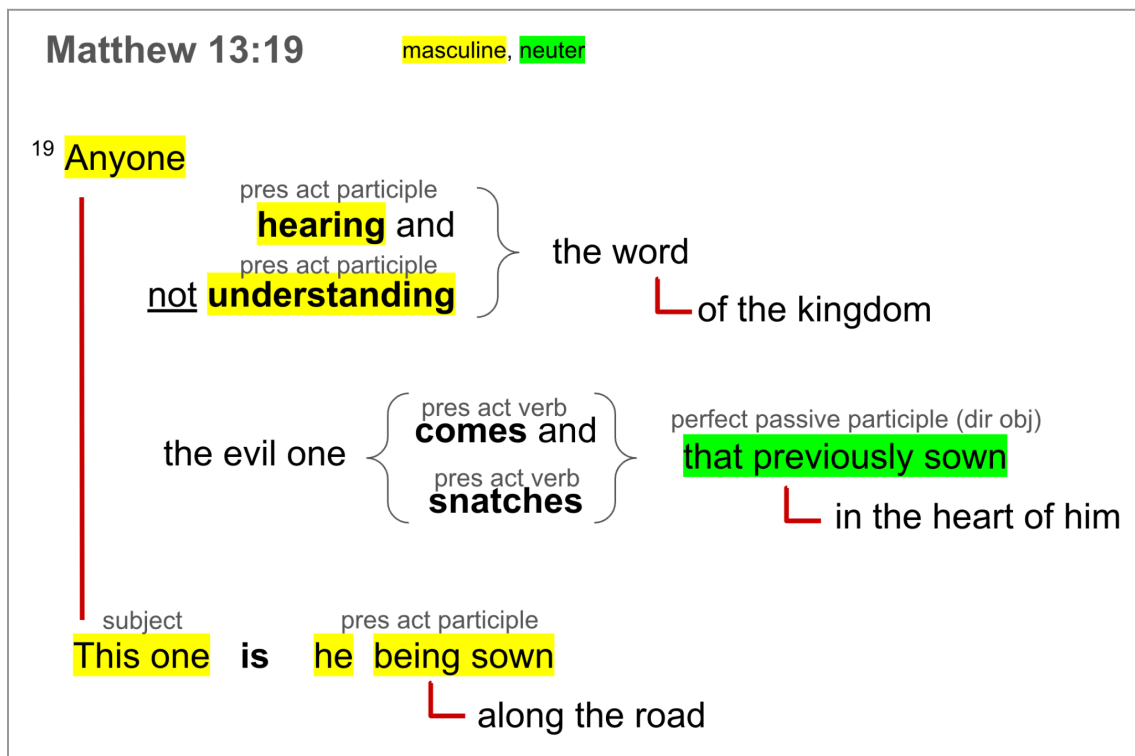
<sup>1</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King*, Multnomah Press (1980): 179.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald N. Glass, "The Parables of the Kingdom: A Paradigm for Consistent Dispensational Hermeneutics," *Michigan Theological Journal*, vol 05 (Spring 1994): 115.

road, and the birds came and ate them up” (Matt 13:4). Here in His explanation it literally says, **“The evil one comes and snatches that which had been sown in his heart.”**

The word of the kingdom had been proclaimed to this person, and although he could barely hear the text says that he did hear the message. But according to Jesus’ answer to His disciples, this man’s heart was insensitive, calloused, or hardened, like the thick, dry husk of a seed. This person’s heart was closed to the word of the kingdom so that message was easily snatched away by his adversary, the devil. This verse presents the “worst case” of a hardened Israelite who refused to understand the word of the kingdom or allow it to impact his life. The scribes and Pharisees who bitterly opposed Jesus are a biblical example of this type of person.

In the last phrase of this verse, Jesus identified this person as **“the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.”** That wording from the NAS95 version is somewhat awkward, and it is not any clearer in the NKJV which says, “This is he who received seed by the wayside.” The original American Standard Version captures the Greek phrase more literally when it says, **“This is he that was sown by the wayside.”** The Greek pronouns and participles are all in the masculine gender. One Greek language scholar has said, “Matthew, like Mark, speaks of the people who hear the words as the seed itself.”<sup>3</sup> And another Bible commentator expressed it this way: “The use of the masculine demonstrative pronoun in verses 19, 22, and 23, as well as the masculine participle, has caused some difficulty. The pronoun and the participle cannot refer to the seed since the word *seed* is neuter in gender.”<sup>4</sup> Several features stand out as we look at a flow diagram of a literal translation of this sentence.



<sup>3</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament*, e-Sword edition.

<sup>4</sup> Toussaint, *Behold the King*: 180.

