

# Interpreting the Parable of the Sower

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The common evangelical interpretation of the Parable of the Sower focuses on people's responses to the gospel message for salvation. For example, one commentator summarized the typical interpretation under three points:

(1) Like the sower, God spreads His Word widely among all kinds of people. (2) Like the three kinds of unfruitful soil, many will respond to His Word with less than saving faith, be it (a) complete lack of positive response due to the enticement of evil, (b) temporary superficiality masquerading as true commitment, or (c) genuine interest and conviction about the truth that simply falls short due to the rigorous demands of discipleship. (3) Like the fruitful soil, the only legitimate response to God's Word is the obedience and perseverance which demonstrate true regeneration.<sup>2</sup>

Most modern study Bibles and commentaries typically interpret this parable in a similar way. One writer described this common trend while citing several examples of the confusing variety of meanings given to the Parable of the Sower:

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.<sup>3</sup>

Those types of interpretive variations can result from a lack of consideration of the context of the passage. By carefully examining the wider context it should be possible to more accurately interpret the message that Jesus intended to communicate in this parable. The goal of the present study will be to build an accurate interpretation by carefully examining the text and context of the Parable of the Sower.

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Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (InterVarsity, 1990), 228.

<sup>3</sup> Marcia Hornock, "Excavating The Parable Of The Sower: Discerning Jesus' Meaning," *Journal of Dispensational Theology*, vol 19:57 (Summer 2015), 185.

## BACKGROUND WITHIN THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

The first task will be to survey the events within Matthew's narrative of the life of Jesus. The first two chapters of Matthew describe Christ's royal genealogy, unique birth, and His early life. In chapter 3 John the Baptist announced the coming of the Messiah, baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, and proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). When opposition to John's message arose, he was put in prison. Jesus then began His public ministry to the nation of Israel in chapter 4, where He taught in their synagogues, called His first disciples, miraculously healed many people, and proclaimed the same message which John the Baptist had declared: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17).

The kingdom being proclaimed was the same one that the Jewish people were already familiar with from the Hebrew Scriptures. They knew their history and understood that God had brought the theocratic kingdom to an end, that God's shekinah glory had departed (Ezek 8:4; 9:3; 10:4; 11:22-23), and that God had judged His people by scattering them among the nations (Deut 28:64). The future restoration of the kingdom and the promised fulfillment of God's covenants with the nation of Israel were proclaimed by nearly every Old Testament prophet.

This kingdom that the Jews were anticipating was the one which Jesus declared was at hand. As one commentator has said, "The promise of the kingdom could not be disassociated from the presence of the King. A kingdom demands a king. This was a well known fact which gave to Israel the confident expectation of their Messiah's coming....It was not that the kingdom had come, but rather that the King was present to offer His kingdom."<sup>4</sup> Jesus did not say that the kingdom had been established. In essence the message was: "The King is here with a legitimate offer of the kingdom if the nation of Israel would meet the condition for its inauguration." That condition was given in the announcement by both John and Jesus when they said, "Repent!" Not only must Israel recognize Jesus as the King chosen by God (Deut 17:15), they must also meet the spiritual prerequisites of national repentance and personal holiness that were clearly stated in their Scriptures (e.g., Lev 11:45; 1 Kings 8:47; Ezek 18:29-32).

With this background in view, Jesus taught the principles of kingdom ethics in Matthew chapters 5 - 7. Then in Matthew 8 - 9 Jesus authenticated His Messiahship by performing many miracles of healing, casting out demons, calming the wind and the waves during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, restoring a dead girl to life, and giving sight to the blind. It was at this time that Matthew started reporting direct opposition to Jesus from the Pharisees and religious leaders of Israel. In Matthew 10 Jesus commissioned His twelve disciples to travel throughout the nation, preaching the nearness of the kingdom, but only to the lost sheep of Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> Lehman Strauss, *Prophetic Mysteries Revealed* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1980), 19, 21.

In Matthew 11 Jesus was visited by messengers from John the Baptist with a question, and after answering them, Jesus gave an eloquent affirmation of John and his ministry. He also referred to His own rejection by the leaders of Israel (Matt 11:16-19), and He condemned the unrepentant cities of Israel in which He had ministered. One commentator said that “the high ethical standards of the kingdom to come did not appeal to the Jewish people. In general, the Jewish people rejected Jesus, though many individuals became His followers. Because of this, Jesus turned to the individual rather than the nation as a whole, inviting each person to come to Him and find rest (Matt 11:28-30).”<sup>5</sup>

Chapters 12 - 13 describe the events which took place on a single day, which many commentators call “the Busy Day.” In Matthew 12:1-8 Jesus and His disciples were walking through a wheat field where the disciples picked some heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees immediately accused them of breaking the Sabbath, but Jesus skillfully defended their actions and ended by proclaiming Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus then taught in their synagogue, where the Pharisees set up a situation to accuse Him. After establishing that it was perfectly lawful to do good on the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. But the Pharisees immediately began plotting how they would destroy Jesus (Matt 12:9-14). At that point the nation’s religious leaders had completely rejected Christ and His well-attested claims as their Messiah and King.

In Matt 12:15-21 Jesus withdrew from the synagogue because He knew what they were planning, but many people followed Him and He healed those who were sick. His withdrawal from the developing conflict was in fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 42:1-4 which confirmed Jesus as the One chosen by God. His fulfillment of this prophecy also hinted at a coming time when the Gentile nations would put their hope in Him.

In Matt 12:22-32 a demon possessed man was brought to Jesus, and the Pharisees watched to see whether He would again violate their Sabbath rules by healing him. Earlier that day Jesus had proven that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, so He immediately healed the man. The crowds were amazed, but the Pharisees accused Him of being in league with Satan. Jesus soundly refuted that charge, but it became clear that the religious leaders of Israel were guilty of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. One writer has said, “This act of blasphemous unbelief on the part of the Jewish religious authorities was the turning point of Jesus’ ministry.”<sup>6</sup> The nation’s leaders had completely rejected Christ, and in Matt 12:33-37 Jesus would condemn their hardened unbelief and depravity.

When the Pharisees attempted to regain control of the situation by demanding a sign, Jesus refused to give them anything further except the sign of Jonah (Matt 12:38-42). Not only did this

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<sup>5</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Every Prophecy of the Bible* (David C. Cook, 2011), 360.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald N. Glass, “The Parables of the Kingdom: A Paradigm for Consistent Dispensational Hermeneutics,” *Michigan Theological Journal*, vol 05 (Spring 1994), 111.

sign prefigure the rejected King's death, burial, and resurrection, but Jesus declared that the repentant people of both Nineveh and Sheba would rise up and condemn the unrepentant Israelites of that generation. The sign of Jonah also includes the important concept of postponement. In the case of Nineveh, God would postpone His judgment on Assyria for 150 years as a result of their repentance. In the case of the nation of Israel, their rejection of their King led to the postponement of His kingdom, which is yet to be realized.

In Matt 12:43-45 Jesus illustrated the condition of those Jews when He intimated His purifying presence, warning them that unless Israel would fill the clean space with belief in their Messiah, their condition would be worse than before. Around this time Jesus and His disciples entered a nearby house. In Matt 12:46-50 Jesus' mother and brothers arrived, but He aligned Himself with the family of faith rather than with earthly family ties.

The nearness of the kingdom had been proclaimed to the nation of Israel, first by John the Baptist (Matt 3:2), then by Jesus (Matt 4:17), and also by the twelve (Matt 10:7). But after the events of Matthew 12, the nearness of the kingdom was never mentioned again in the Gospels. Israel had rejected the King and His kingdom, so the consequence of their rejection was that the prophesied kingdom would be postponed. As Jesus would later declare on His final journey to the Cross, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'" (Matt 23:37-39) Because of their rejection, the kingdom would not be instituted until a future time when the nation of Israel would recognize its Messiah and willingly meet the spiritual qualifications for the establishment of the kingdom.

### **JESUS' CHANGE IN TEACHING METHOD**

From the first two words of Matt 13:1 it is clear that the significant events which happened on "that day" would impact everything Jesus will say in the verses which follow. Matthew 13:53 states that all of this teaching took place on the same day, so toward the end of that "Busy Day" Jesus left the house and walked to the seaside. When the crowd pressed around Him, Jesus stepped into a boat, leaving the multitude standing along the shoreline.