All of the words highlighted in yellow are in the masculine gender, and the participles and verbs are in the present tense. The only participle not in the masculine gender is the one identifying what had been previously sown, which matches the neuter gender for *seed*. That participle is also the only one in the perfect tense, which indicates an action that occurred in the past with consequences that continued into the present. This could represent the initial proclamation of the word of the kingdom. Whatever interpretation we give to this verse, it must remain true to the actual text of this passage.

Most of the early Bible expositors translated this phrase literally. One early Greek language scholar went so far as to say that it would be inaccurate to translate it as, "This is he in whose case the seed was sown upon the road," which is similar to how many of today's Bible versions translate this passage. This particular scholar explained why such a paraphrase is inaccurate:

One might perhaps acquiesce in such inaccuracy of expression as this paraphrase supposes, if the identification of the seed with the persons occurred only in this one passage. But a glance at the sequel shows that this identification recurs in the interpretation of each one of the four parts of the parable. If we add, further, the preliminary observation, that in the parable immediately following, which treats in like manner the sowing of seed and its growth, the seed is from the first expressly interpreted of persons and persons only, it remains without doubt that the present passage can only be explained in the light of this general phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

When people read the original story told by Jesus, they see the different types of soil that are mentioned. But the differences in the soil do not rule out the possibility that there are also differences in the seed, differences which are implied but not overtly mentioned. Most Bible translators and commentators have interpreted the seed as the gospel, with the different responses to the gospel represented by the soils. They interpret the seed as a uniformly consistent thing (the gospel), with the diverse soils accounting for all of the differences in response. On the surface this seems to be a reasonable interpretation of the original story. But when we examine Jesus' own explanation of the story, something unexpected appears.

The seed is not a uniform thing, and as any farmer might tell us, the quality of the seed itself can vary widely even within the same batch. Several seeds can fall right next to each other in a plowed field and one will grow normally while the other will never germinate. On the other hand, even if several seeds fall on hard-packed ground or among the weeds, sometimes a few of them will grow normally even under such adverse conditions. The point here is that the seed itself can be of widely different character, which can account for the different responses.

The following extended quote from a commentator of a previous century expresses the interpretation of this verse in a way that is not typically heard today.

Listening to the parable we should certainly be inclined to think that the chief lessons were to be learnt from the nature of the soil. ... When however we turn to Christ's explanation, we find that such is not the case, but rather that the chief lessons of the

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<sup>5</sup> Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables Of Jesus: A Methodical Exposition*, T&T Clark (1883): 46-47.

parable are those concerning the nature of the seed. Without His explanation we should inevitably say that the harvest depends upon whether the nature of the soil be the open highway, or the rocky places of the fields, or the thorny ground, or the fruitful ground. Jesus, however, lays no emphasis upon the soil, but all emphasis upon the condition of the seed which is cast into the soil. This is a most important distinction to be kept carefully in mind, or we shall continue to misinterpret the parable. I am aware that this statement may seem at first to obscure the vision of truth, contradicting, as it does, popular conceptions of the teaching of this parable.

Notice most carefully here the actual words: "This is he that was sown by the wayside." Not, this is *it*, but this is *he*. "And he that was sown upon the rocky places, this is he that heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth it." Again notice the words, *he* that was sown; not *it*, but *he*. "And he that was sown among the thorns, this is he that heareth the word." Once more, *he* that was sown, not *it*. "And he that was sown upon the good ground, this is he that heareth the word." Thus finally, *he* that was sown, not *it*. We have generally regarded the "sower" of this parable as a type first of our Lord Himself, and then of all those who preach the word, and the seed as the word sown in the hearts of men who respond to it in different ways according to their nature. This is a treatment of the parable which contradicts absolutely Christ's own explanation of it. In that explanation He declares, not that the sowing of the seed is the word cast into the heart of a man, but that it is the casting of a man into a certain situation. The sowing here referred to, then, to state the case broadly, is the sowing, not of truth, but of men, for in the next parable, where the Lord again takes up the figure of sowing, He distinctly says of the good seed, "These are the sons of the Kingdom." This truth is emphasized too in the first parable by the fact that, in every instance in His explanation, the King said, "he that was sown."<sup>6</sup>

This commentary by Dr. G. Campbell Morgan is very insightful, and one which we should carefully consider as we seek to accurately interpret this passage of Scripture. The character of the seed itself can account for the difference in responsiveness. Whenever possible we should simply say what the original text says, and given our own interpretation of a parable versus Jesus' interpretation of that same parable, the interpretation of Jesus is always definitive.

So, what practical difference does it make to the point of the parable if the different responses of people are represented as soils or seeds? In either case the message is clear: a hard-hearted person who refuses to understand and respond to the word of the kingdom will be an easy target for the devil to remove all possibility of understanding. If that occurs, this person will suffer the consequences for his rejection of the truth. It is important, however, for us to remain true to the original text of Scripture as we seek to accurately translate and interpret these passages.