Matthew 13:3 is the first time in Matthew's account when the word *parable* was used. The word παραβολή (parabolē) means placing one thing beside another for the purpose of comparison to illustrate a spiritual or moral truth. One Jewish-Christian scholar has said, "Perhaps no other mode of teaching was so common among the Jews as that of parables. Only in their case, they were almost entirely illustrations of what had been clearly said or taught; while, in the case of

Christ, they served as the foundation for His teaching.”<sup>7</sup> This points out that the way Jesus began to use parables was quite different from the traditional way the Jewish rabbis used them. Another commentator observed that, “A parable is an utterance which does not carry its meaning on the surface, and which thus demands thought and perception if the hearer is to benefit from it....Far from giving explanations, parables themselves need to be explained.”<sup>8</sup>

Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus had illustrated His teaching with pictures from nature and common life experience. These illustrations mainly occur in the Sermon on the Mount and they include the salt and the light (Matt 5:13-16), the birds and the lilies (Matt 6:26-30), the splinter and the beam in the eye (Matt 7:3-5), the two gates (Matt 7:13.), the wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt 7:15), the good and bad trees (Matt 7:17-19), and the wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-27). One commentator has said, “The Sermon on the Mount discourse was not by any means lacking in illustration; still its main lines of thought were of the nature of direct spiritual instruction. But here [in Matthew 13] there is no direct spiritual teaching. It is all indirect, it is parabolic through and through.”<sup>9</sup> This highlights the distinct change in the way Jesus began to teach the crowds using parables rather than direct instruction. Both the disciples and the multitude on the shore would have expected Jesus to teach spiritual truths in an easily understandable way, just as He had done before in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Parable of the Sower consisted of a simple description that was common knowledge among His listeners. To plant a large field, the farmer would walk through the plowed area to broadcast handfuls of seed. Depending on the skill of the sower, the majority of the seed would fall in the plowed soil. Of course, a little of the seed could land on the path, or in the shallow soil at the fringe of the field, or outside the field where weeds and natural plants were growing. The sower only expected the seed that fell within the plowed ground to grow normally, but even those plants would have varying yields. That was the extent of the story Jesus told, and the crowds may have wondered, “Why is He telling us this? We already know how to plant grain in a field.” Jesus’ dramatic change in teaching method was immediately apparent to His disciples and they expressed their confusion by asking, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” (Matt 13:10)

## **THE REASON FOR THE PARABLE**

Within the context of the Parable of the Sower, the sequence of statements provides the key to interpreting its meaning. First Jesus told the story to the multitude. Because of the way He shared this story, the disciples were then prompted to ask Him why He was teaching the crowd that way. Jesus then answered their question by giving the reason for the parable, and this came before His explanation of the parable because it contained the key for understanding His interpretation.

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<sup>7</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2 vols (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 1:581.

<sup>8</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew. New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 500.

<sup>9</sup> W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible*, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940) 4:740.

The initial response of Jesus to their question had a simple structure: “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted” (Matt 13:11). In light of Israel’s rejection of their King and the postponement of the kingdom, some previously unrevealed things will characterize the period of time between the Jews’ rejection of Jesus and their acceptance of Him in the future. There are specific people to whom God granted this new revelation, but the unbelieving and unrepentant multitude were not given to understand. One commentator described those to whom Jesus ministered when he said,

All these men among whom the ministry of Jesus had been exercised had preliminary knowledge of the ways of God as a result of the [Jewish] religion in which they had been born and trained. In fulfillment of the messages of their own Scriptures He had come. Certain of them had received Him, others of them had rejected Him. To those receiving Him were given the mysteries of the Kingdom. To those rejecting Him these messages could not be given, and they were in danger of losing the real value of all that they had gained through their early religious training.<sup>10</sup>

The central reason for the parable was recorded in Matthew 13:13. “Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” It was because of the characteristics of the unbelieving and unrepentant multitude that Jesus began to use parables in His public ministry. At the end of this verse Jesus said, “nor do they *understand*” which is the word συνίημι (suniēmi) meaning to put together mentally so as to comprehend. In the New Testament it is often found in quotations of Old Testament texts, and Jesus continued by citing Old Testament support for His statement when He quoted Isaiah 6:9-10. This passage accurately described the Israelites’ condition, which is emphasized by the use of συνίημι (suniēmi) in each of three consecutive verses (Matt 13:13-15). The Israelites were no different in Jesus’ day than they had been in the days of the prophets. As one commentator summarized, “They had shut their eyes lest they should see, and they had stopped their ears lest they should hear. They had rejected the King at the commencement of His ministry, and without the King they had no key to the mysteries of the Kingdom.”<sup>11</sup>

Christ’s assessment of the multitude in His day is the key to interpreting the parable. Essentially, Jesus told the Parable of the Sower to illustrate the reasons why the multitude in Israel were not responding to the word of the kingdom. Before explaining “the mysteries of the kingdom” promised in Matt 13:11, Jesus was making clear why He spoke to the crowd in parables. One writer explained, “The parable of the Seed and the Sower is the only one of the seven parables that does not begin with the formula ‘the kingdom of heaven is like,’ and is therefore both

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<sup>10</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907), 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

transitional and introductory to the other parables.”<sup>12</sup> This parable was intended to illustrate the types of issues that had led the multitude within Israel to reject Jesus as their Messiah and King.

### **JESUS’ INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLE**

The first phrase of Jesus’ interpretation in Matt 13:19 says, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not *understand*,” which is a form of the important word (συνίημι, *sunīēmi*) that Jesus had used three times in His previous description of the unrepentant Jews. In this verse Jesus was speaking about the same people He had just finished discussing – the unbelieving and unrepentant Israelites of that generation – so they are the subject of the message of this parable.

#### ***First Case***

The first reason why some Jews of that generation had rejected their King and His kingdom was because of their complete hardness of heart. They were closed to the word of the kingdom, so that message was easily snatched away. This verse presented the first case of a hardened Israelite, and the majority of the nation’s religious leaders who bitterly opposed Jesus are a biblical example of this type of person (Matt 12:14; 23:1-36).

#### **Identifying the Seed**

In the last phrase of Matt 13:19, Jesus identified this person as “the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.” That wording from the NASB 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.” What becomes evident in the Greek text is that the pronouns and present active participles are in the masculine gender. One 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>13</sup> A Greek language scholar has said, “Matthew, like Mark, speaks of the people who hear the words as the seed itself.”<sup>14</sup> The only participle not in the masculine gender is the perfect passive participle identifying what had been previously sown, which matches the neuter gender for *seed*. This may represent the initial proclamation of the word of the kingdom, with people’s reactions to that word represented by how the seed grew in various situations.

Most early expositors translated this phrase according to a literal rendering of the text. One early scholar went so far as to say that it would be inaccurate to translate it the way many modern Bible translators have done. He explained that,

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<sup>12</sup> Glass, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Multnomah Press, 1980), 180.

<sup>14</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1930) 1:106.

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>15</sup>

Readers of Jesus' original parable notice the different types of soil which are mentioned, but differences in the soil do not rule out the possibility that there are also differences in the seed. Most Bible translators and commentators have decided to interpret the seed as the gospel of salvation, therefore they logically assume the different responses to the gospel must be due only to the soils. Given the limited details that were presented by Jesus in the original story, this may seem to be a plausible explanation. However, His subsequent interpretation provides additional details that are essential to a proper understanding of His intended meaning.

Unexpectedly, Jesus reveals that the character of the seed itself varies widely. Several seeds can fall 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 is that the seed itself can account for the different responses. One commentator explained,

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 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

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<sup>15</sup> Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables Of Jesus: A Methodical Exposition* (T&T Clark, 1883), 46-47.



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>16</sup>

Given our own interpretation of a parable versus Jesus’ interpretation of that same parable, the interpretation of Jesus is always definitive. This first case in the Parable of the Sower illustrated an Israelite who actively refused to respond to the word of the kingdom. A hard-hearted person who refused to understand and repent was an easy target for the enemy to remove all possibility of understanding.