**Matt 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; <sup>21</sup> 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.**

<sup>6</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fleming H. Revell Company (1907): 53-54, 55-56.

Here in these two verses we see a second reason why the multitude in Israel did not respond to the word of the kingdom. In the case of this second person, Jesus' parable had said, "Immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil" (Matt 13:5). One commentator explained this type of germination:

The stony ground was not ground filled with stones; it was what was common in Palestine, a thin skin of earth on top of an underlying shelf of limestone rock. The earth might be only a few inches deep before the rock was reached. On such ground the seed would certainly germinate; and it would germinate quickly, because the ground grew speedily warm with the heat of the sun. But there was no depth of earth and when it sent down its roots in search of nourishment and moisture, it would meet only the rock, and would be starved to death, and quite unable to withstand the heat of the sun.<sup>7</sup>

Here in Jesus' explanation of this verse, however, there is again a somewhat awkward translation of the Greek text. This could be translated literally, "**And this one is he being sown on the rocky places; this is he who is hearing the word, and immediately with joy is receiving it.**" We see again that the word of the kingdom had been proclaimed to this person, and the text says that he heard the message and actually received it with joy. The Greek word for **received** is *lambanō* which is a broad term that means "to take something that is given." The response is described as an emotional response, rather than a soul-searching, life-changing understanding and repentance. One commentator has said,

Many hearts are thin and shallow. They respond readily to any new thing. They follow new fashions, respond enthusiastically to a famous personality who is popular at the time. They are the emotional type who are swept off their feet easily. They hear the Word and with lighthearted joy respond to it, but they are shallow and have no depth. These stony-ground hearers heard the Word and showed an outward enthusiasm for it for a while.<sup>8</sup>

Even though the initial response seemed positive, Jesus explained that it did not require much external pressure to neutralize the word of the kingdom. He said, "**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.**"

As Jesus explained it, the problem is that this person had **no root in himself**. The word **root** is the Greek word *rhiza* from which we get our English word *rhizome*. It would make more sense to say this person has "**no root in himself**" if we were figuratively representing a man as a seed, rather than as the soil. Soil does not generate roots, but seeds do generate roots from within themselves. So Jesus is speaking of a man that is either incapable or unwilling to put out roots which will allow him to anchor himself in the truth and take in nourishment so he can grow.

Jesus' description means that the word of the kingdom, with its requirement for personal repentance and trust in the Messiah, never impacted the person's heart to the point where he

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<sup>7</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume Two*, Westminster Press (1975): 58.

<sup>8</sup> Lehman Strauss, *Prophetic Mysteries Revealed*, Loizeaux Brothers (1980): 46.

began to take root in the truth. Even though this person may have seemed receptive initially, he was unwilling to make a deep, lasting commitment to the truth of the word. External pressures quickly neutralized it. The word **affliction** is the Greek word *thlipsis* which means “pressure or oppression.” And the word **persecution** is the Greek word *diōgmos* which means “intimidation or harassment, especially for religious reasons.”

The New Testament shares several instances of this kind of response. For example, after Jesus healed a man who was born blind, the Pharisees questioned the man’s parents, but they chose to plead ignorance about the situation, “because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:22). In another case several of the religious leaders initially believed in Jesus, “but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God” (John 12:42-43).

**Matt 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."**

In the case of this third person, Jesus’ parable had said, “Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out” (Matt 13:7). Here in His explanation of this verse, there is again a somewhat awkward translation of the Greek text. This could be translated literally, “**And he being sown among the thorns, this is he who is hearing the word.**” We see that the word of the kingdom had been proclaimed to this person, and the text says that he heard the message. Jesus explained that in this case it did not require much internal pressure to make the word of the kingdom ineffective. He said, “**The worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.**”

**Worry** is the Greek word *merimna* which comes from a root word that means “divided or distracted.” When we see a phrase like “worry of the world” we often assume that **world** is translated from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning the world system around us. But that is not the word used here. This verse uses the Greek word *aiōn* which is often translated as “age” meaning the period of time in which we are living. Every age has different distractions and worries, so this verse would apply universally to people living at any period in history.

**Deceitfulness** is the Greek word *apatē* which comes from a root word meaning “to cheat or to seduce into error.” And to **choke** is the word *sumpnigō* which means “to press around or crowd a person so as to suffocate him.” As in the case of external pressure, here the internal pressures of distraction and materialism suffocate the word of the kingdom. Its requirement for personal repentance and trust in the Messiah never affect this person to the point of changing his priorities in life. One commentator described it this way:

Such a person permits life's competing subjects of concern to take precedence over the priority of his or her spiritual development (cf. 19:16-22). The present life, rather than the life to come, and present treasure, rather than future treasure, capture this person's affections. These things are deceitful because they can drain spiritual vitality before the



person realizes what is happening to him or her. Interestingly, the enemy of fruitfulness in the first instance is the devil, in the second instance it is the world, and in the third instance it is the flesh (1 John 2:15-17).<sup>9</sup>

The New Testament also describes several instances of this kind of behavior. For example, a man who said he had kept the Law's commandments from his youth, asked Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Mark 10:21-22 says, "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, 'One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property."

**Matt 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."**

Jesus finished the *Parable of the Sower* by explaining the seed which grew in the good soil. It could be translated literally, "**And the one being sown on the good ground: this is he who is hearing and is understanding the word.**" It is clear that Jesus is addressing the one whose heart is responsive and he understands the word of the kingdom, which results in believing in Jesus as the Messiah and turning to God in repentance.

This is the person who understands the message about the messianic kingdom when he or she hears it, and responds appropriately to it. This would involve believing in Jesus. Such a person eventually becomes spiritually productive, though the degree of productivity varies. However, Jesus commended all who received the message of the messianic kingdom and believed it, regardless of their measure of productivity.<sup>10</sup>

In this verse Jesus explained that the result is due to differences in the quality of the seed rather than solely on differences in soil conditions. All of the seed in this verse fell side-by-side into the same good plowed soil, but the results varied based on the character of the seed itself: some produced a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. As Dr. Morgan said,

If [this parable] is interpreted in the usual way, then there is no responsibility whatever upon the seed, neither can the soil be blamed for the lack of result due to its own natural hardness, for it cannot help being what it is. But when we come to our Lord's explanation we find how serious our responsibility is, for He teaches that the men will respond or fail to respond according to what we are in ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

## Summary

In Jesus' explanation of this parable, He gave several reasons why the hard-hearted Israelites had rejected their Messiah and King, resulting in the postponement of the kingdom. Some were overtly hostile to the message, while others succumbed to external or internal pressures. The

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew (2023 edition)*, <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/matthew.pdf>, accessed Nov 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan: 61-62.



“word of the kingdom” had been proclaimed to them so that they heard the message, which included truths about the spiritual qualifications for establishing the kingdom. It required both understanding and accepting Jesus as the Messiah as well as personally turning to God in repentance, which was something the majority of them were quite unwilling to do.

Paraphrasing what Jesus said in Matt 13:13, “This is why I speak to them in parables, because they refuse to perceive and understand.” We can see that the *Parable of the Sower* serves as a transition to the next group of six “kingdom parables” that will share “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” which Jesus mentioned in Matt 13:11. As we stated previously, this is a parable about why Jesus began to speak to the multitude in parables.

Many Bible commentaries include this parable with the later ones which share mysteries of the kingdom, but this first parable is an introduction to those parables, rather than giving new revelation about events during the postponement of the kingdom. As one Bible scholar has said, “As far as Matthew 13 is concerned one must look on the parable of the sower and the soils as being introductory and not as containing new revelations concerning the kingdom of heaven. This parable reveals the principle that God gives fruit to those who initially receive and understand the word of the kingdom.”<sup>12</sup>

Another issue we sometimes see is that many Bible commentaries limit this parable only to discussing people’s responses to the gospel for salvation during the Church Age. One writer described this tendency while referencing several examples of these interpretations:

Many Bible commentaries assert that Jesus depicted the responses that four different categories of people will have to the gospel, concluding, “The gospel will be rejected by most people.” Some claim that only the last soil portrays a believer because it produces fruit. Others assert that only the first soil type represents an unbeliever because the seed germinates in the other three. Therefore, the parable is used to evaluate whether people are saved, unsaved, carnal, persevering, or even not saved but think they are. The conflicting interpretations result from classifying the four soils as unbelievers and the seed as the message of the gospel. ... Some scholars designate salvation as the central truth of the parable, not merely an application point.<sup>13</sup>

But as we have seen, the context of this parable does not support such interpretations. As Dr. Morgan expressed it: “This parable, then, has nothing at all to do with the subject of the Christian Church, neither has it anything to do with that of the conversion of individual men. ... The subject of individual regeneration is taken for granted, and the teaching of Christ is not regarding the salvation of individuals.”<sup>14</sup> This parable is about the nation of Israel’s response to the word of the kingdom. Following the nation’s rejection of their King, the kingdom was no longer mentioned as being “at hand” but its coming would be delayed until a future time when Israel will meet the spiritual qualifications for the kingdom’s inauguration.

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<sup>12</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol 121 (October-December 1964): 355.

<sup>13</sup> Marcia Hornock, “Excavating The Parable Of The Sower: Discerning Jesus’ Meaning,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology*, vol 19:57 (Summer 2015): 185, 187.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan: 63.