### ***Second Case***

Not every Israelite was like the majority of the nation’s religious leaders in being completely hard-hearted. A second reason why the multitude in Israel were not responding to the word of the kingdom was given in Matthew 13:20-21. In this second case, Jesus said that initially some people received the message but their response was shallow rather than a soul-searching, life-changing understanding and repentance. Even though the initial response seemed positive, Jesus explained that it did not require much external pressure to neutralize the word of the kingdom because this person had “no root in himself.” It would make sense to say this person “had no root in himself” if the person were figuratively represented as a seed, rather than as the soil. Soil does not generate roots, but seeds do generate roots from within themselves.

The word *affliction* (θλιψις, thlipsis) means pressure or oppression, while the word *persecution* (διωγμός, diōgmos) means intimidation or harassment, especially for religious reasons. Jesus indicated that the word of the kingdom, with its requirement for personal repentance and trust in the Messiah, never impacted this person to the point where he was willing to make a deep, lasting commitment. The New Testament shared instances of this kind of response within Israel. 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

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<sup>16</sup> Morgan, 53-56.

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). These external pressures quickly neutralized the word of the kingdom.

### ***Third Case***

A third reason why the multitude in Israel were not responding to the word of the kingdom was given in Matthew 13:22. Jesus explained that in this third 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* (μέριμνα, merimna) comes from a root word meaning divided or distracted. *Deceitfulness* (ἀπάτη, apatē) means to cheat or to seduce into error. In the case of this third person, the internal pressures of distraction and materialistic values suffocated the word of the kingdom. Its requirement for personal repentance and trust in the Messiah never affected this Israelite 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.”<sup>17</sup>

The New Testament also provided examples of this kind of behavior within Israel. On one occasion 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.” His self-centered values and materialistic priorities neutralized the word of the kingdom.

### ***Final Case***

Finally, Jesus interpreted the seed which grew in the plowed soil. Matthew 13:23 could be literally translated, “And the one being sown on the good ground: this is he who is hearing and is understanding the word.” Clearly Jesus had turned then to address the ones “to whom more shall be given, so that he will have an abundance” (Matt 13:12). These were the Israelites to whom it had been granted to understand the word of the kingdom, evidenced by their trust in the Messiah and turning to God in repentance. The original story said this seed “yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty” (Matt 13:8). The varying results were obviously due to differences in the seed rather than to differences in the soil. 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.

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew*, <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/pdf/matthew.pdf>, accessed Nov 2024, 368.

## CONCLUSION

The Parable of the Sower illustrated the reasons why the nation of Israel had rejected its Messiah and King, resulting in the postponement of the kingdom. The word of the kingdom required both understanding and trusting in Jesus as the Messiah as well as personally turning to God in repentance, which was something the majority of Israelites were quite unwilling to do. The nation's religious leaders were overtly hostile to the message, while others succumbed to external or internal pressures.

The typical evangelical interpretation today views this parable as discussing individual responses to the gospel for salvation during the inter-advent age. But as has been shown, the wider context of this parable does not support that as the single meaning of the passage. A key axiom of evangelical hermeneutics is that "interpretation is one – application is many." As one standard reference stated, "This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study. But a given text or a given passage may speak to a number of problems or issues."<sup>18</sup> While it may be possible to apply the principles found in the Parable of the Sower to several different situations, the single intended meaning of the passage should not be lost. As one writer has said, "Some scholars designate salvation as the central truth of the parable, not merely an application point."<sup>19</sup>

Based on a study of the text and context, the conclusion has been reached that Jesus' single meaning for the Parable of the Sower was to unfold the reasons why the multitude in Israel had rejected the word of the kingdom. This parable served as a transition into the following six parables which would share the "mysteries of the kingdom" that Jesus had promised (Matt 13:11). As one 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."<sup>20</sup> Before explaining the mysteries of the kingdom, Jesus was making clear why He instituted this new teaching approach when speaking in the presence of the unresponsive Israelites of that generation.

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Baker, 1970), 113. For additional explanation, see Robert L. Thomas, "The Principle of Single Meaning" in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Kregel, 2002), 141-164 or *Dispensationalism Tomorrow & Beyond* (Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), 97-114.

<sup>19</sup> Hornock, 187.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol 121 (October-December 1964), 355.